



Teacher's Guide THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE: THE ART OF ESTHER NISENTHAL KRINITZ

Developed by

Robert Mathis, Head, Social Studies Department, Walt Whitman High School, Bethesda MD
Bonny Cochran, retired Head, Social Studies Department, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School,
Bethesda MD

INTRODUCTION

Esther Nisenthal Krinitz (1927-2001) was a survivor of the Holocaust in Poland. In October 1942, after living under Nazi occupation for 3 years, the Jews of her village and town in central Poland were ordered to report to the nearby train station for "relocation." The 15-year old Esther decided she would not go but would instead take her 13-year old sister Mania and look for work among Polish farmers. Turned away by Polish friends and neighbors, the sisters assumed new names and evaded the Germans, pretending to be Catholic farm girls. They never saw their family again. After the war ended, the two sisters made their way to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, where Esther met and married Max Krinitz. In 1949, Esther, Max, and their daughter immigrated to the United States.

In 1977, at the age of 50, Esther began creating works of fabric art to share her story of survival with her daughters. Trained as a dressmaker but untrained in art, she created a collection of 36 fabric pictures of strong, vivid colors and striking details with a sense of folk-like realism. Meticulously stitched words beneath the pictures provide a narrative. While her work exhibits great artistry, Esther never thought of herself as an artist, having created her pictures simply to pass on her memories to her children.

ESTHER'S STORY OF SURVIVAL

- While viewing the film, identify the people who were victims, heroes, perpetrators and bystanders.
Discussion:
Could people be in more than one category? Could people move from one category to another? Why? Can you identify parallels in the present?
- The closing title of the film contains a quote from Elie Wiesel, "Whoever reads or listens to a witness, becomes a witness."
Discussion:
What do you think Wiesel means? What does it mean to be a witness?
- As a young girl during the war, Esther had to make many choices. What were the most critical ones?
Discussion:
What decisions can young adults today make to respond to injustice?

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ESTHER AS ARTIST

- How is this portrayal of the Holocaust different from other depictions of the Holocaust that you've seen? (See the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website for images of the Holocaust: www.ushmm.org)

Discussion:

How do your heart and soul and mind respond to the images in "Through the Eye of the Needle"?

- How did Esther use beauty to convey such a harsh reality?

Activity:

Identify another example of inhumanity and injustice and devise an aesthetic way to portray it. Examples: bullying, genocide, racism, sexism, etc. Form: fabric or paper collage, painting, music, poetry etc.

- Why do you think Esther created these panels? (more than one reason)
- Why is needlework particularly healing?
- Esther always told her stories to her daughters as they were growing up. When she was about 50, she decided she wanted her daughters to see what her home and family looked like, and stitched a picture for each of them. Then, when she was in her 60s, she returned to creating her pictures and continued until she died at the age of 74.
Discussion:
Is there a life stage when people seem to want to tell and make sense of their life stories? Why do we have to tell our own story? Why is it that the lives of ordinary people are often ignored or overlooked?
- What is the significance of the film's title, "Through the Eye of the Needle"?

Research:

- At the end of the war, Esther and her sister went to a Displaced Person camp. What were these camps?
- Research other genocides, political repression, or other horrific events in the world for which artistic expression has been used to tell a personal story or to express feelings. Examples:
 - Picasso's "Guernica", (<http://www.pablocassio.org/guernica.jsp>)
 - Hmong story cloths
<http://www.internationalfolkart.org/eventsedu/education/handmadeplanet/hmongstorycloth.html>
 - Chilean "arpilleras" <http://cachandochile.wordpress.com/2010/09/11/chilean-arpilleras-a-chapter-of-history-written-on-cloth/>
 - Afghan war rugs http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_rugs
 - Art of Conflict Transformation Gallery <http://blogs.umass.edu/conflictart/political-textiles>

"THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE": TIME LINE

[Note to Teachers: For a comprehensive timeline for World War II, refer to <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/timeline/ww2time.htm>. A timeline of Holocaust-related events is at <http://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/before-1933>.]

1927 – February 8: Esther Nisenthal is born in the village of Mniszek in central Poland.

1933 - January 30 - Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany.

1938 - November 9/10 - Kristallnacht - The Night of Broken Glass.

1939 - September 1 - Nazis invade Poland.

1939 - September: Nazi soldiers arrive in Rachow and Mniszek and occupy the village.

1939 – October 26: Forced labor decree issued for Polish Jews aged 14 to 60.

1939 – November 23: German civilian occupation authorities require Warsaw's Jews to identify themselves by wearing white armbands with a blue Star of David.

1942 – January 20: – High-ranking German officials meet in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee to discuss and coordinate the implementation of what they called the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question," a plan to systematically annihilate the entire Jewish population of Europe, an estimated 11 million people.

1942 - July 22: First deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto to concentration camps; Treblinka extermination camp opened.

1942 – October 15: The Jews of Annapol/Rachow and the surrounding villages are ordered to leave their homes and report to the train station in Krasnik. By some accounts, they were put into the Krasnik ghetto and in November 1942, taken from there to the Belzec death camp. Esther, then 15, and her sister Mania leave their family and travel to the house of Stefan, a friend of their father's, in the nearby village of Dombrowa. Stefan, a gentile, agrees to take them in, but after two days asks them to leave out of fear that the Nazis will find them and kill him and his family.

1942 – late October: Esther and Mania travel to the village of Ksiezomierz to seek refuge under assumed Polish Catholic identities, but are sent away when they are unable to produce birth certificates.

1942- November: Esther and Mania come to the village of Grabowka, where they find work and shelter.

1944 - January 6 - Soviet troops advance into Poland.

1944 - July 24 - Soviet troops liberate first concentration camp at Majdanek.

1944 - August 1 - Polish Home Army uprising against Nazis in Warsaw begins.

1944 August: After the Soviet Army liberates the village of Grabowka, Esther returns to Mniszek in hopes of finding her family but finds no survivors. She hears from a neighbor that the Jews might have been taken to Majdanek, and travels there to look for signs of her family. After Russian soldiers give her a tour of the camp, she joins the Polish Army, under Soviet Army command, and goes with them to Berlin.

May 8, 1945 - V-E (Victory in Europe) Day.

1946- After her discharge from the army, Esther returns to Poland to get Mania and the two of them go to a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in the American zone in the town of Ziegenhein, Germany. There, Esther meets and marries Max Krinitz, also a Polish survivor.

1947 – Esther and Max travel to Belgium, where Max finds work while they wait to immigrate to the United States. Their daughter Bernice is born there.

1949 June: Esther and Max and their daughter arrive in the United States and settle in Brooklyn, NY.