



LESSON PLAN: Holocaust Survivors Return to Life

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students examine testimony, artifacts, and letters in order to understand the extreme physical and emotional challenges survivors struggled with after liberation. They also analyze works of poetry and art in order to appreciate the will of the Jewish people to live and their gradual “return to life.”

PART 1: WHAT CHALLENGES DID HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS FACE UPON LIBERATION?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

- 1** As a class, students explore the sources below highlighting the dire physical condition of survivors. They discuss the basic health needs of survivors in the immediate aftermath of liberation:
 - **Video testimony of Charlotte Chaney (bio)**, a 23-year-old American nurse assigned to the Dachau concentration camp in Germany shortly after its liberation in April 1945
 - **Written testimony of Haim Kuznitsky after Liberation** (see handout), who reflects on his weakened physical state after surviving a death march and being liberated near the Neustadt-Glewe concentration camp in Germany
- 2** Students form small groups and learn that they will examine an artifact that was meaningful to a survivor like Haim Kuznitsky during the period of liberation. The **Artifact Analysis** handout is distributed and the instructions are reviewed. The **Artifacts Related to Liberation** handout is then distributed and students immediately fold it back so they can only see the images and not the text. Groups choose one artifact to observe and complete the **See-Think-Wonder** analysis, followed by a group discussion. The class gathers to discuss their reactions and insights. In pairs, students read the **Interview with Franz Stangl** and **Excerpt from Survival in Auschwitz**. They think about how dehumanization made the Final Solution possible from the perspectives of both a perpetrator and a target of Nazi hate. Pairs select one phrase from each reading that most reflects this dehumanization for them. The class engages in a read-around, in which students choose one phrase to read aloud.
- 3** In pairs, students consider the following question: In addition to the physical challenges faced by survivors after liberation, what spiritual or emotional challenges do you think they experienced? As a class, students share their thoughts and reflect on the ways in which spiritual wounds were as devastating as physical ones.
- 4** Students remain in their pairs and are assigned one or more excerpts to read from the handout **First Letters After Liberation**. Students annotate the letters by highlighting and recording margin notes on the emotional challenges faced by each survivor. As a class, students discuss their insights and reflect on the overwhelming hardships survivors had to cope with as they faced their future lives.

PART 2: HOW DID HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS BEGIN A “RETURN TO LIFE”?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

5 The handout *Survivors’ Return to Life* is distributed and students read the introduction together. Students take notes on the handout as they view the testimonies of survivors who reflect on their experiences immediately after liberation: **Anton Mason (bio)**, **Gerda Klein (bio)**, and **David Abrams (bio)**.

6 After viewing the testimony clips, students journal and/or participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions:

- What do the survivors’ expressions, tone, and body language reveal about how they felt upon liberation? How did their stories make you feel?
- What signs of “return to life” most stood out to you? What factors helped survivors to choose life?
- How did the liberators help to “restore humanity” (in Gerda Klein’s words) in the survivors?
- Why did David Abrams refuse to ride in the “welcome wagon” back to his town? How does his choice demonstrate a “return to life”?
- What was your reaction to Gerda’s liberator revealing that he was also Jewish? What feelings might each of them have experienced in that moment?
- How do you interpret Anton Mason’s assertion, “We felt that as long as one is alive, they lost”?
- Gerda says she couldn’t “absorb the wonder of freedom” and Anton comments, “We are free, but how will we live without our families?” What helped them begin to feel free again after so many hardships?

7 Students continue to reflect on the idea of “return to life” by analyzing one of the works of art below. Individually, they choose one piece to think about and engage in a brief written reflection on how the piece symbolizes survivors’ “return to life.” Students then form pairs in which one has focused on the poem and the other on the painting. They share a summary of each work’s meaning and their interpretation of how it relates to “return to life.” As a class, students discuss the artists’ hope and decision to choose life as they coped with the horrors of the Holocaust.

- Poem: “My Life Started from the End” by Halina Birenbaum
- Painting: *Children Alone* by Samuel Bak

8 As a summative task, students respond to the final passage from *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Drawing upon lesson sources, they consider and identify several ways in which that “corpse” might have been able to feel human again, to envision a “return to life.”

“Three days after the liberation of Buchenwald, I became very ill... One day when I was able to get up, I decided to look at myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me.”

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 135 MINUTES