

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



WORLD WAR II: A GHETTO DIARY

BRITAIN SINCE 1930

TEACHERS' NOTES

My Year 5/6 class was engaged in learning about Britain since 1930, focusing on World War II. I wanted to add a citizenship element, and it is a personal view that children, even as young as these, should learn that there was more to the Second World War than the military aspect. So we also looked at the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis. I used as my major historical source the *Kovno Ghetto Diary*, written by Avraham Tory between 1941 and 1943.

This was a demonstration lesson on expressive movement for teachers attending an in-service day in Bristol, and with space at a premium I took just half the class along. Teaching in front of 30 teachers in a crowded room is an interesting experience, so the support of two Nuffield Primary History colleagues was welcome. This was a moving lesson, with the children showing insight, feeling and understanding.

Year group/class and teaching time

Sixteen children, mixed ability, mixed age, drawn from Years 5 and 6. Approximately 90 minutes.

Key question

- What was it like for Jewish families transported to the concentration camps?

Resources

The Kovno Ghetto Diary, by Avraham Tory

Music: *Protecting Veil*, by John Tavener.

'Pigtail poem' see <http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/1034.html>

The teaching

Episode 1

Focus: Engaging with prior learning.

The children sat together and we reviewed what they already knew about how the Jews were treated in the cities conquered by the Germans. Details of concentration camps were not discussed since the children had little knowledge of this aspect.

Children did know, however, that Jewish people were forced to wear yellow stars on their clothes if they went out, and were often subject to unprovoked attacks on the street. They also knew that many Jews were transported across Europe, often being separated from their families.

Episode 2

Focus: Group work – establishing characters.

Once the background had been established through discussion, the story could begin. We told the children they were Jews, put them into groups, and told each group to work out their characters together. Each character was to be no younger than the age of the children (a ten year-old trying to be three is always bad news!). They had to establish age, sex, occupation if an adult, and so on. This only took a few minutes.

I then sat the class in a circle and each child, in role, had to say who they were and what they did. We also asked them questions that they had to answer in role.

Episode 3

Focus: Beginning the story; working on the first scene.

I now gave the children the opening of the story. The year was 1941. Each group had gathered at the home of one of them for a meal. They were discussing the war and what might happen to them.

I asked the children, again in their groups, to work out freeze frames (tableaux) to represent this start to the story. They were given just a few minutes.

The groups performed their tableaux, then were told they had just heard on the radio that all Jews had to report to the railway station at 7.00 the next morning. Each person was allowed to take one small suitcase of personal belongings only. Any person not complying with this order would be either forcibly removed or shot. The next scene should reflect their initial response to this news.

Episodes 4 – 6

Focus: Working on the expressive movement story sequence.

For the main body of this long lesson we built a sequence of movement and speech, scene by scene, to tell the story, rehearsing frequently so that the final presentation would run smoothly. I announced the change from one scene to another. Some scenes included speech and/or expressive movement, while others were still tableaux (freeze frames).

The sequence ran as follows:

The meal and the radio announcement

Gathering belongings together, closing the suitcase (with movement and speech).

Arrival at the station. For these scenes I involved a colleague as a Nazi guard, who shouted unpleasant orders at the children as they made their tableaux.

Boarding the cattle trucks, having had their suitcases taken away. Families were separated (expressive movement).

The journey (with speech).

Arrival: the gates of the truck are opened.

Walking towards the gates of the concentration camp (movement, then freeze frame).

At this point we stopped.

Episode 7

Focus: Conclusion – the final scene; tableaux, music and poetry.

For the final presentation we introduced music. I used Tavener's *Protecting Veil* as the background for the arrival at the camp scene. The opening few minutes of this music is highly evocative.

At the conclusion, the children froze their final tableau (number 7) while we read the 'Pigtail' poem from the Auschwitz Museum given here. <http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/1034.html>

Reflection/evaluation

The process of the lesson was slightly artificial since the children were being watched, and they were aware of the 'performance' nature of their responses.

The teaching should ideally have had two full one-hour lessons, instead of the 90 minutes allowed. I knew that we had to get to the end in the time available; the sequence was therefore rather rushed. To balance this out the additional two adults contributed significantly to the outcome, and the end was a moving occasion, with children and adults sharing in the sympathy and sadness of the moment.

Nuffield Primary History project

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