



VERA'S JOURNEY

INTRODUCTION

This lesson studies the largest organised response to the refugee crisis of the 1930s – the Kindertransport programme – through the experiences of one Czech Jewish girl, Vera Löwyová (now Schaufeld). Having studied the persecution which prompted some Jews to take the difficult decision to leave their homes in the preceding *Impossible Choices* lesson, students can thus progress to examine the reality of life as a refugee, a theme with enduring relevance.

Through study of the Kindertransport, the lesson also introduces students to an aspect of British history with which many will be unfamiliar. Britain's relationship to Nazism and the Holocaust is often overlooked, since the UK was one of the very few countries in Europe never to have been allied to or occupied by the Third Reich. However, it is important for students to understand that, as a European country with a long tradition of immigration, Britain was inevitably affected by the anti-Jewish policies of Hitler's regime.

The Kindertransport is often presented as a redemptive story, enabling Britain to take pride in the fact that it opened its doors to save the most helpless of Hitler's potential victims; this lesson enables students to take a more nuanced view, offering insight into the challenges faced by child refugees.

RESOURCES

The lesson makes use of the following materials:

- *Vera's Journey* PowerPoint.
- *Vera's Early Life* worksheet.
- *Vera's Journey* cards: this resource consists of 12 double-sided A4 cards. The reverse of each card carries a quotation from Vera's testimony, telling a part of her story; the front carries a relevant image or images.

Post-it notes will also be needed for the main activity.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Nazi persecution in the 1930s prompted increasing numbers of German (and, from 1938, Austrian) Jews to seek refuge in other countries. Many looked to neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands or France whilst others hoped to find shelter beyond Europe, notably in the United States and British-controlled Palestine. Nonetheless, there were many German and Austrian Jews who tried to come to Britain, due to its liberal reputation which derived, in part, from its historic 'open door' immigration policy.

However, large-scale immigration to Britain by Jews fleeing persecution and poverty in the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century had been met with growing antisemitism. This had led to the passage of the 1905 Aliens Act, effectively Britain's first immigration law, which dramatically restricted the right to enter the UK. This legislative framework, and the prejudice which underpinned it, remained a significant barrier to immigration in the 1930s. In addition, the mass unemployment which characterised the interwar years (even before the onset of the Depression) further encouraged anti-immigrant sentiment.

Like other democracies, Britain therefore proved reluctant to allow Jewish refugees to enter in large numbers, despite increasing evidence of the injustices they were suffering in Germany. As seen in the *Impossible Choices* lesson, it was only after the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938 that policy was relaxed to some extent, with the government agreeing to a proposal from Jewish and Quaker welfare agencies that children under 17 could be admitted to the UK. However, there remained restrictions: the children, with only a few exceptions, could not be accompanied by their parents, they had to be sponsored by welfare agencies who would pay a £50 bond as security that the children would not be a burden to the public finances, and they were only expected to stay in Britain temporarily prior to future emigration. The outbreak of war meant that, in reality, many remained in the UK.

This programme – known as the Kindertransport – began in December 1938 and brought approximately 9,500 mostly Jewish children to Britain until the outbreak of war in September 1939 ended the transports. Most of the refugees came from Germany and Austria but the scheme expanded in early 1939 to include children from Czechoslovakia, initially refugees from the Sudetenland region, which had been occupied by Germany under the terms of the Munich Agreement of September 1938, and then from the country as a whole following its invasion by Germany in March 1939.

The story of the Kindertransport is in many respects deeply heartwarming. Most obviously, the children were saved from almost certain death, although none of those involved could have known this at the time. Many children were, like Vera, taken in by loving foster families who cared for them for far longer than they might originally have anticipated. A large proportion of the children stayed in Britain after the war and built new lives and families.

However, it is important for students to realise that life as a refugee was challenging, especially for unaccompanied children. Like generations of immigrants before them, the Kinder had to adapt to an unfamiliar culture and, in most cases, to learn a new language. Unlike most immigrants, they had to do so without their families, a point which raises questions about why Britain did not allow the parents to be admitted. This sense of separation was exacerbated by the outbreak of the war which brought, in most cases, a cessation of contact and, increasingly, concern over the fate of parents and other relatives stranded in Nazi-occupied Europe. Most of the Kinder, like Vera, never saw their parents again.

This lesson does not address some of the more traumatic issues surrounding the Kindertransport, which are more appropriate for secondary school. Nonetheless, it enables students to appreciate the complexity of the refugee experience. The fact that Vera was a similar age to the students when she came to the UK should help to encourage comprehension.

LESSON PLAN

Aims

To understand and reflect on the meaning of the term 'refugee'

To explore the reality of life as a refugee

To develop skills of source analysis and interpretation, using images and testimony

Starter

Ask students, individually and then in pairs, to define the word 'refugee'. Collect feedback from the class. This will provide a useful opportunity to dispel any misconceptions which may exist: if necessary, explain the differences between refugees and economic migrants

Show the class the photograph of Vera in the PowerPoint title slide and begin the lesson by telling them that they will be finding out about the life of this individual. Explain that when she was only nine years old (only a year younger than many of the students), she made a very important journey.

Show students slide 2 in the PowerPoint, which shows Vera (on the left) with her friend Jana on holiday in Knokke, Belgium, in 1936. Ask the group:

- *What can we learn about Vera just by looking at this photograph?*

Take a selection of responses. As with most of the images used in the introductory *Pre-war Jewish Life* lesson, this is a familiar childhood scene with which many students will identify. This reinforces that lesson's emphasis on the humanity of those who would become victims of Nazi persecution.

Activity 1

Divide the class into small groups. Give each group a copy of the *Vera's Early Life* worksheet and of the *first three* of the *Vera's Journey* cards. Ask the groups to complete a mind map on the worksheet, using the images and text on the cards to record as many facts as they can find on Vera's early childhood.

Take feedback from each group about Vera's early life. Themes which should arise include family, school, leisure and holidays, and even misbehaviour – in short, a normal childhood.

Take a selection of responses to the following question:

- *If you could use only one word, how would you describe Vera's early childhood?* Words such as 'happy' or 'fun' are likely to be frequent responses.

These discussions can help to frame the subsequent activity by enabling students to appreciate how much of an emotional wrench leaving home and family would be.

Activity 2

Use slides 4-5 to highlight the location of Czechoslovakia, noting its proximity to Germany. Explain that in March 1939 Czechoslovakia was invaded by Nazi Germany which meant that Jewish people like Vera and her family were now in danger.

Provide each group with a set of the remaining nine cards, which have been mixed up in advance, and Post-it notes. First ask the groups to sequence the cards into the correct order so that they describe Vera's journey from the moment she was told she was leaving to her life after the war.

Then ask them to jot down words on Post-It notes to describe how they think Vera may have been feeling at different stages in the journey, and to add the Post-Its to the cards they describe. In particular, ask the groups to consider the following questions:

- *What do you think was the easiest part of the journey for Vera?*
- *What do you think was the most difficult part?*

Take feedback, first ensuring that all groups have the cards in the correct order. The images from all of the relevant cards (i.e. cards 4-12) are contained in the PowerPoint (slides 8-16) to structure the feedback. (Alternatively, the teacher may wish to check chronology and facilitate discussion by having a washing line stretched across the classroom and then asking one group to place the first card on the line, another group the second, and so on, in which case they may choose not to use the slides.)

Feedback should focus on the different stages of the journey, as below.

- Preparing for departure (cards 4-5 / slides 8-9): the most obvious issue to consider here is how Vera might have felt when she was told that she was going away on her own. Links should be made back to her happy childhood memories in the first activity.

The gifts given by her nanny and boyfriend can also be discussed: why might they have chosen these gifts? Perhaps the likeliest answer is to remember them by, although the rosary beads may also be seen as a good luck token. If necessary, explain to students that rosary beads are associated with Catholicism – the fact that Vera had a Catholic nanny could invite discussion of Jewish-Christian relations in Czechoslovakia. Students might also consider what they might choose to give to someone special to them if that person had to go away and why it is important to have something to remember someone by.

This also raises the question of what other items Vera might have brought with her, both reminders of home and practical necessities, and what she might have had to leave behind.

- The journey (cards 6-8 / slides 10-12): the class should consider how Vera might have felt about leaving her parents and also think about the challenges she might have faced on the journey. What, for example, might she have missed most about Czechoslovakia? How might travelling with her aunt and uncle and the gift of the doll from her parents' Dutch friends have helped her to cope with the journey?

The arrival at Liverpool Street and the commencement of a new journey can prompt discussion of the conflicting emotions felt in a new, bewildering situation.

- Life in Britain (cards 9-11 / slides 13-15): students should consider the challenges Vera faced in Britain. They can discuss what would have been similar and what different. What would have been the biggest change for her and why? The text on card 9 might plausibly be used to suggest that issues such as food and language were the greatest difficulties. On the other hand, card 11 reminds us that Vera was separated from her family.

This can in turn encourage discussion of the fact that Vera was living with a family that wasn't her own, both in terms of the challenges that this might have presented but also the importance of the commitment made by her foster family, especially as it proved to be a far longer-term one than they had anticipated.

- Life after the war (card 12 / slide 16): students should consider how Vera tried to rebuild her life after learning of the loss of her parents. Starting a new family is clearly a significant element here. At the same time, students can also discuss the factors which had enabled Vera to deal with all of the challenges she had faced since the beginning of her journey. In addition to her own courage and resilience, a major theme from several of the cards is the kindness of others, whether the gifts from her boyfriend, nanny and the Dutch friends of her parents or the long-term love and stability provided by her foster family. This, like the earlier kindness of the Dutch friends of Vera's parents, highlights the significance of the actions of individuals and families in helping the child refugees, a point which will be returned to in greater depth in the following *What Makes a Hero?* lesson.

Plenary

Ask students to return to their definitions of the word 'refugee' from the starter and review them in the light of what they have learned. Would they change their definitions now? Encourage them to discuss the positives and negatives of the refugee experience, and remind them that Vera was only one of almost 10,000 children who came to Britain in the Kindertransport.

IMAGE CREDITS

All images © Vera Schaufeld, except:

Card 1, left: copyright unknown

Card 5, both images: © National Holocaust Centre

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BCM Box 7892, London WC1N 3XX
T. 020 7222 6822 F. 020 7233 0161
E. info@het.org.uk
www.het.org.uk