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**Gesher Project Poetry at the Vancouver Holocaust  
Education Centre**

The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre's collection of archival and museum items has grown significantly since the 2018 launch of our online collections catalogue, where people can search for and access close to 3,500 items donated to the Centre since its opening in 1994. Much of the VHEC's early collecting activity was linked to exhibitions research and development. The Centre's 1999 exhibition, the Gesher Project, was the culmination of a significant experience for several members of the Vancouver survivor community.

The Gesher Project was a multidisciplinary and intergenerational project that employed creative approaches and discussion to explore the impacts of Holocaust trauma and connection across generations. The project was led by Alina Wydra, a psychologist, Dale Adams Segal, a writing facilitator, Linda Frimer, an art facilitator, and Reisa Schneider, a scribe and co-coordinator. They worked with a group of eighteen Holocaust survivors—child survivors and second-generation survivors—in Vancouver, BC, over a period of six months of talking, writing, and painting. Participants created collective and individual artworks and writings and explored the psychological and intergenerational dimensions of the aftermath of the Holocaust on families and individuals.

The Bridge, collective poem, 4 February 1998

To approach my sisters and brothers  
 Wading through the freezing river  
 Slippery  
 Dangerous dark water  
 Passing to the unknown  
 Shimmering lights in the distance  
 Past and future  
 Hesitation  
 Sense of connecting  
 The bridge is saving lives  
 My cousin's dream told her where she would be taken to  
 Hope transition  
 Crossing over  
 Choice Bridge or water  
 Narrow the bridge among the people  
 Narrow the bridge between the people <sup>1</sup>

The Gesher Project was guided by themes and chronology rather than individual stories. Some project participants had previous professional experience working as artists or writers, while others approached the work without prior art or creative writing training. Some participants continue to write and make art to this day.

Records in the Geshher Project fonds were donated to the VHEC by the art facilitator Linda Frimer, and project participants Sidi Schaffer and Deborah Ross–Grayman. Records include documentation of artworks and writings (including artist statements, letters and poems addressed to family members, and collective and single-authored poems written by project participants). Finished writings were originally gathered in booklets, grouped by the generational identity of the authors: survivor, child survivor or second generation. Booklets were displayed as part of exhibitions, then placed in storage until they were donated to the VHEC. The Geshher Project files, including the exhibition proposal, photographs, video and audio recordings, and writings about the project and exhibition, are now available for research and reference via the VHEC’s collections catalogue.

Reading the poetry, it’s evident that colour was a guiding theme throughout the project. Several poems are named after colours, and researchers can read these poems while looking at the documentation of artworks produced by the authors, and the colours used within them. Facilitators led participants through exercises which allowed participants to explore the significance of colour in Jewish history and in their lives, to generate awareness of different meanings and associations linked to colour. Colour was used to express incomprehensible and painful events and memories through poetic expression, and as an act of liberation.

Authors also considered symbols as part of their work. Symbols of the tree, bridge, light, wall, and the Star of David appear in project artworks and writings. According to the writing facilitator Dale Adams–Segal, participants used a writing technique known as clustering, in which they started with “a single word or phrase evoking feeling, images, and meaningful elements of personal experience” and then wrote down associations and related ideas as they came up, progressing intuitively outwards. “Through clustering, participants were enabled to write from their authentic inner voice, allowing them to discover and validate what they had always known but could not acknowledge.”<sup>2</sup> This writing exercise was paired with a dot-to-line drawing exercise following the same circular pattern of outward expression.

The following poem, written by a child survivor and author of multiple books, uses colour and evokes the shape and movement of the exercises employed in the project:

Yellow Circle of Life, by Lillian Boraks–Nemetz

my world  
is constant as it orbits  
the sun  
  
memories

surface at the tip  
of the paint brush

shapes  
petals in shades of yellow  
circle the black orb  
of my childhood <sup>3</sup>

The collective and individual poetry produced during the Geshher Project is special because of the project's interdisciplinary and exploratory approach, the psychological and trauma-informed space within which these works were produced, and the inter-generational perspectives of the creators. It is reflective of an approach to healing which was innovative at the time, and is still relevant today.



Geshher Project yellow exercise artwork on display.



Geshher Project participants and facilitators group photo.

**1**

Poem from Survivors, collective poetry [loose-leaf binder], item 2020.042.186. <https://collections.vhec.org/Detail/objects/9601>

**2**

Quotes taken from the Gesher Project exhibition proposal, item 2019.084.177. <https://collections.vhec.org/Detail/objects/9010>.

**3**

Poem from Child Survivors [loose-leaf binder], page 9, item 2020.042.187. <https://collections.vhec.org/Detail/objects/9602>