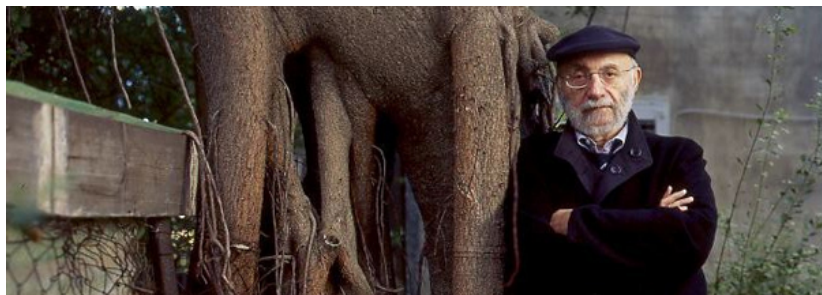


Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Read, annotate, and prepare for class discussion next class based on the questions at the end of the reading.



Samuel Bak is a surrealist painter who is renowned for his representations of Jewish experience during and after World War II. His paintings are heavy with symbolism, and piecing together all the symbols into a single interpretation can be like piecing together a puzzle.

### **Biographical information by Professor Lawrence Langer (Facing History website):**

Samuel Bak was born on August 12, 1933 in Vilna, Poland. A few years later the area was incorporated into the independent republic of Lithuania. He was eight when the Germans invaded in 1941 and established a ghetto for the Jewish population. At first he and his parents hid in a local monastery; when the Germans grew suspicious, they escaped to the ghetto. Bak began painting while still a child, and had his first exhibition (in the Vilna ghetto) in 1942 at the age of nine. From the ghetto the family was sent to a labor camp on the outskirts of the city. His mother escaped and took refuge with a distant relative who had converted to Christianity and was living undetected in Vilna. Then Bak's father managed to save his son by dropping him in a sack out of a ground floor window of the warehouse where he was working; he was met by a maid and brought to the house where his mother was hiding. His father was shot by the Germans in July 1944, a few days before Soviet troops liberated the city. His four grandparents had earlier been executed at the killing site in the Vilna suburb called Ponary.

### **Speaking About the Unspeakable: A Lecture by Samuel Bak**

Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Samuel Bak, I am a painter.

"Speaking About the Unspeakable" is the title of a documentary film on my art that was recently produced in the US. I have rightly given today's talk the same name. It will concern a number of paintings that I have selected from a large body of my work. All are a response to the miracle of my survival. More precisely, these paintings are a visual statement born of an ever-growing need to deal with my experience of having come through the horrors of the Holocaust, and of having done it by age eleven. The images that you will see have matured over a long span of time. Was this indelible experience the sole inspiration for these canvases? I can't say. The creative process is a matter of such complexity that conscious intentions often eclipse subconscious needs. This question must remain open.



I was born in Vilna in 1933, in a city that then belonged to Poland. It is now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. A place so famous for its institutions of learning that it was called the Jerusalem of Lithuania. The members of my family were mostly secular, but were proud of their Jewish identity. The year 1939 shattered what had been for me a child's happy paradise. Irrevocably, I was marked by traumatizing experiences -- brutal changes of regime, Nazi occupation, ghetto, murderous "aktionen," (euthanasia program) labor camps, moments of great despair, escapes, and periods of hiding in unthinkable places. I lost many of my beloved ones, but

my mother and I pulled through. She provided me with a shield of so much love and care that it must have saved my psyche. When in 1944 the Soviets liberated us, we were two among two hundred of Vilna's survivors -- from a community that had counted 70 or 80 thousand. This was not the end of our personal struggle, for there followed a dangerous escape from the Soviets and a long period of waiting in the DP (displaced persons) camps in Germany. I was fifteen when we arrived to the newly established state of Israel in 1948, which was then battling for its independence. On and off, I spent there some fifteen years of my life.

During most of my last four decades, I have been indeed a wandering Jew. I have lived and worked in Tel Aviv, Paris, Rome, and Lausanne, and I presently reside in the US, in Boston. I have become a man who is at home everywhere



and nowhere, an artist whose real roots are in the ground of his art. As I said earlier, and it may sound trite, I know that what I have been painting comes from a compulsive need to give meaning to the miraculous fact of my survival. It tries to appease a sad sense of bewilderment. It comes from the fear that in a world of

unparalleled upheavals, things are never what they seem. My work reveals a reality observed through the eyes of a child who had suddenly aged. Some might call it elaboration of Trauma; I hope that my art is more than that.



I feel that we live in a world polluted by triviality. The Holocaust is a portentous subject. Artists who have chosen to deal with matters of importance, who are questioning the existential dimensions of life, death, good and evil, turn to the experience of the Shoah (Hebrew word meaning "catastrophe" referencing the Holocaust) and believe that their images will stir emotions and stimulate reflection. Visual statements can be stronger than words. But the rhetoric of painting has its limitations. Visual Arts are mostly physical, they require places and spaces, and they can bear only so much moral weight. Besides, certain experiences demand verbal expression.

**From SAMUEL BAK and the ART OF THE QUESTION by DANNA NOLAN FEWELL, Drew University and GARY A. PHILLIPS, Wabash College**

Samuel Bak's work of "Exploring, reworking this range of cultural, religious, and personal metaphors, Bak produces a visual grammar and vocabulary that privileges questioning:



How does a fragmented, murdered world cohere?

How should we now interpret the milestones of Western civilization?

What can traditional Jewish and Christian symbols, stories, ceremonies, convictions possibly mean in a century that has witnessed the Shoah and countless other catastrophes?

Why should we, and how do we, now remember the children murdered by Nazi hatred?

Why should, how does, facing past atrocity prompt us to confront present innocent suffering?

And how does our involvement in political, social, economic, and religious systems implicate us in the suffering of so many?" **From: <http://www.puckergallery.com/pdf/Bak%20WDD%202009.pdf>**

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**Class Discussion Questions (make notes below to help you discuss the reading in class). Be specific and use examples from the text:**

**Why does Samuel Bak paint his experiences of the Holocaust?**

**How do you think we (humans) remember?**

**How do you think Samuel Bak would answer: To what extent are we all witnesses of history and messengers to humanity?**

**Do individuals have a responsibility to bear witness to atrocities so others may be informed?**