

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 4

Ascia Lieberman: Role Players



[Listen to her story](#)

Activity Starter Pack

- **Objective of Activity:** Understanding that the Holocaust took place in full view of the world. Some people chose to resist, while others collaborated or were bystanders...this is a story of rescue. We use the story of Ascia Lieberman to unpack the choices made by ordinary people during the Holocaust.
- **Summary of Story:** Ascia, two of her siblings and her father survived the Holocaust because Juozas Markevičius made the choice to hide them despite putting himself and his family in danger.
- **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:** This activity can be done as a conversational exercise.

ASCIA LIEBERMAN

BORN 1934, LITHUANIA



“[He] was like an angel. He looked after us. He did whatever he could.”

Ascia Lieberman (née Kushner) was born in Subačius, Lithuania. She lived in a double storey house with her parents, two older sisters, Mina and Sonja, and a younger brother, Joseph. She recalled a very happy childhood until the war started and described playing in the garden and looking for wild mushrooms and cherries. ***“I was looking for my own adventures.”***

When the Soviets occupied Lithuania in 1940, Ascia’s father’s business was confiscated without compensation and the family was told that they would be sent to Siberia. Two weeks before their departure, Germany invaded Lithuania and while many other families fled to Russia, her father believed that, as had occurred in WWI, they would be well-treated by the Germans and so they stayed put.

However, as the Germans began bombing Subačius, Ascia and her family took refuge with a Lithuanian family outside of the town. Their hosts were initially very friendly until they heard the instruction, ***“Juden raus! (Jews out)”***, broadcast on the radio. They were no longer welcome and had to go back home. During this time, the Nazis and their local collaborators rounded up many Jews, including young children and old people, and marched them through the streets into the forest where they were shot into mass graves.



Ascia's father made himself invaluable to the German officers by fixing the radio stations and supplying homemade wine. This would save their lives for a time. Ascia and her family still had to move into the ghetto though, where they shared accommodation and the little food available with other families. Her father was sent to work in a wool factory.

One evening there was a commotion as the word spread of the ghetto's imminent liquidation: ***"Tonight they are going to kill us all, they are going to liquidate the ghetto."*** In the ensuing panic and confusion, Ascia and her brother were separated from the rest of their family. Unknown to them, their mother and eldest sister were murdered by Lithuanian collaborators, and their bodies dumped in a mass grave.



Ascia and Joseph made their way to their father's factory. There they ran into the local chemist's wife who took them to her house, where their father and sister were already hiding. The four Kushners then made their way across the fields in the deep snow to the farm of Juozas Markevičius to seek shelter. Juozas created a space in his barn where they could hide in safety. Ascia emotionally recalled that he ***"was like an angel. He looked after us. He did whatever he could."***

The barn was filled with hay from floor to ceiling, into which a small hiding place was made. There was just enough room for them to sit or lie down and no daylight. They had a small paraffin lamp which they had to be very careful with so that the hay didn't catch fire. They had a bucket to use as a toilet and Juozas brought them what little food he could get. Ascia recalled that there were ***"some days we had no food at all as he couldn't steal from his wife because a woman notices what is in her home, in her kitchen ... She couldn't know that we were there."*** They hid like this for nearly three years.

In 1943, when they could no longer tolerate the harsh conditions, the Kushners decided to join a group of Jewish labourers who were building a house for the Nazi authorities. The overseer of the group allowed the family to join without registration. However, after a short time, the Nazis announced that all the Jews of Lithuania were to be deported. Her family realised that deportation meant death and they escaped once again to the Markevičius family, bringing with them three other Jewish labourers. They eventually decided it would be safer to separate; Sonja went to stay in a monastery and Ascia moved to another farm, pretending to be a Lithuanian orphan. She worked as a herd girl, looking after pigs and a cow.

Ascia lost contact with her family during this time but after liberation managed to reunite with her father. They travelled together through Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, never staying long in any one town. Once they reached Hungary, they joined a group of Jewish refugees and walked through the Alps to Austria. She remembered seeing the sun rising as they entered Austria: ***“It was safe and everyone just lay down, they were exhausted, they lay down at the edge of the mountain.”*** After a short stay, they were taken to a displaced persons camp in Italy.

Sonja had also survived in hiding and would later immigrate to Israel with her fiancé. The rest of the family immigrated to South Africa to join an aunt in Durban. Once Ascia completed her education, she too managed to get a job in Durban. She married and had three children and grandchildren and lived for many years in Johannesburg.

In 1991, Yad Vashem recognised Juozas and Elena Markevičius, their sons, Jonas, Romualdas and Vladas, and their daughters, Marijona Rytmetienė and Valerija Stanevičienė, as Righteous Among the Nations.

Ascia vividly remembered her traumatic experiences during the Holocaust, yet she always tried to hold on to the beauty and light of her childhood with her family.

“When I close my eyes and cast my mind back, a long long time ago as if in a dream, I see green fields filled with wild flowers, butterflies hopping from flower to flower, and the breeze is swaying them from side to side as if inviting: ‘Come and dance with me’ and I danced among the butterflies with a handful of flowers for my mother.”



Activity: Role Players

** This activity will explore the following roles: Upstander, Bystander, Perpetrator, Resister and Victim (definitions available on the next page) and will discuss the consequences of these choices for the victims.*

- Begin by asking your students to think of a situation where they saw or heard something and knew it was wrong, but they decided not to act. Ask them to share their reasons for NOT acting? They might mention a number of reasons from "it had nothing to do with me" to "I was in a rush to get to class". Actively listen to these answers.
- Next ask them to think of another situation. This time they saw or heard something and knew it was wrong, but they chose to act. Ask them to explain *why* they chose to act? The answers may be "I knew the victim" or "the same thing had happened to me". Actively listen to these answers.
- Explain to the students that in the first instance they were bystanders – they watched something bad happen and made the choice not to act. In the second instance the students were upstanders – they made the choice to stand up and speak out about something they knew was wrong.

Discussion and Extension

- **Points for discussion:**
 - Who are you helping or empowering if you are a bystander? The students might initially say that they were helping nobody, or just helping themselves. It is important to challenge this idea – by not acting, a bystander allows the perpetrator to continue with their misdeeds, thus enabling or even encouraging the perpetrator. The decision *not to act* can have catastrophic consequences.
 - Ascia and members of her family survived the Holocaust because Juozas Markevičius decided to be an upstander – what risks do you think he faced making this choice as a Lithuanian farmer?
 - Discuss the role of his wife – you will find that some choices are not always easy to define.
 - What are some "upstander" acts you could adopt in your life to make the world around you a better place?
- **Extension Activity:** Ask students to research another example of an upstander during the Holocaust

Definitions

- **Perpetrator:** Somebody who deliberately harms or causes harm to another person
- **Upstander:** A person who stands up to injustices
- **Bystander:** A person who sits on the sidelines while injustices are being perpetrated
- **Victim:** A person who is verbally, physically or psychologically abused