



Painted Words: The Art of Samuel Bak, Child Survivor of the Holocaust

Time: 1-2 Class Periods

Audience: 9-12th Grade (May be adapted for 7th – 8th Grade)

Acknowledgment: *This curriculum is a project of the California Teachers Collaborative for Holocaust and Genocide Education, established by the JFCS Holocaust Center, with support from the California Department of Education, the Marin County Office of Education, and the State of California.*

Learning Objectives

Through this lesson, students will:

- Learn about the impact of the Holocaust in Lithuania
- Analyze visual artifacts through a historical and biographical lens
- Explore the theme of memory and its impact on creative expression
- Gain a deeper understanding of the loss and trauma children and families suffer as a result of war

Aligned Standards

California Common Core:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

CA Department of Education HSS Framework:

[HSS-10.8](#)

Students analyze the causes and consequences of World War II.

[HSS-10.8.5](#)

Analyze the Nazi policy of pursuing racial purity, especially against the European Jews; its transformation into the Final Solution; and the Holocaust that resulted in the murder of six million Jewish civilians.

Context

This lesson focuses on the impact of the Holocaust from a child survivor's perspective. For students in grades 9-12, with little background in the Holocaust, [this 38-minute video](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum will provide helpful context. This [10-minute video](#), *Remember the Children: Daniel's Story*, is more suitable for middle school audiences.

A list of common terms used within this lesson, refer to the glossary at the end of the lesson. A supplemental list of resources is also included at the end of the lesson.

Materials Needed

- [Google Slides](#)
- Handout ["The Family"](#)
- [KWL graphic chart](#)
- A journal, pencils, colored pencils (optional) for note taking and drawing
- Parking Lot: Create a "Parking Lot" on a whiteboard or a large sheet of paper. Have post it notes available on each table for students to write questions down and put in the parking lot.

Lesson/Activities

Lesson Framing: *Please note, due to the challenging themes of hatred and discrimination that this lesson focuses on, it is recommended that students receive a content warning about the challenging nature of the subject at the start of the lesson. Remind students of their options if they feel they need to take a break.*

This lesson begins with direct instruction centered around [google slides](#), and subsequently uses those slides to guide activities and assignments.

1. For high school students who do not have background in the Holocaust, [this video](#) (38 minutes) provides context for the study of wartime Poland/Lithuania. Consider using [this video](#) (10 minutes), instead, for middle school students. Have students complete the first two steps of the [KWL graphic chart](#). Debrief with a discussion of what they learned and whether they have any lingering questions. Please skip to the next step if not utilizing the video.

Teaching Tip! Have students post questions to the "parking lot" to be discussed over the course of the lesson.

2. **Transition to Slide 3 in Google Slides.**

Icebreaker Activity

3. **Slide 3: Color Wheel and Pair Share Ice Breaker Activity:**
Introduce the Idea that color can evoke emotion or moods and then have them look at this color wheel.

Think, journal, pair, and share: This activity is designed to have students think about the power of color to convey emotion as well as engage students through personal sharing. Have them look carefully at the color wheel (slide 5) and choose the color that best conveys how they feel today. Write in journals about their color choice and why they chose it. Have students share out their reflections.

Teaching Tip! Encourage students to use their journal throughout this workshop to take notes on what they are learning as well as feelings and thoughts they have throughout. Encourage them to write down any questions they have in the parking lot.

Introduction to the Lesson

4. Transition to Slide 4: Art Tells Stories

Is a picture “worth 1,000 words?” As an introduction to the connection between art and life’s experiences, discuss the potential of art to tell life stories, sometimes more powerfully than words. The colors that are used and mood they convey, the way paint is applied to the canvas, what is depicted in the painting, what is in the foreground, what is in the background, the expressions on faces, etc. Have students look carefully at Bak’s painting “Interruptions”. Study the colors in this painting. What do they see? What is the mood that is conveyed by the colors? Open class discussion.

5. Transition to Slide 5: Targeted

Tell students that they will be studying the Holocaust through the life and art of Sam Bak, a child Holocaust survivor from Vilna, (Poland and Lithuania). After learning about his early life and his experiences in Vilna before and during the war, they will focus on one of his paintings, *The Family*, in order to explore how the memory of his experiences as a child during the Holocaust impacted his life and his art.

6. Transition to Slide 6: The Life of Samuel Bak in Vilna

Explain that a deeper understanding of art can unfold when we learn about the artist’s life and context. Tell students that they are now going to learn about the early life of Sam Bak, an artist and survivor of the Holocaust and the community where he lived. Slide 6 shows him as a child and as an adult. (Emphasize that painting was part of his life from an early age.)

As you move through the lesson (Steps 7- 13), continue to refer to the KWL chart, and pause at key intervals to have students record what they are learning.

7. Transition to Slide 7

Sam was born in Vilna, Poland in 1933 into an educated middle-class family. Ask students to describe the photo (typical happy baby picture). Note soft cuddly toy (as opposed to blue teddy bear in earlier photo).

8. Transition to Slide 8: Map of Poland 1933

Have students find Vilna on the map. To further the students’ understanding of the Holocaust and Sam’s life in Lithuania they will now learn about the Jewish community in Vilna before the war. Explain that after WWI, Vilna was part of Poland. After WWII started in 1939, it was occupied by the Soviet Union until it was invaded by the Germans in 1941.

To further the students’ understanding of his experiences, they will learn about Jewish life in Vilna before the war. Explain that Vilna was home to about 60-80,000 Jews or about 1/3 of the

city's population. Tell students that Sam Bak and his family were very much a part of this cosmopolitan city that was home to a rich, diverse Jewish community) that included rabbis, writers, artists, schools, and more. To further the students' understanding of his experiences, they will learn about Jewish life in Vilna before the war. Explain that Vilna was called "The Jerusalem of Lithuania" because of its renowned spiritual life.

9. Transition to Slide 9

Ask students what they see in the photographs: What surprises you? In what ways does this add to your understanding of Jewish life? Explain that these five pictures represent just a few examples of Jewish life in Vilna before WWII that included rabbis, art schools, musical groups, sports clubs, and much more.

10. **Transition to Slide 10.** Have students watch the first 3:45 minutes of [this short trailer](#) on pre-war Vilna. Ask them to reflect in their journals about what stands out for them.

Teaching Tip! At this point, teachers can decide whether to go more deeply into the Jewish community of Vilna or skip this and continue with the next slide. If continuing here, explain that Vilna was home to a rich, diverse community of 60,000 (1/3 of the city's population) and they will be learning about some facets of Jewish life there before the Holocaust. Divide the class into six groups and have each read about one aspect of Jewish life described in "[The Story of the Jewish Community in Vilna](#)."

11. Transition to Slide 11: Key People in Bak's Life

In this slide there are four people who were influential in Bak's life before the war. On the far right is Sam and his grandfather in a Vilna park. Next, to the left is Sam's grandmother. Next is Sam's father, Jonas. On the far left is his aunt who had converted to Christianity before the war which would prove helpful to the family during wartime.

Ask students what they can tell, if anything, about the people in the photos e.g. old-fashioned? Modern-looking, etc. (*Opportunity for Connection: Ask students if they were to pick a photograph from their childhood to show the people who influenced them, what photo would they choose? Who would be in the photo?*)

12. Transition to Slide 12: What was the Holocaust? What is a Child Survivor of the Holocaust?

Review a definition of the Holocaust: the state sponsored murder of approximately 6,000,000 European Jewish people by the Nazis and their collaborators.

A Child Survivor: a Jewish person who was born in 1928 or after and survived the Holocaust in Europe.

Remind students that Sam was eight years old when his hometown was occupied by the Germans in 1941 and the class will now learn more about how it impacted Sam and his family.

13. Transition to Slide 13: Map of Ghettos in Occupied Eastern Europe, 1941-42

As Germany occupied Poland and other countries in Europe, they established "ghettos" to imprison Jews. Ask students to analyze the map: *Looking at the map, what inferences might you make about Jewish life in Eastern Europe between 1941 and 1942? What do you notice?*

Teaching Tip! What does the term “ghetto” mean to them? Discuss. Explain that the Nazis created ghettos to imprison Jews and isolate them from the non-Jewish population. There were over 1,000 ghettos in German controlled areas. [Ghettos](#) were a key step in the ultimate destruction of Europe’s Jews.

14. Transition to Slide 14: Nazi Germany invades Vilna, Lithuania June 24th, 1941

On 24 June, the Germans occupied Vilna and ordered the Jews to wear the yellow Jewish Badge. Bak, aged 8, is charged with preparing badges for his parents and extended family.

On 6 September 1941, the deportation of Jews to the Vilna Ghetto was initiated.

Watch minute 1:55-2:38 “Living in the Ghetto.”- [How They Survived the Holocaust: Samuel](#)
Samuel’s father is sent to a labor camp while Sam and his mother Mitzia, are imprisoned in the Vilna ghetto; they manage to escape and find refuge in a Benedictine monastery with the nun Marija Mikulska (friend of Sam’s great-aunt, Janina).

The occupation of the monastery by the Germans forces them back into the ghetto. His grandparents and other relatives were murdered in the forest of Ponary.

15. Transition to Slide 15: Samuel Bak’s Self Portrait, Age 9

In March 1942, two poets invited the nine-year-old Bak to participate in an exhibition organized in the ghetto. Sensing that their end is near, the poets decide to deposit the *Pinkas*, the official record of the Jewish community, into the hands of Bak in the hope that they both survive. Paper is a precious commodity and the white pages of the *Pinkas* beckon the young artist: he uses them to satisfy his craving to draw. Over the next two years, Samuel fills the page margins and empty pages of the *Pinkas*. Watch [How They Survived the Holocaust: Samuel](#) minute 2:39-4:26

[Self-Portrait, 1942, Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum & Samuel Bak Museum, Vilna, Lithuania]

Class activity: Carefully study this image. Ask students to describe how Bak portrays himself in this self-portrait he drew at the age of 9 in the ghetto. How does watching the film clip help them understand Bak and his artwork? What feelings does this drawing bring up for them as they look at this self-portrait?

Teaching Tip! Ask students to write in their journal what comes to mind for them when they think about themselves at age 9. What grade were they in? What were their favorite things to do? Where did they live? Who was in their family? Following this self-reflection, ask them to study the self-portrait of Bak. What do they see in this portrait? What do they think Sam was expressing in this portrait?

Teaching Tip! These four readings give students an opportunity to learn more about ghetto life, especially its rich cultural life that existed in prewar Vilna and was re-activated in the ghetto. [Musical groups](#), [art exhibits](#), a lending [library](#), and [theatre](#) were created soon after the ghetto was established in 1941 and continued until the ghetto’s demise, despite deplorable conditions. These short readings with questions for discussion

highlight the diversity of artistic offerings and help students think about the nature of identity, resistance and cultural expression.

Bak's father is sent to the forced labor camp. Samuel and his mother are sent there, upon the liquidation of the ghetto, on September 24, 1943.

An *Aktion* (German for "Action" see Glossary for definition) takes place in the camp in which 250 children are sent to their death. Bak's mother takes advantage of the confusion in the camp to flee while Samuel hides. A few days later, his father smuggles him out of the camp in a burlap sack. Again, they make their way to the Benedictine convent, where they find shelter for 10 months, until liberation. On 2-3 July, 1944 forced laborers including Sam's father, are shot to death in Ponary, ten days before Vilna's liberation.

16. Transition to Slide 16: Aftermath of the Holocaust

Bak and his mother flee Vilna through Poland and Germany and cross the border of the American Occupied Zone. They are sent to a DP (Displaced Person) camp in Landsberg. Bak's mother remarries. Explain that DP (displaced persons) camps were set up in Germany, Austria, and Italy for the people who had been forcibly removed from their homes. From 1945-1952 more than 250,000 Jewish [DPs](#) lived in these centers that were under the allied authorities and the United Nations.

Teaching Tip! This is a painting Bak made in 1946 of the view from his window while living in the DP camp. Explain what a Displaced Person camp was, and how Bak used imagery and painting to process his world.

17. Transition to Slide 17: What Makes a Family?

Activity: Have the students draw and complete their word cloud in a journal or on a piece of paper. Following the word cloud activity: Imagine someone is painting a portrait or taking a photograph of your family. Describe it: who is in it? What is the background? Colors, lighting, etc. Pair or Group Share.

Teaching Tip! Before studying *The Family*, encourage students to reflect on what family means to them. Have students discuss some of the similarities and differences in their choice of words. Are there common themes? This group share activity is a way for them to make more personal connections when they analyze Sam Bak's depiction of family.

18. Transition to Slide 18: The Family, 1974

The class will now study and analyze one of Bak's pieces, *The Family*. Pass out a handout of *The Family*. Follow directions on Slide 18. Spend some time allowing students to observe and record their observations in journals. Discuss their observations in small groups. Debrief their findings as a class.

While students examine their handouts, ask them to write in their journals:

- What do you notice? What do you see? (*Guide them to list anything that comes to mind, without the need for explanation at this point.*)

- What colors do you see?
- What textures or materials do you observe?
- What stands out in the background? In the foreground?
- Take a closer look at the figures—how would you describe them?
- Using comparison and contrast, what else do you notice? For example: what are their expressions?

In small groups, have students share their observations with one another.

19. Transition to Slide 19: A Deeper Analysis

Follow prompts on Slide 19. This allows students to go beyond simple descriptions.

Share with the class that the artist titled this piece *The Family*, and that it was created after the war, in 1974.

Use the following prompts to guide student self-reflection (in writing):

- Looking at the background: Why do you think the artist chose those colors and included fire and smoke?
- Based on your observations, what story might the artist be trying to tell?
- Why do you think Bak chose the title *The Family*?

Group Discussion: Invite students to share their reflections after learning about Bak's childhood and early life, and after looking deeply at his painting.

Guiding Questions:

- What do you think Bak is expressing in *The Family*?
- What might we learn from this painting?
- Referring to the word cloud from *What Makes a Family?*, what else would you now add to that idea?

Following the discussion, share the following:

The Holocaust devastated Bak's family and yet the artist's works are inhabited by figures of "relatives". These are not his biological relatives but imaginary figures that in the absence of a real family, Bak portrays as his own.

Teaching Tip! As one person from each group shares what their group has analyzed, some students may want to reference the slides and point out what they noticed.

20. Transition to Slide 20: Three Quotes by Sam Bak

"My childhood paradise was not simply lost...but rather destroyed by eager human cruelty and mediated violence, and my art is centered on the memory and meaning of that destruction."

"I couldn't help but reflect on the millions of children who die in man's senseless conflicts, wars and genocides, past and present. I thought, 'What unspeakable abuse of our innocent youth.'"

"... to educate young people. To reach open-minded adults. Since my art speaks to the mind, and also to the heart, it could make a difference".

Teaching Tip! Choose a student to read each quote out loud. Have them identify which quote resonates most with them. Have them write in their journal something they learned from this lesson that they will remember. If time permits, go around and share with the class.

Assessments

- In writing, explain how what you have learned today from the art of Samuel Bak enriched your understanding of the Holocaust as well as the experience of a child survivor. Provide examples.
- *Optional:* Teach what you have learned: Take something you have learned from today's workshop and teach a parent, sibling, friend, relative.

Next Steps?

- Follow up with personal stories that make history come alive. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the USC Shoah Foundation, Yad Vashem have testimonies of Holocaust survivors that reinforce themes from this lesson.
- Study [other art of the Holocaust](#).
- Have students study [Chiune Sempo Sugihara](#), a Japanese diplomat who helped Lithuanian Jews escape by providing them with visas.
- What is a metaphor? Look at other paintings by Bak. How does Bak use objects, scenes, etc. as metaphors?
- See Slide 21. This is another self-portrait made by Bak many years after the war. Compare to the photograph of the boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. Why do you think he used this iconic image in his self-portrait? What else stands out? What do they think the shoes mean? Paper? Rocks? The bag around the young boy's feet? What do the colors convey?
- [Art Project \(optional activity\)](#): Create a portrait of your family. Thinking about how Bak used his art to express his family's history, the students will transform a family photo into a layered collage. See attachment for further details.

Supplemental Resources

- [How They Survived the Holocaust: Samuel](#) This is a short film that highlights
- This [website](#) has a chronology of Bak's life as well as many of his works.
- [Yad Vashem-Samuel Bak- An Arduous Road](#)



Glossary

Aktion: (German for Action) Nazi term for operation involving mass assembly, deportation and killing.

Antisemitism: Hatred or prejudice towards Jewish people

Deportation: forcible removal of Jews to concentration and death camps.

DP (displaced persons): After liberation from Nazi Germany, most Jewish survivors were unable or unwilling to return to eastern Europe because of antisemitism and the destruction of their communities during the Holocaust. Those who did return often feared for their lives. Many homeless Holocaust survivors migrated westward to territories liberated by the Allies where they were housed in displaced persons camps (DP) and refugee centers while waiting to leave Europe. From 1945 to 1952, more than 250,000 Jewish displaced persons lived in camps and urban centers in Germany, Austria, and Italy. These facilities were administered by Allied authorities and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

Ghetto: A section of a city where Nazis forced Jews to live, usually with several families living in one house, separated from the rest of the city by walls or wire fences, and used primarily as a station for gathering Jews for deportation to concentration camps.

Labor Camp: Nazi Germany exploited the labor of the occupied peoples from the onset of the occupation. More than 14 million people and 2.5 million prisoners of war were transported to Germany for labor. Jews were enslaved and interned in a far-reaching network of forced-labor camps across Europe.

Concentration Camp: Camps in which Jews were imprisoned by the Nazis, located in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe. There were three different kinds of camps: transit, labor, and annihilation. Many prisoners in concentration camps died within months of arriving from violence or starvation.

Death Camp: Six major camps designed and built for the sole purpose of killing Jews: These were Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka.

Gestapo: The secret state police of the German army, organized to stamp out any political opposition.

Nazi: Name for members of the National Socialist Democratic Workers Party (NSDAP), who believed in

the idea of Aryan supremacy.

SS: Schutzstaffel; the German army's elite guard, organized to serve as Hitler's personal protectors and to administer the concentration camps.

Aryan: Term appropriated by the Nazis to describe northern European physical characteristics (such as blond hair and blue eyes) as racially "superior".

Swastika: Once an ancient symbol used to ward off evil spirits, the Nazis appropriated it as their official symbol.

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