



Authentic encounters

How can original artefacts enrich our understanding of the Holocaust?

Key Question: How can original artefacts enrich our understanding of the Holocaust?

Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To use an everyday object to disrupt students' feeling of connection and familiarity
- Encourage students to question their understanding of the world around them
- Empower students to ask profound questions and search for their own meaning in the past

Rationale

It is often difficult to know how to approach the history of the Holocaust. This lesson does so through a seemingly unrelated, 'ordinary' object – a wooden toy train. By identifying and exploring the people connected with that toy, students are introduced to the story of an English man, his Dutch wife and their young son, all of whom were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The experience of the Greenman family forms a narrative thread connecting a range of the Centre's lessons – **Authentic encounters**, **Pre-war Jewish Life**, **What was the Holocaust?** **An interactive timeline**, and the **Legacy of the Holocaust** materials – which together traverse the complex history of the Holocaust. This lesson can therefore be used to open a Scheme of Work; one centred upon developing independent, student-centred teaching and learning. It seeks to develop historical knowledge and understanding, but also aims at deepening students' disciplinary understanding. In this way the lesson aims for an authentic learning experience where students arrive at their own questions about the past, appreciate its complexity and struggle to make sense and meaning of what they have learnt.

Key Information

- The lesson is intended for Year 9 students and above. It is devised for History classes, but elements can be adapted for other subject specialisms.
- Timings are suggested on the basis of a one hour lesson, and may need modifying accordingly.
- Prior knowledge is not needed. However, do not underestimate the knowledge and conceptions your students may already have. Where appropriate, ensure this is explored and rectified as required.
- For this lesson you will require the accompanying PowerPoint. The short film of Leon Greenman speaking is embedded within this PowerPoint.
- The following lesson plan should be read and used in conjunction with guidance on the accompanying PowerPoint slides. Extensive support on guided questioning is also available in the additional information following the lesson plan.

Lesson Plan

What can be said about an object? (10 minutes)

Introduce students to the object by displaying Slide 2 of the PowerPoint. Ask students to discuss amongst themselves what can be said about the object presented to them. You do not need to tell them from the outset what the object is. Rather, use guided questioning to reveal as much as is possible about the object.

Contextual Narratives (25 minutes)

Purposeful questioning is key throughout this section, so make use of the detailed slide-by-slide guidance available. Equally ensure you are responsive to students and any questions they may have as you build up these contextual layers.

Play the short film of Leon speaking. Use the film so that students can check on their initial deductions, but also to consider what new information it may provide both about the toy train and the Greenman family. With guided questioning build students' hypotheses.

Suggest to students that we can get more detail about the boy Leon refers to – Barney – from looking at Slide 4. With the photograph as a source, encourage students to consider what it can add to their knowledge and understanding of the Greenman family. After discussing the photograph, narrate Barney's birth, the occupation of the Netherlands, and the Greenmans' imprisonment in Westerbork.

As your narration reaches the arrival of the Greenmans at Auschwitz-Birkenau, use the map on Slide 5 to explore students' prior knowledge and understanding of the camp. Address gaps in knowledge and correct any misunderstandings accordingly.

Use Slide 6 – the aerial photographs of Birkenau – to refocus attention on the arrival of the Greenman family. Relay the fate of Barney and Else, employing the photographs to further illustrate the story.

Reflection (5 minutes)

With Slide 7 on display, ask students to consider the process they have just engaged in. Use the guidance available in the additional information to explain to students the stages they have moved through. Encourage them to think about how their perceptions of the object have been

impacted by the knowledge and understanding they now have of its context, and the fate of its owner.

What are the 'deeper layers of meaning'? (20 minutes)

In small groups, invite students to reflect upon the significance of the story behind Barney's toy train. Suggest they consider what issues and themes are to be found in this history, reflect on what the object and its circumstances mean to them, and share with their group the questions they now want answered.

Collect feedback on these discussions, recording on the whiteboard all of the questions and issues raised. To supplement these, display the questions shown on Slide 8. Ask students to identify which questions and issues they would particularly like to explore further in their study of the Holocaust.

Engaging all learners

Effective questioning is central to this lesson. Teachers may need to employ strategies to make sure questions are understood and accessible to some students. This might require some questions to be broken down into two or more parts; similarly, it might be useful not only to ask questions aloud but to reinforce these through written means as well.

Having key questions on cards for instance may help to support students. This approach will potentially raise literacy issues, but by the same token could develop competencies in this area. Providing students with written versions of questions you want to ask could also enable you to stretch higher attaining students in mixed attainment settings.

The card-strategy also offers an opportunity for students to record and respond their own thoughts in writing. Alternatively this objective could be achieved by using Post-It notes which students write on and then affix to printed copies of the image of the toy train. These notes might later be transferred into a recording grid thereby providing students with a framework that can support their learning.

Additional Information

Pedagogical guidance

The lesson offers an important opportunity for students to develop a sense of what it is to 'do history'. The subject is a tentative one, where inferences are made based on careful examination of the evidence available, and then tested with other sources. The toy train sits at the centre of this process of using different sources to refine our understanding of the past. Yet the principle runs throughout the lesson. For instance, using the film extract in tandem with the photographs of Else, Leon and Barney is essential in avoiding the impression the Greenmans were either in dire poverty or comfortably well-off.

In this way the lesson underlines the importance of context. Without this we are in the realm of conjecture, inference and imagination. The initial inferences students make about the toy are important, but can only take them so far. As the lesson progresses it is necessary to layer in further contextual narratives. Listening to Leon speak on film and seeing the photograph of him as a young man help to do this, whilst also enabling students to build a connection with his story.

Ensuring students are aware of historical context is essential to creating an authentic learning experience. By this is meant an approach to teaching which engages students' interest and captures their imagination, but does not seek to use their emotional involvement to manipulate them, to instruct them in 'moral lessons', or to impose a pre-defined meaning on the past. Authenticity comes from students arriving at their own questions about the past, becoming aware of its complexity, and then struggling to make sense of what they have learned, in a continuing 'search for meaning'.

Artefacts, documents, original photographs and film, case studies, personal histories and sites where the historical events took place can all provide opportunities for an authentic encounter with the past. But authenticity also requires a space for learners to make their own meaning. We must avoid an over-mediated presentation of the past. Students' conclusions must be freely arrived at as the result of open discourse, personal reflection, critical thinking and enquiry. The past should not be instrumentalised; meaning should not be predetermined; lessons should not be devised to lead students inevitably to the teacher's way of thinking. The conclusions that young people draw and the questions they ask may be quite different from those in the mind of their teacher, but they will at least be authentic rather than borrowed meanings, if our students have been allowed to arrive at those questions and conclusions freely for themselves.

This does not mean ‘anything goes’. Authenticity presupposes a desire for truth and a respect for evidence. Insisting on students’ right to draw their own conclusions does not imply that all meanings are possible, nor that all are equally valid. Conclusions must be grounded, and constrained by what the historical evidence will reasonably support, if they are to be valid. Clearly, this allows no place for the work of Holocaust deniers, who manipulate the historical record wilfully to distort the past.

Historical context

The following information is intended to help you provide students with required historical context at different stages of the lesson.

When introducing students to the photograph of the Greenman family in their friends’ garden it is essential students are aware the image was taken during occupation. The Netherlands were invaded in May 1940, with the Dutch surrendering to the German army after five days. The country then came under the control of a German civilian administration. The camp at Westerbork was not established by the Germans, however. It was originally established in October 1939 to house illegal Jewish refugees. From 1942 to 1944 it served as a transit camp for Jews deported to extermination camps in the East.

It is likely your students may have misconceptions about Auschwitz. It is important students understand it was part of a vast camp system in Nazi-occupied Europe. Similarly, they need to appreciate there were many types of camps, some of which served several functions. They included:

- Concentration camps
- Death camps
- Forced labour camps
- Prisoner of war camps
- Transit camps

Located in German-occupied Poland, Auschwitz was the largest complex in this camp system and comprised of three main sites, all indicated on this map:

- Auschwitz I Main Camp
- Auschwitz II – Birkenau
- Auschwitz III Buna-Monowitz

In addition there were some 40 sub camps.

The three main camps had similarities but also significant differences. Auschwitz I was a concentration camp, where victims of different categories were subjected to brutal treatment, summary executions, punishing work, malnourishment and terrible living conditions. People were murdered by phenol injections to the heart; thousands of others were shot, hanged,

gassed or subjected to medical experiments. Buna-Monowitz meanwhile was a factory system which used slave labour to produce synthetic oil and rubber for the German war effort. Conditions were also brutal with a very high death rate. Finally, Auschwitz II – Birkenau – served as a concentration camp and as a death camp.

The death camps of Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau were constructed to murder as many human beings as quickly as possible, within hours of their arrival. None of the other camps had this explicit purpose.

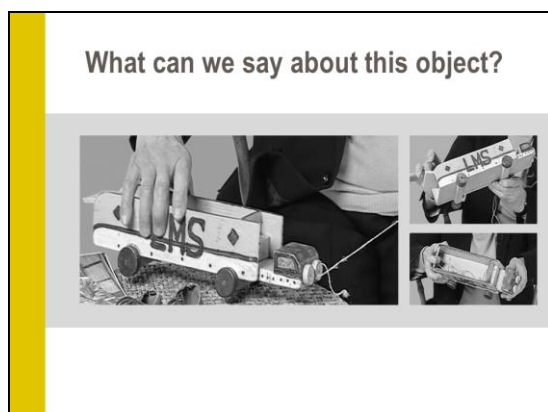
Auschwitz is now synonymous with the iconic image of the guardhouse and train-tracks within the Birkenau camp. However, this railway spur was only constructed in 1944 in response to the spike in arrivals brought by the deportation of Hungarian Jews. Highlighting this to your students is a good instance of how you can challenge and correct their prior understandings and conceptions. It is also important for putting the story of what happened to Barney and Else into its proper historical context. These are issues which you can address by using the aerial reconnaissance photographs included in the PowerPoint slide. You might like to draw attention to the smoke which is visible on one of these images, and explain how this came from open pits dug in 1944. The pits were needed since the rate of killing was so ferocious the crematoria was unable to keep up.

Finally, you may wish to use the aerial reconnaissance photographs to indicate how much the Allied powers 'knew' about the Holocaust, and how they responded to this knowledge. Caution is needed here for these are complex matters and context is crucial. You may wish to broach the question of responses more directly through use of the materials for the Centre's **'Being human?'** lesson.

PowerPoint walkthrough

The following walkthrough takes you through the lesson slide-by-slide. You may find it especially useful for developing guided questioning.

Slide 2: What can be said about this object?



Students should focus only on what they can reasonably deduce from the object itself. You should say nothing about the Holocaust during this stage of the activity. If your students start to speculate about this history steer them away, for speculation of this sort is not supported by the source itself.

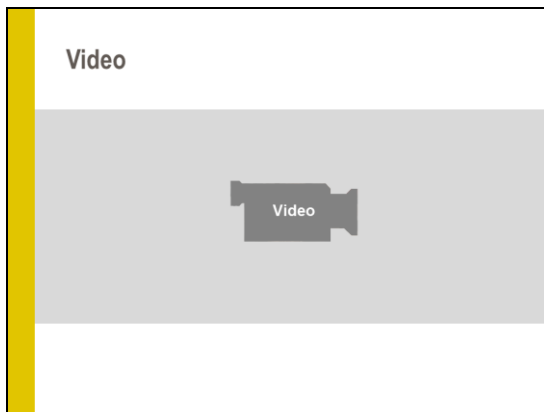
Set up an enquiry question such as 'what can we learn from this object?'

Draw out as much as you can about who your students think owned this toy, who made it, their circumstances, etc. You might want to pose a number of sub-questions:

- What is the object?
- What materials is it made from?
- Who might have owned an object like this?
- Who do you think made it?
- How much time has been taken over it?
- How skilfully has it been done?
- Can we say anything about the wealth or social status of the owner or maker?

To move students on, ask 'how can we find out more?' With a little prompting, someone will suggest asking the person holding the train. This will facilitate transition to the next slide.

Slide 3: Contextual Narratives – Film



Introduce the film clip, explaining Leon is aged 96 years old. Ask students:

- Which inferences made about the object have now been corroborated by this interview?
- What inferences do they need to change or revise?
- What additional information do we now have? How has this helped our knowledge and understanding?
- What were the family's economic circumstances?
- What can we reasonably infer about Leon's relationship with his son?

Since Leon has introduced his little boy, ask students the potential value of learning more about him. As you move to the next slide with its photograph of the Greenmans in summer 1942 explain that in this image Barney is aged two years and three months.

Slide 4: Contextual Narratives – Photography



Encourage students to interrogate this source for further information. Ask:

- What more can we say about the Greenman family?
- What questions do you have about this photograph?

Students may be surprised at how well dressed the family are, given Leon's earlier reference

to having little money. This apparent contradiction should help enrich understanding – he only said that sometimes he '...had no money to buy toys', not that they were in dire poverty. It is evident that our own misconceptions can shape how we read the past.

As you position the photograph in historical context, explain how Barney had by this time spent much of his life under Nazi occupation. Narrate how in October 1942 – just a few months after the photograph was taken – the Greenman family and Else's grandmother were taken to Westerbork in advance of 'deportation to the East'. Emphasise how they did not know what fate awaited them, but rumours were bad and they dreaded deportation. Describe how Leon tried to use his British citizenship to avoid his family being deported, but that the friends he had entrusted with his papers had – for fear of being caught with Jewish documents – destroyed them.

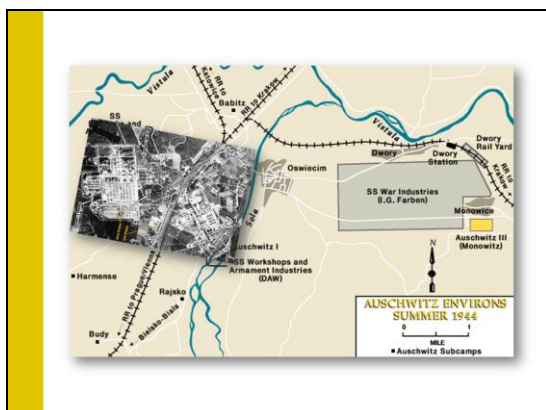
Unable to prove his British citizenship, Leon and his family boarded a train for Auschwitz in January 1943. Recount to students how during the 36 hour journey Leon and Else spoke of the future. Just as Leon told Else that, in the event of him not surviving the war, she should remarry but only if she found someone who would be good to Barney, so she told him the same.

Ask students what does this tell us about how much the Greenman family knew and understood about where they were heading and what fate lay in store for them?

Students should note that there was real dread about deportation, and that Leon and Else both recognised that they may not survive their time in the East. However, it should also be clear that they really did not understand where they were going, shown most clearly in their expectation that Barney would survive. After all, who would harm a two year old child?

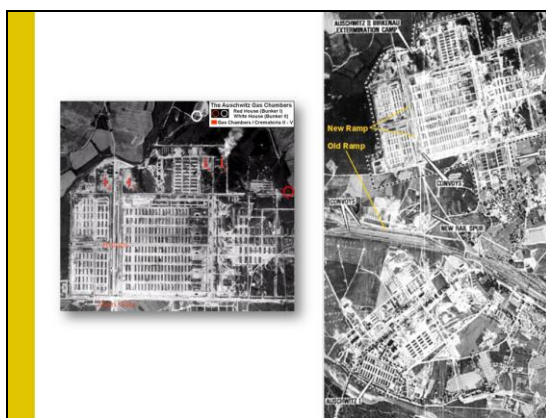
It is striking just how completely unaware they were that Barney – along with the other very young, the old and the sick – was the most vulnerable of all the 700 people on this train. This may be an important point to return to later in your Scheme of Work, as your students are very likely to raise the (important and significant) question about why didn't more Jews fight back. This is an issue explored in depth in another Centre lesson plan and its associated materials.

Slide 5 Contextual Narratives – Maps & Photos of Auschwitz:



Use the map to both explore and correct students' knowledge and understanding, referring to the notes on historical context above as required. Make note of how the map and photograph show the environs of Auschwitz in the summer of 1944 – some 18 months after the arrival of the Greenman family. Ensure students understand that some of the features shown on the map and photographs would not have existed in January 1943 when Leon and his family reached Auschwitz. Point to the railway spur leading into Birkenau as an example.

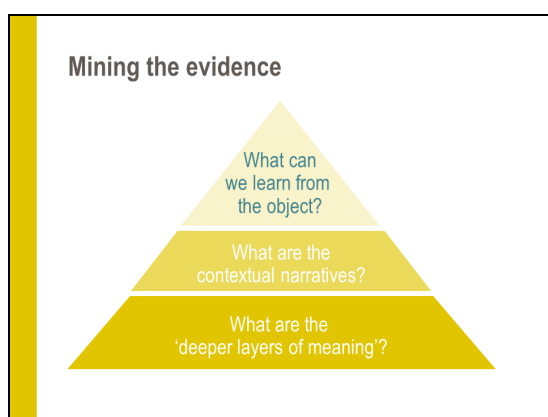
Slide 6 Contextual Narratives – Maps & Photos of Auschwitz:



Indicate the location of the old ramp on the aerial photograph of the map. Narrate the circumstances of Auschwitz-Birkenau at the time of the Greenmans' arrival in January 1943. Remind students that some of the features visible in the photograph did not exist – like the infamous railway tracks inside Birkenau – or were under construction in early 1943, – like the combined gas chamber-crematoria complexes. Describe the events which unfolded after the Greenmans' arrived: how Leon, by virtue of being at the front of his group, was among 50 men who were quickly counted off to work in the camp, and that he caught a glimpse of Else and Barney in the back of an open truck – thanks to the distinctive red velvet peaks of the cloaks Else had made for both of them.

Be clear with students that although we don't have any more eyewitnesses who report what happened next to Else and Barney, we are still able to reconstruct their final moments: this is an opportunity to return to the disciplinary nature of history and role of sources. After establishing how we can claim to know what happened to them (the official documents written by the SS; diaries and letters written by the guards in the camp and documents hidden by the Jewish Sonderkommando who were forced to work in the gas chambers; archaeological evidence; photographs and blueprints from the time; post war testimonies of both perpetrators and survivors) outline how the pair were driven to one of two farm cottages – nicknamed 'the little red house' and 'the little white house' by the SS as one was red brick, the other whitewashed, but officially known as Bunkers One and Two. Both of these former farm houses had been converted by the SS into gas chambers. There Else, Barney and the other 650 people from their train were told to strip for a shower, pushed into one of these buildings and murdered. Their bodies were then buried in a nearby field, in a mass grave. Later, the bodies of tens of thousands of victims were dug up and burned as the Nazis tried to conceal the evidence of their crimes.

Slide 7: Reflection



Allow adequate time for students to absorb and reflect, process and respond to the events you have recounted to them. To move students from the affective into the cognitive domain, invite them to step back and think about the learning process they have undertaken.

Summarise how they began by considering what could be learnt from the object and constructed through discussion quite a detailed profile of what it was, who owned it, how it had been made etc. Remind them they then tested these ideas by listening to Leon (who began to provide historical context), looking at the photograph, and then hearing about what happened to the family.


Having moved through two of these stages ask students to now think about how their initial perceptions of the object have altered in light of it being placed in context. Challenge them to consider what they see as the significance of Barney's train and to think about what questions remain unanswered – the 'deeper layers of meaning'.

You may find it necessary to prompt students as you collect the questions they now have. For this purpose you might ask:

- Although the toy may not be worth anything in monetary terms, is it without value?
- What responses, thoughts, and emotions does the toy now create for you?
- Is the toy any different to when we began the lesson? If so, how?

Slide 8: What are the ‘deeper layers of meaning’?

What are the ‘deeper layers of meaning’?

Does this matter to us today?	Why did they kill Barney Greenman?	Who would kill a two year old child?	How did Leon survive?
What might Barney have done with his life, had he lived?		How did Leon get the toy back?	Why the Jews?
What happened to Barney's killers?		Why didn't they hide or run away?	
How did Leon live with his loss, after the Holocaust?	Did people know what was happening?	Why didn't somebody save Barney?	Why didn't more people fight back?
How was this possible in the modern world?			

In small groups, ask students to think about what issues and questions have been raised by the story of the Greenman family and what they have learned about the Holocaust. Ask them to feedback in plenary.

Make sure you have allowed students adequate opportunity to share their thoughts and questions before concluding with this final slide. Use the questions on this slide as is appropriate: they may serve to reassure students they are not alone in wanting particular answers, and/or they may help to capture the ideas some students might have struggled to articulate. Underline to students how these are large and complex questions which don't necessarily have simple solutions. Conclude by giving students the chance to take ownership of their learning by identifying those questions from their own discussions and from the slide that are of particular interest to them.

Acknowledgements

Lesson plan and materials created by Paul Salmons.

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Artwork by Cheryl Lowe.

Photo of Leon Greenman and family, video extract of Leon Greenman, and photo of the toy train, all used with the kind permission of the Jewish Museum London.

Map of Auschwitz-Birkenau and aerial photos of Auschwitz-Birkenau: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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