

# The Poetry of Artifacts

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Each group has a different poem about an artifact to read, analyze, and appreciate. After you read and discuss your poem with your group, respond to the following questions. Be prepared to share both the poem and your responses with all of us. You will receive all seven poems at the end of this session!

1. What are the clues in the poem that help you to place the artifact in a particular time in history?
2. What is the relationship between the poet and the artifact? (Does the object being discussed belong to the poet? To a relative or friend? Was it in a museum? Did the poet find it or know someone who did?)
3. What is the importance of the artifact to the poet? What are the clues to its importance?
4. What do you learn about the artifact itself from this poem? What do you learn about the poet? What do you learn about the Holocaust?

STEPHEN HERZ

Whatever You Can Carry

*Twenty-nine storerooms were burned before the liberation of Auschwitz. In the six that remained they discovered 348,820 men's suits, 836,255 women's coats, more than seven tons of human hair, and even 13,964 carpets.* —Michael Berenbaum: *The World Must Know*

“You will work in the factory, work in the fields, you will be resettled in the East, bring whatever you can carry.”

So our dresses, shirts, suits, underwear, bedsheets, featherbeds, pillows, tablecloths, towels, we carried.

We carried our hairbrushes, handbrushes, toothbrushes, shoe daubers, scissors, mirrors, safety razors. Forks, spoons, knives,

pots, saucepans, tea strainers, potato peelers, can openers we carried. We carried umbrellas, sunglasses, soap, toothpaste,

shoe polish. We carried our photographs. We carried milk powder, talc, baby food.

We carried our sewing machines. We carried rugs, medical instruments, the baby's pram.

Jewelry we carried, sewn in our shoes, sewn in our corsets, hidden in our bodies.

We carried loaves of bread, bottles of wine, schnapps, cocoa, chocolate, jars of marmalade, cans of fish. Wigs, prayer shawls, tiny

Torahs, skullcaps, phylacteries we carried. Warm winter coats in the heat of summer we carried. On our coats, our suits, our dresses, we carried our yellow stars. On our baggage in bold letters, our addresses, our names we carried.

We carried our lives.

From *Marked: Poems of the Holocaust*  
Stephen Herz (2014, NYQ Books)

Featured in “Writing the Holocaust: A Blog about the Poetry, Fiction, Films, and Art of the Holocaust,” moderated by Dr. Charles Fishman (<http://writingtheholocaust.blogspot.com/>), poetry editor of Yeshiva University’s *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators* (K. Shawn, Ed.): (<https://www.yu.edu/azrieli/research/prism-journal/>).

All other poems are reprinted here from *PRISM* , Volumes 1-5, Spring 2009-2013.

*ELISABETH ROSNER*

from *My Father's Souvenirs*

*One.*

A mustard-yellow tattered star, and  
*JUDE* mimicking the Hebrew alphabet.  
A rectangular patch for  
a faded blue prison number.  
A pale yellow file card with a  
small, passport-size "mug shot"  
of a fifteen-year-old boy with a newly shaved head  
and protruding ears, a mouth held tightly closed  
and wide, wide dark eyes.

*MARGE PIERCY*

How She Learned

A friend was an only child, she thought  
until she sorted through her mother's things  
after the frail old woman died. Her mother  
had borne Anna late in life, a miracle,  
a blessing, she was always told. Then

Anna found a greying photograph.  
Her aunt who escaped Poland  
in '37 had saved and given it  
to her younger sister who barely  
survived Nordhausen working inside

the mountain, skinny almost-ghost.  
Anna recognized her mother, decades  
younger, but against her side was  
pressed a girl not Anna. Scrawled  
on the back, *Feygelah und Perl*.

Who was Feygelah? Her aunt bore  
only sons. This girl was four or five  
with long light braids, her legs  
locked together in a shy fit. Who?  
There were letters back and forth

Boston to Krakow. She sat reading  
them, puzzling out the handwriting,  
the Yiddish. She had a dictionary  
but even then, it took her late into  
the evening. Anna had a sister.

A sister vanished into smoke.  
A sister torn from her mother,  
murdered, burnt. Anna sat numb.  
She was the replacement for  
a girl whose name her mother

could not speak. The weight  
of history pressed on Anna's chest  
that night and finally she wept—  
mourning the sister never known  
and her mother's decades of silence.

*JUDITH CHALMER*

## The Archivist

I didn't expect it to be so  
pretty. I didn't want it to be  
so clean. It wasn't the Nazis  
who fingered the needle,  
stitched a neat cotton backing  
to the coarse-grained star.  
"It was my grandmother  
who lined it," I told the archivist  
when I dropped it on her table.

Slowly, as if lifting a thin yellow baby  
from her bath, the archivist raised  
the tired cloth to the light,  
ran her finger over the little scars,  
the tracks where my grandma pulled  
a heavy thread around all six points  
of the star. *Look!* She nodded  
to where the window framed wild iris,  
orchids banked in the yard, and the star  
translucent against the light.

I'd missed the way people reach  
inside, when even their faces are buried  
in grime, to find something pretty,  
something to shine—Beautiful! in the dirt,  
in the stubble and smear, Bright! in the blade  
of the knife. My eyes followed hers  
in the late gray light to the curled free end  
of the plain cotton thread my grandma hid  
fifty years ago, tucked way inside, so in hands  
like mine, it wouldn't come unraveled.

*DAVID MOOLTEN*

Yellow Star

He saved it like a captured butterfly,  
A medal decorating a box of yellowed black  
And white snapshots, a souvenir of his first  
Lost life, infernal and exquisite, a flared match  
His hand could tolerate just a moment.  
Up close it looked imperfect, homespun, fringed  
With strands from the coat off which he'd torn it  
The day the war ended, the long discarded coat  
On which she slowly, carefully sewed  
What she'd cut from cloth. Posted on walls  
The edict said everyone must make their own,  
Arbitrary and specific as any  
In Leviticus, in the Torah that made him  
Who he was, a noxious star, a hexagram,  
Petaled like a sunflower, a saffron dahlia,  
A bloom she might have pinned to his lapel  
Were they going out to waltz. Maybe that's why  
He kept it, as a mnemonic of her  
Ordinary, singular soul, which imbued  
Whatever her fingers touched, made it  
Less horrific, less contemptible  
Like the apple had Eve grown the tree herself  
And the two of them stood before it scared  
And hungry. Despite his teaching, her shift  
In a shoe factory, they'd little to eat  
With the rationing in Zagreb, no garden,  
Not even a window box for their apartment,  
Just bricks and dust, a candle in the glass  
And the kiss it betokened, not much but savored  
In a way that anywhere before became paradise  
And this the flower he left with.

*ORIANA IVY*

Eyeglasses

Before my grandparents left Auschwitz,  
they went to the mountain of eyeglasses,  
thinking that by a miracle  
they might find their own.  
But it was hopeless to sift  
through thousands of tangled pairs.

They tried one pair after another.  
They had nothing to read, so they traced  
the wrinkles on their hands.  
They'd bring the hand up close,  
follow the orbits of knuckles,

the map of fate in the palm.  
If one eye saw right,  
the other was blurred;  
haze stammered the line of life.  
They took several pairs.

My mother is embarrassed  
telling me the story,  
embarrassed her parents  
took anything at all  
from the piles of looted belongings.

But I would have been like them.  
Those stripped to nothing end up  
with too much, except nothing fits

after reading your hands  
through the glasses of the dead —  
your hands no longer yours,  
but the hands of those  
whose ashes glowed as they rose  
into the crow sky.

Here is how beauty looks  
through those eyeglasses:  
blurred, skeletal,  
a man and a woman  
help each other up,  
walk out through the gate, walk on.

*TOM BERMAN*

The Leather Suitcase

They don't  
make suitcases  
like that  
any more.

Time was,  
when this case  
was made  
solid, leather,  
heavy stitching  
with protective edges  
at the corners

Time was,  
when voyage meant  
train, steamship  
distances unbridgeable  
waiting for a thinning mail  
weeks, then months,  
then nothing

Children's train,  
across the Reich  
stops  
and starts again . . .

Holland  
a lighted gangplank,  
night ferry to gray-misted  
sea-gulled Harwich  
again the rails  
reaching flat across  
East Anglia,  
to London

in my bedroom  
the suitcase,  
a silent witness  
with two labels

"Masaryk Station, Praha"  
"Royal Scot, London-Glasgow"

Leather suitcase  
from a far-off country,  
Czechoslovakia,  
containing all the love  
parents could pack  
for a five year old  
off on a journey  
for life.