

# *Survivors Speak*

Extracting Lessons from Stories of Survival



## **Theme 1**

Lyonell Fliss: Identity



## **Theme 2**

Gitta Rossi-Zalmans:  
The Journey



## **Theme 3**

Cecilia Boruchowitz:  
Resistance



## **Theme 4**

Ascia Lieberman:  
Role Players

# Introduction

**The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC)** is a place of memory, education, dialogue and lessons for humanity. The JHGC explores the history of genocide in the 20th century with a focus on the case studies of the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. It examines the connections between genocide and contemporary human rights issues, urging visitors to understand the consequences of prejudice, discrimination and othering, so as to prevent the recurrence of mass atrocities and genocide in all its forms.

**The lesson plans** each explore a survivors' personal narrative and encourage students to see the 6 million victims of the Holocaust as individuals. These stories of survival, resilience, hope, luck and courage are from the JHGC publication *Portraits of Survival*. *Vol 1: The Holocaust* available [here](#). Each lesson plan also includes an interactive activity based on the story's key theme to nurture engagement and dialogue in the classroom.



For more information, please visit our website <http://www.jhbholocaust.co.za/>

## THEME 1

# *Lyonell Fliss: Identity*



[Listen to his story](#)

# Activity Starter Pack

- **Objective of Activity:** To understand that our identities are complex, fluid and intricate – but so are everyone else's. This activity explores the dangers of grouping, stereotyping, prejudice and 'othering' – the building blocks of every genocide. We use the story of Lyonell Fliss to unpack how our identities can be manipulated.
- **Goal of Activity:** While unpacking the incredibly difficult choices people were forced to make during the Holocaust, the goal of this activity is not to judge or define what is right or wrong – it is purely to encourage dialogue and critical thinking.
- **Summary of Story:** At 5 years old Lyonell came 2nd in his town's annual competition for the most healthy and beautiful child. Shortly after this happy event – when Romania joined the Axis powers - Lyonell and his family experienced terrifying discrimination at the hands of the same community.
- **Time of Activity:** 30 - 45 minutes
- **What you will need:** While this can be done as a conversational exercise, it is useful to have the following:
  - A large flipchart or whiteboard
  - A marker pen
  - Every child needs a piece of paper/notebook and a pen





# LYONELL FLISS

BORN 1935, ROMANIA

***“I am not a religious person ... [but] I believed he was a messenger of god.”***

Lyonell Fliss was born in Iasi, Romania. His father, Lupo, owned a fabric shop, *The Golden Pomegranate*, in the centre of the city and his mother, Adela, assisted in the shop. They lived comfortably in an apartment and Lyonell recalled spending many hours in the shop mischievously making paper airplanes and launching them at customers.

Iasi was a cultural city with many theatres, museums and universities. Half of the population was Jewish, and they were involved in all facets of cultural and economic life. Although Lyonell was an only child, he was part of a large, warm extended family and had a happy childhood. His earliest memory was of an outing to the countryside with aunts, uncles and cousins all travelling on a large cart pulled by two horses. They visited an uncle who worked on a nearby vineyard and he remembered spending many happy hours playing with his cousins.



# CEI MAI FRUMOȘI COPII DIN IASI

Rezultatul concursului organizat sub patronajul revistei „Realitatea Ilustrată”.

**D**UMINICĂ 12 Iunie crt. a avut loc la Parcul Regele Carol II din Iași, serbarea Asociației Funcționarilor Judecătorești din Circ. Curtii de Apel, Iași, serbare dată sub patronajul revistei „Realitatea Ilustrată”. În cadrul acestei serbări, care s'a bucurat de un succes deplin, s'a ținut și un concurs, la care au fost premiați cei mai sănătoși și mai frumoși copii din Iași.

Au fost premiați următorii copii: **CATEGORIA I-a, până la 2 ani:** premiul I, Rodica Popovici, premiul II, Lydia Oberhoffer; premiul III, Marica Segel; premiul IV, Doinița Dobrovici. **CATEGORIA II-a, de la 2 la 6 ani:** premiul I, Angela Orășanu și Nușa Gavrilăscu; premiul II, Dumitru Tudoran, și Fliss Lionel; premiul III, Lică Nestor și Adrian Grișnic; premiul IV, Monica Costin. **CATEGORIA III-a, de la 6 la 13 ani:** premiul I, Irina Iamandi; premiul II, Miorica Iamandi și Violette Dardală; premiul III, Violette Gheorghiu și Lulu Bercovici; premiul IV, Rosica Rahmil.

Un grup de concurente de la 6 ani în sus.

Concurenții și concurente de la 2 la 6 ani.

Un grup de concurente, până la doi ani.



Every year in the middle of summer, a competition was held to find the most beautiful and healthy children in Iasi. There were always hundreds of children accompanied by their proud parents. When Lyonell was about five years old, he came second in this competition, winning a prize and having his photo printed in the local newspaper. The last happy memory that he had of his childhood was being chosen as the runner-up in the Mr Iasi competition.

Romania already had a history of antisemitism, but the situation became worse when it joined Nazi Germany as part of the Axis Powers in 1941. Iasi was about 20 kilometres away from the Russian border and as German and Romanian troops prepared for the invasion of the Soviet Union, his parents grew more and more concerned.

On 28 June 1941, the caretaker of their apartment building threatened to target their family. Luckily, Lyonell's mother saved them by insisting that they all hide under their beds when they heard banging on their door. The caretaker broke the door down but seeing that nobody was there, he helped himself to their precious possessions and left. Later, German soldiers were searching all the Jewish homes and found the Fliss family hiding under their beds. They were forcibly removed from the apartment and Lyonell's mother broke her leg when a soldier pushed her down the stairs.



The Fliss family were then ordered to join a line of Jews outside the central police station. The queue moved forward very slowly and while they waited, they heard gunshots and saw piles of dead bodies. Lyonell's mother spotted a kindly looking young Romanian soldier and begged him to take Lyonell and adopt him. He told her not to worry, that he would protect them. He then took all three of them to the back of the line, by which time the shooting had stopped and they were released. They could not go back to their own apartment as they were scared of the caretaker, so they joined other family members who had gathered at Lyonell's grandmother's home. Over 13 000 Jews were massacred in the Iasi pogrom that day. Lyonell's relatives were among the thousands of Jews rounded up and packed into freight cars and vans. Those 'death trains' were sealed and moved back and forth between railway stations and 2 650 people died of suffocation or thirst, while others lost their sanity.



Although the killings stopped, life continued to be very dangerous for the Fliss family and, like all in the Jewish community, they had to wear an identifying yellow star. Lyonell remembered being six years old, seeing other children going to school and asking his mother when he would also start school. She had to tell him that he could not go to school because he was Jewish. **"It was the first time that I was told that I am Jewish"**, he recalled. The family moved to a small house near a synagogue, where classes were held for the Jewish children. Although the family had suffered losses, including the death of Lyonell's great-grandmother, he felt very protected by his parents and was unaware of any immediate danger.

CENTRALA EVREILÓR DIN ROMÂNIA  
RECENSĂMÂNTUL PENTRU LOCUITORII AVÂND SANGE EVREESC  
CONF. DECRET-LEGE Nr. 3.416, PUBLICAT IN MONITORUL OFICIAL Nr. 299/1941

ACT DE IDENTITATE  
56.985/1942  
Biserica Copu lahe  
Jasi

ADEVERINȚA Nr. 893

S'A PRIMIT DE NOI, COMPLETATĂ, FOAIA DE RECENSĂMÂNT  
A DECLARANTULUI Flis Lionel

DOMICILIAT ÎN Jasi, STR. Sf. Teodor

Nr. 22

SEMNAȚĂ DE: { SUSNUMITUL  
PĂRINTELE  
TUTORELE

Mama Flis

Jasi

LA DATA DE 26 Iunie 1942



Towards the end of the war, Iasi was bombed daily by the Allies and many families, including Lyonell's extended family decided to flee to Bucharest, the capital of Romania. There they lived in his uncle's small apartment.

After the war ended, the Fliss family stayed in Bucharest, where Lyonell finished school and went on to study civil engineering at the university. In the late 1950s he met and married his wife, Liliana, and they decided to escape the Iron Curtain. After a difficult journey, they arrived in Israel where they lived for six years before moving to Johannesburg for work.

In 2011, Lyonell returned to Iasi for the 70<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the Iasi Massacre where he met, among others, the German ambassador. He told him of his 'guardian angel', the Romanian soldier who risked his own life to save the lives of three Jews.

*"I am not a religious person ... [but] I believed he was a messenger of god impersonated in a Romanian officer, a Romanian soul".*

# Activity: The Question of Identity

- Discuss the idea of “identity” as a class - make a list of the aspects that make up our identity so everyone can see them. For example race, religion, age, gender and so on.
- Challenge the students to identify what makes “you” you? Highlight the fact that some parts of these elements of our identity can be changed – others we are born with.
- After this initial discussion, ask the learners to write down three words on a piece of paper – three words illustrating parts of their unique identity.
- You can ask the students to share these 3 words. Discuss what parts are the same, does anyone have the exact same 3 words on their lists?
- Ask them to cross one of these words off their list.
- Then get them to cross one more word off their list.
- Until one word is left.



# Discussion and Extension

- **Points for discussion:**
  - How did this activity make them feel – was this easy or difficult?
  - Is this one part of their identity all anyone needs to know about them?
  - Is it something they can change?
  - Link back to Lyonell’s story – Lyonell went from being “beautiful” to being the opposite just because of one part of his identity – one part he couldn’t change.
  - What is the danger of not seeing more than one part of someone? How does this lead to stereotyping, prejudice and 'othering' – the building blocks of every genocide.
  - Why is a discussion about identity important when dealing with the topic of the Holocaust?
- **Extension Activity:** Ask your students to trace their family tree and/or interview their oldest living relative. Get the student to identify what parts of their identities are the same and what parts are different to these family members?