

# *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 2

# *Gitta Rossi-Zalmons: The Journey*



[Listen to  
her story](#)

# Activity Starter Pack

- **Objective of Activity:** To understand that the strength to survive isn't only physical. This activity encourages the learners to identify the possessions in their lives that give them the strength to face adversity. We use the story of Gitta to unpack the difficult choices families had to make in order to try to survive the Holocaust.
- **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:** After Kristallnacht in 1938 and her father's arrest, Gitta's mother had to make the incredibly difficult decision to send her children to England on the Kindertransport.
- **Time of Activity:** 30 - 45 minutes
- **This activity needs to be conducted in two parts** - the first part needs to take place before Gitta's story is shared with the students.
- **What you will need:** While this can be done as a conversational exercise, it is useful to have the following:
  - A selection of old magazines, scissors and glue
  - Coloured pens and pencils (the students can draw the items)
  - Blank paper or suitcase worksheet (included) for each child



**WHAT WOULD YOU PACK?**



**BRIGITTE  
ROSSI-ZALMONS**

**BORN 1927, GERMANY**

***“I feel very cheated out of never having had a mother when I needed her most.”***

Brigitte (Gitta) Rossi-Zalmons (née Markes) was born in Hattingen, Germany. Her father was a dentist and a proud German who was awarded an Iron Cross after WWI. Gitta lived in a large house next to the town’s synagogue with her parents and brother, Hans-Joachim, who was two years older than her. She was a mischievous, fun-loving girl and had many friends. Her best friend was Leonie, and Gitta later named her daughter after this special friend.

Gitta recalled her first day of school walking proudly with her *Schultüte*, a traditional bag of sweets given to German children to ‘sweeten’ their first day of school. It was September 1933 and Adolf Hitler and the Nazis had already come to power in January of that year: ***“On the way home from school I saw the brother of a friend of mine and I rushed up to him and I said, ‘Please, don’t you want a sweet’. He, in full uniform, clicked his heels and said, ‘Not from you’. I will never forget that answer and I realised for the first time this was going to be the new politics of our little town.”*** While Gitta was aware of rising antisemitism and experienced incidents of children throwing stones at her, she generally did well at school and made friends.





When Kristallnacht happened on 9 November 1938, Gitta was just 11 years old. Her family's home was ransacked and her father's dentist practice was totally destroyed. The following morning her father was arrested and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. Gitta's mother took the children to their old nanny, Elna, and asked her to look after them. After a couple of weeks a neighbour threatened to report Elna for harbouring Jews, and the children were returned home. It was then that her mother made the very difficult decision to send Gitta and Hans-Joachim on the Kindertransport to England.

***“Babies, that is what we were. The babies of our wise old parents. But even then our parents were not sure of what to do. They did their best ... that's all a parent can do. They were courageous enough or maybe frightened enough, to send their children away, alone.”***

Gitta and Hans-Joachim travelled by train to the Netherlands and then on to England by ship. They arrived in London and were taken to Dovercourt Refugee Camp in Essex where they lived with all the other children that had not been taken into homes. Gitta was offered a place in a private home but she wouldn't be parted from her brother. She recalled that ***“when a priest gave me a doll and offered to adopt me but not my brother, I flatly refused. The priest took the doll away and gave it to someone else.”***



Gitta was very happy at Dovercourt and was interviewed by the BBC with other refugee children for a programme called “Children in Flight”. The broadcast was heard by her parents in Germany who were very proud of her. She was also able to receive letters from her mother who always wanted to know how the children were and whether they were warm enough. Although the letters were heavily censored, she was relieved to learn that her father had been released from Dachau. These letters from Germany aroused the suspicion of the British police who wanted to know why she was corresponding with the ‘enemy’. Gitta very indignantly told the policeman that she was related to Mr Marks from Marks & Spencer and that she would report them to her ‘uncle’. She was never bothered by the police again although she admitted that she didn’t even know if such a Mr Marks existed!

Later Gitta was sent to a nearby boarding school, Bunce Court, staying there until she was 14 years old. She was then offered a position at a nearby children’s nursery and after two years she obtained her diploma and qualified as a nurse. She moved to Birmingham, where she had cousins, and worked in the hospital. Her brother joined the army and served in France. Sadly, her father and mother were taken to the Theresienstadt ghetto and then to the Auschwitz concentration camp where they were murdered. Hans-Joachim married after the war and stayed in England; he had one son.

After the war, Gitta met her first husband, Eddy, a refugee from Berlin; she was only 17 years old. They decided to emigrate to South Africa, got married in Johannesburg and had a son and two daughters. ***“I now have children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. So you see, Hitler did not altogether succeed.”***

Gitta had an active life, sharing her story with school children and charity organisations in Johannesburg until she died in 2016. She traveled back to Germany three times and attended a reunion of the Kindertransport children in Israel. Despite all this, she still struggled with the decision that her mother made over 80 years ago. ***“I have learnt how to forgive but still feel very cheated out of never having had a mother when I needed her most.”***



# Activity: The Suitcase

- Prior to reading Gitta's story, ask your students to imagine that they are going on a journey - they don't know where they are going, or for how long. They need to pack a suitcase.
  - What would they pack? The items can be drawn or listed on the worksheet provided.
  - Ask students to share what they have packed and why.
- Now examine Gitta's story and the role of the Kindertransport. Discuss the choices made by Gitta and her mother. What were the repercussions of decisions made by families during these difficult times?
- Ask the students to relook at their worksheets – would they change or add to the items in the suitcase?
- **Points for discussion:**
  - How do the items packed help create a sense of security, home, connection, hope etc.
  - Emphasize the fact that survival is not only physical.
- **Extension Activity:** Ask your students to explore artifacts/possessions/heirlooms that have been handed down over the generations. Get them to bring a photo or a description of this to school so that they can share with the class why this item means so much to their family.