

Chana Senesh Time Capsule

Biography

Chana Senesh (1921–1944), also spelled Hannah Senesh, has become an iconic figure in Israeli culture, a symbol of courage and heroism. Although Chana was just 23 years old at the time of her death, she left behind a unique and important literary legacy. A talented poet and writer, she kept a personal diary right up until the day she left to take part in her final mission, and wrote many letters to her mother and brother still living in war-torn Europe. Her poems were discovered only after her death. The rich archive of her collected writings was deposited at the National Library of Israel in 2021. All documents and primary sources in this program are from The Senesh Family Archive, with thanks to Ori and Mirit Eisen.

Senesh was born in Budapest on July 17, 1921 to an educated family. Her father, a journalist, playwright and author, died when Chana was six years old. Toward the end of her high school studies in Hungary, Senesh experienced antisemitism and harsh restrictions imposed on Jews on the eve of the Second World War. She made the decision to immigrate to the Land of Israel and take an active part in the Zionist enterprise. She arrived in 1939 and underwent two years of training at the Nahalal Agricultural School for Girls, after which she joined the group establishing Kibbutz Sdot Yam. She worked in agriculture, and was a counselor for the Working and Studying Youth (HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed), and at the same time, she wrote poetry as well as a play about life on the kibbutz.

Her embrace of Zionism and immigration did not diminish her concern over what was happening in Europe, and in particular in her native Hungary. Senesh felt an urgent need to enlist in the struggle against Nazi Germany and its allies, and in 1943 she volunteered for the British Army. Her background, courage and determination made her a suitable candidate for one of the most dangerous secret initiatives undertaken by British forces and the Jewish community in Palestine: the parachuting of fighters behind enemy lines in Europe, for the sake of gathering intelligence and helping to rescue Allied pilots who had been forced to abandon their planes. The mission also aimed to make contact with the partisans and anti-Nazi underground, while trying to help save Jews. For Senesh, the Nazi threat against Hungarian Jewry was the main motive for volunteering for the dangerous operation.

In March 1944, Senesh (whose code name was “Hagar”), Reuven Dafni, Yona Rosen and Abba Berdichev parachuted into Yugoslavia, near the Hungarian border. The paratroopers worked with local partisans in Croatian territory, and in June 1944 Senesh crossed the border into Hungary. Hungarian soldiers patrolling the borders quickly apprehended her and she was transferred to Budapest for interrogation. Though severely tortured, she refused to divulge any details about the mission or her comrades in the covert operation. Senesh was prosecuted as a British spy, and because she was also a native of Hungary, for treason as well. In November 1944, before the legal proceedings concluded, 23-year-old Senesh was executed in a Budapest prison.

You can find [more primary sources about Chana Senesh on the main NLI website](#).

Framing

What can you learn about someone's personality, interests, culture, and history through objects they collect and were collected about them? What can you learn about yourself? This interactive, engaging learning experience helps students see that history is about real people and that history is personal. In this time capsule, students will learn about the iconic life and works of Chana Senesh and discover what it meant to live during her time. They will also experience the historian's role in identifying, sorting and assessing information by exploring how the National Library of Israel's primary sources construct the story of a person, time, place or event.

In this activity, they will practice core skills in observation, analysis and constructing narratives, as well as life skills such as problem-solving, communication and cooperation. They will bring history to life and make the personal connections necessary for placing history in meaningful contexts, understanding the passage of time and making sense of the world around us.

Scope

This learning experience can be run in one sitting or split over two separate class periods (90 minutes in total):

- Activity #1 (Video and Missions): 50-60 minutes
- Activity #2 (Chana's Secret Note): 10-15 minutes
- Activity #3 (Reflect): 10-15 minutes

Preparing the Time Capsule

Materials:

- Large envelopes
- Markers
- Pens/pencils
- Scissors
- Tape
- Spare paper
- Post-it/memo notes, giant blank paper OR whiteboard/blackboard

Digital:

- One smartphone/tablet device for each group
- Wifi/data.
- Download 'Zappar' app to each device. ([Android](#), [IOS](#))
- Check for 'Google Translate' on each device.
- Ability to play music from internet (phone/computer/speakers)

Printing:

- Print the [Mission Cards](#) (one copy per group), preferably in color and on thick paper or cardboard. Pack them into separate envelopes for each group and write the corresponding mission numbers on the front.
- Print one copy of [Chana's Secret Note](#), preferably in color and on thick paper or cardboard.
- Print one copy of the [Answer Cards](#).



Optional Customization:

- Place the envelopes in a vintage suitcase or retro box, one per group or one for the whole class.
- Print some of the primary sources in different sizes (e.g. large for the newspaper in mission 2; small for the postcard in mission 5).
- Place the photos in an album in 'mission 1.'
- Bring in a flashlight for an underground feel in 'mission 6'.

Activity #1: Video and [Mission Cards](#)

The students' mission is to complete the tasks to piece together Chana Senesh's story and unlock her final secret message... before time runs out!

- Arrange learners into small groups. Introduce the activity and play the [video](#)
- Distribute the time capsules (envelopes with Mission cards).
- Set the clock for 45 minutes (or your choice of timeframe). Learners can open their mission cards and begin once you say **YOUR TIME STARTS NOW**. Circulate to take note of their observations, questions and discussions.

Mission Cards: Equipment and set up tips

	Mission	Equipment	Set up tips
1	FAMILY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Envelope with activity card + 2 photo album pages Pens/pencils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place the photos in a photo album Create a sense of family. Use a space where groups can be in a circle and all group members have access to seeing the photos, like they are looking at a family album together.
2	WRITER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Envelope with activity card + 1 primary source Smartphone or tablet device Google translate app or internet connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This task is about finding humor. The translation will be weird, funny and memorable. Reminder: TEST that the internet/google translate app works in the room!
3	JOURNEY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Envelope with activity card + 3 primary sources Smartphone or tablet device with Zapper app (Android, IOS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are using technology to bring history to life. Reminder: TEST that the Zapper app works in advance!
4	COURAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Envelope with activity card + 1 primary source Giant blank paper on the wall OR whiteboard and markers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tape a giant blank piece of paper to a large wall. If there is no wall then use markers on a whiteboard, something to give a more 3D experience and sturdy for students to write on. Write or paint 'Courage' in big letters in the middle. You can add some quotes/words on the paper so that the first students aren't intimidated and to help inspire/prompt their own ideas.
5	HEART	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Envelope with activity card + 1 primary source (blacked out letter) Pens/pencils Optional: flashlight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you want to create an 'underground' feel, this task could be completed under tables or in a dark corner with flashlights.
6	LEGACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Envelope with activity card + 1 primary source Scissors Poem puzzle Internet connection for playing "Eli, Eli" in the background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No need to pre-cut anything - learners can do it as part of the task, which is to gain familiarity with the famous song as well as an insight into the writer's mind and how Chana built this poem.

Activity #2: Chana's Secret Note

- **STOP THE CLOCK.** Gather everyone together to read Chana's story, found on the side of each Mission Card. Learners can take turns reading aloud in order from card 1-6.
- Use this opportunity to go through the [answers to each mission](#).
- Reveal Chana's Final Secret Message.

Set up tips:

- You could arrange to take the note out of a vintage dress or from a secret pocket in your own clothes. Be mindful of being overly performative. The idea is rather to provide a 3D visual effect and spark imagination. Being Chana's last written words before her death, this is a moment to strike the right tone.
- As learners pass the note around the room, read aloud the explanation and then the translation.

Activity #3: Reflect

Equipment:

- Post-it notes/memo pad (any 2 colors)
- Pens/pencils

Set up tips:

- Gather in a circle. This is a chance for students to self-reflect as well as to hear, from others, something they might not have considered or connected to.
- Invite learners to write thoughts on post-it notes and place them in the middle of the circle:
Color 1: what surprised you about Chana Senesh?
Color 2: if you could meet Chana Senesh, what would you say or ask?
- Go through the notes and invite several students to elaborate if they wish. Expand on their answers or offer other ideas that you think might be missing.
- Encourage them to share what they learned with one other person today.