
Surviving survival?

Life and trauma after the Holocaust
A case study of Leon Greenman

Key Question: What does it mean to 'survive' the Holocaust?

Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To expand knowledge and understanding of Leon's story and mission in later life.
- To consider the long-term impact of the Holocaust on Leon.
- To use the case study of Leon to consider the impact of the Holocaust more broadly.
- To explore whether life can ever be 'ordinary' and fulfilling after experiencing genocide.

Rationale

When considering the long-term legacy of the Holocaust it is important to complicate students' assumptions – particularly with regard to its human impact. Students may presume all survivors went on to live happy, 'normal' lives, but in many cases, life was not so simple. Rebuilding life was not straightforward; many struggled to come to terms with their experiences, and others still felt an overwhelming compulsion to return to their painful memories and bear witness. The difficulty of living with the long-term trauma of the Holocaust was a challenge that faced many.

Leon's later life provides a lens to examine the enduring impact of the Holocaust on one individual and to understand something of long-term effects of trauma. In this lesson students explore how Leon's post-war life unfolded, including his drive to fight fascism and to testify to the horrors of the Holocaust to thousands of students. Students should come to see survival as complex and at times deeply painful.

Key Information

- The lesson is intended for Year 9 students and above. It is particularly suited for History and Religious Education teaching.
- Timings are suggested on the basis of a one x 55-minute lesson and may need modifying accordingly.
- The lesson presupposes prior study into the history of the Holocaust and use of other Centre materials which explore Leon's life before during and after the Holocaust. It is envisaged the lesson will be used in conjunction with other lessons such as '**Liberation and Home**' and **The first year**.
- Resources included for this lesson are: Information cards 1-4 and Leon Greenman's unfinished poem (card 5). These should be printed for students to work on in groups. Leon's unfinished poem features in the PowerPoint, however, in addition, a printed copy will be needed for each student to annotate and work on for the assessment exercise.
- A PowerPoint accompanies this lesson plan. Notes are included with each slide.

Lesson Plan

Slide 1: (Slides 1- 4, 10 mins) **Lesson introduction.**

Explain to students that they have learned much about the Holocaust and followed Leon Greenman's story throughout. Today they will be learning more about Leon Greenman's later life, in the decades after the liberation and how he survived his survival/

Through this process explain that they will be aiming to:

- Expand knowledge and understanding of Leon's story and mission in later life.
- Consider the long-term impact of the Holocaust on those, like Leon, who survived.
- Explore whether life can ever be ordinary and fulfilling after experiencing genocide.

Note the need to begin by establishing what they have already learned about Leon.

Slide 2: Exploring an Opening image

Ask students to look carefully at this photo of Leon. Ask how old they think he is when this photo was taken? Explain that Leon is 97. Students may notice the tattooed number on his arm (98288) and his firm grip on the walking stick. Ask if students can remember the circumstances that led to the tattoo being there and the horrors that this tattoo represents (Auschwitz concentration camp). You might follow this by asking students what it must have been like for Leon to have that permanent reminder of the trauma he endured in the concentration camps and the death march. You may also wish to ask students, as they examine the photo what they see when they look at Leon, now at the remarkable age of 97? (Strength/determination/vulnerability – all three?)

Allow for class response. Now invite students to recall what they remember about Leon's life? Can you remember what life was like for Leon before the Holocaust?

- Where was he born?
- How did he meet his wife?
- What was his job?
- When was his son born?
- Where were they living?
- What changed everything for them?

Slide 3: Looking back

Through directed questioning, revisit the family's deportation from Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands, what happened to the Greenman's on their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1943, and the murder of Leon's wife Else and son, Barney. Ask students what they remember happening to Leon in the years Leon spent as a Jewish prisoner at the hands of the Nazis, before finally being liberated in April 1945.

Slide 4: Leon's later life.

Ask them if they think Leon was free once he was liberated? (Here you can probe what students understand about liberation for an individual who has lost everything). Suggest to students there is much still to find out about Leon's life, particularly his later years when he was in his 80s and 90s.

- What did the future hold for Leon?
- What was the best he could hope for?
- Did he remarry or find happiness?
- How would he try to make a meaningful life for himself?
- What did he do that was remarkable?
- What problems did he face?

Slide 5-7 (15 mins) Fact finding: Learning More About Leon.

Forward the questions on this slide as examples of some of the questions which are still to be addressed in their encounters with Leon and outline the activity 'Learning more about Leon'.

Organise students into small groups as you see most appropriate. Distribute the downloaded information cards 1-3 to these groups (*Leon's fight, Leon's later life, Londoners Honour Leon*).

Explain to students they are going to piece together a picture of Leon's later life in his 80s and 90s.

Allow 15 minutes for the 3 Rs - read, research, and respond.

When all members of the group have conducted their research invite the class to feedback in plenary style. Share results in a 1-minute feedback session from an appointed rapporteur for each group. Emphasis should be on what students discovered about Leon's later life and what it reveals about how the Holocaust affected him. The questions on the slide 7 can help focus thinking:

- What was Leon's mission in later life and how did he pursue this?
- How did others respond to his activities?
- How did the Holocaust continue to feature in Leon later life?
- Was Leon ever free of the Holocaust?
- How did he live with the memories?
- What do we understand about survival?
- Do you think it is possible to lead a normal life after the Holocaust?

Allow class feedback.

Slide 8: (10 mins) **Card 4: The struggle of trauma.**

Distribute Card 4 (The struggle of trauma) to the whole class:

Display Slide 8. Explain that the final card (Card 4) will need them to use all their skills of empathy to see things from Leon's perspective. Explain that this card describes how difficult it was to live with the memories and how nightmares haunted Leon and tortured him. Explain also how art helped him but that the problems continued daily from the time he was liberated to his elderly years.

The teacher can explore this with students from the front of the class or invite them, once again, to read, research and respond, in groups.

Ask students to try to consider what trauma may still be present in Leon's life despite the remarkable work he achieved to make the world a better place.

Allow class time to mull over and feedback.

Slides 9-11 (17 mins) **Leon's unfinished poem.**

Slide 9: Direct the students' attention to the poem which was written by Leon (Card 5). Show the poem on screen and distribute hard copies for each student (for the purpose of the homework task).

Ask students to follow as you peacefully read the poem and draw their attention to the fact it was discovered in Leon's home by his close friend Ruth-Anne Lenga (Programme Director of UCL Centre for Holocaust Education) a few months after Leon passed away. She picked it up, read it through and found it to be a deeply moving, last reflection which Leon wrote on the meaning of his life.

Invite students to reflect on Leon's thoughts expressed in the poem in pairs. They may also annotate the poem or make a note of key words and phrases.

Prompt questions might include 2 or 3 of the following:

- What does Leon mean when he uses the word 'revenge'?
- Why does Leon write the word in capitals?
- Why does he appear to reject taking revenge?
- Who might Leon be referring to as the ones who should be convicted and why might that be difficult?
- When Leon says he tried to rebuild his life what can you infer about how challenging that was for him?
- From what you have learned about Leon after the war what did he do to try to prevent the Holocaust happening again
- Why has he added 3 question marks after 'a new life'?

Slide 10: Questions to Consider.

Finally ask students to consider:

'Now that you know what you know and perhaps grasped something of Leon's struggle...

- What title would you give this poem?
- If you were to respond to Leon, what would you say?

Slide 11. Thinking this through at home

Their homework task is shown on this slide:

1. Think of a suitable title to Leon's unfinished poem
2. Respond to the final question Leon poses. This can be done in poem form or in a short letter to him, or simply a statement.
3. Answer the following 2-part question using a mobile phone voice-clip emailed to teacher or in written form:
Is it possible for someone to lead a 'normal' life after something as traumatic as genocide?
What can be drawn from Leon's later life?

Slide 12 (3 mins). Surviving survival: Life and trauma after the Holocaust. Film clip.

Explain to students that during this lesson we have learned much about Leon's struggles to live with the past but also have learned of his outstanding determination not to be beaten down or overwhelmed with bitterness. Indeed, as we have discovered, Leon spent his life trying to fight racism for a there to be a better world. In this final clip Leon speaks of the life he has led:

Play the clip from the USC Shoah Foundation. This is an extract from an interview with Leon filmed in 1995.

Slide 13 End of Presentation/ End of lesson.

We end the lesson with no further discussion but quiet contemplation of Leon's words.

Engaging all learners

Due to their textual nature, some students may encounter difficulties in accessing the Information cards. To counter this, you may find it useful to pair less assured readers with more confident peers. Alternatively, you might provide students with paper copies of the cards and have them highlight either key information and/or words they are unsure about.

Additional Information

Resources checklist

Cards 1-3 initially distributed to students

- Leon's fight
- Leon's later life
- Londoners honour Leon

Card 4 later shared with students

- The struggle of trauma

Card 5

- Leon's unfinished poem

Classroom PowerPoint

Film clip of Leon Greenman

Pedagogical guidance

Some of the content of this lesson could trigger emotional responses or students' memories of their own traumatic past. It is therefore important not to rush the lesson and be alert to any discomfort or distress a student may experience and be ready to respond with care and compassion.

Moral, ethical, and philosophical issues are inseparable from Holocaust education, but in the case of this lesson they are especially pronounced. On the one hand they can be found in the highly personalised nature of the lesson resources, which includes material not originally created for classrooms. On the other there is the actual content itself – the myriad of complex questions it raises, and the very important matters it gestures to, such as hate crime and the issue of Holocaust denial. None of these lend themselves to resolution in the confines of a single lesson, and all require careful handling.

Thoughtful pedagogy is therefore more important than ever in this lesson. It is imperative students feel comfortable in exploring the issues it raises, but that necessary support is provided too. In some instances, this may require clear explicit teacher explanation: for instance, students may or may not be familiar with the British National Party and what it advocates. The classroom is no place to give a platform to extremist politics, and of course it is undesirable to spend valuable curriculum time on such endeavours. Yet the teacher must equally be mindful of not making extremism an object of intrigue by closing down reasonable questions students may have. Teachers will need to use their professional judgement.

Through this lesson students are offered a unique opportunity to engage with very raw material they will have never encountered before; material which raises immensely significant questions.

In keeping with the Centre's educational principles learning is student-centred, with active teacher facilitation where appropriate. A 'read, reflect and respond' approach is evident in various guises throughout.

For those who survived it, the Holocaust did not leave a singular, uniform, legacy. Instead, it impacted the post-war lives of survivors in a variety of different ways. In the case of Leon, we see the all-consuming nature of 'survival' and leads us to form a more complex understanding of it. But it is equally important that students recognise the activist nature of Leon's post-Holocaust life. It could be argued that this was not a man who sat still and was swallowed up by history; his campaigning against fascism and his educational work are evidence of that. Leon was someone who sought to increase knowledge and understanding of the past. Students may want to consider his reasons for his activism as they reflect on what Leon's legacy means for them.

Leon's activism

Up until his death in 2008 Leon Greenman had attended every protest against the growth of the far-right in Britain and when far-right groups were entering mainstream political society in the early 1990s, Leon was at the forefront of the struggle to stop them. In 1993, with the election of a BNP councillor and the murder of Stephen Lawrence, he led the 60,000 "Unity" demonstration to demand the closure of the BNP's headquarters in Welling, south-east London.

Leon toured thousands of schools giving testimony of what happened to him and the murder of his wife and child during the Holocaust. His commitment to a life bearing witness was born out of a pact he had made with God while in Auschwitz that should God help him to survive, Leon would dedicate the rest of his life to telling the world what horrors took place there. The poem included in the teaching materials shows Leon's desperate need to honour his pledge with God. There seems to be an enduring will to live a life worthy of survival.

Acknowledgements

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UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, Gower Street, London, WC1H 0AL

Tel: +44(0)20 7612 6437 **email:** holocaust@ucl.ac.uk **web:** www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education

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