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‘Liberation’ and ‘Home’

What did it mean to be ‘liberated’?
What did survivors find at ‘home’?

Key Questions: What did it mean to be 'liberated'? What did survivors find at 'home'?

Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To develop knowledge and understanding of the human experience of 'liberation'
- Explore what concepts like 'liberation' and 'home' mean in the context of the end of the Holocaust
- Consider what some of the long-term effects of the Holocaust on survivors may have been

Rationale

What does it mean to be 'liberated'? To go 'home'? These are ideas all of us can conceive of and relate to in some way or another; they are words we attach certain meanings and understandings to. In the context of the end of the Holocaust, however, these words had very different connotations for the men, women, and children who found themselves still alive at the end of the war. Today in our contemporary culture we associate the Holocaust and liberation with particular images and certain emotions; we presume it was a moment of joy, relief, celebration. But the reality was more complex. Many, for instance, didn't even know they had been 'liberated'.

In this lesson students begin to explore some of these nuances. By listening to survivors' experiences and engaging with creative writing, they are encouraged to think about what 'liberation' and 'home' actually meant to those who experienced it in 1945. As they discover how survivors understood these notions students are motioned towards thinking about the various legacies of the Holocaust.

Key Information

- The lesson is intended for Year 9 students and above. It has been devised for History and RE but its interest in the use of language could see the lesson used in English classrooms.
- Timings are suggested on the basis of a one hour lesson, and may need modifying accordingly.
- The lesson presupposes prior study into the history of the Holocaust.
- Pedagogical guidance and detail on historical context is provided in the Additional Information section following this lesson plan.
- There is no PowerPoint accompanying this session, but students will need to be able to watch the film clips of survivors speaking.

Lesson Plan

Thinking about words (10 minutes)

Working in pairs or small groups, ask students to discuss what the words 'liberation' and 'home' mean to them. Explain these conversations need to lead to them formulating their own definition for both words.

After a short time collect feedback from students. Each pair or group could record their suggested definitions onto cards which are then affixed to a wall around the words 'liberation' and 'home'. Alternatively, definitions could be collected at the front on a whiteboard. Having done so, shift students' focus towards the Holocaust: what would these words have meant in this context? You may direct students to consider different themes, for instance:

- Emotions: how might survivors have felt at liberation?
- Places and next steps: where would people have wanted to go after liberation? What may they have wanted to do?
- Challenges: what difficulties and problems do students think people would have faced after they were liberated?

An account of returning 'home' (30 minutes)

Following on from the above discussions, ensure students have an appreciation of the chaotic situation of Europe at the conclusion of the war. With this context in place, explain how one way of starting to think about what 'home' meant after the Holocaust is to consider the reality which confronted survivors who managed to make it back to the places they used to live.

Share with students Ida Fink's short story *The Tenth Man*. The story can be used in a variety of ways, depending on your subject. Be sure to allow sufficient time for students to read, discuss and then feedback on the story.

History classrooms could focus on positioning the story in its historical context. Students would then consider how this piece of fiction helps us understand the actual events of liberation and going home. In pairs or groups students might discuss:

- The lack of understanding by the non-Jewish community, who were often preoccupied with their own difficulties in the immediate post-war period.
- The absence of a Jewish community (or its support structures) for people to return to. This applied both to destroyed buildings and missing people.
- Not knowing what had happened to friends and families.
- The mixed reaction of non-Jews to the return of Jewish neighbours. Some welcomed the returnees, giving help, shelter, understanding; some were ambivalent; others were openly hostile – especially when local people now occupied the homes of Jews they never expected to return.

- What the story reveals about the nature of genocide. As a crime intended to not only murder people but to destroy their group, genocide creates conditions which prevent a collective from continuing and/or sustaining itself.

RE Teachers might focus on the religious and moral aspects of the story. In this case, students could be encourage to think about:

- What they can learn about the practices of Judaism in this town, before the war began and since it ended. Thought might also be given here to the story's title.
- What they discover about the Christian Church in the area.
- What they understand about the relationship between Jewish people and Christian people in this town.
- The role and behaviour of non-Jews as survivors returned: how they responded, and what happened over time.

English Teachers could direct students to reflect on characterisation and the use of time in the story. Students may debate:

- How Fink characterises the different individuals and what we learn about them. Particular attention might be given to the only named person – Chaim (which means 'life' in Hebrew).
- How Fink uses the passing of seasons, light and dark, to create a sense of change, the passing of time, and move the narrative onwards.
- The impression we are given by the end of the story of survivors as a group of people who have managed to return to this town.

Oral history and the survivor experience (15 minutes)

Having explored Fink's fictional story of returning home, have students discuss the potential merits of hearing survivors speak about their experiences. Contextualise the activity by having students read the Going 'Home' card. Having done so, show students the clips of Anna Bergman and Leon Greenman speaking. You may need to play these clips twice. Next, ask students:

- What emotions do Anna and Leon describe experiencing?
- How far do Anna's and Leon's experiences differ from the characters in Ida Fink's story?
- What have these oral histories revealed about 'liberation' and 'home'?

Plenary (5 minutes)

Working in their original pair or group, ask students to return to their earlier definitions of the words 'liberation' and 'home'. Has their view of these words changed over the course of the lesson? Collect views from the class on this question, encouraging consideration of how far survivors were truly 'liberated' in 1945.

Engaging all learners

This lesson offers an opportunity to develop literacy through the use of Ida Fink's short story. However, some students will require support with this material. For less confident readers teachers may wish to read the story aloud or have more confident readers read it to small groups. It could be useful to work on sections of the story at a time, perhaps even dividing it between groups of students. All students might benefit from identifying words they don't understand, and this could develop into the construction of a class glossary.

Some students may find it difficult to formulate definitions of 'liberation' and 'home'. Accordingly, students could be given the flexibility to construct their definitions in ways they feel most comfortable. This might include sketching images which they associate with these words, and then describing their reasoning. Alternatively students could be given a selection of cards on which are printed words which may (or may not) commonly be associated with 'liberation' and 'home', with students' selecting those they would link with their definition. All students could be asked if 'liberation' and 'home' mean the same in any situation. Extension work could see students exploring other oral histories available on the USC iWitness website. They might consider what others say about 'liberation', including liberators themselves.

Further information

This lesson is the first of four lessons entitled '**Legacy of the Holocaust**'. The second in this series is **The first year**. Teachers wishing to explore the wider societal effects of the Holocaust may wish to also make use of **The void** lesson.

Additional Information

Pedagogical guidance

Two crucial questions often overlooked when planning to teach the Holocaust are where to start and where to end. Answering these depends a great deal on teaching aims and learning objectives. Nonetheless, ending a scheme of work in 1945 with the liberation of the camps neglects both the short and the long term impact of the Holocaust on those who survived, on their former communities, and on a European continent scarred by genocide.

Within our collective memory there is a popular perception of liberation as a moment of revelation, on the one hand, and jubilation on the other. There is truth and distortion in both of these ideas. Despite the brutalities of war, the soldiers who liberated the Nazi camps were not – and in some ways, could not – be prepared for the atrocities they encountered. Likewise, the newsreels and media reports confronted the world with the horrific and shocking realities of state-sponsored genocide. For the survivors, meanwhile, there was naturally relief that the Nazi regime had been defeated.

However there are significant complications to these common images and ideas. A general awareness and understanding that the Jews of Europe had been the victims of brutal policies – including murder – already existed long before the liberations of the camps. The camps themselves, as discovered by the British, American, and Soviet armies, did not always present an accurate picture of what had taken place there: Bergen-Belsen a case in point. Often, many survivors in the camps were so sick and unwell that they didn't even know they had been 'liberated' and/or died hours or days later. And then of course there were those survivors who were not in camps but who were on death marches, in hiding, or on the run. For these individuals there was no identifiable moment of 'liberation'.

'Liberation' then is far more complicated than is generally understood or recognised. For survivors it meant new and complex challenges: searching for surviving family, friends, and community; ensuring basic human needs of food, water, and shelter were met; and trying to rebuild lives, often far from home usually with few, if any, surviving friends or family members. Then there was the task of dealing with the trauma of their experiences with little medical support, or social or psychiatric care. Some who returned to their towns met but further persecution and antisemitism. For example in 1946, in the Polish city of Kielce, 42 Jewish people, many survivors who had returned were murdered in a pogrom by former neighbours.

These are the uncomfortable truths students must discover about 'liberation' and going 'home'. They refute the idea that life simply returned to normal with the defeat of Nazism, and pose questions about the impact of the Holocaust on cultures, societies, and individuals. To help students develop an appreciation of this and begin to reflect on what these issues mean for

them the lesson begins and ends with students exploring what they understand by 'liberation' and 'home'. Throughout, the purpose is not to encourage students to try and 'imagine' what liberation and going 'home' meant for survivors, nor is it to transmit an ideal definition of these terms. Instead, the lesson seeks to complicate students' thinking and afford them an insight into the experiences of survivors at the end of the war. It is to this end that the short story by Ida Fink and the oral history of Anna Bergman and Leon Greenman are directed.

The experience of Anna and Leon presses against the personal stories we often here today of liberation. Often, survivors speak with gratitude about those who helped them and the countries where they eventually settled. We now treat our survivor community with respect and recognise their tenacity in rebuilding their lives. Sadly, such recognition was not always forthcoming in the post-war years. Students should be motioned towards reflecting on these changes and developments over time.

Historical context

The immediate period after the war can be examined from a range of perspectives – be that of survivor, liberator, perpetrator, or the victims' former neighbours. Each raises their own questions. This lesson focuses on the immediate experience of Holocaust survivors: a term usually applied to all who survived the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people. However, it must be noted the wartime experiences of these people was diverse, ranging from partisans who fought in the forests of Eastern Europe to very young children raised as Christians unaware of their heritage, from those interned in camps to others who survived in hiding thanks to the others and good fortune.

At the end of the war many of these survivors were brought together in Displaced Persons camps – often camps previously part of the Nazi system. Tensions sometimes developed between those who had survived the Nazi camps and others. Some ex-partisans for instance adopted the name of She'arit Hapleta ('the surviving remnant'). With time some survivors tried to return to pre-war homes or began the process of immigrating to other countries. Amidst the chaos, the pre-war lives of these people were obscured. They came from a diverse range of backgrounds: rich and poor, urban and rural, religious and secular, assimilated and traditional.

Reading *The Tenth Man*

Ida Fink was born in Poland to a Jewish family. During the war she was in the Zbarah ghetto, but then fled and lived on false papers on the so-called 'Aryan side'. In 1957 she emigrated to Israel. She wrote many short stories, a play, and a novel. She died in 2011.

Her short story The Tenth Man provides a reflection on survival, liberation and loss; the meaning of home and community, and an insight into the reaction of non-Jews to returning survivors. It was published in 1983 and translated into English in 1987.

The story is set in an unnamed town where, over an undisclosed period of time, eleven survivors return: nine men and two women, all of them adults. The story is disturbing in many ways. Very few men or women come back. No children return. Only one survivor is named. There is also a lack of understanding of the survivors' experiences by the town's Christian population, while the survivors are quickly forgotten by these townspeople.

We are given a glimpse of the town before the war when it had a vibrant Jewish community, stretching back at least one hundred years. Despite this the Christian population do not recognise the first returning survivor's song as being a Hebrew prayer. This individual is the only one named; everyone else is described by their former professions. These roles suggest the town's previous diversity and contribution its Jewish inhabitants made to the community. Fink does give us further insight into these people through their faces – each containing clues as to what happened to them during the Holocaust. Some have obviously been beaten, another 'white' in all perhaps with fear or shock.

The representation of the Christian population is complex. It shows both the negative and the positive actions of non-Jews during and after the Holocaust. We learn of people who had hidden a survivor, and a community which failed to recognise a woman from their own town who had disguised herself as a peasant. Fink equally gestures to a failure of the Christian population to understand what survivors had endured, and the speed with which it forgets the returning survivor population. This may well be a comment on human nature and society in general.

In sum, Fink's story may be taken as a representation of the way a particular community responded to the return of survivors; an exemplar of the experience of many, but not all, survivors across Europe. It can also be read as a meditation on the impact of genocide: the destruction not only of people, but if a group's capacity to sustain itself: a few individuals have survived, but can the beliefs, traditions, culture and heritage continue?

It is notable, therefore, that the story has the title it does. In Orthodox Judaism, a group of ten men over the age of Bar Mitzvah (13 years-old) is required in order to say Kaddish (the prayer for the dead). This group of ten men are known as a minyan. In the story the tenth man never arrives, meaning the surviving remnant cannot properly mourn their dead.

Teachers should be aware that within Reform and Liberal Judaism the rules of a minyan do not apply. Also of note is the name 'Chaim' – in Hebrew this word means life. It is a popular name. Within Judaism a great deal of emphasis is placed on the importance of life and family. There is also a tradition of a tree of life – each generation playing a role and ensuring that there are future Jewish generations – and this is also the name given to the Torah. In discussing the story with students, teachers may want to draw attention to these practices.

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