

ARTHUR AND ROCHELLE BELFER

Exemplary LESSONS

i n i t i a t i v e

RETHINKING PERPETRATORS, BYSTANDERS, AND RESCUERS: THE CASE OF MAX SCHMELING

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The focus of this lesson is personal choice and how changing circumstances can affect one person's ethical choices. During the Holocaust, people made choices, and by placing individuals in the appropriate historical context students can begin to comprehend the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged their acts. In fact, some people, like the now well-known Oskar Schindler, demonstrated a range of choices as they faced different circumstances as well as their own consciences and morality. The German Max Schmeling, former heavyweight champion of the world, is probably best known for his two matches against the U.S. boxing champ, Joe "the Brown Bomber" Louis. Louis lost the first match against Schmeling in 1936 but defeated him in the 1938 rematch, which many saw as a symbolic defeat for Hitler's Germany by a black man representing America.

Schmeling's life can be looked at as an example of the paradoxical composite that makes up all of us, and as his life is examined, students discover that this very public figure associated with Hitler had a very private life as well. In the course of his public and private lives Max Schmeling made a series of choices. Exploring his life and the contexts in which he opted for each role provides an opportunity for students to grapple with the challenge of thinking about the inner life and the motivations of historical actors. In considering such complexities, students are less likely to build stereotypical views of the four categories (victim, bystander, perpetrator, and rescuer) of Holocaust actors they had been studying.

This lesson occurs midway through a nine-week, 80-minute daily elective taught within the English department at my school. Students have already examined lives of victims in a personal way through the use of the Museum's 37 Identification Cards, which profile the lives and experiences of a number of Jewish and non-Jewish individuals during the Holocaust, as well as through small group research projects on the non-Jewish victim groups (Jehovah's Witnesses, Poles, Roma, Homosexuals, German handicapped, and Germans of African descent). The students have also studied perpetrators through an examination of a number of concentration camps and killing centers and have begun to discern how many Germans and Poles stood by as Jewish neighbors, for example, were harshly persecuted and began to disappear from their midst. Immediately preceding this lesson, students researched and orally presented portraits of individual rescuers. Thus, by the time this lesson occurs, the students are already thoroughly familiar with the terminology of *victims*, *perpetrators*, *bystanders*, and *rescuers* and have begun freely applying it to the people and situations we study. This lesson takes one 80-minute class or two 40-minute classes.

LESSON BY

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GRADE LEVEL

9–12

GRADE-LEVEL APPLICABILITY

9–12

SUBJECT

ENGLISH ELECTIVE
(HOLOCAUST: THE RESULTS
OF HATRED)

TIME REQUIRED

ONE DAY FOR 80-MINUTE
BLOCK SCHEDULE
TWO DAYS FOR 40-MINUTE
TRADITIONAL SCHEDULE



Before this lesson can work, students need to be thoroughly conversant with the terminology and applicability of victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers. They also must have a clear sense of the main events and shift in political moods in Europe and the United States between the early 1920s and the late 1940s to put Schmeling's life into context. We have already watched the video *Schindler's List*, in which students were able to follow one man's journey and complex reasons for rescue, and they had discussed and written about possible reasons and motives for such changes. The students have also studied a number of less well-known rescuers from many countries who illustrated that rescuing could consist of delivering messages to the resistance, spirited children across borders, or simply providing food to Jews in hiding. In this lesson, they encounter a famous sports figure, whose behavior catches their interest.

In a school with a small minority of Jewish students and a small minority of African American students, most students never think about prejudice. Yet yearly there are small acts of racism and antisemitism that hurt those on the receiving end and puzzle those who thought it did not exist in our school. My students are an interesting mix of ages and ethnicities. All are interested in the historical Holocaust, but because of word of mouth about the course and because of its title, they know that they are signing up for a course that deals with the people of the Holocaust: who they were individually, how they could make the choices they made or live through the horror they lived through, and how the Holocaust was the end result of unchecked hatred. Each year the students become an amazingly cohesive group, most of whom become active in desiring to live a life in which they make choices to act rather than sit on the sidelines in situations of hate. This is, in fact, my main goal in teaching this course.

PURPOSE OF LESSON

This lesson allows students to analyze and reflect on the actions of a famous sports figure that do not really fall neatly into the now familiar categories of perpetrator, bystander, and rescuer. Students are able to compare and contrast Schmeling's complexity with the familiar figure of Schindler, but perhaps more important, they are able to compare and contrast Max Schmeling's choices in various situations with their own choices.

GOALS FOR STUDENT UNDERSTANDING

- Students will develop a more complex understanding of human behavior and an understanding that people do not always neatly fit into the categories perpetrator, bystander, and rescuer. They will learn how the changing historical circumstances influenced the choices made by individuals during the Holocaust.
- Students will understand how a study of individuals' choices during the Holocaust relates to the choices they are making in their own lives today.

WHAT STUDENTS WILL DO TO BUILD THEIR UNDERSTANDING

- The students will read and analyze a *Sports Illustrated* article and take notes about the life of Max Schmeling.
- The students will analyze three specific choices Schmeling made in his life:
 1. He turned to Hitler to clear up a financial problem, thus indebting himself to Hitler; Schmeling hung an autographed picture of Hitler in his study.
 2. Schmeling openly acknowledged the existence of concentration camps in Germany yet did nothing as the Gestapo arrested his Jewish friends.
 3. Schmeling hid two Jewish teens in his hotel suite for two days.
- The students will assess Schmeling's choices in light of the changing political and cultural contexts surrounding him at each step, recognizing the difficulty of stereotyping people into one, unchanging role.
- The students will compare and contrast Schmeling's choices with those of other figures already studied to draw conclusions about the effects of choice in changing circumstances.
- The students will apply their knowledge of Schmeling's motivations and choices to situations they see in their contemporary lives.
- The students will synthesize the goals of the lesson through small group discussion, full class discussion, and individual journaling at the end of the lesson.

STATE STANDARDS

This lesson connects several of Ohio's state standards for English/Language Arts including:

- Reading Process standards, comprehension strategies
- Writing Applications and Conventions standards, writing responses and producing informal writings
- Communications standards, interpretation and evaluation strategies

RESOURCES AND HANDOUTS: BACKGROUND MATERIALS

Bachrach, Susan. *The Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2000. Bachrach traces the troubled history of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, examining the Nazi dictatorship, the escalating persecution of the German Jews, and the abortive movement in the United States to boycott the Games. She tells the complete story of the Games, focusing not only on the athletes who competed but also on those who were banned from the competition.

Berenbaum, Michael. *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1993. This book has served as the background book the students turn to whenever an unfamiliar term, person, or event comes up in our lessons. It's an excellent classroom resource.

Block, Gay, and Malka Drucker. *Rescuers: Portraits in Moral Courage in the Holocaust*. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1992. I use this book to profile many of the less well-known rescuers with the students. They came from many countries, were from all age groups, had many different backgrounds, and rescued in a wide variety of ways. What stands out to my students as we profile these courageous men and women is that most of them do not look upon themselves as heroes but as people doing what had to be done.

Hilberg, Raul. *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992. This book provides the complete context for the terminology used in the class.

Schindler's List. 1993. Directed by Steven Spielberg. This dramatic video illustrates one man's movement from perpetrator and bystander to rescuer. It allows students to draw their own conclusions about which circumstances caused his choices to change and when his conscience began to sway him.

Weisbord, Robert, and Norbert Hedderich. "Max Schmeling—Righteous Ring Warrior?" *History Today*, vol. 43, January 1993: 36–42. This is a good background article on Max Schmeling and can be found online at <http://www.historytoday.com/index.cfm?articleid=9641> or on Info Trac, if your school library is a member.

<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/olympics/>

Online version of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum exhibition *The Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936*.

RESOURCES AND HANDOUTS: MATERIALS USED

Deford, Frank. "Almost a Hero." *Sports Illustrated* December 2001: 64-74.

<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/olympics/zcc036c.htm>

This part of the USHMM Web site shows a few images of the Louis-Schmeling fights.

LESSON NARRATIVE

Because I teach in a school with block scheduling, this lesson is presented for one 80-minute class period. However, it can be broken into two 40-minute class periods with day one consisting of the introductory class discussion, the silent sustained reading of the article, and the student note-taking and annotating, and day two being the small group discussions, board presentations, full class discussion, and journaling.

Before presenting the *Sports Illustrated* article to the students, I ask them who Max Schmeling is and what they know about him. Those few students who have heard of him, mostly boys, know him as a footnote in the Joe Louis story. Between the students' brainstormed information and what I can fill in for them, mostly about the American civil rights climate of the time and the importance of Joe Louis as a model or hero for African Americans of the 1930s, the students now have a cultural context for the man about whom they are about to read.

I then hand out the Frank Deford *Sports Illustrated* article, "Almost a Hero," and together we read aloud the first four paragraphs, which introduce Schmeling and present him as he is known today. At the end of the fourth paragraph is the statement that Schmeling "presents all the contradictions of Everyman, only in him the paradoxes are writ much larger because of who he was and what was going on all around him when he was in his prime." This text introduces the idea of cultural and historical context helping shape the choices we make. I then direct students to a silent, sustained reading of the article. They are instructed to annotate the article, underlining or making marginal notes wherever they find a choice Schmeling makes that puts him into one of the categories of perpetrator (also allowing collaborator to fall into this category), bystander, or rescuer.

This would end day one in schools with a traditional schedule.

I then divide the students into three groups, each responsible for one choice from the article. I ask them to consider the following questions:

- At what stage in Schmeling's career did this choice occur?
- At what risk to himself did he make this choice?
- Can you discern from the article what motivated him to make this choice? In your opinion, were there contextual circumstances that might have influenced his choice?
- Did he later regret the choice?

These questions are designed to have the students analyze Schmeling's choices in light of his motivations and the pressures he was under from the world he lived in.

One member of the group is the designated scribe, and he/she lists on the board all the answers to the questions. As a full class we then discuss the accuracy of the placement, looking at motivation as well as actual choice. We also look at Schmeling's life beyond the actual war years, for example his quiet financial support of the ailing Joe Louis in the years before the Brown Bomber's death. If there is disagreement about the placement of some evidence, for example

something placed in the bystander **and** perpetrator categories, we discuss the criteria the differing groups used to categorize the evidence. We also note how difficult it is to be finite in our placement of some of his choices, underscoring for the students how difficult many of life's choices are and how hard it is to categorize people. We wrap up the class discussion by bringing in some of the people we have studied before, such as Oskar Schindler, the Danish fishermen who ferried Jews to safety, nameless Germans who lived by rail stations yet "didn't know" that anything was happening to carloads of Jews, and others. I am able to assess the students' understanding of the article's facts as well as their synthesis of the issue of choice as presented through Max Schmeling by their participation in class discussion, and as I go from group to group by listening to their group discussions.

The final 10 minutes of class are for a student response journal entry. Students have journals in a drawer of my classroom, and they write in their journals at least four out of five days on a given prompt that relates to the lesson planned. Many times journal entries begin the class, so that I can stimulate student thought about a subject before we delve into it or have them think about a quote that relates to the material about to be presented. However, there are times when I end with a student journal response, and I use these as an assessment of their understanding of the lesson. I give them a series of prompts to stimulate their personal response, and they may respond to one or as many as they choose.

- How do you personally evaluate the choices made by Max Schmeling?
- How do you explain his motivations?
- Do public figures have a different degree of responsibility than the everyday person?
- Is Max Schmeling "almost a hero," as the title of the article suggests? Why or why not?
- Can you describe a time in your life when you had to make a difficult choice? What influenced your choice, and what were the consequences?

They also have the freedom to go beyond my prompts to something else they choose to add about what they have learned.

STUDENT WORK SAMPLES

Here are some representative journal entries from students. These two students chose to comment on being a bystander and a rescuer and then considered these concepts in their own lives.

Gabey wrote:

Evil things grow and get bigger because of bystanders. Because people sit there being silent while others hardly different, if different at all, from themselves are being persecuted and destroyed. Bystanders aren't bad people. They're good people; it's just that they might as well persecute people themselves because they do nothing or are silent.

When I notice something wrong and don't agree with it, I rarely act on it. I have stood up for my views and opinions if someone offends me or others, but I will admit to being a bystander. I want to defend people as a whole. For example, if someone makes a racist joke, I want to be able to voice or act on my opinion and defend that minority. When it comes down to it, I should also try to stop caring about what people think or how they see me.

Lauren wrote:

I realize how truly considerate the people of Le Chambon, France (most of this village of religious Christians helped rescue Jews throughout the war) really were. They might be modest about their actions, but they saved many lives. If everyone would have thought the same as these citizens, then many more Jews from the Holocaust would still be alive. Even though they never outwardly stood up to the Nazis, they realized how terrible the Holocaust was and did what they could to save lives. I always beat myself up when I don't do something I should have. Although some people have a conscience that tells them to do something, only the truly decent people take action against something that terrible and inhumane.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed informally through their class discussions, both in their small groups and with the class as a whole. They are also assessed through their journal entries. I look for two aspects to their journal entries: an understanding of the lesson and a personal response to it in which they apply it to something they have learned before or see in their own lives. In this journal entry I am looking for connections made to any number of earlier lessons about perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers. I want to see synthesis of the earlier material with the present study of Max Schmeling. I want to find an appreciation for the cultural contexts that may affect personal choices. I want to see if students are questioning the impact of choices on both those who make the choices and those whom their choices affect. I want to find increasing recognition of the complexity of making choices and in individual human beings. This journal entry helps document students' progress in synthesizing all the concepts of this course and gives them a personal voice on all class issues. In fact, at the end of the course, when I ask students for a letter to me listing the top ten things in the course that have affected them, many students list their journals among the top ten.

TEACHER REFLECTION

I have to admit to not being a regular reader of *Sports Illustrated*. However, a few years ago my former principal, who was always highly supportive of my development of this Holocaust elective, gave me this article when it appeared. As I first read through the article I was struck by what a complex, paradoxical man Max Schmeling is. The course terminology—*perpetrator*, *bystander*, *rescuer*, *victim*—which, by that time, had become part of our daily vocabulary, leaped out of every page as I read. I thought that a sports figure caught up in the web of history might be intriguing to my students.

I have found that this lesson works perfectly midway into the course. The students have already become immersed in the shared vocabulary and have already examined many examples of people making hard choices. As the course progresses after this lesson, we look at the lessons of the Holocaust as ways of examining and assessing our present day world: hate groups found on the Web (I always go through tolerance.org, which has an area that displays hate group home pages without actually going onto these groups' Web sites); how one person or a community can make a choice to combat this hate (I show the video *Not in Our Town*); how genocides have not ended with the Holocaust (the students' final project in the class deals with 20th-century genocides or ethnic cleansings such as Sudan, the slaughter of the Kurds, and Chechnya). A main goal of mine is to help students become aware of the power of individual choice and then to become empowered as individuals functioning in this world full of hard choices.

This lesson has remained a favorite of the students. While the lesson is not flashy or multimedia, somehow the impact of this interesting man, still alive at present, makes a great impression on students, and Max Schmeling becomes a reference point for them through the rest of the course.