UCL Centre for Holocaust Education marks #HMD2022 with a description of the arrest of Leon Greenman and his family, by Dutch collaborators to the Nazis, in October, 1942.

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'What a difference a day makes, 24 little hours …' these are the lyrics that start a popular song from the 1930s. The song goes on to express how it can take just one day to change your life forever, when you meet that special someone, and find love.

Beautiful as the words truly are, we all know the sobering fact that 24 hours can also change your life in the worst way possible - bringing complete devastation and an end to all hope.

Such was the experience of Leon Greenman, a Jewish man and his family, on 8th October 1942.

Background:

Leon was born into a Jewish family in London's East End on the18th of December 1910. His grandparents were of both Dutch and Eastern European heritage. When Leon was young his family decided to live in Holland. Later he became an apprentice hairdresser, joined a boxing club and became an amateur singer of romantic songs. During a musical evening held at a club for young Jewish people Leon met his future wife Esther (Else) van Dam – a Dutch girl living in London. He moved back to London, the town of his birth, to be nearer to her and they fell deeply in love.

Leon and Else were married in London in the Stepney Green Synagogue in June of 1935. They honeymooned in Brighton. Shortly afterwards they went on a visit to Rotterdam in Holland to see Else's grandmother. While there, she persuaded the young couple to settle in Holland to look after her. They agreed.

On the 17th of March 1940 Else gave birth to a boy named Barney. The happiness was short lived. Nazi Germany invaded Holland just two months later. Leon gave his British passports and money to non-Jewish Dutch friends for safe keeping. He was worried that these important documents and all the money he had may be confiscated. If this happened Leon and the family would be in danger of the same fate as the Dutch Jews who were now under German rule. But when Leon came to reclaim his documents, he discovered that his friends had burned the passports for fear of being caught helping Jews. Leon's money had also 'disappeared'.

'24 little hours…'

One night – on the 8th October 1942, everything changed.

It was about 10:15 in the evening. Leon, Else, and Else's elderly grandmother had settled down for the night. The house was quiet. Two-year-old Barney was sleeping soundly. Leon and Else talked about how some of their friends had been rounded up and taken away. They also talked of their fears for what fate may lie ahead for them. The distant sound of RAF bombers provided Leon and Else with some reassurance as they started to nod off. Suddenly there was a ring at the doorbell and a loud banging on the door. Leon released the latch. Police, dressed in the black uniform of Dutch police, who were working for the Germans, shone a torch in Leon's face and ordered the family to get dressed and come with them. They were to be removed from their home. Leon tried to explain that he was British, and, as such, had rights and should not be treated this way.

Leon says:

'I tried in vain to protest to one of the men….but he would not listen…Frustrated and frightened I looked around the room and saw my wife's grandmother a woman of 83, trying to reason with one of the officers, …My wife was standing there as well, tears streaming down her cheeks as she told me to do as they say ….and I turned to see Barney, standing up in his cot, …shaking the sides - trying to get our attention.[1]

Leon had no choice but to do as he was told and to follow their orders.

'The inevitable moment had come for us just as it has for our friends and acquaintances. We had now become just one more forsaken family…In a matter of minutes, life had become a nightmare, unnatural, and surreal.'[2]

They suddenly felt very scared and uncertain about what lay ahead.

Auschwitz Birkenau:

The Greenmans were taken to Westerbork, a transit camp for Dutch Jews. Whilst there, Leon tried many times to explain his British citizenship and the family's right to be interned under international law, but it was all to no use. They were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on the 18th of January 1943. On arrival Leon was separated from Else and Barney. What followed for Leon was a horrifying two years of slave labour, beatings and starvation in numerous concentration camps and he was subjected to brutal 'medical' experimentation. He was eventually liberated by the Americans at Buchenwald on the 11th of April 1945.

During his time in the camps, Leon made a 'covenant' with God: if he and his family survived, he would dedicate his life to bearing witness to the Holocaust so that the despicable acts might never happen again. Leon was eventually to discover that his wife and son had been murdered in gas chambers soon after they had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The last sighting Leon had of Else, and Barney was of them crowded in a waggon waiting to be taken away – their matching red velvet hats peeping out from the group of the others, facing the same fate. This tragic picture would play heavily on Leon's mind and remain with him for the rest of his life.

Leon after the Holocaust:

Leon lived to 97. He never betrayed his promise to God to bear witness to the atrocity that was the Holocaust. He gave lectures to thousands of teachers and students and was an activist fighting racism. He was awarded an OBE from the Queen in 1998 for services to Holocaust Education.

Talk to your teacher and your peers to develop an idea for your artwork. Think about these questions:

- How will your artwork show the importance of this 'One Day' in Leon's life? What images or ideas will you include?
- How will your artwork express the feelings of Leon and his family in this moment?
- How will your artwork speak to the idea of a future without genocide?
- What materials and equipment will help you make your artwork the best it can be?
- What kind of colours would show the meaning of your artwork?

[1] Greenman, L (2001) An Englishman in Auschwitz. Valentine Mitchell. P 20-21.
[2] Ibid p22