

“Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car” by Dan Pagis

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers’ Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/written-in-pencil>.

Introduction

This kit presents resources for analyzing and interpreting a six-line Hebrew poem by Dan Pagis, an Israeli poet and Holocaust survivor. Born in 1930 in Radautz, a small town in the region known as Bukovina, which today is divided between Romania and Ukraine, Pagis survived three years in Nazi concentration camps. Shortly after liberation, he immigrated to Palestine, where he settled in Jerusalem and earned a PhD from Hebrew University. Pagis became a professor and leading scholar in the field of Medieval Hebrew literature, and he wrote and published poems—some of which addressed Holocaust themes—until his death in 1986.

In his best-known poem, “Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car,” Pagis raises universal questions about how people can murder their fellow human beings, using two poetic devices: the visceral and well-known image of Jews being deported to killing centers in railway cargo wagons and the metaphor of Biblical Eve, the mother of humanity, being transported to her death along with Abel, her murdered son. The poem raises questions about human choice and human responsibility during the Holocaust.

This resource kit can be used by teachers of language arts, history, art, Judaic and Holocaust studies, sociology, and psychology in a variety of educational settings including Jewish schools and secular universities and high schools.

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Hebrew, Holocaust, Poetry, Tanakh

Reading and Background

- *Points of Departure*, a collection of poems by Dan Pagis and translated by Stephen Mitchell, was published by the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia in 1981. The book contains an excellent introduction to analyzing the poetry of Dan Pagis.
- Poetry International Rotterdam offers this [short bio](#) of Dan Pagis on their website.
- *Art From the Ashes* (1995), edited by Lawrence Langer, is a wide-ranging anthology of writing from the Holocaust, with an extensive poetry section.
- Both Jacob Glatstein’s collection of Holocaust poetry in English translation, *I Keep Recalling*, and the *collected, translated poems* of Nelly Sachs are rare but not impossible to find online or at a library. You can also visit [this devoted translator’s website](#) to read more poetry by Sachs. You can read [Glatstein’s poems](#) in the original Yiddish at the Yiddish Book Center’s digital library.

Resources

1: The Biblical stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel.

As with many poems by Dan Pagis, an understanding of certain Biblical allusions can be helpful in interpreting “Written in Pencil.” These passages from Genesis tell the story of Adam and Eve, the first (Biblical) human beings, and of their sons Cain and Abel, the first murderer and murder victim.

Suggested Activity: Read the passages with students. Discuss the following questions: Who were Adam and Eve and what, according to the Bible, is their relationship to every human being? Who were Cain and Abel and what is the importance of their story? Why do you think that the Bible begins with these stories? What lessons do the stories offer?



Source: Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2: 18-25, Genesis 4: 1-16, trans. Jewish Publication Society, 1917. Source Sheet compiled by Alexis Aaeng using sefaria.org, 2017.

2: Excerpt from Holocaust memoir, "Still Alive," by Ruth Kluger, 2001.

Originally from Vienna, Ruth Kluger spent a period of her childhood in Theresienstadt, the Nazi concentration camp located approximately 100 kilometers outside Prague, before being transported, like the majority of Theresienstadt's inmates, to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Kluger's memoir, originally written in German, provides detailed insight into her Holocaust experiences, including the conditions she and others endured in the camps. This excerpt provides a visceral and heart-wrenching account of her transport from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz in a railway car designed for carrying cargo.

Suggested Activity: Read the excerpt with students. Ask students to list and describe each of the atrocities Kluger documents in her account of the transport. Now ask them to list the various emotions that Kluger and others seem to have in the wagon. Prompt students to consider how the passengers dealt with limited access to a "window," and how Kluger and her mother each react to the older woman suffering a breakdown nearby. Ask them to consider how the experiences of a child like Kluger might have differed from or been similar to those of an adult in the same car.

Give students time to process (through discussion or writing) their own emotional reactions to this passage.

Source: Ruth Kluger, *Staying Alive* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), 91-95.

3: Poem, "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car" by Dan Pagis, 1981, two translations and audio recording.

This is the Pagis poem in the original Hebrew and in two English translations. While the poem is extremely short and fragmentary, it is packed with emotion and possible meaning. The poem's narrator is Biblical Eve, traveling in a railway car with her son, Abel. Eve wishes to get a message to those who stand outside the railway wagon, but the poem cuts off before we learn what that message is. One possible reading of the poem is that the people Eve is addressing—the people she asks to convey a message to Cain—represent the onlookers who stood by and did nothing as the Holocaust happened.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the poem read aloud in the original Hebrew. Then read the two different English translations, the first of which is by Stephen Mitchell, who translated many Pagis poems in the 1982 volume *Points of Departure*. The second translation, by Daniel Utley, was published on the website reformjudaism.org. Ask students to reflect on some of the following sets of questions:

What thoughts and questions come immediately to mind just by reading the title of the poem? In Hebrew the words "Katuv" (meaning "Written") and "Khatum" (meaning "Sealed") allude to the holiest time of the year for Jews—the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—when Jews are hoping to be "written and sealed in the book of life." Why might Pagis have used those specific words in his title?

In Hebrew, the singular and plural words for "you" are different. In lines 4 and 6 of the poem the Hebrew plural word for "you" is used rather than the singular. How does this affect your interpretation of the poem? Who is the "you" being addressed?

Why does Eve call Abel "b'ni" ("my son")? What might Abel represent in this poem? Why does Eve use two terms, *b'ni hagadol* ("my older son") and *ben Adam* ("son of man" or "son of Adam") to describe Cain? What might Cain represent? What does it mean to place these characters on a railway car during the Holocaust? Where do you think Cain is? Why has the poet placed Abel with his mother rather than Cain (who killed Abel in the Biblical story)?

What differences do you notice between the two English translations? If possible, compare the translations to the original Hebrew and ask students why the two translators may have made different choices. How does each translation alter the interpretation of the poem?

What effect does the abrupt ending of the poem have? What do you think Eve's message for Cain might be?

Source: Reproduced from *Points of Departure* by Dan Pagis, translated by Stephen Mitchell, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 1982 by The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia.

The second translation of the poem, by Daniel Utley, was published on the website reformjudaism.org.

The audio recording was made by Rabbi Robert Sternberg at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA, 2017.

4: Video excerpt, oral history interview with David (Dudi) Bergman, 1990.

This is an excerpt from a longer oral history interview with David (Dudi) Bergman from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives. Bergman was in Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen, and was one of the only people in his cattle car to survive the transport to Dachau. This interview was recorded in 1990, and features Bergman talking about his Bar Mitzvah, which he had on the cattle train.

Suggested Activity: Watch this clip as a class and ask students to consider the following questions: What do you take away from David Bergman's testimony? How does he memorialize, in this story, the experience of being transported to a concentration camp? What emotions does he seem to express—both in words as well as in body language—while telling the story? Why is this particular memory meaningful, not just to Bergman, but to you as a listener? Do you think you would have the same reaction to the story if you read it in writing, rather than viewing the video?

Source: David (Dudi) Bergman, (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Archives, 1990), https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_oi.php?ModuleId=0&MediaId=1903

5: Poem, "You, Onlookers" by Nelly Sachs, with audio recording.

Nelly Sachs was born in Berlin in 1891 and was a well-established and well-respected writer in Germany long before Adolph Hitler came to power. She remained in Germany until 1940, a witness to *Kristallnacht* and the demise of German Jewry, at which point she immigrated with her mother to Sweden. The majority of poems by Sachs focus on the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust, which she read about from her position of safety in Sweden. The poem "You, Onlookers" addresses those who were neither perpetrators nor collaborators but who stood by and did nothing to stop the genocide.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the Sachs poem in the original German, and then read the English translation aloud with students. Then ask: What feelings, thoughts, and questions does this poem evoke? Who is being addressed in this poem? How does the Sachs poem "speak" to "Written in Pencil"?

Sources: "You Onlookers" from *O The Chimneys* by Nelly Sachs. Translation copyright (c)1967, renewed 1995 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. Used by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Users are warned that this work is protected under copyright laws. The right to reproduce or transfer the work via any medium must be secured with Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

"Ihr Zuschauenden", from: Nelly Sachs, Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden. Herausgegeben von Aris Fioretos, Band 1: Gedichte 1940-1950. Herausgegeben von Matthias Weichelt. © All rights reserved by and controlled through Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin.

The audio recording was made by Michael Yashinsky at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA, 2017.

6: Poem, "Well-Bred People" by Jacob Glatstein, with audio recording.

Jacob Glatstein, a contemporary of Sachs, was born in 1896 in Lublin, Poland, and was also a well-established writer before the Nazi era. He immigrated to the United States in 1914 during the period of mass migration of Jews from Czarist Russia and settled in New York City, where he became a distinguished member of the Yiddish literary circle. His Holocaust poems, among which "Well-Bred People" can be counted, are a small part of his vast oeuvre, but they are visceral and passionate in articulating the lessons of the Holocaust for humanity.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the Glatstein poem in the original Yiddish, and then read the English translation aloud with students. Then ask: What feelings, thoughts, and questions does this poem evoke? Who is being addressed in this poem? How does the Glatstein poem "speak" to "Written in Pencil" and to the Nelly Sachs poem in resource #5 above? Is the "they" in Glatstein's poem the same as the "you, onlookers" in the Sachs poem and the "you (plural)" in the Pagis poem?

Source: Jacob Glatstein, *I Keep Recalling* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1993), 213.

The audio recording was made by Rabbi Robert Sternberg at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA, 2017.

7: Photograph of the wagon (or cattle car) monument at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, 2015.

This monument, also known as the Memorial to the Deportees, is on display at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel. Though it is not visible in this photograph, Dan Pagis' poem "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car" is included in the display.

Suggested Activity: Discuss with students: What do you see in this image? What feelings does it evoke? Why do you think Yad Vashem has included this railway car in their exhibits? Why do you think the car is displayed as it is, in the treetops, at the end of a broken track?

What do you think about the choice to include "Written in Pencil" with the car? How might that affect a visitor's experience of the car, or a reader's experience of the poem?

Source: Shiva, Andrew, photographer. "ISR-2015-Jerusalem-Yad Vashem-Wagon monument 01" Photograph. Jerusalem, Israel: Wikimedia Commons, 2015. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ISR-2015-Jerusalem-Yad_Vashem-Wagon_monument_01.jpg (accessed May 26, 2017).

8: Photo of women being transported to a Nazi concentration camp, circa 1942-1944, and photo of Hungarian Jewish women and children arriving at Auschwitz, 1944.

These two photographs, taken by Nazi photographers, depict people being transported to and unloaded at concentration camps.

Suggested Activity: Study the first image with students. What emotions do they see on the faces of the women looking out through the opening of the car? How does this image resonate with the passage by Ruth Kluger (resource #2) or the poem by Pagis (resource #3)?

Now study the second image. Look carefully at the people in the photograph. What emotions can be seen in their faces? What might they have been thinking and feeling as they disembarked from the railway car and were forced to pose for the camera?

In what ways do these images deepen your understanding of "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car"? How does examining historical images strengthen one's understanding of the Holocaust?

Sources: Women being transported to a Nazi concentration camp. Circa 1942-1944. [Bundesarchiv \(Federal Archives of Germany\)](#).

Jewish women and children from Subcarpathian Rus await selection on the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. 1944. [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#), courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain).