

Authentic encounters

A search for meaning in the past



INTRODUCTION

This **one hour lesson activity** is a development of ideas previously described in the HEDP activity 'Ordinary Things?' which you may already have explored on our website, and perhaps used with your class. It follows the same underlying pedagogical approach, educational principles, and an emphasis on an 'authentic learning experience' that are again outlined below.

As with 'Ordinary Things?' this activity takes as its starting point a seemingly every-day object and seeks to disrupt students' feeling of connection and familiarity by locating that object in a time and place far beyond our lived experience. In so doing, the aim is to create a dissonance, leading young people to question their understanding of the world around them, to ask profound questions, and to search for their own meaning in the past.

On this occasion, however, the 'ordinary object' that is our starting point is not anonymous, as was the case with the little shoe in 'Ordinary Things?' Crucially, this lesson explicitly identifies the people whose stories are connected with the object – a simple wooden toy: Leon Greenman, his wife Else, and their little boy Barney. The intensely moving story that unfolds, of an English man, his Dutch wife, and their young son all deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, then forms the core of HEDP lessons and activities, connecting a wide range of resources. If you incorporate these resources and lesson activities into your scheme of work then your students will encounter the Greenman family at various historical moments, providing a strong narrative thread through the diverse resources and the complex history of the Holocaust.

PREPARATION

What you will need:

- The PowerPoint presentation 'Authentic encounters' (notes below)
- Video extract of interview with Leon Greenman

These resources are available on the secure area of the Virtual Learning Environment, and are accessible to teachers who have participated in the CPD programme, for free use in their schools.

Read the pedagogical overview, below. It explains the rationale, approach, and educational principles that inform these resources underpin the Holocaust Education Development Programme.

Read the lesson outline, below. The lesson outline gives an overview of the four parts of this activity. Please use it alongside the pedagogical overview, and the detailed notes in the PowerPoint presentation.

Explore the PowerPoint presentation 'Authentic encounters'. The notes for this presentation, reproduced below, suggest ways to support learners as they examine and interrogate the source; anticipate likely responses and questions that your students might raise; and provide the essential narrative needed to locate this original artefact in its historical context.

Watch the short extract from the Jewish Museum's video interview with Leon Greenman. This can be viewed on the secure area of the Virtual Learning Environment on the HEDP website www.hedp.org.uk and is accessible to participants in the CPD programme for use in their classrooms. The film gives further historical context for the wooden toy, and introduces your students to Holocaust survivor Leon Greenman, whose story will form a narrative thread throughout the HEDP educational resources.

PEDAGOGICAL OVERVIEW

Educational principles

This activity is informed by a number of educational principles developed for effective, age-appropriate teaching and learning about the Holocaust:

- **Respect for the victims of the Holocaust and for the students in our care** should govern the selection of materials that we use in the classroom: graphic atrocity images and descriptions designed to shock or to horrify should be avoided.

- **The events of the Holocaust need no embellishment** as the story of ordinary people in extraordinary times will move and engage your students, raising profound questions about what it means to be human.
- **Moving from the particular to the general** helps students to grasp the enormity of these events: personal stories and other methods that highlight the human scale will help young people to engage with complex events and processes.
- Original historical sources and case studies of real men, women and children open possibilities for **an authentic learning experience**, but only if the meaning of the past is not packaged and pre-determined by the teacher. Students should be encouraged to question, to reflect, and to find their own meaning in this history, constrained only by a desire for truth and a respect for the evidence.

'Authenticity'

This lesson activity and discussion seeks to create an *authentic learning experience*. By this, I do not mean that it provides a 'window on the past', nor am I claiming that this historical representation is more 'real' or 'genuine' than others. Rather, I am arguing for an approach to teaching that engages students' interest and captures their imagination, but which 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. In my view, the *authentic learning experience* can come only 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'.

For the learning experience to be authentic, several connected elements are deemed to be necessary:

- Authenticity requires some tangible connection with the past. 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. These remnants open up the only possibility for us to investigate what happened in the past and to reconstruct the lives, ideas, and actions of those who lived before us.
- Authenticity 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.

- 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 in accurate contextual narratives, 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.

LESSON OUTLINE

Students are encouraged to examine and discuss a historical artefact presented in the accompanying PowerPoint '*Authentic encounters*' and to engage with the powerful and moving story to which it is connected. The PowerPoint contains multiple viewpoints of a child's toy, made for two year old Barney Greenman by his father Leon before they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau where Barney, his mother and grandmother were all murdered on arrival.

Through guided group discussion, your students will uncover details about the Greenman family and their fate. In so doing they are introduced to skills of deduction and the analysis of historical sources. Together with the historical narrative (provided in the accompanying video interview with Leon Greenman and in the notes to slides 3-6) this activity should stimulate your students to ask significant and important questions about this history.

The activity comprises four distinct stages:

1. What can be said about this object? (10 minutes)

[PowerPoint slide number 2]

Students discuss what can be said about the owner of the wooden toy train presented in these slides. Multiple viewpoints and guided questioning suggested in the notes below can reveal much about who made this little train and students can speculate on the personal circumstances of the family who owned it.

However, it is important that students focus at this stage only on what they can reasonably deduce from the object itself. You should say nothing about the Holocaust during this stage of the activity, and should steer the discussion away from any speculation about this history by your students – none of which can be supported by the object without further contextual information. The first stage of this analysis is to remain with what can be gleaned only from the source itself, without reference to its historical context.

2. Contextual narratives (20 minutes)

[PowerPoint slides 3-6, and the accompanying video extract of Leon Greenman speaking about this little toy]

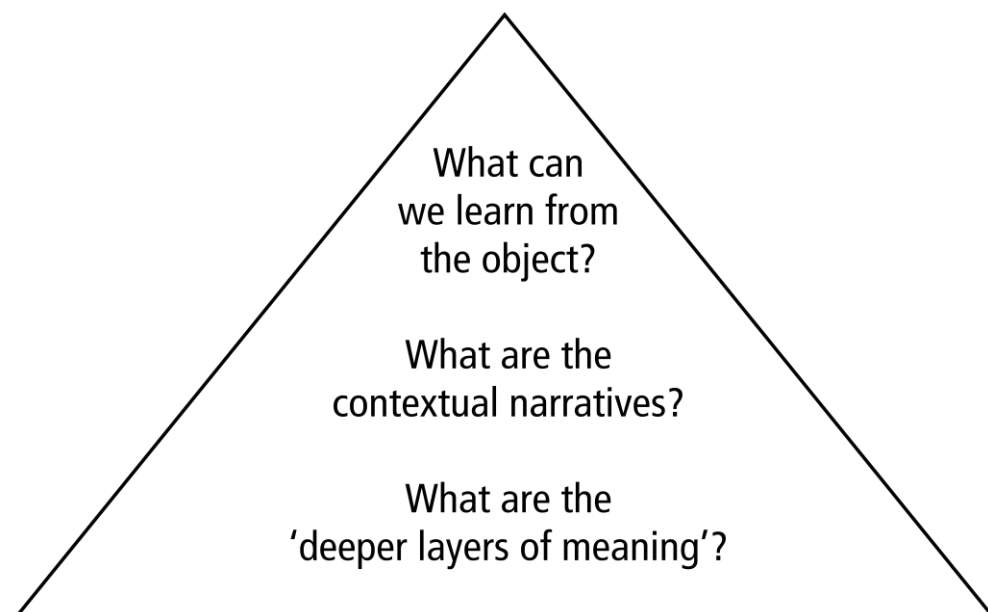
Having developed their own ideas about the wooden toy, most students will want to know if their deductions were correct. This can be checked by reference to the video interview with Leon Greenman, which introduces the family at the centre of this story and enriches your students understanding about the object and the time in which it was made.

You will now relate that the little boy who once played with this toy, Barney Greenman, was deported with his family to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was murdered. This historical narrative is provided for you in the notes to slides 4-6.

3. Reflection on the learning process (5 minutes)

[PowerPoint slide 7]

A schema outlining an approach to interrogating historical sources – ‘mining the evidence for meaning’ – is provided in the PowerPoint presentation and reproduced below:



It is important for students to reflect upon what they have learned and on the process by which they examined this object if they are to be able to transfer this approach to other sources in the future.

You will need to make explicit the different stages of this process: that they first built up a good picture simply through their deductions about the wooden toy itself; then the story related by Leon Greenman in the video interview, and the narrative that you told (derived from numerous other historical sources) placed this toy in its historical context.

Ask students to look at the image of the toy again: has our understanding of what happened to the family changed the way in which we look at this object? Reflect on how deeper meaning comes from greater knowledge and understanding.

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

[PowerPoint slide 8]

Students are invited to reflect upon the significance of this narrative, to consider what issues and themes are to be found in this history, and to search for 'deeper layers of meaning' beyond the object and the given narrative account.

If students have been allowed to arrive at their own conclusions, rather than have meaning imposed upon them, then this may be said to be a more 'authentic' encounter with the past. Students will then have some ownership of these meanings, and as such are more likely to internalise the conclusions that they draw.

From this position of deeper reflection students may also raise questions that you can respond to in further classroom lessons and activities, many of which are the subject of further HEDP lesson materials and resources.

Authentic encounters PowerPoint Presentation – slide by slide

SLIDE ONE



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Authentic encounters with the past

How can original artefacts enrich our
understanding of the Holocaust?

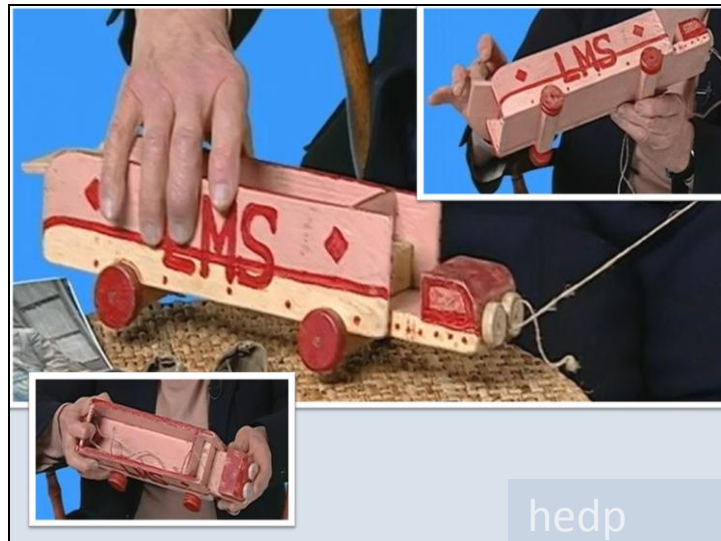
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hedp **Holocaust Education**
Development Programme

The Holocaust Education Development Programme (HEDP) is part of the
Institute of Education, University of London. It is jointly funded by the Pears
Foundation and the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) with
support from the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET).

This lesson activity approaches the history of the Holocaust through a small, wooden toy train, the story of the little boy to whom it belonged, and his family. As your students uncover the story of this family, it is hoped that they will raise profound questions and begin on their own search for meaning in the past.

SLIDE TWO



How do we begin to approach the Holocaust with our Year 9 students? One possibility is to start with an object that has no obvious connection to this history, and to start with what our students can infer from it.

The first question that our students need to ask is 'What can we learn from this object?' What information and ideas can be gleaned just by studying the source itself?

Draw out as much as you can about who your students think owned this toy, who made it, their circumstances, etc. Of course, much will be highly speculative but this is an opportunity to say something about what it is to 'do history': that ours is a tentative subject, making inferences about the past based on careful examination of the evidence that we have, and then seeking to test these inferences with other sources.

To help in this first task, you might want to suggest a number of sub-questions for your students to consider:

- 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?
(Note the painted details, and also that the section at the back appears to be hinged...)
- Any speculation about their wealth and social status?
- Any questions about this object?

After exploring what can be said, just by examining the toy train, ask 'How can we find out more?' With a little prompting, someone will suggest asking the person who is holding the train, which takes you to the next slide.

SLIDE THREE



Without context, without narrative, there can be no deeper meaning: we are in the realm only of conjecture, inference and imagination. These initial inferences are important, but can only take us so far. This is where we begin to layer in further contextual narratives.

The slide shows Leon Greenman, aged 96 years old. On the secure area of the HEDP website you will also find a short video extract of Leon speaking about this wooden toy, which the Jewish Museum London allows you to show to the students in your classroom.

Play the short video (it lasts for less than one minute). Stop the film just after Leon has explained what LMS stands for – ‘London, Midland, Scotland’, an English railway company – and before he mentions the Nazis, so as not to give too much of his story away at this point.

Discussion points:

- Which inferences that the class already made about the object have now been corroborated by this interview?
- What inferences do they need to change or revise? (Reinforce to students that this is a positive process: it is not a question of having ‘got things wrong’ but of clarifying our understanding, being prepared to respond to new evidence, being open to new information.)
- What additional information were they able to glean from this new source? How has it helped to enrich their picture of the past?
- What were the family’s economic circumstances? Do students think that Leon only made this for practical reasons? What else can we reasonably infer about the way he recalls his little boy playing with the toy? Does this tell us anything about their relationship?
- Leon’s interview has introduced us to his little boy, so from here ask: ‘Would you like to see Barney?’

SLIDE FOUR



Moving to this next slide, we see Barney Greenman aged two years and three months old, with his mum and dad, Else and Leon. Having met Leon as a very old man in the video interview, it could be powerful for students to see him as he was in his early thirties, with his young family. All of this helps students to build a connection with Leon and so to engage with his story.

What more we can say about the Greenman family from this photograph?

Do students have any questions about it?

They may be surprised at how well dressed the family appear, given that Leon has said how little money they had. This should again help to enrich our understanding – while the family did not have much money, they were not in absolute poverty. Leon was in work: they had enough to eat, and clothes to wear. This shows the importance of using different sources to refine our picture of the past – the photograph alone could give the misleading impression that they were comfortably off; the video interview alone could give the impression that they were in dire poverty.

It is important to add some further contextual information that you can narrate to your students:

The Greenman family - Leon, Else and Barney – are pictured here in the garden of their friends the Van Gijns in Rotterdam, June 1942 (Photo courtesy of the Jewish Museum London).

Barney was born in March 1940. A couple of months later, the German army invaded the Netherlands so by the time that this photograph was taken Barney had lived almost all of his short life under German Nazi occupation.

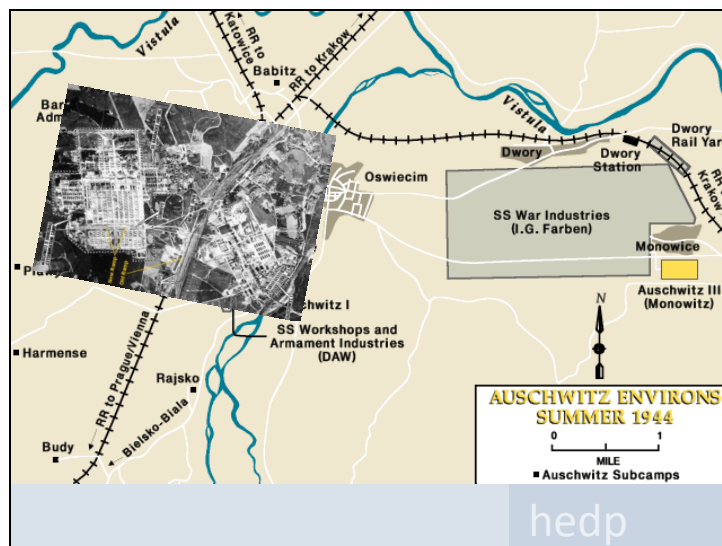
In October 1942, just a few months after this photo was taken, the Greenman family, who were Jewish, were taken together with Else's grandmother to the transit camp of Westerbork to await 'deportation to the East'.

They did not know what fate awaited them but the rumours were bad and they dreaded deportation. Leon – who was born in England – tried desperately to use his British citizenship to avoid the deportation of himself and his family. However, Leon had entrusted his papers to friends who – frightened of being caught with Jewish documents – had destroyed them and Leon was unable to prove his British citizenship.

In January 1943 the family were ordered aboard a train headed for Auschwitz. The name of this place meant nothing to them. On the 36 hour journey Leon and Else spoke about the future that lay ahead. Leon told Else that if he didn't make it through the war that he wanted her to be happy, to find someone else and to remarry, but only if she found someone who would be good to their little boy. (Leon himself lost his mother at a very young age, and had a very difficult childhood at the hands of a violent stepmother). Else told Leon the same – to remarry if she did not survive the war, but again to find someone who would be kind to Barney.

Of Barney himself, it seems, they worried less. 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.

SLIDE FIVE



This map and aerial photograph show the environs of Auschwitz in the summer of 1944, some 18 months after the arrival of the Greenman family, but it is still useful to point out the three major camps, and to provide key historical background:

Auschwitz was part of a vast camp system in Nazi-occupied Europe. There were many types of camps, some of which served several functions. They included:

- concentration 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, a concentration camp
- Auschwitz II – Birkenau
- Auschwitz III Buna-Monowitz, a slave labour camp

In addition there were some 40 sub camps.

Auschwitz I was a concentration camp, where many 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 terrible medical experiments.

Buna-Monowitz was a factory system which used slave labour to produce synthetic oil and rubber for the German war effort. Conditions there were also brutal and again there was a terribly high death rate.

But Auschwitz II– Birkenau, while also serving as a concentration camp, had another function. *Do any of your pupils know what the other core function of Birkenau was?* Auschwitz-Birkenau was a death camp.

It is important that your pupils understand the difference between the hundreds of concentration camps, where many thousands of people died or were brutally murdered, and the death camps of Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The death camps were constructed to murder as many human beings as quickly as possible, within hours of their arrival. They were built to murder every Jewish man, woman and child in Europe.

SLIDE SIX



This slide takes the aerial photograph of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and reorients it to better see where the train carrying the Greenman family arrived, and what happened to them. While this aerial photo may give an unfamiliar perspective, students should be reminded that it was not long ago, nor very far away from your classroom, where Leon kissed his little boy for the last time, as they got off their train and stepped down into the snow.

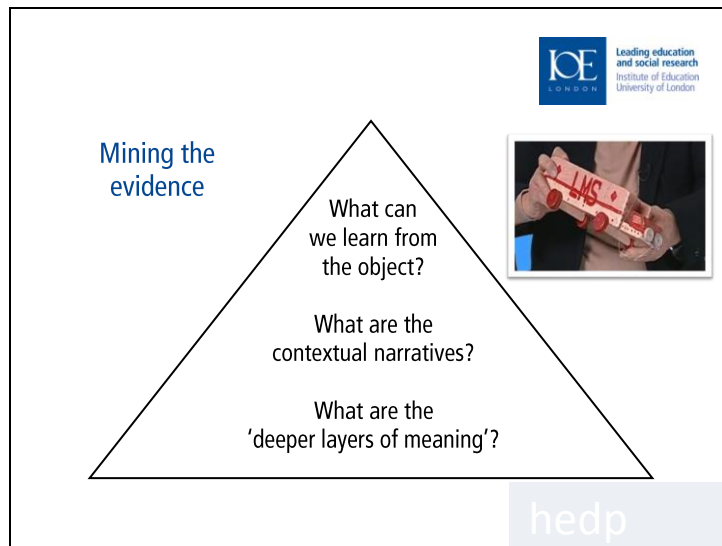
And we can still see the location where they arrived; where they were ordered off this train and were divided into two groups – men and older boys one side, women and young children on the other: the place where Leon was parted from his wife and son. The ‘new ramp’ indicated in Birkenau was only built in the summer of 1944, with the railway spur that was extended into the camp to speed the process mass murder. In January of 1943, when the Greenman family arrived at Auschwitz, their train stopped at the location marked here as ‘the old ramp’.

Leon was toward the front of his group, and was among 50 men who were quickly counted off for work in the camp. Else and Barney went the other way, with the other 650 people from that train. We don’t know precisely what happened next, but Leon did catch one last glimpse of them, in an open truck, with the red velvet peaks of their cloaks showing among the huddled people, cloaks that Else had made from their velvet curtains, for herself and her son, to protect them from the winter cold. Leon called out to them, but with the noise of the truck they didn’t hear him and didn’t turn around.

Else and Barney were driven to one of two farm cottages – the Red House or the White House, bunkers one and two. (Crematoria II-V, marked on the map, had not yet been constructed.) And there they were told to strip for a shower, pushed into one of these former peasant houses, now converted by the Nazis into gas chambers, and murdered. Their bodies were buried in a nearby field, in a mass grave.

Having related this narrative, it will be important to give students a chance to reflect, to comment, and to ask questions. The activity in the next slide is designed to support this.

SLIDE SEVEN



It is important to reflect on the learning that has happened so far. Students might be deeply affected by the story that you have told them. It is important to offer some time to make comments or ask questions, perhaps first to each other in small groups.

And it is necessary to move out of an affective experience and into the cognitive realm. Invite students to step back from the narrative and to think about the process involved in reading this artefact, taking them through the three elements in the pyramid approach to reading historical sources. This also opens a space, in the discussion of 'deeper layers of meaning', for your pupils to begin to reflect upon the narrative and the significance of the wooden toy; to respond with questions and ideas; and to begin to discuss what meaning might be discerned in this history.

The first stage in reading the artefact was to consider what we can learn from the object itself. The group, through prompting from you and your guided questioning, should have been able to construct quite a detailed image of who owned this wooden toy, who made it, and even something about their relationship given that a good deal of time and care has been spent on making and painting the truck. But of course, there is only so much that can be said and even this was speculative and tentatively held.

Once we 'met' Leon Greenman, heard the extract from his interview, and related some of the historical contextual narratives about his family and their fate, then we were able to locate the object in time and place. It should be made explicit to your students that the narratives about deportation and Birkenau were drawn from many other historical sources – photographs, documents, eyewitness testimonies, archaeological evidence and more.


So far, though, we have only explored these first two levels. How do we move to the meaning and significance of this artefact? How do we mine the evidence for deeper meaning?

For this to be authentic, we should not tell young people what 'lessons' they should learn. The ideas must come from the students themselves; they must be asked to reflect upon what issues, questions and themes this artefact and the story of the Greenman family evokes in them.

Having raised this challenge, move on to the next slide and ask the students to reflect in small groups of threes or fours what issues and questions occur to them. This will create a safe space for students to test out some of their ideas before feeding back to the class as a whole.

SLIDE EIGHT

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 Leon get the toy back?

What happened to Barney's killers?

Why the Jews?

How did Leon live with his loss, after the Holocaust?

Why didn't they hide or run away?

How was this possible in the modern world?

Did people know what was happening?

Why didn't somebody save Barney?

Why didn't more people fight back?

This object is a simple, homemade toy. It is not worth anything in monetary terms; but does it mean anything? Does it evoke a response in us; does it raise any questions, issues, thoughts and ideas? Do we look at this toy differently now that we have the historical context – do new meanings arise out of this history?

Consider that this is the only toy that remains from the life of Barney Greenman; consider also the poignancy that it is a wooden train, given his own journey. Think also about the emptiness of this object, and how this can speak of the void. Taking this further, shouldn't Barney's children and grandchildren have played with this, or something similar? What would he have made for his own children? What would he have done with his life?

Ask students to feedback on the discussions that they have had in their small groups, and put on the board all of the questions and issues that they raise. Share the questions presented in the PowerPoint slide, drawn from the responses of other groups that have examined this same story.

SLIDE NINE



Authentic encounters

Created by Paul Salmons
Holocaust Education Development Programme

www.hedp.org.uk

Holocaust Education Development Programme
Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL

Tel +44 (0)20 7612 6437
Fax +44 (0)20 7612 6126

Email hedp@ioe.ac.uk
Web www.hedp.org.uk

www.hedp.org.uk

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Which of the questions and issues raised would your students like to explore further in their study of the Holocaust? We are fortunate when our students come to us with issues and questions that they wish to pursue further, that they would like to explore and to learn more about. But it is not intended that you should attempt to answer all of the questions raised by your students in this first session, or the questions contained in this slide. Help pupils to see that many of these questions are incredibly complex and avoid giving simple answers to difficult and complex questions.

Further lesson activities in the Holocaust Education Development Programme will address many of these issues and these, it is hoped, will deepen their understanding about the Holocaust and facilitate further reflection on the questions that your students have raised.

'Authentic encounters'

Lesson plan and accompanying PowerPoint presentation

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Photo of child's shoe: Olivia Hemingway www.oliviahemingway.com

The shoe is part of the Imperial War Museum Collections

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: USHMM