

GRADES 3-6 CCS/ELA/SS Alignment for *Gifts from the Enemy* by Trudy Ludwig

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Trilling, the literary critic, observed that youth is the time “when we find the books we give up, but do not get over.” Trudy Ludwig’s *Gifts from the Enemy* is that type of a book. This succinct nonfiction story, based on *From a Name to a Number: A Holocaust Survivor’s Autobiography* by Alter Wiener, reaches out from its pages to share an insight Wiener credits to his survival: the importance of seemingly small acts of kindness and their power to transform and, in Wiener’s case, to empower our lives. As Trilling also noted in his commentary about the power of literature: “A real book reads us.” This is a work so deceptively simple and true that students grades 3-6 can grasp its emotional and psychological messages about the necessary conditions for surviving life challenges while students grades 7-12 can use its bare sequenced chronology as a platform for reflecting on human nature and the range of human responses to laws and to rationale which defy basic moral tenet.

Under the guidance of caring teachers out to both instill academic rigor and support the historic primary source material with grade and age appropriate historical context, all students can absorb the basic historic conditions that changed Polish Jewish teen Alter Wiener from the member of a loving, civically minded family circle to a Jewish prisoner at work in a German factory. Most importantly, through teacher facilitated use of the evocative oil paint illustrations rendered by artist Craig Orback that bring the deep emotions and severity of the Holocaust conditions to potent color rich concretization, a broad range of students in grades 3 and up—including Newcomers, ESL and Special Needs--can be introduced to visual renditions of despair, loneliness, and hopes surfacing for future.

In use of *Gifts from the Enemy* with students in grades 3-6, teachers can tap into a full array of CCSS ELA Reading, Writing (including argument, short research, and explanatory writing), Speaking and Listening and Language (including a focus on multicultural Judaic/Yiddish words) vocabulary skills.

Lesson Plans for Grades 3-6 (CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening- Comprehension and Collaboration)

Before reading *Gifts from the Enemy*, here are some questions to ask the students:

1. Why would someone you feel is an enemy give you a gift? If someone who was your enemy – whether because he or she was on another team or someone else’s friend or you were told he or she was your enemy, gave you a beautiful gift that saved your life, what would that tell you about your enemy?
2. Is it possible for someone who is an “enemy” to have a “good” part in his/her character and be helpful to you? Explain your answer. Has anyone who you thought was an enemy ever helped you? If yes, how?

List without any comment the quotes from the children. Some may make reference to the gift of the Trojan Warhorse.

3. When there is no electricity, gas, and heat due to power outages, do you feel your family should worry only about keeping warm, fed and safe themselves or should your family reach out to help other neighbors? Explain what you feel personally and what you and your family have done in this situation. (Given recent power outages, hurricanes, and snowstorms many have

experienced throughout the US, this question should be one that students can react to, based on those experiences.)

We will read a story which is taken from the true adult autobiography written by a man who, as a teenager, received a gift from someone who was his “enemy,” according to the law of Germany at that time. This man, Alter Wiener, grew up in Poland in a family where his mother had some very definite ideas about whether or not to help others if there was a community problem with food or heat.

During the class reading of *Gifts from the Enemy*, here are some questions to ask:

1. In what ways would growing up in Poland during the late 1920’s to the 1930’s be very different from growing up today in the United States? Look only at the illustrations, the beautiful oil paintings by Craig Orback. (Illustrations on the first two pages are sufficient.) Detail the different ways Alter’s home and town life was like when he was a child (e.g., no cell phones or computers, no indoor plumbing, etc.), compared to today’s youth. Have the children draw these on an experiential chart as well as list them in writing. This can expand the lesson to elementary newcomers and to spatial learners. ***(CCSS Reading for Information-Key Ideas and Details including illustration of ideas and integration of Knowledge and Ideas presented in different media/formats to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue)***
2. How does Alter’s mother feel about helping others in need of food and shelter? What in the story proves how she feels? Find both words and an illustration to back up your answer. ***(CCSS ELA for Information-Reading Key Ideas and Details)***
3. What did Hitler, the German leader who took over Alter’s country of Poland, feel about those in Poland who were different from him? How did Hitler use his powers to get others in Germany and Poland to share his feelings about differences? (Have the children reference both illustration and the words. ***(CCSS ELA Reading for Information- Reading Key Ideas and Details)*** What laws did he pass, so that those with differences could not socialize and be a part of the entire Polish community anymore?

BIG QUESTIONS:

(CCSS ELA Reading for Information-Key Ideas and Details, CCSS Speaking and Listening, CCSS Writing Persuasive Essay – for grades 3-4, argument writing for grades 5-6)

Before Hitler took over Poland, Jews had citizenship rights, went to school, prayed in their houses of worship, played in playgrounds, and could go out anytime during the day or night as could any citizen. Should Polish adults who were not Jews and who still had all of their rights as citizens have tried to help the Jews or protested to the German government? Or should they have been happy they were not “different” and “hated” by the Germans and done nothing since these laws were only hurting Jews? If laws were passed today against one group – a religious, racial, social, or ethnic group- one which you were not in--should you and your family try to help that group or protest? Explain why or why not.

BIG QUESTIONS:

(CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening-delineate a speaker’s argument-CCSS ELA Writing Make an argument)

As you read about Alter’s struggle to work as a teenager in a prison labor camp, what memories and strengths do you think he used to survive? Children were not only used for labor, even if they were eleven or younger but appeared older or seemed to be tall enough to work. They also, like Inge Auerbacher, spent a good part of their childhood in Concentration Camps. As with Alter, many youth were cruelly treated by the guards, always hungry and alone for long hours. What do you think helped

them survive or want to remain alive beyond just luck? What type of thinking and strategies helped some of those other teen prison labor camp workers and concentration camp children stay alive? In what way did Alter's gift from a German worker help him survive and want to survive even in world where, as a Jew, he had no rights? Pretend you are Alter and make an argument explaining what techniques you would use to motivate yourself to survive and to have hope, even though you were a teenager who worked in a prison labor camp.

BIG QUESTION:

(CCSS ELA Reading for Information- Analyze in detail how a key individual is introduced, illustrated and elaborated in the text)

In what ways does the story's illustrations and text help us to grasp how important the gifts of the bread and cheese sandwiches given to Alter for thirty days were for his survival? Detail how the illustrations offer information including verbal information and through the portrait of Alter's face as he eats a sandwich.

BIG QUESTION:

(CCSS Collaborative Speaking and Listening Collaborative Discussions reviewing key ideas of text and demonstrating multiple perspectives through reflection – CCSS Writing – Write narrative to develop real or imagined event using effective technique)

Alter never knows the actual reason or inspiration which led the female German factory worker to leave him hidden bread and cheese sandwiches over 30 days. Using the relevant details in this biography plus Alter's ideas about her motives, retell the story as the anonymous German factory worker would tell it. Explain why she left the sandwiches, even though in doing so she clearly disobeyed all the signs. What would she say led to her act of courage and this gift of hidden sandwiches?

BIG QUESTIONS:

(CCSS ELA Reading for Information- Craft and Structure)

Alter feels he has learned an important lesson from the German woman: "There are the kind and the cruel in every group of people. How those you meet in life treat you is far more important than who they are." In what way does this quote help explain the title of the book? Would Alter have been open and eager to get help from other Germans and from Nazi guards? Explain your answer by using the title and this quote.

BIG QUESTIONS:

(CCSS ELA Reading: Key Details and Structure)

Why do you think Trudy Ludwig wrote this story? What lesson /purpose did she have? Look at the copyright page. Notice Mr. Wiener's statement as he looks at a picture of himself during the time of this story. What is his purpose for sharing his story? ***(CCSS ELA Reading: Author's Purpose)*** Now that you have finished the story, do you, as readers, feel that Trudy Ludwig and Alter Wiener have achieved their purposes in publishing this nonfiction work? Does the work persuade you that you can receive small gifts from an enemy that will change your life for good? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE STORY:

(CCSS Writing- Research to Build and Present Knowledge)

Gentiles (non-Jews) who helped rescue, feed, or hide Jews during the WWII years were called "Righteous Gentiles." Research these individuals and find at least two to write about. Compare and contrast their actions with those of the German woman in Alter's story.

Read more about the Jewish Culture and identify at least five other special Jewish holidays and foods. Compare and contrast these with your own religious or ethnic holidays or with general national celebrations such as Thanksgiving and July 4th.

What qualities of character does Alter demonstrate which you admire and would want to take forward as a youth and as an adult? What can you, living in the United States today, learn as a person from what he went through in the past? Pretend you are speaking directly to Alter. ***(ELA CCSS Writing a reflection)***

CULMINATING ACTIVITIES:

Interview a parent, a close neighbor, or other adult. Share with them what you have learned about acts of kindness from this book. Ask them to share acts of kindness they have experienced in their lives or acts of kindness they have deliberately done or are now doing for others. Get them to share what motivated them to do these acts of kindness or how being the recipient of an act of kindness has helped them in their lives. Try to illustrate the act or have a friend read your interview and draw an illustration to go with it. ***(CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening Conversations- CCSS ELA Writing a Narrative or an Oral History)***

Read at least two other memoirs by Holocaust survivors. Focus on the emotional and intellectual strengths they drew on in order to survive. Summarize these strengths and compare them with those Alter used to survive. ***(CCSS ELA Writing-Short Research Paper)***

Spend two weeks reading either a local print newspaper or following local news online. During that time download or cut out all photos and stories about acts of kindness (i.e., rescuing an abused child, paying for vet care for an abandoned cat, returning a lost ring, helping someone who has been hurt while the ambulance comes, paying for someone on a grocery line who does not have cash, etc.). At the end of two weeks, develop an ACTS OF KINDNESS listing /compilation right here in _____ (your local neighborhood). Review this list to see if you find some unlikely individuals or those who you would not expect to be performing acts of kindness but who, in fact, are. ***(CCSS ELA Reading for Information- Range of Reading)***