
Narrative links

How can an object help us to narrate the past?

Key Question: How can an object help us to narrate the past?

Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To construct a narrative based on an object
- To synthesise accounts and interpretations
- To reflect on the ethical responsibility of narrating the past

Rationale

UCL research published in 2016 revealed 54.9% of students thought mass murder took place in Germany and noted that knowledge of mass killing in Eastern Europe during the war was also 'very limited'. This lesson focuses on the Vapniarca concentration camp, a camp administered by Romania (an Axis country) and located in Transnistria (now Ukraine). This lesson can help students develop a greater geographical awareness of the Holocaust and learn about the wider involvement of European nations and the diversity of experience of victims of the Holocaust.

Gyula Frenkel was imprisoned in the Vapniarca concentration camp in Transnistria from 1942 until 1943. Whilst in the camp he made a belt from copper and aluminium. Each link depicts the conditions of the camp and tells of his experiences and those of other prisoners. In this lesson, as students encounter the object, they examine each link, make meaning, and construct a narrative. As they then consider an explanation of the links and discover how Frenkel sequenced these, students attempt to synthesise these different narratives and thus reflect on the nature of recounting the past.

This exploration of the nature of narrative, how it is constructed, and the ethical responsibility of recounting the past with fidelity to the experiences of others, can lead to rich discussion. Moreover, it guides students towards considering the value of the belt as a visual account of historical events and its role in memorialisation.

Key Information

- This lesson is intended for Year 8 students and above. It is devised for English classes but could also be used in the history classroom.
- As a stand-alone lesson, it could be taught as part of the English contribution to an off-timetable curriculum day for Holocaust Memorial day marked on 27 January each year.

- Working in groups of four, each group will require the following contained in the PowerPoint: A set of 12 *Photograph sorting cards*, a set of six *Survivors describe similar experiences* cards and the information sheet *Order in which the links are soldered*.
- You may want to provide students with inexpensive mini magnifying glasses.
- Each student will also need a copy of the Information sheet: *Mathias Gal explains the links* found in the Word document.
- Prior knowledge of the history of the Holocaust is required.
- Internet access to make use of <http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>

Lesson Plan

What can be said about these images? (15 minutes)

Small groups of 4 students look at the cut up set of (12) *Photograph sorting cards*. Ask the groups to discuss the photographs of the objects, by considering:

- What do they think the objects are?
- How do these 12 objects relate to each other?

Direct students to summarise what they think the objects are. If they are unsure, explain these are metal links. Encourage groups to explore how they think the links relate to each other. If they struggle, explain that each photograph is of a metal link from a belt.

Ask each student to select three of the 12 photographs. They should study these in detail – you may choose to provide each student with an inexpensive mini magnifying glass. Instruct the groups to:

- Explain what they can see in each of their three selected photographs to the rest of their group.
- Describe to one another the scenes depicted, and where they are able, explain where and when the scene took place.

Discuss the 12 links and the events students think are represented within each scene. Some events will be clearer than others, and at this stage students may not be certain about all of their deductions. This is not a problem, but is as it should be. Once all 12 scenes have been discussed, encourage students to explain what story the belt reveals.

Explain to students that the belt was made by a prisoner of the Vapniarca concentration camp and that each link depicts his experiences and those of other prisoners at the camp (At this point you may want to explore students' ideas of what a concentration camp was or do some preparatory work on camps prior to this lesson. See Additional Information – 'Historical context')

Making connections (10 minutes)

For six of the links there are accompanying extracts of text from survivors describing similar experiences in other camps or ghettos during the Holocaust. Ask students to:

- Read the six extracts on the *Survivors describe similar experiences* cards.

- 'Match' the extracts to the images from the belt. This encourages students to make connections with the images from the belt and the additional text that describes other similar experiences (see Additional Information for biographical details of these survivors).
- Ask students to explain their decisions and explore with them how text and image work in different ways to communicate the events.
- Supplement a couple of the texts with filmed interviews of Flora Carasso and Ruth Brand. Flora Carasso talks about her experience of roll call at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany and Ruth Brand talks about sleeping in the barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp in German-occupied Poland.

Further information on accessing these interviews and how they can be used can be found in the section 'Making connections' in Additional Information.

Creating a narrative (15 minutes)

Ask each group to join with two other groups. Working in this larger group of 12, invite each individual student to take ownership of one of the 12 links. In a class of 24 you will now have 2 groups of 12. With a larger class (of perhaps 28 or 30) students will need to share a link.

Instruct the two large groups to arrange the links so as to create a narrative. Tell students that they can aim for a chronological sequence, or an order which makes 'sense' to them. During the process each individual needs to advocate for the placement of their link. At this stage the groups are making meaning and creating a narrative. Crucially, this is *their* interpretation of the belt links.

Collect feedback from the groups on the process they undertook and the subsequent interpretation they have constructed, ensuring they explain their decisions. You may ask them to take some time to look at the other group's arrangement of the cards.

Another interpretation (10 minutes)

Discuss the fact that the groups have created a narrative using the cards; first by interpreting the images and then placing them in an order.

Explain to students the provenance of the belt. The maker of the belt was Gyula Frenkel. The events at the Vapniarca camp are communicated in a story on the belt as told by Frenkel (see the section 'Historical context' for further information in Additional Information).

Hand out the information sheet: *Mathias Gal's explanation of the links* (the images are not in the order determined by Frenkel). Explain that Gal was another prisoner in the camp and that Gal's explanation of the links can be seen as another interpretation.

Discuss Gal's interpretation. You may choose to focus on links students found the most difficult to decipher, or encourage them to read through all of Gal's explanation. Question whether this additional information clarifies any of the images groups may have been unsure about. Ask students whether they want to rearrange any of the cards in light of this further information.

Synthesising narratives (5 minutes)

Hand out the information sheet: *Order in which the links are soldered*, which shows the original sequence of the links as soldered by Gyula Frenkel. Suggest students compare and contrast the original order with their own.

Students have constructed their narrative, based on their interpretation of the links and in light of information provided by Mathias Gal. Ask them to discuss whether it matters that there exists a 'set' order that the maker intended. The section 'Creating and synthesising narratives' in Additional Information lists other points for discussion.

Plenary (5 minutes)

Explain to students that the belt could be said to connect Frenkel and Gal, and Gal's interpretation connects the belt to Yad Vashem. Yad Vashem and the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education are linked – with the Centre using an artefact from Yad Vashem to create a lesson – and this lesson links Frenkel to the students.

Ask students to consider how, as they tell the story of the belt, they become 'narrative links' themselves; do they have a responsibility to recount the past with fidelity to the experiences of Frenkel?

As a final task, ask students to select 3-5 images which they feel most clearly communicates the experience of the camp prisoners and share their choice with the person next to them.

As a homework, students could write an informative piece based on their selected 3-5 images, describing what life was like in the Vapniarca camp. You may choose to provide students with their chosen images to fix into their exercise books.

Engaging all learners

This lesson uses a range of teaching materials; images, text and film, and is very much centred on group work. In order for all students to feel supported and to encourage group interaction, the careful construction of the groups will be essential to ensuring successful group work. When it comes to their individual homework writing activity students can choose how many links to focus on and the complexity of the links they choose.

Additional Information

Pedagogical guidance

Making connections

When students are engaged in making connections between the images of the belt and the oral history from other survivors it is important they avoid purely 'matching' the pictures to key words in the text (like 'dog'). You can enhance this activity by showing the films of Flora Carasso and Ruth Brand describing their experiences. Watching the two women speak, hearing their voices and seeing their body language, can add to a reading of the transcriptions.

When watching the film of Ruth Brand, look at how she uses her hands to describe sleeping arrangements in the barracks and being packed together in the bunks 'like sardines'. After she says "there was not enough room between us", note how she pauses and looks down, breaking eye contact with the viewer as she articulates this painful memory. She then holds her hands together as she is mentally transported back to the past before making a sharp clap to 'shake off' the image in her mind's eye and resume her account.

Encouraging students to approach Ruth's account in this way develops their skills of analysis and criticality. To help with this, you could try playing the extract initially with the sound on and then off, thereby forcing students to really focus on the use of her hands and facial expressions. Adopting the same approach to Flora Carasso, you can draw students' attention to how she describes the female camp guards, screwing up her eyes as she remembers seeing their "cruel faces". What is revealed by this behaviour? What does it suggest about the impact of these events, and their imprint on Flora?

You can show students these two extracts by using the IWitness resources at

<http://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/>

You will need to register (for free) to create an account and then search for Flora Carasso and Ruth Brand. You can then scroll down to the relevant clips and play them from the site.

- Flora Carasso (clip #46) talks about the roll call at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany.
- Ruth Brand (clips end of #77 'then we were marched in to the barracks', leading on to #78) talks about sleeping in the barracks 'like sardines' at Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp in German-occupied Poland.

In the above ways, students can be encouraged to consider how watching these two films can enhance readings of the text. Should you choose, you could also show students the films of the other extracts included on the cards *Survivors describe similar experiences*:

- Joseph Aleksander (clip #10) talks about deportation to Majdanek concentration camp in German-occupied Poland.
- Henry Goteiner (clip #60) talks about barrack accommodation at Tschenschow-Warta concentration camp in German-occupied Poland.
- Rose Kohn (clip #59) talks about thirst at Auschwitz II Birkenau extermination camp in German-occupied Poland.
- Steven Frank (clip #55) talks about being attacked by a dog whilst at Westerbork transit camp in German-occupied Netherlands.

Biographical notes

Ruth Brand

Born: 1928 Cuhea (Romania)

Date of interview: November 26 1997

Location of interview: Maaleh Adumim, West Bank, Israel

Camps: Auschwitz II Birkenau extermination camp German-occupied Poland, Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp Germany

Ghettos: Dragomiresti, Romania

Flora Carasso

Born: December 11 1935 in Salonika, Greece

Date of interview: April 5 1997

Location of interview: New York, USA

Camps: Bergen-Belsen concentration camp Germany

In hiding in Salonika and Athens, Greece

Joseph Aleksander

Born: August 3 1923 in Warsaw, Poland

Date of interview: June 23 1995

Location of interview: Los Angeles, California, USA

Camps: Auschwitz concentration camp (generic) German-occupied Poland, Buchenwald concentration camp Germany, Majdanek concentration camp German-occupied Poland

Ghettos: Warsaw German-occupied Poland

Henry Goteiner

Born: November 16 1923 in Lodz, Poland

Date of interview: December 17 1996

Location of interview: Boca Raton, Florida, USA

Camps: Buchenwald concentration camp Germany, Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp Germany, Tschenschau-Warta concentration camp German-occupied Poland,

Ghettos: Lodz German-occupied Poland

Hiding in Germany

Rose Kohn

Born: October 10 1924 in Lodz, Poland

Date of interview: January 24 1996

Location of interview: Los Angeles, California, USA

Camps: Auschwitz II Birkenau extermination camp German-occupied Poland, Bergen-Belsen Germany, Geislingen an der Steige Germany.

Ghettos: Lodz German-occupied Poland

Steven Frank

Born: July 27 1935 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Date of interview: June 26 1996

Location of interview: Chorleywood, England, UK

Camps: Barneveld concentration camp The Netherlands, Westerbork camp German-occupied Netherlands

Ghettos: Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia

Creating and synthesising narratives

When students compare and contrast their constructed narratives with that of Gal and the order Frenkel soldered the links together, you can raise some or all of the following questions and issues:

- Whose story is it that we tell? The maker of the belt (Gyula Frenkel), a contemporary of Frenkel's, (Mathias Gal), or our own?
- Do we have a responsibility when re-telling the past to remain faithful to the events when we recount the experiences of someone else?
- How would the students narrate their own lives?
- How would the students want their story to be told?
- Does it matter how someone else might tell the students' life stories?
- Whose narrative takes precedence - Frenkel's or the one we construct in response to the artefact he made?

- In the process of engaging with the images, another story of the learning taking place is created, in what way might this add to the ongoing 'narrative' of the belt?
- In recounting Frenkel's story what role do the students play in securing the memory of the Holocaust?

Plenary

As students tell the story of the belt to you, their teacher, and to each other, in what ways do they become 'narrative links' themselves? Do they have an ethical responsibility to recount the past with fidelity to the experiences of Frenkel?

You may also want to discuss the historical value of the belt in terms of it being a record of events which took place. You could ask students to consider the value of such a visual record.

Finally, you may ask students to consider not only the value of the belt as an account of historical events but also its role in memorialisation. At Yad Vashem, the curators of the belt have written the following about this object:

'His plight, and that of his fellow prisoners is memorialized in this belt, which he made under the brutal and oppressive conditions of camp life'.

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bearing-witness/frenkel.asp>

You might want to discuss the nature of memorialisation and what it is to memorialise. You may ask students to think about this aspect of the belt. They might also ponder what Yad Vashem (The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Israel) means by the words, 'His plight, and that of his fellow prisoners is memorialized in this belt'. Are the experiences it depicts to be memorialised, the experiences of the prisoners more generally or the prisoners themselves? Or does the belt say something about Frenkel's creativity and resilience?

Historical context

In 1942 Iuliu (Gyula) Frenkel (1898-1967) was deported to Vapniarca concentration camp in Transnistria having been incarcerated in Caracal in 1940. From Vapniarca he was moved to the Grosulovo camp in 1943 and then in the March of 1943, to Targu-Liu prison. He was freed on 23 August 1944. During his time in the Vapniarca camp he made the belt from copper and aluminium. The belt is now part of the Yad Vashem artefact collection courtesy of George Frenkel NY, USA and Julius Frenkel, Jerusalem, Israel.

The above information comes from:

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bearing-witness/frenkel.asp>

Vapniarca camp

Vapniarca camp was located in Transnistria (now Ukraine).



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Vapniarca camp was administered by Romania. For historical information about Romania in the Holocaust please visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website:

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/romania>

For an article about the camp system more generally please visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website:

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth>

For information about Transnistria and other related artefacts at Yad Vashem please visit:

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bearing-witness/transnistria.asp>

For a history of the Vapniarca camp please read the chapter from The Nizkor Project in Professor Ihiel Benditer's book 'Vapniarca' which provides an account of his personal experiences in the Vapniarca camp:

<http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/benditer-ihiel.html>

Acknowledgements and bibliography

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<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bearing-witness/frenkel.asp>

For information about other artefacts and Transnistria:

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bearing-witness/transnistria.asp>

Benditer, Ihiel (1995) *Vapniarca* ANAIS Ltd. Excerpts from his book to be found at <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/c/carmelly-felicia/benditer-ihiel.html> it is translated from the Romanian by Felicia (Steigman) Carmelly

Vapniarca information: Shoah Resource Centre, The International school for Holocaust studies www.yadvashem.org

Shapiro, Paul A. (2013) 'Vapniarka: The Archive of the International Tracing Service and the Holocaust in the East', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Volume 27:1 pp114-137.

Films of survivor interviews: USC Shoah Foundation <http://iewitness.usc.edu/SFI/>

Map: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum www.ushmm.org

Article on the concentration camp system: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website – 'Concentration camp system: In depth'

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth>

Article on Romania in the Holocaust: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website – <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/romania>

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