

Centropa Lesson

I Was There – A Journey into a Child’s Past Exploring the Shoah through Biographies, Memoirs and Autobiographies of Children in a time of Chaos

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This project was created with a profound debt of gratitude to Cynthia Peterman for her amazing ideas.

Type of school: Jewish Day School, K-8

Course: Holocaust Studies

Lesson Category: Holocaust

Grade level: 6th grade, high achieving. Can be used for 7th grade.

Academic time needed: six to eight 50 minute classes, plus homework.

Summary:

In this project, students in groups of 3-4 will read a memoir, diary or biography about a European child whose life was turned to chaos during the Shoah, 1933 to 1945. To start the project, each group will receive a photograph of a contemporary railway station in Europe near where the child’s story takes place and they will begin their Geographical Treasure hunt by finding out where that railway station is today. Using Centropa’s methodology, the groups will then research the life of the child in the book they are reading, up until 1939, when World War II broke out, and continuing with the child’s life during the years 1939 to 1945. Each group will create a poster with the child’s entire biography, including what happened to them after the war ended, and information about the child’s Jewish community prior to 1933. The project ends with students presenting their poster and each child’s story to the rest of the class, as well as an essay each student must write about their emotional reaction to what they learned.

Background Lesson Information

1. Context for Lesson

This is the culminating project of our Holocaust unit. Students will have studied the Holocaust for 8-12 lessons, the emphasis of which is how children lived in the chaos of the years 1933-1945.

2. Enduring Understanding

- Jews led rich, complex lives in Europe, prior to Hitler’s rise to power in 1933.
- Not all Jews murdered in the Holocaust were Ashkenazi (of Germanic origins). There were Sephardic (of Spanish origin) Jews as well – as in Greece and Yugoslavia.
- Children were resilient despite the hardships and horrors thrust upon them.

3. Goals/Objectives

a. Knowledge Acquired

- Richness and diversity of Jewish life before the Holocaust.
- How children survived the chaos and horrors of the Holocaust.
- To expose the students to the story of the Shoah through the eyes of children who witnessed it.
- To expose the students to experiences of children in different countries.
- To expose the students to the experiences of children in different circumstances.

b. Skills Acquired:

- To develop research skills: library, Internet databases, gathering relevant data from memoirs.
- To explore the role of memory in understanding the Shoah.
- Use of primary sources for research.
- Use of photographs, maps and other resources to create visual presentations.

4. Centropa Resources:

Supplies:

- Books about children in the Holocaust for students to read (see attached list)
- Computers to access the Centropa site as well as the USHMM, Yad Vashem and Yad L'Yeled sites
- Poster boards
- Scissors, paper, glue

Centropa Resources:

- Film – Maps, Central Europe and History
- Centropa's database of photographs: Jewish Witness to a European Century

5. Background skills/knowledge students need:

In order to successfully complete this project, students will need:

- To know how to read a book and be able to disseminate relevant information according to questions asked.
- A solid background in appropriate Holocaust education to give them the context for the stories.
- Some computer skills to begin searching databases and Internet sites for information.
- Mapping skills.

6. Evidence of Student Learning:

- A successful poster created by each group will include the following:
 - answering successfully all of the necessary questions in each of the required sections;

- pictures pertaining to the life of their child – his or her hometown, family, friends, etc, found on the Centropa site, as well as others.
- a map showing their child’s journey, including their subject’s hometown successfully identified by using nothing more than the picture they initially received of a railway station.
- additional information about their child’s hometown, indicating success in having navigated other websites and gathering relevant information.
- When they become a “teacher,” presenting their work to their classmates, they will teach about their child in a way that others can follow the story and understand the major events and experiences of the child’s life.

III. Lesson Plan:

Motivating the students/Opening Activity:

- Show Students a map of modern Europe, and ask students several questions to trigger their memory from previous projects:
 - Do you think Europe’s borders have always looked this way? If not, do you know of any changes in the borders of these countries?
 - Why might the borders of a country change?
 - If your students have had previous exposure to 20th century European history, ask them to remember any of the border changes that were caused as a result of WWI or WWII.
- Show students the Centropa film, “Maps, Central Europe and History,” and discuss what they learn in the video. You may want to run the film once through and then another time, stopping at places you would like to highlight or discuss. Allow some time for discussion – this video causes quite an impact.
- Hand out pictures of the modern day railway stations – one to each group – and tell the students that they are about to go on a Geographical Treasure Hunt!

The Lesson:

- *Gathering Maps.* Armed with just the picture of the railway station, which has nothing more than a name of the city on it, such as Frankfurt-am-Main, students are to find the town where the railway station is, or the closest one to the town they’ll read about. Using library books or the Internet, they are to find:
 - a map of the country where there station is located in Europe.
 - a map of Europe
 Students should set aside both maps, preferably in a folder they won’t lose.
- *Reading the book/answering questions:* Once they find out which country their train station is located in, they will be given their instruction sheet, the book and a set of questions to follow as they read. Students will read the book – taking at least 3 to 4 class periods. They will alternate reading the

book aloud to each other and writing the answers to the questions on the question sheet. The answers must be typed up, either in class (if there are computers) or at home.

- *Research:* Then, using the question sheet as a guideline, students search the Centropa database, and other web sites, for photographs and more information about the child they read about, the places s/he lived and the events s/he experienced. When students have collected all of their data, they decide as a group how they want to present the information on a poster.
- *Creating a visual presentation:* Working together, each group decides how they want to visually present the pertinent information about the journey of the child in their book. We used a poster, but those with access to computers can have students make a slide presentation through PowerPoint, Prezi or Voicethread. The goal is to create a presentation about the child, from the period of their earliest memories of home, through the war years and the Shoah, and how profoundly it affected their lives.

Guidelines for creating the poster include:

- On the maps, students should trace their child's journey from his/her hometown to wherever she was taken or fled to.
- Students must include photos of the child, his/her family, hometown, school, friends, vacation places etc., and they can use photos that represent the experiences the child had throughout his/her life (e.g., a photo of a child in a ghetto).
- A portrait of the child at the center of the poster.
- The maps they found in the first part of the assignment.
- If possible, students should find an old photo of the train station the child left from and put that alongside the modern photograph they were given at the beginning of the project.
- Each photograph should have a typewritten caption.
- All information must be typed up.

Students are given a list of web sites they can use for this project, but the primary site they will use is Centropa's database of photographs.

Concluding Activity

Our concluding activity for this project was a presentation of all of the posters to the entire class. In addition, at the end of the entire Holocaust unit, the students wrote an emotional response essay, in which they are asked to write about their responses to what they learned and how what they learned has affected them.

Grading Rubric

Grading Rubric:

- 25 points : Group grade: for cooperative work as a team player
- 25 points : Individual grade: for individual work ethic and behavior in the group
- 25 points : Appearance: How does your poster look? Is it clean? Pleasing to the eye? Neat?
- 50 points : Information: Is the information accurate? Are all the questions answered to the best of the group's ability?

IV. Reflection

The project left me stunned! I truly was not expecting the reaction I had from the kids – they loved doing the project. They found the reading to be the most tedious part and this is something I may have to work on. Giving it to them for homework wasn't possible because we only had one book for three to four students. The reading did take 3 full days of class time – 50 minute periods. However, the reading is unavoidable since the project after all is based on the memoir of a child from as early as they can remember, right up to present day.

The main challenge with this project was getting photographs from the books the students read so they could include them on their posters. Next time I do this project I will make the copies in advance and each group photos from the book they're reading, along with the photo of the railway station. They'll have the book to cross-reference.

Each group worked so differently from one another – one did all the reading and then answered the questions, one group did section by section, but they all successfully answered the questions.

One recommendation: try to create groups that include students with different strengths: someone with good spatial balance and color skills; a good note taker, who is quite content to listen to the story and take the notes; someone who loves to run back and forth with needed items; and one with strong technology skills, who can successfully navigate new sites and help his or her group members learn how to search successfully, as well. I also like to create groups with a nice boy/girl mix but it sometimes depends on the book. There were a few all-boy groups because the boys were interested in the boy memoirs, and there were some all-girl groups for the same reason. But the experiences moved my 6th graders deeply so in the end it really didn't matter who read which story.

Overall, the project was a great success and I will be doing it again in the future, especially since the students said they loved the project and felt it was one of the highlights of the year.

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children in a time of chaos
Student Assignment/Handout

Introduction

- You will work in small groups of 2-3 people. Each group will be given a photograph of a railway station and a book.
- You will research the photograph first. You are to find where this station is located. Once you have done this, you are to make a copy of the map of the country in which the station is located. Put it in your project folder.
- Next, make a copy of a map of Europe. Put this in your project folder.
- Next, you will read a book and answer questions about the story (see separate handout with questions). This reading will take 3-4 class periods. Take turns reading and writing – while one person reads, another answers as many questions as possible.
- When you have finished reading, go back to find any missing answers. This is a group effort.
- When you have collected all of your data, create a poster about the child you read about, from his/her earliest memories of home to the chaos of the war years and the Shoah and how it profoundly affected his/her life.
- You can only use the web sites given to you for this project when you begin your research. The main site you will use is CENTROPA.

The Project

On a 2’ x 3’ poster board, you will create a “visual” biography of your child based on the book you read with your group. You will need the following:

- a) Follow the instructions in the Introduction. Remember, many of the small towns and villages that Jews came from in Eastern Europe were completely destroyed in WWII. The railway station closest to your child’s town is also acceptable.
- b) After your group has read the book and answered the questions, you will have to decide as a group how you want to present all of the information you have collected. It must be typed up and you will need photographs of your child, their family, hometown, school, friends, vacation places, etc.

- c) If your child was later hidden, in a ghetto, a camp, or fighting resistance with the Partisans, you will need photos of these places, as well, wherever possible, to go with the information about what happened to them.
- d) You will need a nice portrait of your child, if possible, as the center of your poster.
- e) Be sure to add your maps, and they should be fairly prominent on your poster. On the maps, try to trace your child's journey from their hometown – if they were taken away to a different country, if they fled to the forests, if they fled to join the Partisans, if they were taken to a camp or ghetto. If possible, show the station they left from and put that photo next to the modern photograph that you were given at the beginning of the project.
- f) Do not forget captions for all of your photos.
- g) All of this material is to be put neatly on your poster to create your child's biography.
- h) No handwriting will be allowed, except to put your names on the back, along with a list of all the resources you used to create your "biography."

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Reading Questions

Together each group must answer the below questions as you read your assigned book. Type up each section separately, either at school, if computers are available, or at home. Share all the work equally among your group members. You will be graded as a group and individually.

1) Basic Information:

- When and where was the child you read about born?
- Parents’ names and occupations
- Grandparents’ names
- Other family – Siblings – brothers, sisters
- Other family - Aunts, uncles, cousins

2) Your child’s community before the Shoah:

- How many Jews in the community?
- Did they get on well with their Christian neighbors?
- Was there Anti Semitism? A lot? A little? How do you know?

3) The Nazis Arrive:

- Did the Nazis pass laws?
- Did they install a new government or keep the old one?
- Did the town welcome the Nazis?
- What happened to your child during this time?
- Could they stay in school or not?
- Was their experience the same as all the Jews?

4) The Shoah:

- Did your family find a place to escape to?
- Where did they go? (Show this on your maps by drawing a line from their town to their new hiding place.)
- If they found a place to hide, where was it? (other city, private home, forests, farm etc.)
- Describe your child’s experience.
- If they went to a ghetto or camp show their route on your maps and describe the child’s experiences there.

5) If your child survived the Shoah:

- Where did they go before returning to their home?
- What was their experience like on their return home?
- What happened to their community after the Shoah?
- How many people in their community survived?
- Was their community rebuilt after the Shoah?
- Did people leave to live somewhere else and where did they go?

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Book List

Below is the list of books Ilona used in this project. Below each book title you will find the name of the city discussed in the book and the railway station students received a photograph of to begin their research project, as described in the lesson.

Auerbacher, Inge. *I Am A Star*.

Railway station: Orschweier/Mahlberg/Kippenheim Germany

Cohn, Lilo. *A Shadow Over My Life*.

Railway station: Berlin, Germany and then Ship from Genoa, Italy

Eyer, Eleanor, with Helen Waterford and Alfons Heck. *Parallel Journeys*.

Railway station: Frankfurt Am Main, Germany

Gruener, Ruth. *Destined To Live*,

Railway station: Lvov

Levine, Karen. *Hana's Suitcase*.

Railway station: Nove Mesto, Czechoslovakia.

Mortgenstern, Naomi. *The Daughter We Had Always Wanted*.

Railway station: Czortkow, Poland/Ukraine

Pressburger, Chava, ed. *The Diary of Petr Ginz*.

Railway station: Prague, Czechoslovakia

Ransom, Candace. *So Young to Die: The Story of Hannah Szenes*.

Railway station: Budapest, Hungary

Schur, Maxine Rose. *Hannah Szenes: A Song of Light*

Railway station: Budapest, Hungary

Van der Rol, Ruud, and Rian Verhoeven. *Anne Frank: Beyond the Diary*.

Railway station: Aachen, Germany

Wolff, Marion Freyer. *The Shrinking Circle*.

Railway station: Berlin (Bentheim), Germany