

Lesson

Duration:

Two 50-minute class periods

Interdisciplinary: Creative Expression in the Ghetto in Petr Ginz's Diary

Learning Objectives

In this lesson students explore the artwork and writings Petr Ginz created during his imprisonment in the Theresienstadt ghetto. They consider the value of creative expression as a means to cope with oppression. It may be helpful for educators to read the entirety of Petr's diary prior to this lesson because of its unique format.

Educators and students are encouraged to read the introduction to Petr Ginz's diary in *Salvaged Pages*, pages 160–67. It provides valuable information about the writer's life as well as a historical context for a reading of the diary.

Overview

This lesson was initially drafted by Holocaust educator Colleen Tambuscio.

The need to record one's experience during the Holocaust was not limited to the written word. Young people expressed themselves, revealed their private thoughts, and documented their everyday lives during wartime in a variety of ways.

Petr Ginz was one such artist. Deported from Prague to the Theresienstadt ghetto in October 1942 at the age of fourteen, Petr continued to write, paint, draw, and produce graphic arts inside the ghetto.¹ He accomplished this in the context of a vibrant cultural life in Theresienstadt and with the help of educators who encouraged young people to continue their creative lives despite their imprisonment and in defiance of their oppressors.

While Petr's diary does not reveal in depth his thoughts and feelings, his surviving artwork and writing stands as testament to his experiences in Theresienstadt and his efforts to pursue creative outlets to express and overcome them.

Focus Questions

The Nazis humiliated Jews and other targeted groups in order to strip away their humanity, making it easier to oppress them. In spite of these efforts, young people continued to create and leave a human record of their lives both through writing and through art.

- How does the historical context affect your interpretation and understanding of a piece of writing or artwork?

- How does understanding who created the art or composed the writing affect your interpretation of their work?
- Consider the conditions young people endured during the Holocaust and the fact they continued to create art. How does this perspective affect your understanding, your appreciation, or your value of what was created?
- Do creative and intellectual efforts constitute resistance during the Holocaust? If not, what word would you use to describe those intellectual and artistic efforts?

Citations

¹ Throughout this lesson Theresienstadt will be primarily used to refer to the ghetto and the specific time of German occupation rather than using the name of the town, Terezín.

Activities

Opener: Reading a Diary Entry from Petr Ginz

Begin the lesson by asking students to reflect on the first two Focus Questions for this lesson. Discuss them as a large group:

- How does the historical context affect your interpretation and understanding of a piece of writing or artwork?
- How does understanding who created the art or composed the writing affect your interpretation of their work?

Explain that the lesson and diary of Petr Ginz is a bit different than the others in *Salvaged Pages*. His diary is not lengthy. He did not make daily entries nor did he write in a narrative form. Rather his diary consists of just a handful of entries, lists of “Plans,” his notes of what he wanted to accomplish in the coming month, and “Reports” listing what he actually accomplished. To get a sense of his diary introduce the following to students:

Diary Entry

9.2 [February 9] 1944. Wednesday (evening, in bed)

Nothing special. At lunchtime we had Gebäck [bread], soup (a good one, with meat, I would accept no other), and porridge in the Magdeburg [barrack]. There are no potatoes in the ghetto. I cleaned the cooks' shoes for the first time. I do not intend to write here any rambling essays like I saw in Wolker's diary, but only little things [that are] to the point, which I will be able to use as points of reference that will help me remember and reproduce the events as they happened with appropriate colorfulness. At eight o'clock we had a Chinese poetry evening organized by Jelínek. The most important idea of his introduction: People are the same everywhere. Chinese poetry is poetry of the people.²

Plans

For November [1943]

Finish Ceylon [a novel Petr was writing]

Get to know perfectly a brief history of humankind.

To write my contributions (the better ones) from the magazine [Vedem] + 5 pictures-

Instead of the history of humankind: Plato +

Reports

November [1943]:

Continued to work on Ceylon (all together 136 pages of manuscript already) Bookbinding

Picture: (From the Feast)

Lino-cut: A Medieval Mythological Ship

Have written down the best contributions from the magazine [Vedem] New contributions

[to Vedem].

Have read: Plato's Euthyphro, Crito, Apology of Socrates, part of Phaedo.

I couldn't do more because of unsettled conditions at the end of the month. (German visits, calls-ups to do labor, Strassenreinigung [street sweeping])

Discuss with students their initial impression of Petr Ginz based on these entries. What do they notice? What appears to be the focus of his attention? What more would they like to know?

It is very important in this activity for students to have some familiarity with the history of the Theresienstadt ghetto. If students are familiar with it, how do these entries reinforce their background knowledge? If they are not familiar with it, read together a [description of Theresienstadt](#) and the [summary of the German occupation of Czechoslovakia](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website.

Main Activity: Learning About Petr Ginz Through Creative Expression

In the "Plan" and "Report" above, Petr Ginz refers to the magazine *Vedem* (Czech for *In the Lead*). *Vedem* was a secret camp magazine written in Theresienstadt by the boys in Home One barracks from 1942–1944. It was edited by Petr Ginz. The magazine included articles, poetry, plays, short stories, and artwork. Working on it occupied the time of these young men. Through these pages we see the full breadth of Petr's, and many others, creative and intellectual efforts.

Begin by showing students the following short film "[Petr Ginz and the Boys of Vedem](#)." It is found on the website Centropa, an organization dedicated to preserving 20th century Jewish family stories

from Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Ask students what new information about Petr, Theresienstadt, or *Vedem* they learned from the film. Ask them to share their responses to the film. If students would like further information, you can direct them to the [Vedem website](#).

Post on tables, or around the classroom, the artwork and accompanying entries (when they align) from [the gallery below](#). Have students do a silent [Gallery Walk](#). Ask them to remain quiet as well as disperse themselves as they move through the room viewing the source materials.

Have students return to their seats and record their impressions. Then use the [Think, Pair, Share](#) teaching strategy to give students opportunity to share their impressions. Ask, “How did viewing the art when you had some historical context affect your understanding or feeling about the art?” Discuss their responses.

Citations

2 Alexandra Zapruder, ed., *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 169.

Assessment

Ask students to think about the first two Focus Questions. Then discuss their initial responses to the artwork. Ask about their responses after they learned the historical context. Discuss with students the differences in their responses once they knew the historical context.

- How does the historical context affect your interpretation and understanding of a piece of writing or artwork?
- How does understanding who created the art or composed the writing affect your interpretation of their work?

After discussing the questions above with students, have them respond to the following writing prompt in an essay format.

- In general, do creative and intellectual pursuits such as art constitute resistance? During the Holocaust, could such pursuits be considered resistance? What purpose did intellectual and artistic pursuits serve? What criteria would you use to distinguish the difference? Are these details important? Why?