

Activity 8: Britain and the Legacy of Loss - Part 2

Student Worksheet

Task 1

What benefits do you think there are in learning about the Holocaust from a Holocaust survivor? For example, think about the difference between learning about an event from someone who experienced it versus learning from a history book or other historical source.

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Task 2

Now read the following biography for Irene Kirstein Watts:

Irene Kirstein Watts was born on 24 May 1931 in Berlin, Germany. She grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family. Irene and her family were persecuted by the Nazis during the pre-war period and her father, Ziegmund Kirstein, was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In December 1938, Irene (aged 8) boarded the Kindertransport to the United Kingdom. She lived in England initially but when war broke out, she was evacuated to Llanelli, Wales and was later fostered in London. Irene’s parents escaped to the United Kingdom during the war and eventually lived in Swansea. Irene, her husband and four children emigrated to Canada in 1968.

Irene was interviewed on 28 June 1998 in White Rock, British Columbia, Canada.



Student Worksheet

Task 2 continued

Next look at this photograph of Irene's father, Ziegmund Kirstein.



Ziegmund Kirstein, Irene Kirstein Watt's father in Swansea, 1950s.

Image from Irene Kirstein Watts's interview from the archive of the USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education, 1998. For more information: <http://sfi.usc.edu/>.

Working in pairs/groups, describe the photograph. Try to answer questions like:

- What can you see in the photograph?
- Where and when do you think the photograph was taken?
- What impression does the photograph give you of Irene's father?
- What aspects of the photograph give you this impression?
- What do you want to know more about?

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Task 2 continued

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Next read the following summary of the British government’s policy on ‘internment’ during World War 2:

During World War 2, the British government had a policy of internment (detention without trial) of men and some women who were deemed to be ‘enemy aliens’. These were people from enemy states living in Britain – Germans, Austrians, and later Italians. ‘Enemy aliens’ were categorised by the authorities according to the level of security risk they were judged to pose. Initially, only those identified as high risk were interned, and Jewish refugees were largely identified as low risk so did not face internment. However, by May 1940, there was acute anxiety in Britain as a German invasion appeared imminent. These fears led to a much larger group of ‘aliens’ being interned, including thousands of Jewish refugees from Nazism. They were held in a variety of holding and permanent camps in the UK and on the Isle of Man and, later, in Australia and Canada.¹

Write down any new information you learned from reading this summary.

¹ Roger Kershaw, *Collar the lot! Britain’s policy of internment during the Second World War* (2015) <<https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/collar-lot-britains-policy-internment-second-world-war/>> [accessed 22 May 2022].



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Task 2 continued

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Now watch **video clip 1**, where Irene describes what happened to her father during and after the war. The video includes a reference to Judith Kirstein, Irene's younger sister.

[Note: ***Trigger warning: Suicide*** - this video describes Irene's father's suicide.]

Then, working in pairs/groups, answer the questions below:

Why do you think the British government took the decision to intern Irene's father and other Jewish refugees in 1940? Does this surprise you given these refugees had fled Germany to escape Nazi persecution?

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What does the policy of internment suggest about the attitudes in Britain towards refugees in Britain during the war?

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Student Worksheet

Task 2 continued

What does the tragedy of Irene’s father’s suicide after the end of the war suggest to you about the trauma of surviving the Holocaust?

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Was there anything that you learned from Irene’s video testimony that would have been difficult or impossible to discover from the other sources provided?

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Task 3

Now read this short extract from the Yad Vashem website which briefly describes some of the challenges faced by Holocaust survivors who were liberated at the end of the war.²

What Did Liberation Mean for Jewish Survivors?

Liberation should have been a happy day for the survivors. Finally they were free of the constant fear of death they had lived with for so many years. For the Jewish survivors, however, liberation had come too late. Entire communities in Eastern Europe, especially, had been wiped out and all their Jews exterminated. Over 90% of the Jewish community in Poland, the largest in Europe, had perished.

² Yad Vashem, *Liberation and Survival* <<https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/lesson-plans/liberation-and-survival.html>> [accessed 22 May 2022].



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Task 3 continued

What Did the Survivors Do Following Liberation?

By the end of 1945, those Jews who had managed to survive forced labour camps, concentration camps, extermination camps, and death marches, or who had survived in hiding, in forests, or with the help of local individuals, wanted only to go 'home'. Some found that they had no homes or families left. Others found that going home involved a dangerous journey through chaotic, post-war Europe. Those who succeeded in reaching their old homes had to confront a new reality: the local populations in their homes, particularly in Eastern Europe, were antisemitic and hostile toward Jews, and saw their return as unwelcome.

Then, working in pairs/groups, answer the question below:

According to this extract, what challenges did Holocaust survivors face on liberation?

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Now watch **video clip 2**, where Irene talks about her adult life after the war.

Then, working in pairs/groups, answer the questions below:

Based on the video testimony, what factors do you think helped Irene to deal with the challenges she faced as a Holocaust survivor?

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Task 3 continued

Having listened to Irene’s testimony, can you identify any additional benefits or value in learning about the Holocaust from a Holocaust survivor (building on the discussion in **Task 1**)?

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Task 4

Consider the statement:

Holocaust survivors were the lucky ones.

Write a response to this statement. Try to refer to the evidence you’ve analysed during this lesson – particularly Irene’s video testimony – and include your own thoughts and reflections.

You might also want to reflect on the following question as part of your response:

How might governments, charities, aid agencies and individuals best help families who are escaping war or persecution in another country?

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