

HOLOCAUST SHEET 3 for older visitors

Read the article. There are related questions and discussion points on the next page.

What can the stories teach us about the Holocaust?

Not all the stories deal with the Holocaust, nor do they all show the Jewish people as victims. What they do reflect are common experiences of immigration, struggling to settle in a new country and the journey towards generally harmonious integration and co-existence.

However, there are always reminders that the Jewish community can never be complacent about its security in the diaspora. Permanence can be an illusion.

It is important to remember that Jews have frequently been forced to flee their homeland as refugees, driven away by persecution. Anti-Semitism is the ghost that stalks many of the stories. The Russian pogroms led to a significant migration, a mass exodus, of Jewish refugees. Some fifty years later, this was followed by the Nazis' systematic persecution of the Jews, the most obvious and terrifying manifestation of a barbaric form of racism. Anti-Semitism is not necessarily always so extreme and blatant. The lessons of the past and today's troubling, rumbling aftershocks must neither be forgotten nor ignored.

The Holocaust references in this exhibition are deliberately understated. Visitors are invited to look beyond the obvious stereotypes of victimhood and see the community as socially diverse and varied. However it is clear that these stories, images and objects are often loaded with deeper, wider significance and symbolism.

For example, the tattoo, now preserved in a display case, perpetuates the memory of the traumatic events of Nazi persecution. The tattoo is just one of the countless shameful aspects of the Holocaust. It represents the de-humanization of a minority group, the industrialisation of terror. The tattoo is part of the Holocaust's sinister iconography, a step on the descending path to the terror of mass extermination, a road to hell disfigured by the progressive harassment of Jewish citizens, the increasing restrictions imposed on movements and jobs, closing and trashing of businesses, homes and places of worship, the passing of discriminatory laws, random arrests and detentions, the requirement to wear the yellow star. Other stages of this descent into the abyss were the enforced confinement of Jewish populations in ghettos, the subsequent round-ups and the unspeakable horrors of deportations in cattle trucks, mass imprisonment, shootings, forced labour and systematic mass slaughter inside the gas chambers of purpose-built death camps.

We could look at the painting of the boy studying and point to the darkness of the room as a foreshadowing of events that were to engulf the Jewish people all over mainland Europe.

The photograph of the Singer family could be seen as another example of the spectre of uncertainty which perhaps characterises Jewish destiny. Whilst Peter smiles cheerfully at the camera, other family members look worried, concerned; they are staring into the distance, as though towards gathering storm clouds.

So the exhibition speaks to us in many ways. It shows the universal experiences of families and their treasured memories but it also shows how these memories can be tinged with a deeper significance - a sadness, a sense of transience and loss. Many of the stories radiate feelings of optimism and hope but many also resonate with more unsettling messages. We arrive, we belong but we also remain watchful and wary..... and we take nothing for granted.

Questions and discussion points about the text for older readers

- 1) Which word in the first 10 lines refers to the Jewish world outside Israel? Research the origin of this word. How was it used in the book of Deuteronomy?
- 2) Why do you think the exhibition organisers tried to avoid an excessive focus on the Holocaust and Jewish people as victims of discrimination and persecution?
- 3) Find the word (in para 3) that means 'leaving, departure'. It is also a book of the bible.
- 4) Explain the phrase: 'Antisemitism is the ghost that stalks many of the stories'. (Para 3)
- 5) Para 5: In what ways is a tattooed number an example of de-humanisation and industrialisation? Think about other contexts where people are given numbers.
- 6) Para 5: What do Jewish people call the yellow badge star they were forced to wear. Research when the Nazis required it to be worn and reactions to the edict.
- 7) Para 5: The author uses the phrase 'death camps'. How are these normally referred to? Why are phrases like this more effective?
- 8) In para 5, the events of the Holocaust are described in terms of which feature (it's found in town or the countryside).

General questions

- 9) Which stories do you think are particularly optimistic and positive? Which ones are more negative?
- 10) Do you agree with the message of the article which is that no minority should ever be complacent?
- 11) Which recent events in the world confirm the message about groups facing discrimination and intolerance?

