

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 are stories of survival, resilience, hope, luck and courage and 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 3

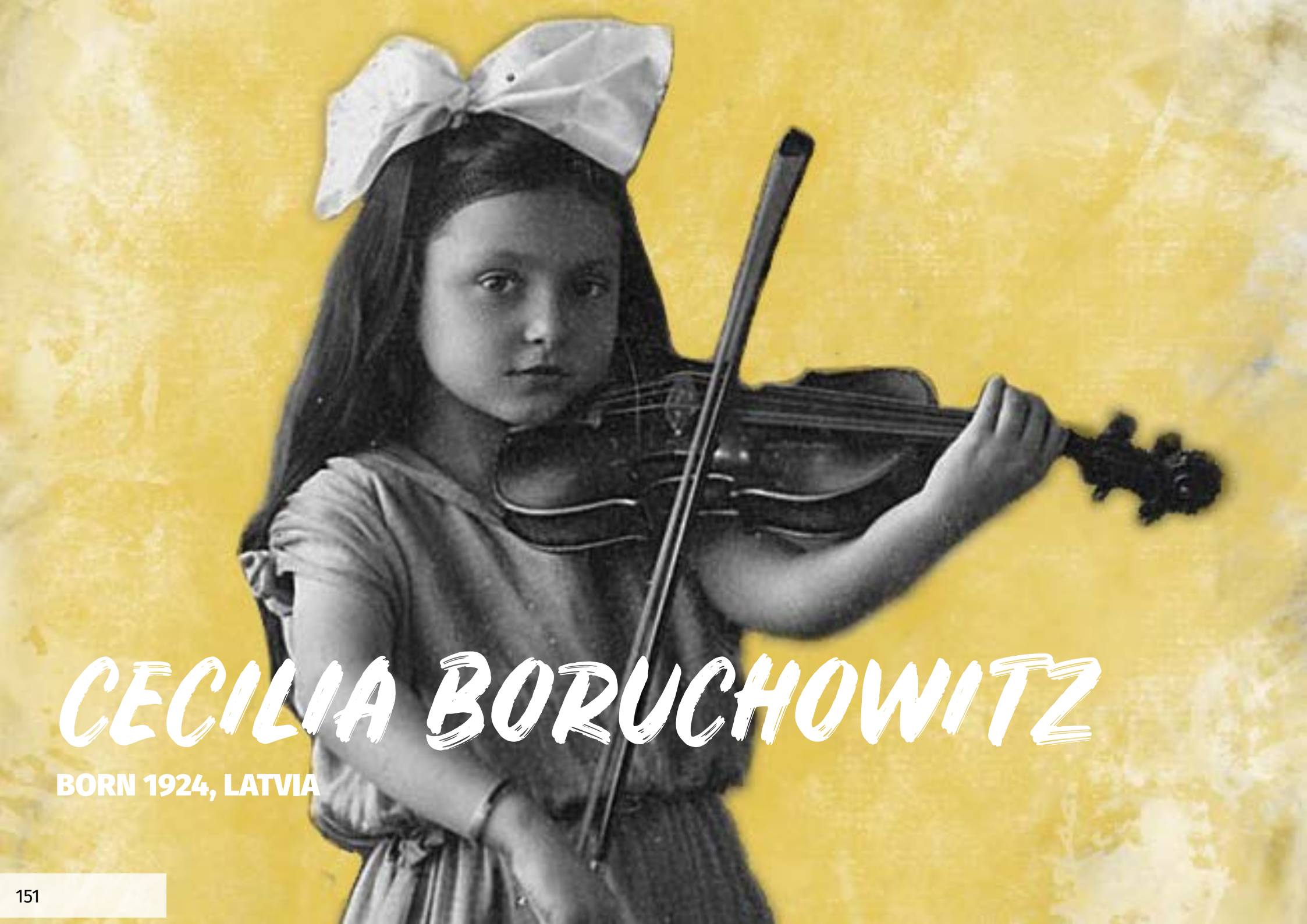
Cecilia Boruchowitz: Everyday Resistance



[Listen to her story](#)

Activity Starter Pack

- **Objective of Activity:** To understand the varied forms that resistance can take.
- **Summary of Story:** After a failed rescue attempt, Cecilia and her sister made the decision to go to the Vilna ghetto. We use Cecilia's story to illustrate that resistance is not only loud and violent, but it can also be a simple everyday personal action.
- **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.
- **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 if you would like it to be a 'silent conversation' (explained in the activity worksheet):
 - A1 (large) piece of paper – 1 for each group
 - Coloured pens and pencils



CECILIA BORUCHOWITZ

BORN 1924, LATVIA

“All the nations have got good people and bad people.”

Cecilia Boruchowitz (née Gradis) was born in Dvinsk (Daugavpils), Latvia. She had two older sisters, Elizabeth and Nadia. They lived in comfort with their parents and were a musical family. Cecilia remembered that her parents, particularly her father, liked to entertain guests. ***“He was so proud that his daughters could play the violin and speak three languages. I was the little one and so everybody liked me and used to give me chocolates.”*** They spoke Russian, Latvian and German. Cecilia attended a Latvian junior school in Dvinsk and later went to live with her aunt and uncle in Riga where she attended a private Latvian school and also studied to play the violin at the Conservatoire under Professor Metz. She had a very happy and active life.

Once the Soviet Union occupied Latvia in 1940, life became very difficult. Cecilia returned to her family in Dvinsk just a week before the Germans occupied Latvia in June and July 1941. Soon after her return, all the Jews in the town were rounded up and taken to the local synagogue where Cecilia and her sister, Nadia were separated from the rest of their family. That was the last time they saw their mother, father and sister, Elisabeth, who were all murdered in the Holocaust.



Cecilia and Nadia begged a nearby guard to let them escape and somehow managed to get away. Taking off their yellow stars they went to the home of Professor Metz, Cecilia's Christian music teacher who agreed to hide them for several months. He even arranged forged Latvian passports for them but when they went to collect the passports, they were recognised, arrested and jailed for a week. Fortunately, Professor Metz had good connections and managed to get them released. They then hid in various people's homes until they secured train tickets to Vilna (Vilnius), Lithuania.

When Cecilia and Nadia arrived in Vilna, they first stayed with local peasants and then with a Polish woman who was very kind to them. However, Cecilia decided that she would rather live and suffer with Jews, and so they moved to the Vilna ghetto. She joined the ghetto's Symphony Orchestra and worked in the hospital as a cleaner. She remembered playing ***"in the evenings when people were exhausted, hungry ... I played some solo, I played with the orchestra. I played also [for] the policemen."***

Cecilia and Nadia managed to escape to Vienna, Austria, just before the Vilna ghetto was liquidated. They lived there as Roman Catholics and Cecilia joined the Vienna Orchestra. She was even offered an audition for the prestigious Radio Orchestra. However, when she went for the audition, she saw another Latvian musician who would recognise her as a Jew and ran away.

After liberation, it became very difficult for Cecilia and Nadia to live in Vienna, and they travelled first to Hungary and later to Italy, where they were helped by the Jewish relief organisation, the American Joint Distribution Committee. They gifted Cecilia with a violin, which was recovered by American forces from among looted valuables taken by the Nazis. The violin's former owner was most likely murdered in the Holocaust. This gift made it possible for her to study violin at the Santa Cecilia Music Academy in Rome.

Cecilia's experience during the Holocaust exposed her to both the kindness and cruelty of human-kind. She poignantly surmised from this ***“that all the nations have got good people and bad people ... there were good people and bad people also in Latvia.”***

While studying in Rome, Cecilia met her future husband Salomon, a survivor from Lithuania. After they got married, they moved to South Africa in 1949 and had three children. Cecilia played the violin for the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra for many years.

Today, Cecilia's violin has found its home in the permanent exhibition of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre. Cecilia's teenaged great-grandsons, Jacob and Joshua, were moved to see her violin and story shared with the public. Joshua spoke about the privilege of having heard her testimony first hand and said that hearing ***"about her survival during the Holocaust has made me, a fourth-generation survivor, a witness to her story."*** Cecilia's violin forms a tangible connection with her story and the varied human responses to the horrors of the Holocaust that it holds. Joshua believed that his ***"great-grandmother's story of ultimate resilience will go a long way to ensure that her legacy as my Holocaust heroine lives on forever."***



Cecilia Boruchowitz's (née Gradis) Violin

Cecilia's violin was made by Josef Klotz in Mittenwald, Czechoslovakia in 1932. It was recovered by American liberating forces from amongst looted valuables.



Wedding Photo of Cecilia

Activity: Everyday Resistance

- Divide students into groups of around 5 people per group. Each group has a big piece of paper and each student has something to write with.
- **Silent Conversation***: Keeping in mind the harsh living conditions of the ghettos – especially for children – get the group to critically discuss and debate the following:
 - Why do you think Cecilia played the violin in the ghetto?
 - Did her actions only benefit her?
 - If you had the opportunity to sneak out of the ghetto (which was forbidden) and steal food for your family, would you do it and why?
- Allow time for groups to report back to the class and encourage a broader discussion. These pages can also be displayed in the classroom to encourage an ongoing conversation.
- **Extension Activity**: Ask your students to research other examples of everyday acts of resistance that took place during the Holocaust.

** Students silently write their point of view – prompted by the questions above – on the large piece of paper. Once they have each expressed their opinions, they can choose to agree or disagree with the thoughts of the other group members. This ‘conversation’ takes place in silence and ensures that everyone has a chance to express their views.*