

# History and the Power of the Personal Story: A Centropa Project

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## I. Enduring Understandings:

It is hardly innovative to state that the study of Jewish history in the day school is more than just an academic discipline. The Jewish history classroom is used as a forum for students to connect with their own Jewish identities by exploring the way Jews in the past connected to Judaism, the Jewish community and the gentile world around them. This lesson plan incorporates a number of enduring understandings that will contribute to the effective use of the Jewish history classroom as a place for both academic inquiry and identity exploration.

### ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS:

- History is not a list of dates and places. It is made up of the personal stories of individuals that historians combine to create a larger narrative of the past.
- Using personal stories to study history is an endeavor that must be undertaken with the knowledge that each person's story is unique to that person, and may or may not be indicative of larger trends in a community or nation. Historians must also take personal bias and imperfect memory into account when using individual stories to construct a narrative about the past.
- Our own stories, and the stories of our families are part of Jewish history.

- Incorporating our family’s stories into a larger scope of Jewish history helps us understand Jewish history in a very personal and intimate way.
- Incorporating our family’s stories into a larger scope of Jewish history helps us understand the complications of using personal stories in the academic study of history.
- Incorporating our family’s stories into a larger scope of Jewish history helps us understand the power and importance of other people’s personal stories
- Studying the importance of individual stories will enrich our connection to Jewish history and thus to Judaism and the Jewish people.

## II. Lesson Plans

This project is meant to be an ongoing investigation that will occur over the course of a trimester. The following are the component parts:

### A. Centropa Poland Exhibit<sup>1</sup>

Students are introduced to Centropa through Ed Serotta’s introductory video on the Centropa website and through watching one of the Centropa videos on the website (we viewed a video about Poland because we had the Poland exhibit at school, but any video could be used). An entire class period is then devoted to a visit to the Poland Exhibit. Students are asked to fill out the attached worksheet as they visit the exhibit. (Appendix A)

Filling out the worksheet and visiting the exhibit should take approximately 45 minutes. Following the visit, the class returns to the classroom to discuss what they saw.

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<sup>1</sup> In my classroom, we actually visited the Poland Exhibit after the “Our Stories” part of the curriculum, but I think it would be even more effective to visit the exhibit beforehand.

Prompts for class discussion:

Which interview meant the most to you?

Why did you find it so interesting?

After some discussion about individual stories, ask students to share their answers to the “Conclusion” questions on the back page of the worksheet. Try to elicit from students the importance and the complications of using personal stories to study history.

**B. Our Stories**

At the beginning of November, students are introduced to the National Day of Listening Project (<http://nationaldayoflistening.org>). This project, part of StoryCorps, aims to have people listen to and record the stories of their loved ones on the Friday after Thanksgiving each year as a non-commercial alternative to “Black Friday.” The website for the National Day of Listening includes selected people’s stories as well as tips and suggestions for conducting an interview. Because so many young American Jews spend Thanksgiving weekend with family, it is a wonderful time to kick off a project that involves interviewing a family member about his or her background and family story.

Students are told that they will be embarking on a semester-long project to interview a family member about his or her background as a Jewish American. It is important to emphasize to the students that a project such as this has multiple goals and is significant for a number of reasons. Students should understand that interviewing a family member helps them understand their family’s story as well as recording the story of a family member for the future. Students will come to find this

a very meaningful project as they discover pieces of their family's past that they never knew. They also find that the family member being interviewed feels honored that his or her story is important to the next generation. Of course, students should understand that their family story is part of a larger story of Jewish history. The Assignment Sheet is attached as Appendix B. [NOTE: Throughout the process of conducting Oral History Interviews, students can be reminded of the Centropa exhibit that they visited and the questions they thought about and discussed in class after that visit.]

**C. Lesson on Conducting an Oral History Interview**

As part of the interview project, it is critical that students learn some basic skills about conducting an oral history interview. We brought a speaker from Centropa to speak to the students, and then followed up the speaker with a handout with a list of helpful tips. (Attached as Appendix C)

**D. Ongoing Class Discussion and Mentoring Process**

Throughout the project, classroom sessions should be periodically devoted to checking in with students about their progress. Students can present their successes and difficulties to each other and the teacher, and receive constructive advice and assistance. The challenges faced by one student are likely also faced by other students in the class. After submitting their interviews and receiving feedback from the teacher, students are required to submit a "storyboard" of their final project. This allows students to work on the conceiving the story they want their project to tell by building it with component parts. (Storyboard Template attached as Appendix

D) The teacher should give feedback on the storyboard to help students create the best final project possible.

E. **Final Project Submission**: The culmination of the Our Stories assignment is the submission of the final project—either a video, a PowerPoint or some other audio-visual presentation. The Final Project assignment sheet is attached as Appendix F.

F. **Research Paper**

Once the final project is submitted, students begin work on their research paper. The research paper will address a topic covered in the Oral History Interview. For example, a student who interviewed his grandfather about his service in the US Army during WWII can do his research paper on Jews in the US Army. The students are required to use their interviews as primary sources for their research paper. The introductory paragraph of their paper must begin with an anecdote from their interview that is illustrative of their thesis. Including the interview in their research papers will enable students to see how one individual story fits into a larger narrative of history. It will also give them insight into the historian's craft of using individual stories to construct and illustrate that narrative. (I have not included the research paper scaffolded assignment here, because it is a more standard assignment that many history teachers already give.)

G. **Border Jumping**

Once students have turned in their final projects, they can upload them to Centropa's Border Jumping webpage. My hope is to make contact with a Jewish school in Central or Eastern Europe who would like to watch our projects and perhaps share projects of their own, allowing students in both schools to learn about each others' histories and

communities. Because I have not yet reached this part of the project, I do not yet have a sense of how this will work in reality, so I cannot give too many details.

#### **H. Conclusions**

A project of this scope is certainly demanding of the teacher's time and mental energy. It also demands a great deal of self-motivation and creativity on the part of students. These aspects make it challenging to keep the project progressing from beginning to end. However, the payoff can be enormous. As our project reaches its culmination, I see that the students have begun to independently make the connections I have sought to teach. The project has enriched their Jewish identity, their connection to the Jewish past, and their understanding of Jewish history.

## Centropa Polish Exhibition: Jewish Witness to a Polish Century

Before you look at the exhibit, please read the introductory panel and the timeline to ground yourself in the history of Jews in Poland and the purpose of the exhibit.

The exhibit covers eight different general topics: School, Leisure, Holidays, Army, Portraits, Community Life, Work and the Holocaust.

- 1) Choose 3 general topics that interest you from this list.
- 2) Visit the section of the exhibit with the posters addressing that topic and **choose one** that particularly interests you.
- 3) Fill out a chart (attached) for each of your three posters.
- 4) At the end of your visit to the exhibit, answer the "conclusion" questions on the last page.



General Topic:

Name of Interviewee:

Time period addressed by the interview:

Why did you pick this interviewee?

What did you learn about Polish Jewry that you didn't know before you examined this poster?

What additional information do you need about Polish Jewry in order to fully understand the poster?



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## **APPENDIX “B”**

### **Oral History Interview Project**

For your second trimester project, all JH11 students are required to conduct an oral history interview of a family member whose life story can broaden our understanding of events and developments in modern Jewish history.

You are encouraged to use photographs and other visual documents to assist you in conducting your interviews.

The culmination of your project will be a short 4-7 minute video or 10-15 slide PowerPoint presentation that tells the story of your interview subject in a creative and visually-pleasing way.

Some ideas of possible interview topics:

- Experiences in the Holocaust and subsequent immigration to America
- Life under Soviet rule
- Service in the American army in World War II or another American military conflict
- Immigration to America and integration into American society
- Life as a Jew in America during the interwar, WW2 or postwar years
- Involvement as a Jew in the Civil Rights Movement or the Feminist Movement

#### **Important Dates:**

November 19, 2010	Introduction to Oral History – A lecture by Eszter Sandor from Centropa ( <a href="http://www.centropa.org">www.centropa.org</a> ) about methodology in conducting an oral history.
December 2, 2010	Topic Worksheet Pre-Interview Worksheet
December 16, 2010	Hypothesis/Geo-Historical Fact Sheet
January 14, 2010	Interview recording and Photos/Documentation
January 28, 2010	Photos/Documents with context
February 28, 2010	Creative presentation due

Detailed information about each of these steps can be found on the reverse side, and further information will be posted to the website and explained in your classrooms.

We hope that you will use this project to learn more about your family’s own personal story and how that story fits into Jewish history. We also hope that this project will be a positive experience for you, your relative and the BT community.

**Good luck!**

<u>Project Component</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
1. Topic Worksheet	Students will complete the attached <i>Topic Worksheet</i> , which provides information about your subject and the proposed method for conducting the interview. Teachers will provide feedback on the students' selections.
2. Pre-Interview Worksheet	In the first step toward conducting the interview, students provide their subject with a copy of the Pre-Interview Worksheet for completion. This completed worksheet should provide students with basic information on their subject's life and the historical time period in which s/he lived.
3. Hypothesis/Geo-Historical Fact Sheet	Next, Students learn more about their subject's world by conducting research on the historical time period. Using the Encyclopaedia Judaica, students produce fact sheets about the major events and developments from the period.
4. Interview	Students now conduct their interviews. Ideally, students allot at least two hours for the interview and record it using audio or video. Documents and photos can help direct the interview process.
5. Interview recording and Documentation	Students submit a recording of the interview as well as <u>copies</u> of the photos and documents used in conducting the interview.
6. Storyboarding	Students fill out a "storyboard," laying out the story they plan to tell about their interview subject using the interview and photos/documents.
7. Creative presentation	Using the photographs and the synopses, students create a 4-7 minute video or a 10-15 slide PowerPoint presentation (complete with voiceovers of interview subject) about their subject.

**Oral History Interview**

*Topic Worksheet*

1) Who is the subject of your oral history interview?

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2) Explain why you chose to interview this individual.

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3) On what aspect(s) of this person's life will you focus your interview?

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4) What sort of primary sources (photographs, passport, immigration documents, ritual objects, etc.) will your subject be able to bring to the interview?

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5) When and how will your interview be conducted? List the following:

- Planned date(s) for the interview (please provide for at least 2 hours of interview)

○ \_\_\_\_\_

○ \_\_\_\_\_

○ \_\_\_\_\_

- Means of conducting the interview (in person, by phone, skype)

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- Means for recording your interview (i.e., video, audio, notetaking)

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## APPENDIX “C”

### SUGGESTIONS FOR CONDUCTING AN ORAL INTERVIEW (from the presentation by Eszter Sandor from Centropa)

- Before you begin, make a list of topics and some specific questions that you want to ask. Do not write out a list of specific questions, because you don't know what directions the interview may take.
- Also, before you begin, make a family tree that you can fill in together with your interviewee. This will give you basic data and will help you as you refer back to it during the interview. The family tree should contain names, birth and death dates, and birth and death places if known. You can also include information like what languages the members of the family spoke, places they lived throughout their life, what education they had, and how religious they were.
- Bring pen and paper with you to the interview because additional issues will come up and you want to be able to jot down questions as you think of them so you can return to them later.
- Conduct interviews in the morning when people's minds are more fresh.
- Conduct interviews for only 2 hours at a time, at the most, so your interviewee does not get too tired
- Make sure you begin by explaining to your interviewee why you are interviewing him/her. This will help him/her respond to questions and will also encourage him/her to participate.
- Ask your questions in chronological order to aid your interviewee's recollection of events.
- Be sensitive to your interviewee's possibly painful memories.
- Don't be afraid of silence. Let your interviewee think if he/she needs before answering questions.
- Make sure you allow your interviewee to fully answer your question before you ask the next question.
- Make your interview a conversation, but keep your role as minor as possible and remember that you are there to listen.
- Treat your interviewee with respect. Don't be judgmental, even if you disagree with something he/she says or did.
- Ask background questions, even if you already know the answers because your interview is for posterity, and other readers may not know the information that you know about the interviewee.
- Ask simple and concrete questions - e.g., “What were your favorite classes in school?” not “What was your schooling?”



- Ask open-ended questions - e.g., “Tell me about shabbat in your home growing up.”
- Ask about values and attitudes as well as asking about events, food, clothing, etc.

ENJOY!

## APPENDIX “D”

### **STORY-BOARDING**

The following are the questions you need to ask yourself before you fill out the attached chart:

- 1) What is the story you want to tell?  
e.g., How my great-grandmother escaped the Holocaust, my uncle’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement
  
- 2) What are the significant dates/events in your story?  
e.g., 1919 – Birth of my great grandmother  
1940 – Great grandmother deported from Prague to Terezin  
1942 – Great grandmother arrives in Bergen Belsen
  
- 3) How will you tell your story?
  - a. Pictures – e.g, family photos, portraits, camp or school pictures
  - b. Documents – e.g., passport, conversion certificate, immigration papers
  - c. Video/Voice clips – e.g., a particularly moving or exciting part of your interview
  - d. Maps – e.g., to show as background while voice-over is explaining travels through Europe or settlement in America

APPENDIX "E"

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**STORY BOARD**

TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

#	Date(s)	Story	Depiction
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			

APPENDIX "F"

**FINAL INTERVIEW PROJECT**

The time has finally come to translate all your hard work this year into a final product. Your final product should be a video, PowerPoint, or some other audio-visual display that tells a story from the life of your interviewee in an exciting and visually attractive way. Remember that you want to tell a coherent story, and it may be only a piece of the information you learned in your interview.

**DUE DATE: Tuesday, March 29<sup>th</sup>**

When I grade your project, I will be using the following rubric:

<b>Element</b>	<b>What I'm looking for</b>	<b>Possible Points</b>	<b>You earned</b>
<b>Medium</b>	Audio-Visual- e.g., video, PowerPoint saved on a DVD or CD-ROM	5	
<b>Length</b>	5-7 minute video or 10-15 slide powerpoint	10	
<b>Content</b>	Tells a coherent story that is historically significant. Includes enough information to tell the story, but not too much information.	40	
<b>Presentation/Creativity</b>	Is exciting and visually pleasing to watch. Visual aspects connect well to audio or text aspects. Photographs and/or documents belonging to interviewee used.	40	
<b>Attribution</b>	Any pictures taken from books or internet are properly cited	5	

GOOD LUCK!