

A PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES LESSON PLAN

THE BOXER

A twenty-year-old Jewish boxing champion from Thessaloniki is deported to Auschwitz and forced to fight fellow prisoners for SS entertainment — where every victory meant another man's likely death.

GRADES 9–10

QUICK REFERENCE

TIME 45 min core / 90 min with extensions. Recommended: 2 days. Day 1: Watch + Analyze. Day 2: Create + Reflect.	MATERIALS Device to play video; printed discussion questions (optional)	CONTENT ADVISORY Depicts forced boxing at Auschwitz; references family murders. Stylized animation, no graphic violence. Preview before classroom use.
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EPISODE SUMMARY

About This Film

Salamo Arouch was twenty years old, Jewish, and one of the finest amateur boxers in Greece. He was the son of a stevedore at the Thessaloniki port, who had taught him to box as a child. By the time he was eighteen he had joined Maccabi Thessaloniki — a Jewish sports club founded in 1908 — and was undefeated in twenty-seven bouts. They called him “the Ballet Dancer” for his footwork. Thessaloniki, then, was a city called the Jerusalem of the Balkans: for more than four centuries it had housed the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the world, arrived in 1492 as refugees from the Spanish Inquisition.



Salamo Arouch in Auschwitz, as depicted in The Boxer

In 1943, nineteen transports carried more than forty-five thousand Thessalonikan Jews to Auschwitz. Ninety-four percent of the community was murdered. Salamo and his family were on one of those transports. His mother and three sisters were killed on arrival. His father was gassed when he grew too weak to work. His brother Avram was shot on the spot for refusing to extract gold teeth from the corpses of the dead. When the SS asked if anyone could fight, Salamo raised his hand.



The Judenrampe, Auschwitz — where selections were made on arrival (archival photograph, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum)

The SS forced prisoners to box in a warehouse inside the camp. Officers drank, smoked, and placed bets; a prisoners' orchestra sometimes played as the fighters entered. By Salamo's own count, he fought more than two hundred times over nearly two years. He never lost. Losing often meant the losing fighter would be killed soon after. In January 1945 Salamo was forced on a death march out of Auschwitz; he survived Bergen-Belsen until British forces liberated the camp on April 15, 1945. He met his wife, Marta Yechiel, in the camp hospital and they were married sixty-four years. Salamo Arouch died on April 26, 2009, at the age of eighty-six. He carried the weight of every fight for the rest of his life.



Salamo in the warehouse ring with his opponent, as depicted in The Boxer



Salamo shakes hands with a British soldier at Bergen-Belsen, April 15, 1945, as depicted in The Boxer

FOR EDUCATORS

About This Lesson Plan

This lesson plan is designed around a single 90-second microshort film — a format that combines the emotional power of documentary storytelling with the time constraints of a real classroom. It follows a four-step structure: Watch (pre-viewing context and the film itself), Analyze (discussion and close reading), Create (structured creative response), and Reflect (personal connection and exit thinking). Each step is differentiated across three grade bands (7–8, 9–10, 11–12) so a single film can serve an entire department. The lesson introduces students to Lawrence Langer’s framework of “choiceless choices,” the essential concept for teaching survivor ethics without flattening them into triumph. Extension activities and full standards alignment are available in the appendix.

STEP 1 OF 4

Watch

Use the pre-viewing activities below to build context, activate prior knowledge, and frame student thinking before the film begins. Then show the 90-second microshort.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A World That Was Erased

“My grandfather said the port of Thessaloniki closed on Shabbat. He said his mother lit candles on Friday night in a kitchen that smelled of almonds and orange water. He said he was nine years old when the Germans came, and he did not know the word for what was about to happen. When he came back, there was no one to light the candles. There was no one to say the blessing. He was the only one who came back.”

— Testimony of a Thessaloniki survivor, recorded in Israel, 1997 (adapted from accounts in the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive)

Salamo Arouch was one of fewer than two thousand Thessalonikan Jews who returned. His community — a community that had existed, in that city, for more than four centuries — did not.

BEFORE VIEWING

Based on what you have just read, write down one or two questions you want answered. What do you want to know about this story? Hold onto your questions as you watch.

Historical Context

For more than four centuries, the Greek port of Thessaloniki was home to the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the world. The community had arrived in 1492 as refugees from the Spanish Inquisition, welcomed by the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II. By the sixteenth century, Jews were the majority of the city. They maintained fifty-nine synagogues. They published thirty-five Ladino-language newspapers. The port closed on Shabbat.

In March 1943, the Germans began deporting Thessaloniki's Jews. Over the next five months, nineteen transports carried more than forty-five thousand people to Auschwitz in sealed cattle cars, eighty to a car, on a journey of a thousand miles and five to nine days. Ninety-four percent of the community was murdered. Fewer than two thousand returned. The Germans destroyed the Jewish cemetery — one of the largest in Europe, with five hundred thousand graves — and used the tombstones to pave roads and build a university campus. The university still sits on the cemetery grounds today.



Young Jews of Thessaloniki, 1930s (USHMM Photo #42481)

PREDICTION PROMPT

The film is titled *The Boxer*. Based on the logline — “every victory meant another man’s likely death” — what do you predict the film’s central tension will be? Write your prediction in 2–3 sentences. Is this a story about winning?

VIEW THE MICROSHORT — 90 SECONDS

Show the film in full without interruption. Students should have their pre-viewing notes visible but should not be writing during the film. The goal is full, attentive viewing.

STEP 2 OF 4

Analyze

These discussion and analysis activities develop close reading and historical thinking skills. Use small groups or whole-class discussion formats as appropriate.



The warehouse ring where Salamo fought, wide shot, as depicted in The Boxer

Text-Dependent Analysis

1. The film opens with the line, “Win, you live. Lose, you die. So he never lost.” What does the structure of that sentence do? Why does the film choose to give you the resolution (“he never lost”) before the story has begun?
2. The narration tells us the fights happened in a warehouse where SS officers drank and bet on the outcomes. How does this detail change the meaning of a “victory” in that ring? What kind of audience is a fighter performing for?
3. After Salamo wins, the film does not show his fallen opponent — only the empty space on the floor where he fell. What is the effect of that absence? What does it keep us from seeing, and what does it force us to feel?
4. The film refuses a triumphal ending. There is no swelling music, no raised arms, no victory pose. Instead, it ends with an aging face and dark brown eyes. What does this ending argue about what survival actually was?

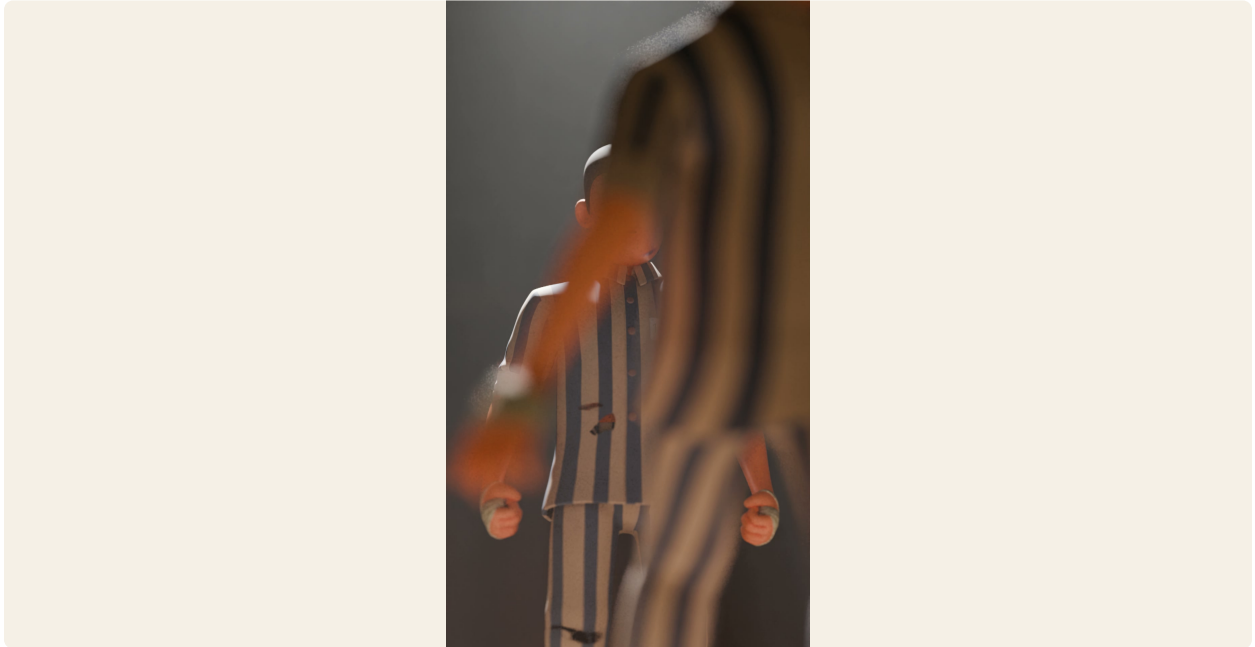
Historical Sourcing

5. The film states that Salamo fought “over two hundred bouts by his count.” Why does the phrasing matter? What does it tell us about the historian’s obligation when dealing with survivor testimony?
6. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum documents that boxing matches took place at the camp. Other specific details — the exact number of Salamo’s fights, for example — rely on his own account. How do historians decide what to treat as established fact and what to treat as testimony?
7. What claims in the film could you verify through independent sources (newspapers, museum archives, academic history)? What claims rest on Salamo’s account alone? Does that distinction change how you read the story?

STEP 3 OF 4

Create

Students respond to the film through structured creative writing. Choose the option that best suits your strengths or interest. Allow 20–25 minutes for the core activity, or assign as homework for a longer response.



*Salamo faces his opponent in the warehouse ring, as depicted in *The Boxer* — the opponent's back and arm fill the foreground*

*“We fought until one went down or they got sick of watching.
They wouldn’t leave until they saw blood.”*

— Salamo Arouch, interviewed in *People*, 1990

GRADES 9–10

Argumentative Paragraph (MEAL Format)

Salamo survived Auschwitz by winning more than two hundred fights, by his own count, against other prisoners — men who, when they lost, were often killed soon after. Write one well-developed argumentative paragraph using the MEAL structure (Main claim, Evidence, Analysis, Link back to claim) that answers the following question:

PROMPT

Is Salamo Arouch's survival best described as a "triumph," as something more complicated, or as something the word "triumph" cannot capture at all? Use evidence from the film, from Lawrence Langer's framework of "choiceless choices," and from your historical knowledge to support your position. Anticipate a counterargument.

Your paragraph should be 150–200 words. Underline your main claim sentence. Circle your strongest piece of evidence.



Prisoner 136954 — a number Salamo carried on his left forearm for sixty-four years after the war

STEP 4 OF 4

Reflect



British liberator with survivors at Bergen-Belsen, April 1945 (archival photograph)

These closing activities help students consolidate their thinking, make personal connections, and carry the lesson's meaning beyond the classroom. Allow 8–12 minutes.

GRADES 9–10

Sentence Frame Reflection

Complete the following sentence frame as a written reflection. You may write as many sentences as you need to complete each thought — the frame is a starting point, not a limit. Be specific. The strongest reflections name something particular they learned, not just general impressions.

“Before watching this film, I thought stories of survival were mainly about _____. Now I understand that they can also be about _____. The hardest part of this story for me is _____, because _____. The question it leaves me with is _____.”

Share your reflection with a partner. Where do your reflections overlap? Where do they diverge? What might explain the difference?

*“We fought until one went down or they got sick of watching.
They wouldn’t leave until they saw blood.”*

— Salamo Arouch (1923–2009), interviewed in *People*, 1990

GOING DEEPER

Extension Activities

These activities are designed for students who want to go further — in research, in creative production, or in interdisciplinary analysis. They are suitable for homework, independent projects, or honors-level coursework.



SS officers smoke and bet as a fight begins, as depicted in The Boxer — neither fighter had a real choice

Research and Argumentation: The Ethics of Representation

How a story is told is never neutral. Every choice — what is included, what is left out, what music plays, whose face fills the frame — makes an argument about what the story means. Research one of the following questions and write a 400–500 word argumentative essay with a clear thesis, evidence, and counterargument:

1. **Triumph or testimony:** Holocaust stories have often been told as stories of triumph of the human spirit. Lawrence Langer and Lawrence Baron argue this frame can do moral damage. Drawing on at least two films, memoirs, or news accounts, make an argument about when — if ever — the “triumph” frame is appropriate, and when it is not.
2. **Testimony under doubt:** Salamo claimed more than two hundred fights; Jacko Razon, his pre-war teammate, sued him in 1989 for twenty million dollars, claiming the story had been conflated and the count inflated. How do historians handle disputed survivor testimony? What standard of evidence should a documentary use?
3. **Memory and location:** The Germans destroyed the Jewish cemetery of Thessaloniki, and the Aristotle University campus was later built on the cemetery grounds. Tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions still appear in school playgrounds. What obligations, if any, does a present-day institution have to memory on a site like this?

Your essay must include at least two credible sources beyond the film. Cite them properly.



*Salamo runs at the Thessaloniki waterfront, as depicted in *The Boxer* — the port city that was home to a community of fifty thousand*

APPENDIX

Full Standards Alignment

Appendix A: Common Core ELA Standards

Grades 7–8

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
RI.7.1	Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis.	Students cite details from the film's narration to answer comprehension questions.
RI.7.2	Determine two or more central ideas and analyze their development.	Students track two central ideas — survival and moral weight — across the film's 90 seconds.
RI.7.6	Determine author's point of view and how the author distinguishes his or her position.	Moral Reasoning questions ask students why the film refuses a triumphal ending.
W.7.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic.	Letter-to-Avram and narrative activities require structured writing.
SL.7.1	Engage effectively in collaborative discussions.	Small-group discussion of comprehension questions; partner-share exit prompt.

Grades 9–10

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
RI.9-10.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence.	Text-Dependent Analysis requires citing narration, historical claims, and the film's structural absences.
RI.9-10.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases, including connotative meanings.	Students analyze specific word choices — "by his count," "often," "never lost."
RI.9-10.6	Determine an author's point of view and analyze how rhetoric advances it.	Students analyze the choice to open with the resolution and refuse a triumphal close.
W.9-10.1	Write arguments using valid reasoning and evidence.	MEAL-format paragraph requires a defensible claim about survival and triumph.
SL.9-10.1	Participate effectively in collaborative discussions.	Historical Sourcing and Text-Dependent Analysis designed for group discussion.

Grades 11–12

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
RI.11-12.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence, including where the text leaves matters uncertain.	Historiographic questions require identifying what the film qualifies ("by his count").
RI.11-12.5	Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the author's structure.	Students evaluate the 90-second constraint and what the compression argues about survival.
RI.11-12.6	Determine author's point of view where rhetoric is particularly effective.	Students analyze third-person narration and refusal of triumphal music.
W.11-12.1	Write arguments using valid reasoning and evidence.	Comparative Medium Analysis requires an argument about form and moral responsibility.
W.11-12.2	Write informative/explanatory texts on complex ideas.	Open-ended reflection on Langer and Ebert requires sustained exposition.
SL.11-12.1	Participate effectively in collaborative discussions.	Rhetorical Analysis and Historiographic Questions designed for seminar-style discussion.

Appendix B: C3 Framework for Social Studies

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
D2.His.1	Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.	Students connect Salamo's story to the 1943 deportations, Auschwitz selection, and the 1945 death marches.
D2.His.3	Use questions about individuals to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time.	Discussion questions examine how Salamo's story was told in 1989 and how it is told now.
D2.His.14	Explain multiple causes and effects of past events.	Historical Context traces from Ottoman welcome (1492) to community destruction (1943).
D2.His.16	Integrate evidence from multiple historical sources into a reasoned argument.	Historical Sourcing asks students to weigh museum documentation against disputed testimony.
D4.1	Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.	MEAL paragraph and Comparative Medium Analysis require multi-source argument.

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
D4.6	Use interdisciplinary lenses to understand local, regional, and global problems.	Reflect step connects camp ethics to present-day representational questions.

Appendix C: Florida B.E.S.T. Standards

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
ELA.x.R.2.1	Explain how individual text sections convey meaning.	Students analyze how each of the film's beats conveys distinct ideas.
ELA.x.R.3.2	Analyze the author's choices in structure, order, and narration.	Rhetorical Analysis focuses on structural choices.
ELA.x.C.1.3	Write and support a claim using logical reasoning.	Create step requires evidence-based claims across all grade bands.
SS.912.W.7.6	Describe the causes, events, and effects of the Holocaust (1933–1945).	The entire lesson centers on the Holocaust — Thessaloniki deportations, Auschwitz, camp boxing, Bergen-Belsen liberation.

Appendix D: Texas TEKS

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
ELAR x.6(A)	Analyze how authors use language, point of view, and literary devices.	Students analyze third-person narration and numerical rhetoric.
ELAR x.8(A)	Analyze the author's purpose and response to conflicting evidence.	Historiographic Questions examine how the film handles disputed testimony.
ELAR x.10(A)	Write informational essays that synthesize multiple sources.	Ethics of Representation essay synthesizes USHMM, Yad Vashem, and academic sources.
WH.15(A–D)	Analyze causes and events of World War II, including the Holocaust.	Lesson directly addresses WWII, the Holocaust, and the fate of Greek Jewry.

Appendix E: California HSS Framework

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION	HOW THIS LESSON ADDRESSES IT
10.8.1–10.8.6	Causes and consequences of WWII, persecution of minorities, Allied response.	Covers Thessaloniki deportations, Auschwitz selection, death marches, British liberation.
11.7	America's participation in World War II.	Extension activities connect to the broader Allied liberation context.
7.10	Medieval and early modern political developments in Europe.	Historical Context covers the 1492 Spanish expulsion and Ottoman Jewish community.

Appendix F: CASEL SEL Competencies

This lesson builds self-awareness through personal reflection on how we react to stories of extreme moral pressure. It develops social awareness through empathy with a historical figure caught in a situation our normal moral frameworks cannot describe. Responsible decision-making is exercised through engagement with Lawrence Langer's "choiceless choices" framework — the explicit refusal to judge survivors for surviving. Collaborative discussion activities develop relationship skills, including listening carefully to peers who may have reacted differently to the film.

DASA — Dignity for All Students Act (New York State)

This lesson plan supports New York State's Dignity for All Students Act by engaging students in anti-bias education through the study of historical injustice and the destruction of a centuries-old Jewish community. Students examine how dehumanization operates systemically and how the representation of survivors carries ethical weight in its own right.

Appendix G: State Holocaust Education Mandates

This lesson plan satisfies Holocaust education mandates in 25+ states including New York, Florida, California, Illinois, New Jersey, Connecticut, Michigan, Oregon, Colorado, Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Maine. The lesson meets the instructional intent of these mandates: that students learn not only the historical facts of the Holocaust but also the ethical questions it poses about survival, representation, and memory.

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