



LESSON PLAN:

FIRSTHAND HISTORY: EDDIE WILLNER

Middle (6-8)

OVERVIEW

Students will analyze the purpose of primary sources before being introduced to Eddie Willner, a survivor of the Holocaust who is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. They will then listen to a portion of an oral history interview he gave to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). While listening, students will answer questions about the interview and the importance of primary sources. Students do not need to already be familiar with World War II or the Holocaust in order to participate in this lesson.

Resources include a PowerPoint, primary source packets, guiding worksheets, and a grading rubric.

Estimated time: 1-2 class periods, 90 minutes total

- Part 1, Why do Primary Sources Matter?: 30 minutes
- Part 2, Analyzing Primary Sources: 60 minutes

STANDARDS

Content standards vary by state. This lesson can be used to teach the following common core reading and writing standards and similar wording may be found in your state standards.

National Council For the Social Studies Standards

- NCSS.D1.5.6-8: Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of views represented in the sources.
- NCSS.D2.His.12.6-8: Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to identify further areas of inquiry and additional sources.

Common Core Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6: Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8: Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9: Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will describe types of primary sources.
- Students will compare and contrast first-hand accounts (primary sources) with second-hand accounts (secondary sources).
- Students will analyze the purpose of using primary sources in historical research.

RESOURCES NEEDED

- Firsthand History PowerPoint
- Copies of the student worksheet (1 per student)

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Lesson Part 1: Why Do Primary Sources Matter?, 30 minutes

- Introduction: 5-10 minutes
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 2: What is a primary source?
 - Students should know that a primary source (such as a journal entry, letter, newspaper article) was created at the time of the historical event or by someone who experienced that event.
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 3: Primary Sources
 - Primary sources are materials created during a historical event; they are a first-hand account of a historical event
 - Ask: What are types of primary sources?
 - Optional follow-up questions: 30 years from now, how could someone know what happened today? What records do we make to let people know what happened? How did people know when [important historical event] happened? How was the information shared with other people at the time?
 - Primary sources can be written materials like letters, diaries, and newspaper articles
 - They can be images like photographs, posters, and drawings
 - They can be interviews or what historians call oral histories
 - Primary sources can also be objects.
 - Optional follow-up questions: Who here has visited a museum and seen objects on display? What are some objects you saw? Those objects are also primary sources. They existed and were used during a historical event and can tell us about that historical event.
 - Explain: To study history, historians use primary sources: documents, images, and other artifacts from the past that offer firsthand information on events and experiences as they were happening at the time. Historians, journalists and writers then analyze information they learned from primary sources, along with



their own understanding of historical events, in order to create secondary sources.

- Activity: Compare and Contrast: 10-15 minutes
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 4: Compare and Contrast
 - These are two articles about the end of World War II. Without reading the articles, can you guess which is the primary source and which is the secondary source? Why do you think so?
Students may recognize the first article as a primary source, since it was written at the time World War II ended.
 - Let's read parts of each article to explore further.
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 5: "Japan Surrenders!"
 - Read aloud and analyze.
 - When was this article written?
 - Why was this article written?
 - What's the main idea?
 - What is the author's tone?
 - What kind of words does the author use – are they very factual, emotional, descriptive?
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 6: "Fifty Years Ago: The End of World War II"
 - Read aloud and analyze.
 - When was this article written?
 - Why was this article written?
 - What's the main idea?
 - What is the author's tone?
 - What kind of words does the author use – are they very factual, emotional, descriptive?
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 7: Compare and Contrast
 - After reading, which do you think was the primary source and which was the secondary source? Which one seems like it was written by someone who witnessed the events described in the article?
The first is the primary source. It was written by someone who experienced the celebration at the end of World War II firsthand.
 - How were the articles similar?
Students may identify that the articles were both published in newspapers and both were about the end of World War II, or other similarities.
 - How were the articles different?
Students may identify that the first was more emotional and the second more factual, the first was written right after the war ended and the second was written 50 years



later, the first focused on the day the war ended while the second included information about the entire war and peace negotiations, or other differences.

- Activity: Why Primary Sources? 5 minutes
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 8: Why Do Primary Sources Matter?
 - Ask: Why do primary sources matter? What do we learn from them?
Students may identify that primary sources show what people thought of historical events at the time, they give personal detail about historical events, they can offer many different perspectives on an event, or other responses.

Lesson Part 2: Analyzing Primary Sources, 60 minutes

- Activity: Introducing Eddie Willner
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 9: Eddie Hellmuth Willner
 - When most people die, they are buried or have some kind of marker or memorial to help people remember them. Ask: What can we learn from Eddie's headstone at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia?
 - Birth and death date
 - He was a Major in the U.S. Army
 - He was Jewish
 - He was an Auschwitz survivor
 - Does anyone know what it means to be an Auschwitz survivor?
Students may or may not know anything about the Holocaust or Auschwitz. If students know anything allow them to share before continuing; if not, simply continue to the next slide.
 - Display PowerPoint Slide 9: What was Auschwitz?
 - **Note:** The Holocaust is a very difficult and expansive topic and should be approached with sensitivity. Some key facts are provided here to provide context for Eddie Willner's oral history; for additional information and education resources on the Holocaust, we recommend referencing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:
 - Introduction to the Holocaust:
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>
 - Education Resources: <https://www.ushmm.org/teach>
 - Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust:
<https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>
 - Key facts:
 - In 1933, the Nazi party, led by Adolf Hitler, came to power in Germany. One of the goals of the Nazi party was to establish a "master race" by



killing groups of people they considered “undesirable.” The largest group they targeted was Jewish people.

- Between 1933-1945, six million Jews (two-thirds of the Jews in Europe at that time) were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators. This systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder is now referred to as “the Holocaust.”
- During the Holocaust, Jewish people were persecuted in various ways, including having their businesses, homes, and synagogues destroyed and being forced to live in crowded neighborhoods called ghettos.
- In 1942, the Nazis began what they called the “Final Solution” – their plan for killing all Jewish people under their rule. This included mass shootings and deporting people to killing centers with poison gas chambers.
- Some Jews were sent to concentration camps, where they were forced into hard labor. Many died in concentration camps from the poor conditions, little food and exhaustion.
- Auschwitz had a killing center and multiple concentration and forced labor subcamps. It was the largest of the Nazi camps, and 1.1 million people died there.

- Video on Auschwitz from the USHMM:

<https://youtu.be/w1OWxLDJdYg>

- **Summary:** Auschwitz was the main Nazi extermination camp where millions of Jewish and other people were systematically killed during World War II. Being an Auschwitz survivor means having survived one of the most horrific periods in human history.
- Display Slide 10: Eddie Willner’s Life
 - **Note:** The information provided on this timeline is to give some context before the students listen to Eddie Willner’s oral history. You do not need to share all the information below.
 - **August 15, 1926:** He was born in Germany and named Hellmuth Willner.
 - **1938:** After Germany increasingly became unsafe for Jews, Hellmuth’s parents sent him to live with a Jewish family in Belgium. Because the Belgians did not like the Germans at that time, he changed his name to Eddie, which did not sound as German as Hellmuth. The rest of his family soon came to Belgium as well.
 - **1940-1942:** After Germany started attacking other countries in May 1940, Eddie’s father was arrested in Belgium for being German, and was sent to a prison camp in France. When Eddie and his mother tried to find him, they were arrested too. In 1942, the family was able to briefly escape a prison in France, but they were captured by the French police.



- **September 1942:** At that time, the French government collaborated with the Nazis, so they sent the family to Auschwitz. Eddie and his father were sent to Nazi labor camps while his mother was murdered at Auschwitz.
 - **1942:** Eddie and his father did hard labor at a variety of labor camps, including building rail lines, digging up unexploded bombs, and building underground bunkers. They were given very little food or clothing and many people died of exhaustion, starvation, and disease. At one of the camps, Eddie befriended Mike Swaab, another teenage boy.
 - **Fall 1944:** Eddie's father fell ill and was murdered.
 - **January 1945:** As the Soviet army approached, prisoners in Nazi concentration camps in Poland were evacuated toward the interior of Germany in death marches. Eddie was forced to walk 180 miles in the cold and snow.
 - **February-April 1945:** Eddie was at a Buchenwald subcamp in Langenstein-Zwieberge blasting tunnels in the Harz Mountains as part of a Nazi program to produce and hide German weapons underground.
 - **April 1945:** Eddie's camp was forced onto another death march. During the march, Eddie and his friend Mike were able to escape. After several days, they found an American tank unit and were taken in and cared for until the end of the war.
 - **1947:** Eddie immigrated to the United States.
 - **1948:** Eddie enlisted in the U.S. Army, and later attended Officer Candidate School to become an Army officer.
 - **August 1948:** Eddie married Johanna Tiburtius, a woman who had escaped communist East Germany and was working in a U.S. Army office in West Germany. They had six children together.
 - **1968:** Eddie retired from the Army as a Major and began a career with the U.S. federal government.
 - **1988:** Eddie retired from his career in the government.
 - **May 25, 1989:** Eddie was interviewed by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum about his life and experiences during the Holocaust; this is the interview you will watch as part of this lesson.
 - **March 30, 2008:** Eddie Willner died at home in Virginia and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.
- **Activity: Listening to an Oral History**
 - **Explain:** The USHMM has interviewed Holocaust survivors in order to preserve their personal stories. In this lesson, you will listen to a portion of Eddie Willner's interview. While it was not recorded at the time of the Holocaust, it is a primary source because he is describing what he experienced firsthand.
 - As students listen, they should fill out the "Listen" questions on their worksheet. After the oral history is done, they should answer the "Reflect" questions.



- Go to <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504739> and select Part 2 of 3. Play from 7:48-25:17. (In the transcript, available on the same webpage, this section goes from page 15 starting at "Health was of utmost importance," to page 19 "So that's how I was able to survive that.")
- **Note:** In the interview, Willner jumps around a bit. To help you follow along, this is the order of the stories he tells:
 - How he dealt with disease and hunger while in the camps.
 - How much he and his friend Mike Swaab weighed when they escaped.
 - The difference between Blechhammer and Auschwitz. Blechhammer was a work camp about 50 miles from Auschwitz, which was a death camp and consisted of a number of concentration and forced labor subcamps. Blechhammer had a gasoline factory that was often targeted by American bombs.
 - The conditions of working and living at Blechhammer.
 - His father being killed.
 - He and Mike planning how to escape, the difficulty of escaping the guards, and the challenge of not being recognized as escaped prisoners.
 - Getting hit by machine gun fire when his work group was accused of not working hard enough, then acting as if he were fine so that he could continue to work.
- After students complete their worksheets, lead a discussion using the three Reflect questions:
 - How was hearing Eddie Willner tell his own story different from hearing your teacher talk about his life?
 - Why do you think the USHMM has tried to record so many oral histories from people who survived the Holocaust?
 - What else do you wish you knew about Eddie Willner's life and what kind of primary sources could give you that information?

LESSON EXTENSIONS

- Read *The Diary of a Young Girl*, also known as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, another firsthand account of a teenager's experience during the Holocaust. The USHMM has more information and a lesson plan available here: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/anne-frank-diary?parent=en%2F142>
- Explore interviews, home movies, memoirs, and diaries of Holocaust victims, survivors, rescuers and liberators available through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/>
- Plan a field trip to an archive, library special collections, or historical society near you for students to see primary sources in person and meet someone who works with primary sources for a living.
- Plan your own oral history collecting project using the guidance from EDSITEMENT, a partnership between the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Trust for the Humanities: <https://edsitement.neh.gov/teachers-guides/oral-history-educational-experience>



PLANNING A VISIT TO ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY?

Eddie Willner is featured on the Arlington National Cemetery World War II Walking Tour, which explores how the war affected people from all walks of life. You can find it on the Education Program website: <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/education>

TEACHER BACKGROUND ON WORLD WAR II

With Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party's rise to power in the 1930s, Germany started rearming and remilitarizing the Rhineland, a region bordering France and Belgium. It also annexed Austria. In response, Great Britain and France began low-level preparations for war and attempted to prevent German expansion through negotiation. Ultimately, negotiations with Germany failed, and on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later Great Britain and France, forming the Allied powers, declared war on Germany. Germany and its allies formed the Axis powers.

During the first eight months of World War II, isolationism swept through the U.S. Most Americans did not want another war. However, as the war in Europe progressed, Americans increasingly supported entering the war. In September 1940, the United States began supplying Great Britain materials for the war effort through the lend-lease program.

A little before 8:00 a.m. on Sunday, December 7, 1941, Japanese forces attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This event shocked the nation and pulled the U.S. into the war. On December 8, the U.S. declared war on Japan. Japan's allies, Germany and Italy, quickly responded, declaring war on the U.S. that same day. Three days later, the U.S. officially declared war on Germany and Italy.

The U.S. sent troops to both the European and Pacific theaters. Back home, the entire country mobilized to respond to the needs of the "total war." The expanded wartime economy ushered in new opportunities for women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans and other minorities who were able to secure positions in the armed forces or as civilian workers in factories or shipyards. Government-sponsored campaigns advocated civilians to do their part for the war effort, whether that was purchasing war bonds, rationing goods or volunteering for service.

In 1945, the Allied forces advanced toward Germany. Soviet forces reached Berlin on April 21, 1945. Germany surrendered two weeks later. War in the Pacific Theater continued another three months. After considering an invasion of mainland Japan, President Harry S. Truman authorized the use of atomic bombs against Japan. The U.S. dropped a bomb on the city of Hiroshima on August 6th. This was followed by another bomb on the city of Nagasaki on August 9th. Japan surrendered on August 14th, 1945, effectively ending World War II.

Name:



Class Period:

Firsthand History: Eddie Willner Oral History

Listen:

1. What did Willner say the prisoners would eat to help with diarrhea?

Coal or ash

2. Why was it so dangerous to work at the gasoline factory?
What were the Americans doing?

The Americans would bomb the factory

3. Why was Willner's father murdered?

He was old or weak

4. What were some of the things that made it difficult to escape?

Answers will vary but may include: high walls, electric barbed wire, guard towers, guards with guns and dogs, it would be obvious they were escaped prisoners because they were wearing blue and white striped uniforms, had numbers tattooed on their arms, had no hair, and were very thin.

5. When the guards asked why Willner was bandaged up, what did he say?

He had been hit during an air raid/bombing

Reflect:

1. How was hearing Eddie Willner tell his own story different from hearing your teacher talk about his life?

Answers will vary

2. Why do you think the USHMM has tried to record so many oral histories from people who survived the Holocaust?

Answers will vary

3. Write two things you wish you knew about Eddie Willner's life and what kind of primary source could give you that information.

Answers will vary



SOURCES

Feinberg, Alexander. "All City 'Lets Go'." *New York Times*. August 15, 1945.

"Fifty Years Ago: The End of World War II." *Washington Post*. August 27, 1995.

"Introduction to the Holocaust." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Last modified March 12, 2018. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>

Willner, Eddie Hellmuth. "Oral history interview with Eddie Willner conducted by Ellen Epstein." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Branch. May 25, 1989. Video. 57:39. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504739>

IMAGES

Slide 3: Eddie Willner, family photograph.

Slide 3: New York Times, June 7, 1944.

Slide 3: Gen. George S. Patton's diary entries for March 1943, March 1943, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mcc.085/>

Slide 9: Eddie Willner Headstone, Arlington National Cemetery.

Slide 9: LT Willner, family photograph.

Slide 10: A view of the Auschwitz concentration camp after liberation, after January 19, 1945, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Unknown Russian archive, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa30676>