

Inside The Glass Case: Ben Guyer's Uniform



Developed by:

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Recommended grade levels: Grades 8-12

Suggested timeframe: 2 class periods

Historical Context:

- The Camp System
 - The Nazi government established a series of camps to imprison perceived political, ideological, and racial opponents.
 - As the Nazis invaded other countries across Europe and expanded their areas of control, they established tens of thousands of concentration camps.
 - The conditions at these camps were horrible and many people imprisoned there died from exhaustion, starvation, disease, and exposure.
 - One such camp was [Buchenwald](#)
- The [Final Solution](#)
 - The systematic mass murder of all Jews was known as the "[Final Solution.](#)"
 - Six [killing centers](#) were established in German-occupied Poland to carry out the Final Solution: [Chelmno](#), [Treblinka](#), [Sobibor](#), [Belzec](#), [Auschwitz-Birkenau](#), and [Majdanek](#).
 - Nearly 2.7 million Jews were killed at these killing centers.
 - As the Allies made their way into Europe, the Nazis liquidated camps in Poland and sent the prisoners on [death marches](#) to camps in Germany.
 - [Teaching](#) of this topic is difficult for teachers and can be traumatizing for students. Content should be selected carefully, and the presentation of information should be handled with sensitivity.
- Students will know:
 - How to analyze an artifact and survivor testimony.
 - About the camp system and the Final Solution.
- Students will understand:
 - How artifacts can deepen our understanding of history in fuel our inquiry/research.
 - How prison uniforms contributed to the dehumanization of the victims.
 - How survivors regained their dignity and created meaningful lives after the Holocaust
- Students will be able to:
 - Connect personal experiences and accounts of history to major events of the Holocaust.

Procedure:

Opening activity:

Have students respond to the following questions in their notebooks or on a piece of paper. Teacher can pick one question, or post them as an invitation to write at the beginning of class each day. Allow 5 minutes for students to write per question.

- What is the purpose of a uniform? (show photos of different uniforms)
- When have you or someone you know had to wear a uniform?
- Do you think there can be positive and negative aspects to wearing a uniform?

Part 1: Artifact Analysis

Show students photographs of the uniform jacket, and ask them to list observations about it, think about where it might have come from, who it might have belonged to, etc.

Let students know that it belonged to a Holocaust survivor named Ben Guyer. Distribute copies of Ben Guyer's [biographical profile](#) or his [written testimony](#). Have students do a close read of the document to learn about Ben's story. Summarize his story together as a class.

Explain to students that during the Holocaust, camp prisoners were often given blue and white striped uniforms to wear. In addition, they were referred to by identification numbers rather than their names.

Part 2: Identity, Dignity and Humanity

Lead a class discussion about the meaning of identity, dignity, and humanity. Ask students to consider how the three words are related and different. Students can think about their own identities, sense of dignity, and humanity.

Explain to students that while Ben Guyer lived through the horrors of the Holocaust, he had a life before. He was born in 1915 in Gombin, Poland - which may seem to students like it was forever ago and in a faraway place - and had a whole life there.

In order to get a sense of where Ben came from and what his life might have been like, break students into small groups. Have each group explore the [History of Gombin](#). Assign one of the following subsections per group: Jewish Life & Religion, Economy & Occupations, Culture, Literature & Theater, and Sport & Community Organizations. Each group should be prepared to summarize what they learned, and should pay attention to where they notice elements of identity, dignity, and humanity.

Each group should present their findings, and then the class as a whole should discuss their takeaways from this activity.

Part 3: Dehumanization

Explain to students that during the Holocaust the Nazis did not only target Jewish people for murder, but made every attempt to dehumanize them.

Have students define dehumanization. (Suggested definition from Echoes & Reflections: As a political or social measure, dehumanization is intended to change the manner in which a person or group of people are perceived, reducing the target group to objects or beings not worthy of human rights.)

Show [Itka Zygmuntowicz's](#) testimony video, and have students take notes on how Jews in the camps were dehumanized.

Students share their notes as a class. Have students think back to Ben's uniform jacket and discuss camp uniforms might have impacted people's identity, dignity, and humanity.

Part 4: Resilience

Review [Ben Guyer's](#) story and explain to students that after liberation, Ben kept his camp uniform and later tailored it. Show students the photo of his uniform jacket and explain some of

the ways in which he tailored it. Compare his uniform to [Steve Lewkowicz's uniform](#), which was not tailored.

Have students respond to the following questions:

- Why do you think Ben kept his uniform?
- Why do you think Ben altered his uniform?
- What do you think it meant to him?
- What does it symbolize?
- Why do you think he donated it to our museum?
- What can we learn from this artifact?

Content Standards:

- Michigan's Grade Level Content Expectations for Social Studies (9-12)
 - WORLD HISTORY
 - 7.1.3 - Genocide in the 20th Century
 - 7.2.6 - Case Studies of Genocide
 - UNITED STATES HISTORY
 - 7.2.4 - Responses to Genocide
- C3 Social Studies
 - D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts
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- English
 - SL.9-10.3 Comprehension & Collaboration. Evaluate a speaker's POV, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3
 - Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.