

WORKSHOPS FOR ISRAELI AND POLISH YOUTH

“LETTERS TO HENIO - WORKSHOP ON THE DIFFICULT MEMORY
OF JEWISH CHILDREN WHO PERISHED IN THE HOLOCAUST”

“GRODZKA GATE – NN THEATRE CENTRE”, LUBLIN 2010.

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Educational workshop based on the story of Jewish family Żytomirski, living in Lublin before World War II. The participants will learn about life in Lublin during World War II (about Jewish and Polish communities). The workshop includes 3 exercises, during which Israelis and Poles work together in groups. In the end everybody writes a letter to Henio Żytomirski – small boy, who was killed in Holocaust and became an icon of suffering of Jewish nation in World War II.

Workshop time: 120 min.

Target group: students of secondary schools in Poland and Israel.

Number of participants: 30 people.

Number of working groups: 2.

After the workshops, participants will be able to:

- describe the common history of Poles and Jews, on the example of Lublin before 1939,
- identify the common elements of cultural and scientific life of both nations in the history of Lublin (called by the Jews "the Jerusalem of the Polish Kingdom" and "the Jewish Oxford")
- understand the issue of multiculturalism and approach the "others" in a sensitive way,
- understand functioning of cultural stereotypes,
- work with the documents (textual and iconographical) in order to cultivate knowledge of their own roots.

Needed materials:

- photographs [annex 1 – photographers 1-20 and annex 13],
- self-adhesive labels (20-40 pieces),
- colored paper (5 blocks),
- 4 large gray paper,
- markers (6 pieces),
- pens (30 pieces),
- A4 papers (40 pieces),
- envelopes (30 pieces),
- flipchart and magnets.

Workshop

Introduction to the workshop (5 min.)

The moderator welcomes the participants and asks, to sit in a circle.

1. Exercise – Write your name (10 min.)

Needed materials: self-adhesive labels (20-40 pieces).

Participants sit in a circle. Each person receives a self-adhesive label and writes his/her name in their own language. The Poles ask the Israelis, how to write their names in Hebrew and write the names of Israelis in Polish. As a result, each participant has a label with his/her name written in two languages. All participants stand in a circle and read their names loud.

2. Introduction to the exercises – The symbolism of the space, the “other”, (10 min.)

Needed materials: pens, annex 1a.

The moderator starts a discussion, asking questions about the "other", "foreign":

- could it happen, that we do not like people, whom we don't know?
- why does it happen? (because of fear, habits, prejudices),
- what are the culture stereotypes?
- is it important to keep the memory about historical events?
- why is it important to know our own culture? (by knowing our own culture, we can understand the others),
- is it possible to talk about the history of a place?

The moderator explains the symbolism of the Gate Grodzka, that used to be a connection between Jewish and Christian town in Lublin [materials for moderators – annexes 4a-10].

The moderator divides the participants into two mixed Israeli-Polish groups and asks to sit in earlier prepared work-places.

The teachers (if attending the workshop) are asked to complete the questionnaire [annex 1.a.].

3. Exercise – Matching elements. Lublin, Poland before the war, and today (20 min.)

Needed materials: photos [Annex 1: Photos 1-20], flipchart, markers and magnets.

Both groups get a set of photos, that should be matched together. The participants can arrange them in a free way (for example, picture of an empty street – Szeroka Street – could be matched not only with contemporary images of Lublin, but also with the photo of the synagogue). First group receives a set consisting of images: 1, 3, 5, 8-14, while the second group gets photos: 2, 4, 6, 7, 15-20.

Each group explains the other, why they have matched pictures in such way. Photos are hung on the flipchart (or put on the floor/table). The moderator asks that the first group to choose the image, that could be the most symbolic sign of the past of Lublin, and the second group – to choose the picture corresponding to the modern Lublin. The moderator should use the photo descriptions in annex 11.

At the end of the activity the moderator explains, that the child appearing in some photos is Henio Żytomirski.

Pictures stay, where the participants put them. The participants are asked to gather around the photos and the moderator asks to characterize pre-war Lublin, the birth place of Henio Żytomirski, basing on the photos. Some questions might be asked:

- What was the role of a synagogue in a Jewish town? (it was a place of prayer and teaching, the largest synagogue in Lublin was Maharshalshul located close to Szeroka Street, near the Castle Hill. It was destroyed during and after the war),
- How to identify other nationalities? (by national symbols, language, coats, behavior, dress, etc.),
- What does mean the fact, that before the war there were printing houses in Lublin – newspapers and books (also in Yiddish) were published? (it was a center of science, culture and spiritual life, called by the Jews "Jerusalem of the Polish Kingdom" or "Jewish Oxford"),
- What is Yiddish? (vanishing language of Ashkenazi Jews).

The moderator asks one person to read the piece of written oral history [annex 1.b-1.d] and asks, if participants know any famous people coming from Lublin. The moderator tells about first Jews in the town [annex 7] and the appearance of the Jewish quarter in Podzamcze before the war. The moderator stresses, that Lublin was a town of culture, science and art, full of interesting personalities [annex 5 and 6].

4. Exercise – The story of one family – Henio Żytomirski (10 min.)

Materials needed: photos [annex 1: Photos 1-20], flipchart, markers, and magnets.

Among the photos there are some showing places associated with the history of the Żytomirski family. The moderator asks the participants to find them. Some questions could be asked:

- What pictures show Henio's family? [Photos 13, 14, 15,]
- What does a "home" mean?
- Which photo shows a view from the window of Henio's grandfather house? [Picture 4]
- What happens in the street?
- What kind of people are there?
- Why is Henio dressed like a king? (it's his birthday, which was in spring time – around Purim – the Jewish holiday, commemorating liberation of Jews by Princess Esther, on Purim women dress up as men, and men as women, children play the story from the Book of Esther).

The moderator asks participants to find a picture of a family at a bus stop [picture 14]. He asks, who the leaving people could be and where they might be going (part of the family emigrated to Palestine in 1937, in 1930's, as there were anti-Semitic persecutions in Poland, many Jews, mostly Zionists, were leaving to Palestine).

The moderator informs, when Henio was born and asks to count, how old he was when the war started (6 years). The moderator asks to identify pictures, where Henio is the oldest (the last picture of Henio was taken in the summer 1939). The moderator asks participants to try to describe the Lublin during the war:

- What pictures do not show people? Could the destruction of the town be seen there?
- How did people look like in the ghetto? (they seem to look normal, they were not expecting the scale of genocide that was going to happen),
- What were conditions in the ghetto? (several families living together in one apartment, poor sanitation, lack of intimacy).

The moderator informs about the ghetto in Lublin (in Podzamcze district – it was established by the Nazis in 1941 and gradually liquidated – in 1942 there was a final liquidation of the ghetto in Lublin and other Polish towns – remaining there Jews were killed or transported to the death camp in Belzec) [annex 7].

The moderator asks participants to point out to the differences between the images taken in the Jewish quarter before and during the war (in 1941 Jews in the ghetto were wearing ribbons on their sleeves with the Star of David). Where could Henio be at that time? (is leaving family home, like all Jews in the town – moving to the ghetto, to a house on Kowalska Street 11 – photo 8).

The moderator asks participants to find Henio's father's letter and check:

- Who is the addressee (Henio's uncle, Leon, who had emigrated to Palestine),
- When was the letter sent? (March 7, 1943),
- What does it say? (participants read aloud the letter in Polish and Hebrew),
- What does it mean, that Henio and father were together? (they survived, most probably the rest of the family is elsewhere, where?),
- Why is the letter so short? (censorship),
- Why is there a sign of the cross on the letter? (letters were sent through the Red Cross, after the war this organization was helping people to find their families),
- Where is the Żytomirski family, where is Henio? (after the liquidation of the ghetto Jews were deported to the extermination camp in Belzec. Men, who could work, were often sent to the Majdanek concentration camp. Probably there was Samuel Żytomirski with his son Henio.)

The moderator asks participants to find photographs of three books for children (primers):

- What was the difference between primers for Polish and Jewish children?
- What was the world Henio was learning about from the primer?
- What happened to the Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian and Jewish children during the war? (some Jewish mothers were leaving their babies in Polish families. Jewish children, when placed in concentration camps, were immediately sent to the gas chambers, while children of other nationalities could usually stay with their mothers),
- how did Lublin look like before the war? The moderator asks the two participants from the second group to read pieces of the oral history [annex 1.b],
- What has happened to the non-Jewish children in concentration camps (died or survived) – the moderator asks two persons to read the survivor testimonies [annex 1.c, 1.d] (Polish participant and the participant from Israel).

Unsigned photos may provoke participants to read the symbolic emptiness of the world, that does not exist anymore [Photo 5, 19 and 20].

To sum up the exercise, the moderator asks, how we know, that there was someone like Henio, yet thousands of children were killed in death camps, without giving them numbers and writing their names in Nazi documentation? (Through documents, such as letters or photographs, family stories, for example Neta Żytomirska-Avidar's family history [annex 4.b] or "Letters to Henio" Project [annex 8]).

5. Exercise – My family tree (20 min.)

Materials needed: [annex. 2], pens, cards.

In both groups participants sit in Polish-Israeli pairs. All participants receive a card [annex 2] and fill it with the names of members of their families. The moderator encourages participants to teach each other such words in Hebrew and Polish as "mom," "daddy," "I", "family", "home", "address", etc.

The moderator asks, what kind of problems participants had while filling the family tree and asks participants to take and finish filling them at home.

6. Exercise – The Żytomirski's Family Tree (10 min.)

Materials needed: [annex 3-3.c], markers, 4 big papers.

Participants are divided into four groups, each group receives one large paper to draw the Żytomirski's family tree, basing on some attachments [annex 3-3.c]. (The moderator explains, that some of the materials were reconstructed by Neta Żytomirska- Avidar). Participants have five minutes to draw the trees – two groups start from the side of Neta Żytomirska- Avidar and two other groups start from Henio. In the end all the groups compare their trees. The moderator tells the story of Neta Żytomirska- Avidar.

Summary of the exercise (10 min.)

The moderator rises questions:

- What is a document? (witness of the history in various forms – oral testimony, photography, letters, legal documents, maps, etc.)
- How could be documents useful? (they teach about the past)
- How can we avoid giving unjustified judgments about other cultures, other people? (learning, gaining knowledge about the world, its traditions and other cultures, without assuming aggressive mindless ideological attitudes and stereotypes)
- What makes our knowledge of the world limited? (other manners, habits, religious beliefs, political views, ignorance, aggression, fear of social rejection, lack of capacity of independent thinking, distrust),
- Has the workshop changed the participants thinking about the document and perception of other nationalities?

The moderator thanks all participants for attending the workshop and invites to write a letter to Henio.

7. Writing letters to Henio Żytomirski (25 min.)

Materials needed: papers, pens, envelopes.

Participants write letters to Henio Żytomirski (in any language).

The moderator explains how to address a letter (Szewska Street 3, Lublin) and why it is important to write such a letter. Thus we commemorate the history of Henio, instead being one of the many victims of the Holocaust, he gets his name back, is not anonymous, as people were in concentration camps, where their identity was taken away and replaced with a numbers. Letters to Henio are symbolical protest against wars and nationalism, as Henio, a child, is a symbol of innocence.

Summary of the workshop

The moderator shows two photographs [number 7 and 21]: the last photograph of Henio and a modern picture of the place, where he was standing (Cracow Suburb Street 64). We can see a larger void, remaining after the World War II in Lublin and in many other Polish towns, where once Jews used to live. The moderator emphasizes, how important it is to remember and commemorate the past, especially if it could be still seen in the area of the city's architecture.