

Etgar Keret's "Shoes"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/etgar-kerets-shoes>.

Introduction

Israeli writer Etgar Keret's short story "Shoes," first published in 2004, follows a young Jewish Israeli boy as he develops his understanding of the legacy of the Holocaust. On a school field trip to an austere Holocaust museum, the narrator and his fellow students receive an education from a survivor who lectures them on the dangers of forgiveness, memory, and Germany. Later, the narrator is gifted a pair of Adidas sneakers by his parents and contemplates his relationship to a grandfather who died during the Holocaust. In this story, the past influences the present just as the present influences how we interact with our past. The story links an individual second-generation survivor experience with the trauma of communal and mediated memories as the narrator wrestles with the Germany that killed his grandfather and the Germany of today. In the end, the narrator transcends the past (wears his German shoes) to live in an international future (plays street soccer with the neighborhood kids as a member of the "Holland" national team).

This resource kit includes materials that will help teachers discuss the story, highlighting the power of Holocaust museum narratives and objects as keepers of personal and communal memory. These materials will also help teachers unpack the tension in Israeli society between survivor and *sabra* (native-born Israeli), and help them think about how irreverence in art can illuminate deep meaning.

Cover image: The baby shoe of a child named Hinda Cohen, with the date of her deportation to the death camps carved into the sole by her father. From the collection of *Yad Vashem*, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

Subjects

Childhood, Fiction, Hebrew, Holocaust, Israel-Palestine

Reading and Background

- The story "Shoes" translated from the Hebrew by Margaret Weinberger-Rotman, can be found in Etgar Keret's English-language collection of stories *The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God & Other Stories* (Riverhead Books 2015). The original Hebrew publication, "*Na'alayim* [Shoes]," is found in *Ga'aguay Le'Kissinger* [*Missing Kissinger*] (Zemora-Bitan 1994).
- A short biography, as well as information about Etgar Keret's books, films, stories, articles, and interviews can be found through his [website](#).
- Scholarly discussion on Israelis and Holocaust memory can be found in Dalia Ofer's journal article "*The Past That Does Not Pass: Israelis and Holocaust Memory*" (*Israel Studies*, Spring 2009). Arlene Stein writes about American Holocaust consciousness and a shift from mainly private stories to quite public ones in *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness* (Oxford University Press 2014).
- For more information on "post-memory"—the way memories can be inherited—and the way in which trauma can be transmitted, see Marianne Hirsch's journal article "*Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory*" (*Discourse*, Winter 1992-93). Additionally, for information on the transmission of trauma, see Melissa C. Kahane-Nissenbaum's "*Exploring Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in Third Generation Holocaust Survivors*" (Doctorate in Social Work Dissertation, UPenn, 2011).
- The essay "Empty Shoes" by Ellen Carol Jones from *Footnotes: On Shoes* (Rutgers University Press, 2001) edited by Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss uses Holocaust experience and memory to assert the importance of the shoe as a representation of Holocaust trauma. Michael Bernard-Donals looks at shoes as Holocaust artifact and their metonymic vs. synecdochic "connection to the historical past" in "*Synecdochic Memory at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*"



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(*College English*, May 2012).

- For historical background on the town of Volhynia, including the Jewish population's role in *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) during the British Mandate period and their support for the *yishuv* (early Jewish settlements in Palestine), see the [Jewish Virtual Library](#) as well as [Yad Vashem](#), Israel's World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

Resources

1: Text and audio excerpts, the last line of Etgar Keret's story "Shoes" in Hebrew and two English translations.

It is interesting to compare two English translations of "Shoes." One of the most fascinating differences between the two is the description of the shoes in the final sentence of the story. Along with the original Hebrew text, the two translations of the final sentence are presented here, one an excerpt from the printed story, and one an audio clip of [Keret himself reading the story aloud](#).

Suggested Activity: Have students read and listen to the excerpts and compare the translation of the final sentence. How might the reader interpret the translations "bounce in my step" versus "judging by the tread"? What does each translation offer? What does each evoke? If students have a background in Hebrew, have them read the original text and offer their own translation. You can note for students that in the past, Holocaust writing in Hebrew implied an ideological Zionist decision. With Keret, however, it is less of a reactive, political choice. It is simply his native language. Ask students how this story would change if it were written in Yiddish or English than in Hebrew.

Sources: Etgar Keret, "Naalayim," *Ivrit* at UC Berkeley, 2010, <http://ivrit.berkeley.edu/index.php/list/single/naalayim>.

Etgar Keret, "Shoes," in *Gaza Blues: Different Stories*, Etgar Keret and Samir El-Youssef (Eastbourne UK: Gardners, 2004).

Etgar Keret, "Etgar Keret Reads Shoes," Radio Free AWP, *Inside Higher Ed*, January 29, 2011. <https://www.insidehighered.com/audio/2011/01/29/etgar-keret-reads-shoes>.

2: Video excerpt, "The Museum of Boyfriend Wardrobe Atrocities," from "Inside Amy Schumer," 2015.

Comedian Amy Schumer creates a skit parodying the serious, almost sacred, atmosphere nurtured in many museums, and the authoritative and convincing tone with which museums often narrate history. In particular, "The Museum of Boyfriend Wardrobe Atrocities" mimics the curatorial decisions, the language, and the visitor responses one might find in a Holocaust museum. It is important to note that the skit's final punchline uses a pile of Crocs sandals as an explicit mirroring of Holocaust shoe memorials.

Suggested Activity: Watch the skit and have students identify the various elements in the Museum of Boyfriend Wardrobe Atrocities that mimic elements of Holocaust museums and memorialization. What is being parodied in Schumer's skit? Ask students to think about the irreverence on display in both Schumer's skit and Etgar Keret's story. How does this comedic portrayal of the act of memorialization differ from Etgar Keret's portrayal in "Shoes"? What is each saying about how commemoration spaces "instruct" or expect visitors to act? Talk to students about the "Museum Effect"—the importance and validity that accrues to an object when it is placed in a museum—and ask them what they think of Schumer creating this effect around somewhat trivial objects.

Source: Amy Schumer, "Museum of Boyfriend Wardrobe Atrocities," Season 3, Episode 7, of *Inside Amy Schumer*, Comedy Central, June 2, 2015, accessed at <https://vimeo.com/141682826>.

3: Testimony excerpt of Dr. Adolf Avraham Berman at the Eichmann Trial, Jerusalem, May 3, 1961.

During the televised trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann, testimonies of Holocaust survivors played a large role. Jewish resistance fighter and Israeli politician Dr. Adolf Berman introduced his testimony through the display of a Holocaust object: a pair of children's shoes. The shoes act as a historical trace and, for the court audience, they aid in the formation of a previously unheld memory. For a transcript of the English translation of the testimony, click [here](#).

Suggested Activity: Ask students to comment on Dr. Berman’s choice to present a pair of shoes during his testimony. What do the shoes evoke? In what way are shoes a compelling vessel for memory? Why might he have chosen to bring and show the pair of shoes, rather than to simply describe them? Ask students to compare the meaning of the pair of shoes in Berman’s testimony to the meaning of the pair of shoes in Keret’s story. Why might shoes be a recurring and even quintessential Holocaust artifact?

Source: Eichmann Trial, session 26, “Testimony of Dr. Adolf Avraham Berman,” accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of The Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archives of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1001556>.

4: Poetry by Holocaust survivor-poets Abraham Sutzkever and Moses Schulstein, in Yiddish and English translation.

Yiddish poets and Holocaust survivors, Abraham Sutzkever and Moses Schulstein, both wrote poems that describe trauma and memory through the central image of shoes. Written in the Vilna Ghetto on January 1, 1943, Sutzkever’s “A Wagon of Shoes” depicts shoes that are simultaneously empty and imbued with memory. The shoes move and pulse, and are strikingly incomplete. In Moses Schulstein’s “I Saw a Mountain,” a pile of shoes animates and shares its testimony. In both poems, shoes are no longer able to serve as support for walking, but they emotionally transport writer and reader.

Suggested Activity: In small groups, have students read aloud and study either Sutzkever or Schulstein’s poem. For Sutzkever’s, ask students what the use of questions tell us about the narrator and the mood that he creates. Ask students why he tracks the movement from Vilna (often referred to as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania”) to Berlin. How might one see his poem, written in the Vilna Ghetto, as a form of resistance? For students with a background in Yiddish, have them listen to Sutzkever’s poem the Smithsonian Folkways Recording and compare it to the English translation.

In Schulstein’s poem, the mountain of shoes is more “Holy than the Mountain of Sinai.” Ask students to interpret this line. What connections can we draw between the mountain of Sinai and the mountain of shoes? If God’s law is the gift that was received at Mount Sinai, what is the gift that is received at Mount Shoes? Is God present on this mountain? What gives the shoes or this moment its “holiness”? What is “holier” than God’s law? Is this a call to a new type of covenant?

Then have the class come together and ask the groups to report to each other what they’ve discovered about each poem. Have students compare the poems’ uses of shoe imagery to the anthropomorphized shoes in Keret’s story. Ask students to list the ways in which shoes are used as symbols or metonyms in all three texts. Then ask: what does it mean to “bear witness” to the Holocaust? Can objects (such as shoes) bear witness? If so, how?

Sources: Abraham Sutzkever, “A Wagon of Shoes,” trans. Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 151.

Abraham Sutzkever, *Di fesṭung lider un poemes : geshribn in Vılner Geṭo un in yald 1941-1944* (New York: Yiddisher Kultur Farband, 1945), 27-8.

Abraham Sutzkever, “Sutzkever Recites 13 Poems,” The Frances Brandt Online Yiddish Audio Library.

Moses Schulstein, “I Saw a Mountain,” trans. Beatrice Stadtler and Mindele Wajzman, in *From Holocaust to New Life: A Documentary Volume Depicting the Proceedings and Events of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*, ed. Michael Berenbaum (American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, 1985), 121. <http://www.70voices.org.uk/content/day36>.

Moses Schulstein, *A boym tsyishn ḥuryeš lider un poemes*. (Paris: Editions Ofsnai, 1947), 170-2.

5: Text excerpt from article about Etgar Keret, “Life at a Louder Volume” by Maya Jaggi, 2007.

In this excerpt, Maya Jaggi provides a brief biography on Etgar Keret and records his take on Holocaust memory and the ways in which the Holocaust factors into his writing. Keret’s relationship to communal and personal history is on full display as he speaks about growing up in Israel with Holocaust-survivor parents.

Suggested Activity: Students may choose to read the entire article or focus on the excerpt that begins “Keret’s treatment of the Holocaust...” Ask students to think about what Keret says in this article in light of the short story “Shoes.” Do you think the story is

working against what Keret calls the “rigid and petrifying” national memory of the Holocaust? What do you make of the fact that Keret has been criticized for being irreverent toward the Holocaust? And of his response that his Holocaust memories don’t “belong to the nation,” but to him?

The article also touches on the importance of the perspective of children in Keret’s work. In “Shoes,” how does the narrator’s perspective (that of a child) influence your reading? Ask students how they interpret the parenting that goes on in Keret’s story. Is it a case of the child wishing to remember what the parent wishes to forget? Is there a reversal of the “protector” role: the narrator compartmentalizes past and present and permits his parents’ divergent memory?

Source: Maya Jaggi, “Life at a Louder Volume,” *The Guardian*, Mar 16, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/17/featuresreviews.guardianre...>

6: Photographs and paintings, shoe images from Yad Vashem, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Samuel Bak.

The shoe, as object, image, and symbol, is an entry point for contemplating the relationship between communal and personal Holocaust memory. Shoes are identity markers. They describe professions, hobbies, and lives lived. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes in “Why We Need Things” from *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, “the body is not large, beautiful, and permanent enough to satisfy our sense of self. We need objects to magnify our power, enhance our beauty, and extend our memory into the future” (28). Shoes signify forward motion and progress as well as the past and memory in the footprints they leave behind. They also invite ideas of the monument and stand in for absent human life. The various photographs and paintings featured here illustrate “shoes” as holders of communal and personal memory.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider all or some of these images and think about what makes each powerful. They can also discuss: what is the difference between seeing an artifact like a shoe in a museum and in situ? What is different about looking at a single pair versus a pile of Holocaust victims’ shoes? In what ways do these images represent the lives of individuals and communities? In what ways do they represent death and absence?

Ask students to think about the pair of Adidas shoes in Keret’s story. What do they represent to the narrator? To the narrator’s mother? Students can attempt to draw or otherwise create an image of the Adidas shoes, and see what new meaning emerges with a visual representation.

Sources: “Hinda Cohen 1942-1944,” *Bearing Witness: Stories Behind the Artifacts in the Yad Vashem Museum Collection*, Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bearing-witness/shoe-hinda-co...>

“Auschwitz women inmates sort through a huge pile of shoes from the transport of Hungarian Jews,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain), <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa8637>.

“Shoes confiscated from prisoners at Majdanek,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, on loan from the State Museum of Majdanek, Lublin, Poland.

Samuel Bak, *Absence*, Oil painting, 1997. Image Courtesy of Pucker Gallery.

7: Film excerpt, “Long is the Road,” dir. Herbert B. Fredersdorf and Marek Goldstein, 1948.

Written by and starring Israel Becker, *Long is the Road* examines the Holocaust through the perspective of a Polish-Jew. Filmed in a displaced persons camp during the summer of 1947, this was the first German-made film to directly address the Holocaust. Towards the end of the film, the main character, David, who is living in a DP camp, contemplates emigrating to British Mandate Palestine. The film is optimistic and idealistic about the prospect of life in the Land of Israel. David tells his soon-to-be wife, Dora, that immigrating there, and actively *forgetting*, will be the best salve for their psychological trauma. The film ends as David can be seen farming German land, and imagining his future in Israel.

Suggested Activity: Ask students about the way this film handles collective trauma and the need for a new collective identity. Is forgetting a valid response to trauma? Is it possible? Does constant remembrance create Holocaust fatigue or additional trauma? Ask students to discuss Keret’s story in light of this clip: Is the narrator suffering from too much remembrance in his family and in

his society? Or too much forgetting?

Source: *Long is the Road*, directed by Herbert B. Fredersorf and Marek Goldstein (U.S.-Occupied Germany, 1948). Restored by the [National Center for Jewish Film](#).