

The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL

TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE EXHIBIT

INTRODUCTION

ESTHER NISENTHAL KRINITZ, along with her sister Mania, were the only members of their family, and among the few Jews in their Polish village, to survive the Holocaust. In 1939, when Esther was 12, she watched as the Nazis entered her village, dragged her grandfather from his doorstep, and cut off his beard. Three years later, after the Germans ordered all the Jews to leave their homes and report to the nearby train station, the 15-year old Esther, desperate to save herself, took her 13-year old sister and said goodbye to the rest of her family, never to see them again.

In 1977, at the age of 50, Esther Nisenthal Krinitz began creating works of fabric art to depict her stories of survival. The exhibit, *Fabric of Survival; The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz*, includes a total of 36 pieces that narrate Esther's story, from her pre-war childhood in Poland, through her survival, and her later emigration to the United States. The works combine techniques of embroidery, fabric collage, and stitched narrative that bring Esther's story vividly to life.

The exhibit and accompanying educational materials were developed by Art and Remembrance, a 501(C)(3) non-profit organization founded by Esther's family. For more information on the exhibit and Art and Remembrance, visit www.artandremembrance.org.

GOALS OF THE EXHIBIT

Relating the experiences of a child and teenager, Esther Krinitz's art and story provide a powerful lens through which young people can view and reflect on important issues and themes raised by the Holocaust. The primary goal of the educational materials accompanying this exhibit is to open the hearts and minds of students to these experiences. Through guided study, students in grades 6–12 will be encouraged to reflect upon and gain a greater understanding of the Holocaust and issues of cultural diversity, prejudice, individual identity and choice, and personal freedom. Students will be encouraged to explore and respond to the work as it relates to such themes as:

- Holocaust and social justice, including issues such as prejudice and violence
- Identity and framing the individual
- Narrative through art
- Empowerment of the storyteller and artist
- Fabric art technique

RESOURCES:

Visit www.artandremembrance.org to:

- View images of Esther's art works
- View a video: "Through the Eye of the Needle - The Art of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz"
- Order the book, "Memories of Survival" or the DVD, "Through the Eye of the Needle"

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL

GUIDE TO QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

The following questions are intended to encourage reflection on narrative and artistic elements in the works of Esther Nisenthal Krinitz; prompt students to consider broad contextual themes; and elicit personal responses to questions of values and choices throughout the story. The exhibit and



Esther Nisenthal Krinitz

respective questions are broken into six sections, so that students might break into small groups to address sets of questions. A series of cross-cutting questions and exercises are provided at the end of this guide, which are intended to guide a larger group discussion of broad themes.

THE EARLY DAYS (Pictures 1-6)

Describe Esther's village – what kind of place did Esther grow up in? What did people do for work?

■ Esther's childhood years were spent in the village of Mniszek (pronounced Mi-nish-ek), during the 1920s and 30s. Village life was likely much as it was in the 19th century, with no electricity and few, if any, machines. As was typical of eastern European "shtetl", or small towns, the Jews of Mniszek grew or raised small amounts of food, while also engaged in some type of trade. Esther's father, for example, was a horse trader, buying and selling horses at markets in each of the nearby towns. Students might describe the pastoral setting and make note of the natural environment as a key part of village life.



Picture 1

What impressions do you have of Esther's life as a child?

■ In general, Esther's depictions of childhood seem idyllic, and centered around family life. Students might note that aspects of Jewish culture feature prominently in these early pictures. These rituals were clearly a large part of her life, that she was later forced to abandon.

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THE EARLY DAYS (Pictures 1-6) Continued

What can you learn about Esther's family from her pictures? How did Esther feel about her family? How are these relationships and feelings described in Esther's pictures? How do these compare to your own memories of your family life?



Picture 3

■ Esther's family included her father, mother, older brother (Ruven), and three younger sisters (Mania, Chana, and Leah). Other family members depicted include her grandfather (called "zayde" in the Eastern European Jewish language, Yiddish), cousins, etc. Their lives largely revolved around farming activities and the rituals of Jewish life.

Clearly, Esther adores her family, particularly her brother Ruven, as is tenderly shown in picture 3. Her reverence for her grandfather is also clearly demonstrated as she recalls the Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New



Picture 6

Years) service that he leads, in picture 5. Her mother – a model for her throughout – is proudly shown baking matzo in picture 6. And her love of her siblings is evidenced as she plays with them in several of the pic-

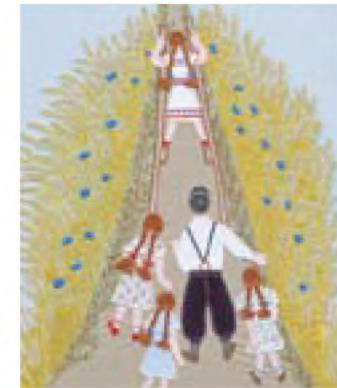


Picture 5

tures, including picture 4. Teachers may want to ask students to describe the similarities or differences of their own families to Esther's and to depict, through art and story, their warmest memories of their own family life.

What role did religion play in Esther's life? How can you tell?

Esther was Jewish, and her religion played a very important part in her and her family's lives. This is most visually evident in the rituals depicted in pictures 4, 5, and 6.



Picture 4

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL



Picture 8

THE WAR ARRIVES (Pictures 7-16)

What happened to the Jews when the Germans first came to the village? What happened as time passed?

■ Germany's invasion of Poland in September of 1939 initiated the Second World War, and brought to Poland the same brutal repression of Jews and other minority groups

that had been occurring in Germany during the 1930s. The implementation of Hitler's "Final Solution," to eliminate the world of these groups, began with the creation of ghettos or confinements of Jews to certain quarters within cities. Eventually, the Germans built death camps to which Jews were transported in order to be murdered systematically, quickly and in large numbers. The Jews of Rachow



Picture 10



Picture 7

(the present-day city of Annapol), the town near Mniszek, knew of the ghetto in Warsaw, and though they may not have known about the death camps, they all were aware first-hand of the labor camps in which prisoners were worked or starved to death (as in pictures 8, 10 and 12).

From the moment they entered the village (picture 7), the Nazis began to terrorize the Jewish populace. The cutting off of Esther's grandfather's beard – a symbol of the venerable Jewish elder - initiated a 3-year period of terrorism for the Jews of Esther's village. Throughout this series of pictures, Esther witnesses and experiences



Picture 9

many forms of brutality and oppression, as well as the overall disempowerment of her family. Yet there are also several moments in which Esther's courage – and that of her family – is here foreshadowed. Esther's encounter with the dentist in picture 9 is an important example of this early brava-do, as well as of her awareness that she must hide her identity as a Jew.

Perhaps most illustrative of this period is picture 12, which shows Esther caught between two worlds – her idyllic pastoral childhood, and the horrors of the Nazi occupation. Not only does the brutality and threat of occupation increase (we see Esther's family become more and more desperate in their attempts to survive), but Esther's own understanding of the dire nature of her situation increases as time goes on.



Picture 12

How did Esther and her parents react to these events?



Picture 13

■ There are several instances in these pictures in which Esther's parents take actions to protect the family. In picture 13, Esther describes her father's refusal to allow Ruven to be taken to the labor camp or to go in his place, and the sacrifices made by both parents as her father stays in the forest with Ruven. Picture 16 beautifully foreshadows the separation soon to come, as Esther's mother directs her to separate as they flee through the fields to escape a Gestapo raid.

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL

GOODBYE MY CHILDREN, MAYBE YOU WILL LIVE: OCTOBER 15 (Pictures 17-20)

On the day Esther and her sister said goodbye to their parents, their mother Rachel packed sacks with bread and cheese, and each took potato-digging tools, pictured alongside their sacks in picture 17. Why do you think they chose these items?

■ Esther and Mania took with them only the basic elements for their survival: food to eat and tools with which to work. Students should describe what they consider essential for their own survival.



Picture 17

What sorts of feelings do you think Esther had on this day? How does she convey them? Are there objects or colors that convey these feelings?

■ In picture 17, Esther shows everyone in her family crying, with tears on their faces. In this picture and in pictures 19 and 20, crows, an ominous sign, are in the sky. And the text in all the pictures speak of death and dying.



Picture 20



Picture 18

In pictures 17 and 18, Esther is shown leaving her family from two different perspectives. Esther said that this was the most difficult scene for her to recreate, yet she came back to it again. How are these pictures different?

■ Students might point out the differences in the way Esther shows herself, observing that in picture 17, Esther stands in the middle of her family, facing the viewer, while in picture 18, Esther and Mania have parted from their family, and are small figures, backs to the viewer, receding into the background. In this latter picture, the other members of the family and their neighbors are the central figures, suggesting that in the second view of the same scene, Esther wanted us to see what she was leaving behind.



Picture 19

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL

ON THEIR OWN (Pictures 21-26)

The scenes depicted in picture 21 take place over several days. What happens to Esther and her sister over this period of time? Describe the different scenes taking place in this picture.

- The scenes shown include 1) Stefan welcoming Esther and Mania at his doorstep, 2) the girls stringing tobacco in the attic over the course of two days; 3) the girls making their way down the road on their own in the rain; and 4) the girls drying their boots in the forest, following the rains.



Picture 21

Coming out from the woods and on to the open road, in picture 22, Esther sees a Gestapo barracks and two German soldiers in her path. She has to make a choice: to keep going or to turn back and hide in the woods. She decides to keep going. What did she have to do to pass safely?



Picture 22

- Esther may have had the choice to turn back but instead kept going, knowing that the soldiers might have seen her. But she knew that she would have to be careful not to reveal that she was Jewish. In particular, she had to hide the fact that she could understand the soldiers' German, a language similar to the Yiddish language. By pretending to be a Polish girl on her way to her grandmother's, she ironically wins the affection of the soldiers and thus safe passage.

In pictures 23 and 24, Esther shows herself and her sister Mania in hiding. How does she depict these places, and how do you think she feels in them?

- Esther and Mania are often cloistered by natural elements, such as the trees and the haystack, which seem to protect them, while at the same time revealing how alone they are. Reflecting on picture 24, students might talk about the difference between the girls in the window who look out from a safe and warm world, versus the cold, lonely one of Esther and Mania. Encourage students to imagine where they would seek shelter and how they would feel.



Picture 23

Picture 26 depicts a dream in which Esther's mother takes her by the hand, pulling her along in flight from a falling sky. Why do you think Esther had this dream? Can we tell from the picture that this is a dream?



Picture 26

- Esther allows herself to have a mother in this dream; she is not "on her own." She is allowed to return to her child identity here. This picture is not very different from the others – in many ways, Esther portrays the dream with the same elements of realism as are in her waking memories.

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT (Pictures 27-29)

All of Esther's pictures reveal a strong sense of her environment and season. In picture 27, what techniques does Esther use to clearly show us that this scene takes place in the winter?

■ This was the first picture in which Esther used fabric paint, in this case, to create an expansive, crisp sky. Notice also the use of thin and jagged lines, and the sparseness of embroidery and paint, leaving white, uncovered areas of fabric.



Picture 27

In picture 27, Esther shows a Nazi soldier coming to her aid. How do you think she felt when she first saw him at the well? How do you think she felt after he came to her aid? Might Esther have felt differently about him after he came to her aid?

Did this event “humanize” the soldier in some way?

■ Students might say that Esther felt afraid, or that perhaps she was emboldened after her earlier encounters. Although in hiding, Esther never felt totally safe from the

Gestapo, as is evidenced by this and other encounters (picture 28). Yet while frightened, Esther was also struck by the soldier's helpfulness and courtesy. Students might consider whether Esther would have been treated this way if the soldier had known she was Jewish.



Picture 27

Who is protecting Esther in pictures 28 and 29?

■ Esther clearly shows the bees as coming to her aid in the first picture, one of many examples of her portrayal of the environment as her protector. Her subtle humor here – despite the trauma of the situation – should not be overlooked. Esther is also protected here by Dziadek. Carrying a cane, Dziadek may be seen as both vulnerable and protecting. In picture 29, she looks to her grandfather for protection and takes comfort from her dream vision of him.



Picture 28

What does it mean to say that Esther and Mania have been “hiding in plain sight?”

■ Although in hiding, the girls must behave as though they have no reason to hide. Yet they are never truly safe from the Gestapo, nor can they ever be sure that others aren't aware of their true identities. Even though the girls have new identities, they still remain exposed in many ways. Besides the danger of being recognized by someone who knew them from home, the Gestapo often rounded up Polish youth as slave laborers.



Picture 29

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL



Picture 30

LIBERATION AND A NEW LIFE (Pictures 30-36)

As the Russians – Esther’s liberators – pass through the village of Grabowka, in picture 30, what do you think are the different feelings that Esther is experiencing? And what do you think are the choices Esther now has for where she could go?

■ When talking about this moment, Esther said that she was incredulous at being finally free. Yet she must have also felt tremendous sorrow in thinking about the fate of her family. In answering these questions, students might consider how, at 17, Esther must once again reinvent herself. Her options for where to go might be limited. At this point, she is not fully aware of the scope of the Holocaust. No family remains in Mniszek when she returns later, a family has moved in to her house, and has taken in her dog.

The Maidanek (pronounced My–don–ek) concentration camp, recently liberated by the Russian army, was the place where neighbors believed that the Jews of Esther’s town had been taken. Take a moment to look carefully at the various places and events that Esther highlighted in picture 31. What did Esther see when she arrived at Maidanek, and how do you think it changed her?

■ Looking at the gates of Maidanek, students might observe the contrast between the innocent young girl in pigtails, brightly dressed, with the

horrors that await her inside. In many ways, Esther loses this innocence upon seeing the Nazi concentration camp, in which she believes it is likely her family may have perished. It is at this moment that she also realizes the full dimensions of the war, and the scope of the atrocities committed as part of the “Final Solution.” This is a point of rapid maturity for Esther, who suddenly moves beyond her own personal tragedy to confront the tragedy of her people, and of humanity. Her response is to join the Polish and Russian Armies, in order to fight back collectively.

Students should focus on the historical details that Esther inserted in this picture: the shooting of thousands of prisoners in the woods, the crematorium and other features of the camp. At the same time, Esther personalizes these details: her horror at the sight of giant cabbages, her touchingly futile search to find traces of her family’s shoes among piles of thousands. At Maidanek today, visitors can see these thousands of shoes on display, evidence of the tragedy witnessed and experienced personally by Esther.



Picture 31

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL

LIBERATION AND A NEW LIFE (Pictures 30-36) *Continued*

When Esther joined the army, she became one of the liberators shown in picture 32. Although triumphant here, the Russian/Polish army still faced many dangers. Why do you think Esther joined, despite this continuing danger? How are the mixed feelings of danger and liberation expressed in this picture?



Picture 32

Faced with the loss of her family and all that was familiar to her, the army also gave her a home, something to belong to. The road here is shown as open, unlike earlier roads in which she encountered obstacles in her way. Students might compare this road to the road to Krasnik in pictures 19 and 20, particularly noting the Nazis who are hung from trees here.

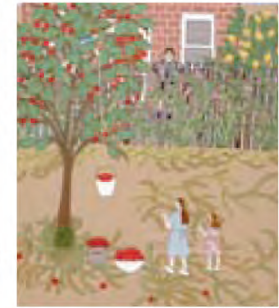


Picture 33

■ For Esther, liberation meant that she was free not only to come out of hiding but also to fight back--joining the army gave her this opportunity.

In pictures 33 and 34, Esther describes her arrival and early years in America, where she has established a new life. Who has she become? What feelings about this new life and identity do these pictures convey?

■ Esther is an American, a wife, a mother, an adult. The pictures convey a sense of humor, optimism, and a sense of hope for her family and the next generation.



Picture 34

Why do you think that the last two pictures shown (35 and 36) are portraits of Esther's family? What kinds of feelings do these pictures express, and how do they relate to other emotions expressed in other pictures?



Picture 35

■ These pictures evoke emotions similar to those expressed in

Esther's portrayal of her childhood in Mniszek. Her love and admiration for her family provide opening and closure to the exhibit, as well as to Esther's own expression of herself as artist.



Picture 36

FABRIC OF SURVIVAL

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the different groups of people represented in Esther's pictures? How do we know? Does everyone get along? Why do you think that?

■ The major groups depicted are Jews, Poles, and Germans. Before the war, there were no clear distinctions between groups. Once the war began, the Jews are made to wear Star of David armbands. The Germans are, of course, identifiable by their uniforms.



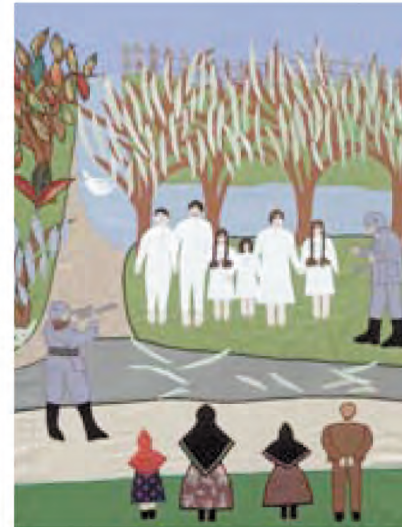
Picture 24

are passive witnesses (her neighbors in picture 14); sometimes they are rescuers (the villagers of Grabowka).

While we see the Germans most often as fearful and cruel (cutting off Zayde's beard, roughing up Esther's father), we also see the kindness

How does Esther depict Nazis in her pictures? How does she depict Poles?

■ While her love for her family and her neighbors is evident, she shows mixed feelings for the other groups. Sometimes, Poles are seen to be helpful (Stefan in picture 21); sometimes they are frightened for their own safety (Zebina in picture 24); sometimes they



Picture 14

of the German dentist who gives Esther chocolate and of the German soldier who helps her draw water. At the same time, Esther believed this kindness would not have been extended had the Germans known she was Jewish.

When did Esther reveal her identity? When did she hide it?

What aspects of Esther's personality helped her to survive? Where are these aspects shown? Where do you think these traits came from?

Which moments in Esther's story do you think foreshadow later choices in which Esther showed these personality traits?

How did Esther's parents help their children to survive?

Esther's natural environment is a major element throughout her works. In some cases, it provides protection. In other cases, the environment provides clues or signs. Select several pictures in which the natural environment plays an important role in protecting Esther, or in guiding the story, and describe how Esther shows this.