

Writing Poetry based on *Beneath White Stars*: Activities for Secondary Language Arts and Social Studies Students

by Holly Mandelkern

"We read to understand history. We get the facts from prose. But we come into the story, we feel, we understand, on a personal level, from poetry. When you teach the Holocaust, you will teach facts, you will use the prose of textbooks, or the heightened prose of Anne Frank or Elie Wiesel. Of the latter writers, it's interesting that the most memorable passages are often the most poetic ones.

In teaching the Holocaust through the writing of poems, you put your student inside the history, and more important, inside the characters that lived or died in it. In doing so, you will give them something they will remember, something that may enhance them, change them."

Al Rocheleau

Past president of the Florida State Poets Association and author of *On Writing Poetry*

➤ **Activity I: Create a Found Poem using the Lost and *Found* section of *Beneath White Stars*.**

"A found poem is created by locating vivid and powerful language from prose, extracting it, and arranging it into lines and stanzas of poetry. The language itself is 'found,' but the poem is created."

Karen Shawn

Visiting Associate Professor of Jewish Education at Yeshiva University and co-editor of *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*

General guidelines for writing a found poem from prose are:

- Write down key words in the order in which they appear in the text you are using as inspiration. Your new poem will consist mainly of these words.
- Choose a focus; don't try to tell everything.
- Write your poem using words in the order in which they appear in the source text.
- You can make small changes to the words from the source text for tense and capitalization.
- You can add up to two words of your own to write the poem.

Found poems can be written by each student or as a class.

A. An **INDIVIDUAL STUDENT** writes a found poem.

Example: Here's a found poem that I wrote using the Lost and *Found* section as the source text (on pages 139-141) for this new poem. I made my list of key words as I read each paragraph of the source text. Keeping these words in the order in which they appear in the Lost and *Found*, I used the general guidelines listed above for writing a found poem.

Counting Their Thousands

For Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara

Sugihara found hundreds
assembled to leave, to travel
through Japan to reach Curacao.
Ready to write
with encouragement from Yukiko,
he wrote visas
against directive of his government.
Thousands escape.

Polish Jews,
relocated through no certain path,
filled with gratitude:
"We will never forget you.
We will see you again."
For each, the consul wished
good luck.

Sugihara and family,
ordered to leave Kovno
still writing visas from hotel and train,
were posted,
imprisoned,
unrecognized.

Many survived because of one
Chiune Sugihara,
his work in keeping with public service
he had been taught.
"Righteous Among the Nations" awarded by Israel,
tree planted at Yad Vashem,
and the "Hill of Humanity" built in Japan
belatedly acknowledge
"One Thousand Furrows."

B. A WHOLE CLASS writes a found poem.

Here is a class exercise for writing a found poem based on the life of Roman Kent, the subject of the poem "Uprooted." Please read pp.167-9, the *Lost and Found* for "Uprooted" about Roman Kent, to write a new poem.

- Divide the class into six groups after students have read the source text on pp. 167-9.
- Each group reads one paragraph of the *Lost and Found* and, using this paragraph as the source text, writes one stanza for the new poem.
- Assign a different paragraph of the *Lost and Found* to each group.
- I recommend writing a free-verse poem to help make combining the stanzas easy.

Here are instructions for the class:

- In your group write down key words that seem important from your assigned paragraph of *Lost and Found*. Include strong nouns and verbs.
- Keep it simple; don't try to tell everything.
- Write a stanza keeping the words you chose in the order in which they appear. Each group can add up to two words not from the source text to write a stanza.
- Organize the chosen words into a free verse poem rather than a fixed form. This makes combining the stanzas from the different groups achievable.
- As a group, edit your stanza.
- Read the whole poem aloud to ensure flow and consistency. Edit if necessary.

Example: Here's a found poem I wrote from this same *Lost and Found* section (one stanza for each paragraph):

"Uprooted": A Found Poem

In Łódź,
a textile of sisters and brother,
Jewish school, bicycle, ball, and dog Lala,
his charmed life ends
the moment war begins—

Restrictions and March to the Ghetto.
Lala journeys to reunite,
dividing her time—
now ordered to be
turned over.

Gardening and permitted to keep their yield,
with other young people at the leather factory
Roman and Leon sew knapsacks, belts,
and goods for the German army.
Potatoes planted,
their malnourished father dies,
the boys shouldering the family
and fretting over crops.

Grabbed and dragged,
deportees raid food supplies,
though Roman arms himself with sticks and brooms.
Ravished, famished,
head bowed and sobbing,
his family, too, is soon sent
to Auschwitz...

Marched,
liberated by American soldiers,
the brothers in Atlanta
are gone with the wind,
detached.
Moved to a nurturing home,
university and career become Roman.

Roman dedicated himself
to Holocaust education,
gathering survivors, friends—
this gracious, kind man.

➤ **Activity II: Write a poem using words from several poems in *Beneath White Stars*.**

As you read **poems** from *Beneath White Stars*, write down any words/images/objects/or lines that make an impression on you. Include objects and other nouns. Keep this list!

Take this list of words/images/objects/or lines and use some of them to write a poem.

Add other words not on your list to weave your favorite words together into a poem. You can write a poem in any form you like—or no form—from your list of words/images/objects/lines on your list, feeling free to change the order of anything you've written.

Here are examples of:

- my favorite words/images/objects/lines
- my whittled-down list of concrete nouns and a few strong adjectives
- my poem resulting from this weaving

Holly's Favorite Words/images/objects/lines from poems in *Beneath White Stars*:

we give nothing away
leaden cloud
suspended hope in single strands
tossed her frayed and favorite dress
Goethe for the train
linocut knives had schooled his heart
in archives so that we could see the hues
sea of yellow stars unveiled abuse
the scale to weigh each child
a sea of pleading eyes behind the gate
our story driven underground like potatoes in Łódź
posed for a shutter
a trace of family's past
painted birds in bluest skies
I could survive where lovingkindness dwelt

Narrowing the list above: Choosing concrete nouns/objects (and a few strong adjectives)

nothing, leaden cloud
single strands
frayed and favorite dress, Goethe, train
linocut knives, heart
archives, hues, sea stars
scale, child
sea, pleading eyes, gate
story, underground, potatoes, Łódź
shutter
trace, past
painted birds, bluest skies
lovingkindness (This is not a concrete noun, but it's an interesting word so I included it.)

Beyond a Leaden Cloud

Beyond a leaden cloud,
I see single strands and seas of stars from the train.
We of Łódź and pleading eyes approach the gate,
wishing to be hidden underground like potatoes,
etched from this scene by linocut knives.
I packed my frayed and favorite dress
and hold thoughts of painted birds in bluest skies.
Can hearts of lovingkindness tilt the scale here?
I shutter my fears and give nothing away,
no traces of family's past.

I am a child with a story, a leaden cloud,
that will make Goethe and his sorrows pale.

If you're stuck, a possible way to start your poem built on favorite words/images/objects/or lines is: "Where I'm from is...", "I am from...", or "We are from..."

➤ **Activity III: Writing new poems from questions addressed in the book as the prompt.**

What does the student think about that? Poems come down to a question, an answer, a wise thought, or an unusual one.

Here are a few questions and thoughts that inspired my poems and may encourage students to pose their own answers or to raise other questions to write a poem: (Several poems are listed that address these questions, though there are others, too.)

What were some ways to fight back?

Poems in the chapters **Praying in Pencil** and **Standing in Blood** address these questions. Why were there so many different ways to resist? How did events shape the responses? Are any of these ways interesting to me: finding food, tending children, bringing the first map of a death camp and dynamite to the underground, praying in Auschwitz, serving as partisan? "Bowl of Soup" "His Overtures of Love" "Timing Is Everything" "The Standing Prayer" "Patzan"

Was it harder to be a parent or a child during this time?

"Watching Myself Watch My Son" and "I Am That Child"
"Packing Her Bag" and "Watching My Daughter Pack Her Bag"

What could adults, such as Dr. Korczak, have done to make the lives of children better amidst the suffering? Did he succeed?

"His Overtures of Love"

Why did historians document what was happening in ghettos?

"So the World Would Know"

What role did luck play in survival?

"No Art" and "Patzan"

What happened to survivors after the war? What did they do with the memories? Would you ever want to talk about these events again if you had survived?

In "A Glezele of Tei" Tess Wise started a Holocaust museum in Maitland, FL

In "L'Chaim" Nesse Godin married a survivor with whom she had never even spoken. She was married to him for a lifetime.

In "Timing Is Everything" Vladka Meed concretized her desire to help educate teachers about Jewish resistance so they could pass this on to their students.

How did rescuers show creativity and boldness in their rescuing? What prepared them to rescue Jews?

"Mr. Sugihara's Eyes," "The Likeness of a Man" (Raoul Wallenberg), and "Kissing the Wall" (Father Bruno Reynders)

➤ Activity IV: Other Ways to Get Started Writing Poems

Write a poem with the same title as one of mine: e.g., "Heartbeats" "I Am That Child" "Packing Her Bag" "So the World Would Know" "Bowl of Soup" "History Lessons" "Uprooted" "Memories in Color"

Write a poem from an epigraph in the book: e.g., Emily Dickinson's in "His Overtures of Love" or Maya Angelou's in "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories"

Write a poem from an illustration: e.g., Anne's view out her window for "Parallel Limbs" or the drawing of Petr Ginz on the moon for "Lines in Space"

Create a written conversation with a person from a poem in the book: If you were in a room with this person, what would you ask him/her? For example, if you wrote about the girl who packed her suitcase ("Packing Her Bag"), ask her, "What did you want to take that you didn't pack? What did you pack with hopes that it would bring you comfort, but it did not?" Turn this into a conversational poem.

Rewrite one of the poems from the book in a different form: If the poem appears in the book as free verse, you might choose a fixed form as a way to rewrite it.

Write poems for a contest sponsored by a Holocaust Center.

Write a poem as part of a collective reading for a closing activity for the unit of Holocaust study, reading the poem aloud.

Use a poem from the book or write your own as the foundation for composing a song, writing a play, or choreographing a dance.

Read a child's diary from the Holocaust: Use this as source material to write a poem.

Expand Beneath White Stars: Write another poem about one of the people in this book or write about another person from this time.

Use Beneath White Stars as a model for writing poems about other historical events: One creative writing teacher from Vermont said she is using my book for a mini course, not on the Holocaust, but a writing unit on witnessing events in history.

Write a poem based on objects in my book.

The list below includes objects appearing frequently in poems in *Beneath White Stars*:

birds: "Parallel Limbs" "I Never Saw Another Butterfly" "Risen and Rescued" "Timing Is Everything" "Unter dayne vayshe shtern: A Sonnet for Sutzkever" "A Crowd of Hosts" "Feathers"

books: "Packing Her Bag" "Watching My Daughter Pack Her Bag" "Overdue: Book Reports, May-September 1944" "Lines in Space" "*A Glezele Tei*"

bread: "Through Leaden Cloud" "Lines in Space" "His Overtures of Love" "Risen and Rescued"

butterfly: "Parallel Limbs" "You Never Saw Another Butterfly"

eyes: "Watching Myself Watch My Son" "Transported" "*Patzan*" "*L'Chaim*" "Mr. Sugihara's Eyes" "Kissing the Wall" "The Witness Stands" "Memories in Color"

face: "Between the Lines" "*Misericordia* for the Last Jews of Busk, Ukraine"

flames/fire: "The Small World of Little Fritz" "Crosscurrents" "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "Telltale Lines" "*L'Chaim*" "The Witness Stands"

hands/gloves: "Beneath White Stars" "Heartbeats" "Watching Myself Watch My Son" "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "Mr. Sugihara's Eyes" "Memories in Color"

heart: "Heartbeats" "The Small World of Little Fritz" "No Art" "Sutzkever's Stars" "*L'Chaim*" "*A Glezele Tei*" "Memories in Color"

home: *Kindertransport* poems "His Overtures of Love" "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories"

host: "A Crowd of Hosts" "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "The Likeness of a Man"

map: "Lines in Space" "The Likeness of a Man" "Uprooted" "Memories in Color"

mother: "Packing Her Bag" "Watching My Daughter Pack Her Bag" "Transported" "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "Telltale Lines" "*Patzan*" "Unter dayne vayse shtern: A Sonnet for Sutzkever" "*A Glezele Tei*" "Kissing the Wall" "Recounting"

parades: "The Small World of Little Fritz" "Transported" "The Witness Stands"

passports/visas: "Mr. Sugihara's Eyes" "The Likeness of a Man"

rabbit: "Heartbeats" "Transported"

sewing: "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "Between the Lines" (Karmel sisters) "His Overtures of Love" (sewing corner) "Uprooted"

shoes: "Packing Her Bag" "Timing Is Everything" "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "Unter dayne vayse shtern..." "Memories in Color"

singing/song(s): "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "Telltale Lines" "Uprooted" "Unter dayne vayse shtern: A Sonnet for Sutzkever" "Sutzkever's Stars" "Crowd of Hosts" illustration of German family ("A Place For Us?") "A Crowd of Hosts" "Memories in Color"

soup: "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" " Bowl of Soup"

stars: "Beneath White Stars" "Packing Her Bag" "Sutzkever's Stars" "So the World Would Know" "His Overtures of Love"

stranger: "Watching Myself Watch My Son"

trains/railroad: *Kindertransport* poems "Patzan" "Packing Her Bag" "Watching My Daughter Pack Her Bag" "Lines in Space" "No Art" "Kissing the Wall" "Uprooted" "Feathers" "The Witness Stands"

trees: "Heartbeats" "Parallel Limbs" "You Never Saw Another Butterfly" "Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories" "Unter dayne vayse shtern: A Sonnet for Sutzkever" "The Witness Stands"

wheels: "Mr. Sugihara's Eyes" "Kissing the Wall" "Likeness of a Man"

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