

A PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES LESSON PLAN

THE BOXER

He fought over two hundred boxing matches where losing meant death. He never lost a single one.

GRADES 7-8 | 9-10 | 11-12

EPISODE SUMMARY

About This Film

Salamo Arouch was born in 1923 in Thessaloniki, Greece, into a Sephardic Jewish family descended from the great community that had flourished in that city for more than four centuries. A natural athlete, he became a middleweight champion — undefeated in twenty-seven professional bouts before the war. In 1943, the Nazis moved to destroy what was then the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the world: fifty thousand people, a living culture half a millennium old. Arouch, along with nearly the entire Jewish population of Thessaloniki, was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

At the camp, SS personnel discovered that Arouch could fight. They forced him into boxing exhibitions staged in a warehouse near the crematoria. Camp personnel bet on the outcomes and drank while watching. For the prisoners who were made to compete, losing a bout often meant being killed soon after. Over nearly two years — by his own count — Arouch fought more than two hundred times. He never lost. Every victory kept him alive. Every victory meant another prisoner had lost. The narration of the film holds this tension without resolving it: *every time he won, he knew what it cost the man across from him.*

Most of Arouch's family was murdered. His mother and sisters were killed on arrival at Auschwitz. His father was executed. His brother was shot. Of the nearly forty-six thousand Jews deported from Thessaloniki, fewer than two thousand survived. Arouch was evacuated to Bergen-Belsen and was liberated on April 15, 1945. He emigrated to Israel, built a life, and lived quietly until his story became widely known. He died on April 26, 2009, at the age of eighty-six.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Curriculum Standards

FRAMEWORK	GRADES 7–8	GRADES 9–10	GRADES 11–12
Common Core ELA	RI.7.1, RI.7.2, RI.7.6, W.7.2, SL.7.1	RI.9–10.1, RI.9–10.4, RI.9–10.6, W.9–10.1, SL.9–10.1	RI.11–12.1, RI.11–12.5, RI.11–12.6, W.11–12.1, W.11–12.2, SL.11–12.1
C3 Social Studies	D2.His.1.6–8, D2.His.3.6–8, D2.His.14.6–8	D2.His.1.9–12, D2.His.3.9–12, D2.His.14.9–12, D2.His.16.9–12	D2.His.1.9–12, D2.His.3.9–12, D2.His.14.9–12, D2.His.16.9–12, D4.1.9–12
Florida B.E.S.T.	ELA.7.R.2.1, ELA.7.R.3.2, ELA.7.C.1.3	ELA.910.R.2.1, ELA.910.R.3.2, ELA.910.C.1.3; SS.912.W.7.6	ELA.1112.R.2.1, ELA.1112.R.3.2, ELA.1112.C.1.3; SS.912.W.7.6
Texas TEKS	ELAR 7.6(A), 7.8(A), 7.10(A)	ELAR 9.6(A), 9.8(A); WH.15(A–D)	ELAR 11.6(A), 11.8(A); WH.15(A–D)
California HSS	7.10	10.8.1–10.8.6 (WWII & Holocaust)	11.7 (WWII)
CASEL SEL	Self-awareness, Social awareness, Responsible decision-making	Self-awareness, Social awareness, Responsible decision-making	All five competencies
DASA (NY)	Anti-bias education: empathy, understanding dehumanization, examining moral complexity		

TIME

45 min core / 90 min with extensions

MATERIALS

Device to play video; printed discussion questions (optional)

CONTENT ADVISORY

This episode depicts forced boxing matches at Auschwitz where prisoners fought for SS entertainment. Each victory meant survival but contributed to another prisoner's likely death. This is a story of what scholar Lawrence Langer calls "choiceless choices" — situations where victims had no morally acceptable options. The stylized "Amber Clay" animation creates necessary distance while maintaining emotional weight. Teachers should prepare students for the moral complexity of survival at others' expense.

STEP 1 OF 4

Watch

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

GRADES 7–8**Vocabulary Preview**

Dehumanization The process of treating people as if they are less than human — denying them dignity, autonomy, and rights — often as a first step toward persecution or violence.

Choiceless Choices A term coined by Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer to describe situations in which victims were forced to choose between options that were all harmful — meaning they had no truly free or moral choice at all.

Deportation The forced removal of people from their homes or country, typically by a government, often to a camp or hostile territory.

Boxing Exhibition A staged boxing match held for an audience, typically not a formal competition — but at Auschwitz, these exhibitions were coerced performances staged for the entertainment of camp personnel.

Anticipation Question**THINK ABOUT IT**

Have you ever been forced to do something you didn't want to do — where saying no wasn't really an option? What does it feel like to have no real choice? Write two or three sentences before we watch.

GRADES 9–10

Historical Context

Before the Holocaust, Thessaloniki — also known as Salonika — was home to the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the world. These were Jews whose ancestors had been expelled from Spain in 1492 and had built a thriving civilization in Greece over the following four and a half centuries. By 1943, Thessaloniki's Jewish community numbered fifty thousand people and had existed in that city for longer than the United States has existed as a nation. Between March and August of 1943 — in fewer than eight weeks of active deportation — 96 percent of that community was murdered. Nearly forty-six thousand people were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Fewer than two thousand survived. It was one of the most complete destructions of any Jewish community in occupied Europe.

PREDICTION PROMPT

The episode is called *The Boxer* and opens with: "He fought over two hundred boxing matches where losing meant death. He never lost a single one." What emotions does this statement provoke? Is this a story of triumph or tragedy — or both?

GRADES 11–12

Primary Source: Lawrence Langer on "Choiceless Choices"

"The reality of the Holocaust challenges us to reconsider the meaning of choice when all options are unbearable. The victims of the camps did not choose between life and death; they chose between one form of abnormal response and another."

— Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (1991)

FRAMING QUESTION

How does the concept of "choiceless choices" challenge the idea that survival in the camps was a matter of individual will, talent, or heroism? Come prepared to apply this framework to what you observe in the film.

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 media literacy skills. Use small groups or whole-class discussion formats as appropriate.

GRADES 7–8

Comprehension Questions

1. Who was Salamo Arouch, and what was his life like before the war?
2. What happened to the Jewish community of Thessaloniki during the Holocaust?
3. Why did the SS force prisoners like Arouch to fight in boxing matches? What did those exhibitions mean for the people watching — and for the people fighting?
4. What happened to the prisoners who lost? What happened to Arouch's family?

Visual Storytelling

5. The film uses an "Amber Clay" animation style — characters that look smooth, sculpted, and toy-like. Why do you think the filmmakers chose animation rather than live-action footage for this story?
6. What mood does the warm Mediterranean color palette in the opening scenes create? How does that mood change when the film shifts to Auschwitz?
7. What sounds or images stood out to you during the boxing sequences? What did those choices make you feel?
8. The film is only 90 seconds. How did it use that time to make you understand both the man and the situation he was in?

Text-Dependent Analysis

1. How does the film handle the moral complexity of Arouch winning while others died? Does it take a position, or does it leave that judgment to the viewer?
2. The narration states: "every time he won, he knew what it cost the man across from him." How does this line change the meaning of "never lost"? What does winning mean in this context?
3. What visual techniques — color, pacing, framing — signal the shift from Thessaloniki to Auschwitz? How do those techniques shape how you experience the transition?

Historical Sourcing

4. What can historians verify about forced boxing at Auschwitz? What sources would you use to corroborate or question the film's account?
5. Arouch claimed he fought "over 200 bouts." How do historians evaluate claims like this — especially when the primary witness is also the subject? What factors might affect the accuracy of that number?
6. What questions does the film leave unanswered that you would want to investigate further?

Rhetorical Analysis

1. How does the film avoid making Arouch a simple hero? What specific choices — in narration, pacing, imagery — prevent the story from becoming a straightforward triumph narrative?
2. The "Amber Clay" aesthetic — smooth, miniaturized, toy-like — creates distance from the horror of what is being depicted. Is this distance ethical? Does it enable engagement with material that might otherwise be unbearable, or does it risk softening the gravity of what occurred?
3. Compare the ethical and aesthetic choices made in this film to other representations of "choiceless choices" in Holocaust literature or cinema you have encountered. What does this medium — a 90-second animated microshort — allow, and what does it foreclose?

Historiographic Questions

4. The film centers Arouch's perspective. What about the opponents who lost? What do we know — or not know — about them? Whose stories are absent from this account?
5. How should educators present survival stories when the survivor's survival may have contributed — directly or indirectly — to another person's death? What framework makes that conversation possible without judgment?
6. Langer argues that imposing the language of "choice" on victims in the camps is itself a form of distortion. Does this film succeed in avoiding that distortion? Where does it succeed, and where might it fall short?

STEP 3 OF 4

Create

Students respond to the film through structured creative writing. Each grade band offers a focused prompt; teachers may offer choice within the structure as appropriate. Allow 20–25 minutes for the core activity, or assign as homework for a longer response.

GRADES 7–8**Journal Entry — Before the Fight**

Write a journal entry from Salamo Arouch's perspective the night before one of his fights at Auschwitz. What is he thinking? What is he feeling? What does he see, hear, and smell in the barracks around him? What does he tell himself in order to get through the night?

PROMPT

Write 1–2 paragraphs. You do not need to have all the answers — Arouch might not either. The goal is to inhabit the moment honestly, without easy resolution.

Remember: this is a real person and a real situation. Write with respect for the weight of what he was living through.

GRADES 9–10**Argumentative Paragraph (MEAL Format)**

Write one well-developed argumentative paragraph using the MEAL structure (Main claim, Evidence, Analysis, Link back to claim) that answers the following question:

PROMPT

Was Arouch's decision to fight an act of resistance, or simply survival? Or is the distinction meaningless in this context? Support your claim with evidence from the film and from the historical context you have studied.

Your paragraph should be 150–200 words. Underline your main claim sentence. Circle your evidence. There is no single correct answer — the strongest responses will acknowledge the tension rather than dissolve it.

GRADES 11–12

Analytical Essay — Medium, Morality, and Distance

Write a 2–3 paragraph analytical essay that does the following:

1. Compare the film's portrayal of Arouch to Langer's concept of "choiceless choices." Does the film successfully represent a situation in which there were no morally acceptable options, or does it — consciously or not — frame Arouch's survival as a form of agency?
2. Analyze how the "Amber Clay" animated medium affects how we process the moral complexity of the story. Does the aesthetic soften the horror? Or does it allow us to engage with what we might otherwise turn away from?
3. Conclude with a claim about the ethics of representing choiceless choices in short-form documentary media. What does this format owe its subject?

Your essay should make an argument — not just describe the film. Engage directly with Langer's framework and apply it to specific moments in the film.

STEP 4 OF 4

Reflect

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 7–8**One-Sentence Takeaway**

Write the single most important thing you are taking away from this lesson in one complete sentence. Then answer: Why is it important to understand stories where there are no simple heroes or villains? What does a story like Arouch's ask us to think about?

EXIT PROMPT

Complete both parts on a notecard or in your journal:

1. The most important thing I'm taking from this story is: ____
2. Stories without simple heroes or villains matter because: ____

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.

"This story complicated my understanding of survival because _____. I used to think surviving meant _____. Now I realize it can also mean _____."

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

GRADES 11–12

Open-Ended Reflection on Survival and Legacy

The film ends with Arouch's survival — liberation, emigration, a long life. But it also tells us that most of his family was murdered: his mother and sisters killed on arrival, his father executed, his brother shot. The community that made him who he was — fifty thousand people, four hundred and fifty years — was almost entirely destroyed.

Write a sustained reflection (one page) on the following question: How do we hold both of these truths at once — the fact of his survival and the scale of what was lost? What does it mean to call someone a "survivor" when survival came at such a cost, both personal and moral? And what does Langer's concept of "choiceless choices" ask us to feel toward Arouch — not what we *should* feel, but what we honestly do feel, and whether those are the same thing?

There is no single right answer. The goal is to think rigorously and honestly — and to resist the urge to resolve a tension that may not be resolvable.

“Every time he won, he knew what it cost the man across from him.”

— Project Witness Microshort Stories, *The Boxer*

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.

GRADES 7–8

Research Project: The Salonika Jewish Community

Before the Holocaust, Thessaloniki's Jewish community was one of the oldest and most remarkable in the world. Research what that community looked like at its height — its culture, its language (Ladino), its institutions, its place in the city — and what remained after 1943.

Create a "before and after" visual — a poster, a digital slide, or a hand-drawn display — that captures the community in 1940 and what remained after the deportations of 1943. Include at least five specific facts, a brief timeline, and one image or illustration that represents something meaningful about what was lost.

Use Yad Vashem's online resources (yadvashem.org) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (ushmm.org) as starting points.

Creative Production: Write Your Own 90-Second Microshort Script

The Microshort Stories format follows a tight six-beat structure. Using the same architecture, write a 90-second script for another story of "choiceless choices" during the Holocaust — a story you believe deserves to be told in this format. Your script must follow the beat structure below:

Hook (0–10s)	A single arresting fact, image, or question that stops the viewer cold.
Setup (10–25s)	Establish the person, the place, the time, and the stakes.
Deportation (25–40s)	The moment of rupture — the world before and the world after.
Arena (40–55s)	The impossible situation: what must the subject do, and at what cost?
Fight (55–75s)	The compressed action — the doing, and what it takes from them.
Legacy (75–90s)	A final fact or image that reframes everything the viewer just watched.

Your script should be 200–250 words. Include a brief note (2–3 sentences) explaining why you chose this story and what you hope a viewer would feel.

Comparative Essay: Two Films, One Story, Different Ethics

In 1989, Hollywood released *Triumph of the Spirit*, a feature film based on Salamo Arouch's story, starring Willem Dafoe. The film was praised for bringing Arouch's story to a wide audience — and criticized by Holocaust scholars for its framing, its narrative choices, and the ethical problems of dramatizing forced-combat survival as a conventional hero's journey.

Research the controversy surrounding *Triumph of the Spirit* — the critical reception, the scholarly objections, and the specific accusations about how it handled the moral complexity of Arouch's situation. Then write a comparative essay (600–800 words) that:

1. **Identifies the key ethical objections** made by scholars to the 1989 film's approach.
2. **Analyzes the choices** made by this 90-second microshort in response to the same material — whether consciously or not.
3. **Argues** whether the shorter, animated format resolves, sidesteps, or simply repositions the ethical problems that the feature film failed to navigate.
4. **Concludes** with a claim about what any representation of "choiceless choices" owes to its subject.

Your essay should include a works cited section. Minimum two sources: one film review or scholarly critique, one historical source on Arouch or the Thessaloniki deportations.

Full Standards Alignment

Common Core ELA Standards

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
RI.x.1	Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
RI.x.2	Determine central idea(s) of a text and analyze their development; provide an objective summary.
RI.x.6	Determine the author's or narrator's point of view or purpose and analyze how it is conveyed in the text.
W.x.1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using valid reasoning. (Grades 9–12)
W.x.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly. (Grades 7–8; 11–12)
SL.x.1	Engage effectively in collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own clearly and persuasively.

C3 Framework for Social Studies

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
D2.His.1	Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.
D2.His.3	Use questions about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time.
D2.His.14	Explain multiple causes and effects of events and developments in the past.
D2.His.16	Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument. (Grades 9–12)
D4.1	Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources. (Grades 9–12)

Florida B.E.S.T. Standards

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
ELA.x.R.2.1	Explain how individual text sections and features convey meaning.
ELA.x.R.3.2	Analyze the author's choices in organizing text, including structure and perspective.
ELA.x.C.1.3	Write to make a claim, supporting it with logical reasoning and relevant evidence.
SS.912.W.7.6	Examine the causes, course, and consequences of the Holocaust, including Nazi policies and their impact on Jewish communities and other targeted groups.

Texas TEKS

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
ELAR x.6 (A)	Analyze how the language and style of a text reveal the author's purpose and perspective.
ELAR x.8 (A)	Analyze the author's purpose and how it affects the meaning and structure of the text.
WH.15 (A-D)	Analyze the causes and effects of World War II, including the Holocaust, the Allied response, and the long-term consequences for global human rights.

Full Standards Alignment (continued)

California History–Social Science Standards

STANDARD	DESCRIPTION
7.10	Analyze the causes and effects of major world events, including human rights issues and their historical contexts.
10.8.1–10.8.6	Analyze the causes and consequences of World War II, including the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, and the Allied response. Students examine primary sources and evaluate the human cost of the war.
11.7	Analyze America's participation in World War II and its consequences, including the Holocaust and the origins of international human rights frameworks.

CASEL Social-Emotional Learning Competencies

This lesson supports development of core SEL competencies across all grade bands. For grades 7–10, the primary competencies addressed are **self-awareness** (recognizing how one's own values and judgments shape responses to moral complexity), **social awareness** (understanding the perspectives and experiences of others across time and culture), and **responsible decision-making** (analyzing situations where choices carry ethical weight and consequences for others). For grades 11–12, the lesson engages all five CASEL competencies — including **self-management** and **relationship skills** — through extended critical reflection and collaborative discussion of choiceless choices, survivor testimony, and the ethics of historical representation.

NYS Social Studies Framework — Key Ideas

KEY IDEA	DESCRIPTION
8.10 — Human Rights Violations	Students examine historical and contemporary examples of human rights violations, genocide, and efforts to protect and promote human rights.
10.6 — Unresolved Global Conflict	The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Students examine causes, course, and consequences.
11.10 — Human Rights in the Modern Era	Students analyze the causes and consequences of human rights violations and evaluate the various responses of individuals, organizations, and governments.

DASA — DIGNITY FOR ALL STUDENTS ACT (NEW YORK STATE)

This lesson plan directly supports the goals of New York State's Dignity for All Students Act by engaging students in anti-bias education through the study of historical injustice and moral complexity. The lesson asks students to examine how dehumanization operates at a systemic level — how a regime can strip people of identity, autonomy, and dignity — and to grapple honestly with situations in which victims had no morally acceptable options. The activities develop students' capacity for empathy, critical thinking, and moral reasoning without judgment: core competencies for building inclusive school and community environments.

STATE HOLOCAUST EDUCATION MANDATES

This lesson satisfies Holocaust and genocide education mandates in 25+ states, including New York, Florida, Texas, California, New Jersey, Illinois, and others that require or strongly recommend instruction on the Holocaust as part of history, social studies, or human rights curricula. The lesson is designed to meet both the content requirements (historical context, causes, and consequences of the Holocaust) and the pedagogical expectations (age-appropriate materials, primary sources, and ethical frameworks) common to these mandates.