

Educational workshop “Letters to Henio”

“Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre

Created by: Aleksandra Zińczuk

Developed by: Aleksandra Zińczuk, Agnieszka Zachariewicz (2010)

Updated by: Dominika Majuk, Izabela Czumak (2014)

Translated by: Jarosław Kobyłko

The present workshop is a part of the “Letters to Henio” (Pol. *Listy do Henia*) artistic and educational project which has been implemented at the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre since 2005, to celebrate the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Counteracting Crimes Against Humanity (19 April).

The workshop aims to discuss the genocide of Lublin Jews using the example of an individual child. Henio (little Henryk) Żytomirski was born to an assimilated Jewish family. He was six years old when the Second World War broke out. Thanks to the preserved family photo album, the participants of the workshop learn about the life of Henio and his family up until the times of the Holocaust. In 1941, they all had to move to the Lublin ghetto. In Spring 1942, the liquidation of the ghetto began, and Henio shared the fate of thousands of Jews from Lublin.

In the course of the workshop, young people also learn about the atmosphere of the Polish-Jewish Lublin and its war and post-war history, using the provided source material (photographs, oral history documents, memories). At the end of the workshop, the participants write letters to Henio which are later sent to one of the Żytomirski family’s former addresses. This activity commemorates individual victims of the Holocaust and encourages an intimate reflection upon the history of the extermination of Lublin Jews.

The workshop also improves inter-cultural skills, teaching empathy towards the Other and transgression of cultural barriers and stereotypes.

Duration of the workshop: 90 minutes

Target group: middle school/high school pupils

Number of participants: up to 30

After the workshop, each participant will be able to:

- discuss the shared history of Poles and Jews against the backdrop of the history of Lublin before 1939,
- indicate the common elements of the daily life of the two communities in the history of Lublin,
- discuss the fate of the Jewish community in Lublin during the war,
- create a genealogical tree,
- write a letter and address it correctly,
- transgress cultural frontiers and understand the mechanism behind cultural stereotypes,
- work with written and iconographic documents.

Required materials:

- printouts of the annexes,
- 2 large (A3) sheets of paper,
- marker pens,
- ball pens (30 pcs.),
- A4 paper sheets (30 pcs.),
- envelopes and postage stamps (30 pcs.),
- a flip chart and magnets.

Workshop plan

1. Introduction (5 mins.)

The instructor welcomes the participants, and initiates a short conversation asking if it is important to preserve the memory of the past. Then, they ask the participants if they know the significance of the date of 19 April. The instructor explains that it is the date on which the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started (19 April 1943). Nowadays, this day is celebrated as the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Counteracting Crimes Against Humanity. The instructor explains to the participants that their involvement in the workshop can be their personal contribution to commemorating the victims of the Holocaust.

2. Exercise – photographs tell the story of Lublin (20 mins.)

Required materials: flip chart, magnets.

The instructor divides the participants into two groups and invites them to take seats at two tables. Each group receives a different set of photographs thematically related with the cultural heritage of Lublin [annex 2.1]. The instructor asks the participants to pair photographs that, in their opinion, are related to each other. There is no correct choice, photographs can be paired freely. The objective of the task is that the participants get acquainted with the iconographic material and recognize relations between photographs.

On the basis of the photographs from both sets, the instructor moderates a discussion during which the participants learn about various aspects of the history of Lublin. The instructor asks questions ranging from the issues of the pre-war period, the times of war, all the way to the present times. Having discussed the photographs related with subsequent historic periods, they ask the participants to read out the fragments of oral history documents from the collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre, which form a commentary to the photographs.

Both groups are asked questions alternately:

PRE-WAR LUBLIN

- **Which photographs depict streets of the pre-war Lublin?**

Szeroka St. (2), Nowa St. (12), Grodzka Gate (13)

- **Which photographs attest to the multicultural history of Lublin?**

daily newspapers in Polish and Yiddish language (1, 7), school primers in Polish and Hebrew (9, 11), the Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva (9), Orthodox and Catholic churches (14), synagogue (10, 15), new Jewish cemetery (3), clothes of people on the street, shop signboards, advertisements (12).

The instructor asks the participants to read out two excerpts from Julia Hartwig’s account [annex 2.2].

WARTIME LUBLIN:

- **Which photographs provide information about the situation of the Jewish population during the war?**

Since 1939, Jews were forced to wear armbands with the Star of David; the Germans requisitioned metal balustrades from the balconies and other metal pieces from the houses in the Jewish quarter (8). On 24 March 1941, a ghetto was established in the Podzamcze area. It existed until 19 April 1942, with extremely poor housing, sanitary and health conditions, suffering also from lack of food (16).

- **Which photographs depict the Jewish quarter after the liquidation of the ghetto?**

The liquidation of the ghetto began on the night from 16 to 17 March 1942. It was the first stage of extermination of Jews within the *Aktion Reinhardt* – the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” devised by the Nazi Germans. 28,000 Jews were transported to the Bełżec extermination camp and some 8,000 to a smaller ghetto in the Majdan Tatarski district of Lublin. The last mass killing of Lublin Jews took place on 3 November 1943, in the course of the *Aktion Erntefest* (Operation Harvest Festival). 18,000 people were shot at the Majdanek camp, and the Jewish quarter ceased to exist. The buildings were later gradually razed (4, 10).

The instructor asks the participants to read out two excerpts: from the account of Mieczysław Kurzątkowski and the account of Irena Gewerc-Gottlieb [annex 2.3].

CONTEMPORARY LUBLIN

- **Which photographs depict still existing sites in Lublin related with the Jewish community?**

New Jewish cemetery (3), yeshiva (5), Grodzka Gate (13).

- **Which photographs depict changes in the cityscape where the Jewish quarter once was?**

Castle Square (6), view from the castle hill (14).

3. Exercise – Henio’s family photo album (20 mins.)

Required materials: flip chart, magnets.

OPTION I

The participants remained divided into two groups. The instructor informs that they are about to receive photographs from the album of the Żytomirski family from Lublin. Each of the groups is again given a different set of photographs [annex 3.1]. Their task is to arrange each set in chronological order. The arranged photographs become a basis for reconstruction of the history of the family.

Each of the groups is then asked to present their arranged set of photographs to other participants. First, the instructor asks six members of group 1 to take one photograph each and line up, so that the photographs are presented in chronological order. The instructor then asks questions, giving clues and, if necessary, revising the presented order of photographs. The correct answers are determined based on the descriptions of the photographs [annex 3.2] and additional information about the Żytomirski family [annex 3.3].

Questions for group I:

KEY: order of photographs: 2 – 6 – 5 – 3 – 1 – 4

1. What were the names of Henio’s parents? When was Henio Żytomirski born? (photo 2)
2. Where did Henio Żytomirski and his parents live? (6)
3. Who is holding Henio in their arms? How old is Henio? (5)
4. Who is the girl that is sitting on a chair with Henio? Where was the photograph taken? (3)
5. The instructor asks one of the participants to read out loud the excerpt from the memories of Esther Bernhard (nee Rechtman), who was photographed together with Henio [annex 3.4].
6. Where is Leon Żytomirski going to? Why is he leaving Lublin? (1)
7. What place in Lublin appears in the photograph? (4)

Having established the correct order of photographs that group I received, the instructor invites 6 members of group II. Like with group I, the instructor determines the chronological order of photographs, asking questions:

Questions for group II:

KEY: order of photographs: 9 – 12 – 7 – 11 – 10 – 8

1. What was the name of Henio Żytomirski's grandfather? What are the names of other, more distant relatives? (photograph 9)
2. Where is Henio Żytomirski in the photograph? Why is he a king? How can we tell that the family is of Jewish descent? (12)
3. Who is taking a walk with Henio? From what family did Henio come from – a Polish or a Jewish one? How can we tell? Was it a traditional or an assimilated family? (7)
4. Where was the photograph taken? How old might Henio be? (11)
5. What street is depicted in the photograph? In what period was this photograph taken? (10)
6. The instructor asks one of the participants to read out loud the excerpt from the memories of Józefa Paciorkowa, who was accommodated in the 3, Szewska St. tenement house after the Żytomirski family was expelled from there and transferred to the ghetto, to the Kowalska St., shown in the photograph [annex 3.5].
7. 12. Where is the letter from? Who are the sender and the addressee? What can we find out about Henio from this letter? (8)

Having established the correct order of photographs in each group, the instructor reads out the dates on which the photographs were taken, each time calling the participant who held the respective photograph. 12 participants from both groups form a semicircle, presenting the chronological order of the photographs, according to the Key. The instructor once again asks the participants to look carefully at the photographs, as if they were looking at Henio's family album.

KEY: order of photographs in groups I and II: 9 – 2 – 6 – 5 – 12 – 3 – 1 – 7 – 11 – 10 – 8 – 4

OPTION II

The person conducting the workshop divides the participants into 4 groups. Each group receives a set of photographs from the Henio Żytomirski album [annex 3.6] and a selection of photo captions, extracted from the commentaries done by Neta Żytomirska-Avidar [annex 3.7]. The task is to match the pictures with the captions and to organise them chronologically.

The next task is to discuss the pictures in groups, analysing both the photograph and the text underneath. The person conducting the workshop checks and corrects the content, giving additional information connected with Henio and his family life [annex 3.8]. While discussing the last picture, participants, together with the educator, think about Henio's possible wartime fate.

If needed, the term 'Holocaust' is explained.

The person leading the workshop informs the participants on the sources of information on Henio's life story and provides them with the biography of Neta Żytomirska-Avidar [annex 3.9].

4. Exercise – my genealogical tree (5 mins.)

Required materials: 30 printouts of the worksheet [annex 4.1], ball pens.

The scheme of a genealogical tree is distributed to all participants [annex 4.1]. The instructor asks them to fill it according to their knowledge. When the task is completed, the instructor asks about problems encountered by the participants while creating genealogical trees of their families. They suggest that each participant take their tree home and, if needed, complete any missing information together with their family.

5. Exercise – Henio and Neta: the Żytomirski family genealogical tree (15 mins.)

Required materials: marker pens, coloured pencils, 2 or 4 A3 sheets of paper.

The instructor asks the participants how do we know the story of Henio, given that the boy and his closest relatives died in Lublin during the war. The instructor explains that all photographs and documents used during the workshop were deposited in the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre in 2002 thanks to a cousin of Henio’s. Neta Żytomirska-Avidar, born in 1943 in Palestine, daughter of Leon Żytomirski, brother of Henio’s father, had brought the family album to Lublin. Leon was the only member of the Żytomirski family to survive the Holocaust [annex 5.1].

The instructor divides the participants into 2 or 4 groups. Each group is given a large sheet of paper and writing implements. Their task is to create a graphical representation of the Żytomirski family genealogical tree, using additional information and provided material [annex 5.2]. One group draws the genealogical tree of Henio Żytomirski, the other – of Neta Żytomirska-Avidar.

At the end of the exercise, both groups present the results of their work. Commenting on both genealogical trees, the instructor asks about the biggest difference between them. Neta’s tree shows the continuation of the family history in the form of her children, contrary to Henio’s tree, where the boy is the last member of the family.

6. Exercise – Let’s write Henio a letter (15 mins.)

Required materials: 30 A4 paper sheets, ball pens, envelopes, postage stamps.

The instructor shows the participants the last two photographs of Henio (4) and a contemporary photograph of the site where he was photographed – 64, Krakowskie Przedmieście St. (11).

Juxtaposing these photographs, we see the huge void that was left after the Jewish population of Lublin virtually disappeared during the Second World War. Thanks to the material presented during the workshop, the story of a single person, a little boy, can serve as a reminder of the fate of all Jewish inhabitants of Lublin and other cities and towns, murdered in the times of the German occupation.

It is likely that we will never obtain accurate information about the last days of Henio’s life. The information that we have is based on general historical knowledge and hypotheses which clearly speaks to the grade of difficulty of reconstructing the fate of millions of Jews who perished during the Holocaust. There are ever fewer witnesses of those times among us, the surviving documents are scarce, and many pre-war buildings and streets no longer exist. That is why it is so important that we remember and engage in commemorative actions which allow us to empathize with the victims.

The instructor invites the participants to write their own letters to Henio. This activity commemorates individual victims of the Holocaust and inspires a personal reflection upon the history of the extermination of the Jews of Lublin.

The instructor hands out sheets of paper, pens, envelopes and stamps, and explains how to address such letter, using one of the Lublin addresses where Henio lived: no. 3, Szewska St. or no. 11, Kowalska St., and where to place one’s own name as the sender.

7. Conclusion (5 mins.)

Closing the workshop, the instructor acquaints the participants with other activities carried out by the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre in the course of the “Letters to Henio” project [annex 7.1]. The instructor thanks the participants for their contribution to the workshop.



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