

Grades
6 - 12



THE PIANIST OF WILLESDEN LANE STUDENT GUIDE



THE KINDERTRANSPORT

“ *The force of the crowds swept me away from my family and onto the train. The heavy brakes gave way, and I saw the steam come through the tracks as we lurched forward.*” —LISA JURA



▲ Children board the Kindertransport

After the devastation of *Kristallnacht*, “The Night of Broken Glass,” the British Parliament decided to bring children from major cities in the Third Reich like Berlin, Vienna and Prague over to England. The *Kindertransport*, or “Children’s Trains,” carried over 10,000 children, ranging from infancy to 17 years old, to the relative safety of British homes.

A ticket cost 50-pound sterling (about \$3,700 in today’s currency). The children would wear signs with numbers around their necks for identification before boarding the trains; none were accompanied by their parents and the few babies on board were

carried by older children. Surrounded by strangers and having to pass through Nazi checkpoints alone, the children journeyed for several harrowing days until they reached England and were placed with foster families, group homes or hostels throughout the country.

After the war, the majority of the Kindertransport refugees remained in England. About 25% moved to the United States, settling all over the country, including Cleveland. To commemorate the facilitators and riders of the Kindertransport, many European cities built statues in train stations. Meanwhile, the Kindertransport Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to uniting the survivors and their families, has held reunions for many years. The 75th anniversary reunion was held in London in 2013, and the KTA recently designated December 2 as World Kindertransport Day.

TO DO:

Imagine you have found a diary written by a child who traveled on the Kindertransport. A few pages are missing. Choose any moment before, during or after the Kindertransport and recreate the lost pages by writing a passage from the child’s point of view.

THE BLITZ

Between September 7, 1940, and May 21, 1941, the German army dropped 100 tons of explosives on British cities including London, Birmingham and Liverpool. This became known as Blitzkrieg — German for “lightning war” — or just “The Blitz.”

London was bombed for 57 nights in a row. In Liverpool, there were nearly 4,000 deaths as a result of one devastating bombing. These are only two examples of many.

The intention of the Blitz was to demoralize the British, force them to surrender and significantly damage their war economy. Despite its ferocity, the eight months of bombing did not achieve these goals. The British kept fighting, and the war industries continued to operate and expand. Many cite the German’s lack of strategy in their bombing campaigns and their poor intelligence on British targets as reasons for this failure. It is important to note, however, that although the Blitz was not as effective as the Germans had hoped, it still caused enormous damage to Britain’s infrastructure, cost around 41,000 lives and injured another 139,000.

Ernie Pyle, a journalist who witnessed many battles in Europe during WWII, gave his testimony from his time in London during the Blitz:

“St. Paul’s was surrounded by fire, but it came through. It stood there in its enormous proportions — growing slowly clearer and clearer, the way objects take shape at dawn. It was like a picture of some miraculous figure that appears before peace-hungry soldiers on a battlefield.”



▲ Dec. 9, 1940: St. Paul's Cathedral in London emerges from smoke and flames after one of the worst raids.

A tremendously important reason the Blitz did not cause a British defeat was the resilience of the people who lived through it. Julia Draper, now 94, was a British Red Cross nurse during WWII and survived the Blitz. She said in an interview, “We maintained a courageous and resilient spirit to serve our country. And even as the times were trying, we tried to keep a semblance of normal life. We just got on with it.” It is because of Julia Draper and other ordinary British citizens who gave back to the war effort and stayed strong in the face of unimaginable terror that Britain not only survived the Blitz, but also won the war.

TO DO:

“Keep Calm and Carry On,” a popular slogan today, was actually used to encourage British citizens to remain brave in the face of terror during World War II. Create a poster with a morally uplifting slogan or image that you think would uplift and inspire people during a difficult time, such as a war or economic depression.

TELLING HER MOTHER'S STORY

In this excerpt of a 2012 *Los Angeles Times* interview, pianist and playwright Mona Golabek discusses her inspiration for *The Pianist of Willesden Lane* — her mother's story of “music, love and survival.”



▲ *Mona's mother, Lisa Jura*

Why did you want to tell your mother's story?

When I was a little kid, when she taught me the piano, she made it the most extraordinary experience. They weren't really piano lessons; they were lessons about life. We'd be working on a Beethoven sonata and out of nowhere she would say, "Mona, did I ever tell you about the time that Johnny 'King Kong' read poetry to me at nighttime when the bombs came down?" Before she would answer the question, we'd go into a Chopin nocturne. And then out of nowhere she'd say, "What about when Aaron whistled the Grieg piano concerto to me at nighttime to comfort me?" And I thought, who were these amazing characters? One day when I was in my 20s, I was engaged to play the Grieg piano concerto with the Seattle Symphony. So I woke up the next morning after getting that engagement and thought, "Wow, this is the piece that my mom told me all the kids would whistle when they would see her during the war years. This is the piece that tells the story of her life." And I thought I wanted to tell her story.

Is it possible to put into words how music contributed to your mother's survival?

She would tell me how my grandmother, the woman for whom I'm named, gave her a gift



▲ Mona portrays her mother on stage in *The Pianist of Willesden Lane*

at the Westbahnhof train station in Vienna when she was put on the Kindertransport and sent away from Vienna to save her life. My grandmother looked at my mother, took her face in her hands and said, “You must promise me that you will hold onto your music. It will be the best friend you ever have. I will be with you every step of the way when you’re playing that music.” It was that phrase at the train station that guided her through this dark period.

You and your sister Renee performed at the 60th reunion of Kindertransport children in London in 1999. What was that like?

That was an amazing experience. There are about 2,000 survivors left now of the 10,000 original Kindertransport children. About 1,000 people showed up for that event, and Richard Attenborough, the director, was the keynote speaker because his family took in two sisters from the Kindertransport. What was most touching was that my niece Sarah, who I think was nine years old at the time, said to the audience in a little squeaky voice, “I make a pledge to you that I will tell my children, so you will never be forgotten, what you went through.” What all of this is about is who’s going to tell the stories when they’re gone and pass it on?

TO DO:

Ever want to be a reporter? Interview an older family member about an exciting time in their lives when they were young. For example, “What was your favorite family vacation and why?” or “What did you do for fun when you were a kid?” Pick one question from your interview and practice performing the answer the exact way your family member did. What were their mannerisms? What were the words that they emphasized when telling their story? Perform the interview as a monologue with your classmates or family!

HOLDING ON TO THE MUSIC

“ *Music saved my life and music saves me still... I am Jewish, but Beethoven is my religion.*” —ALICE HERZ-SOMMER

“Hold on to your music. It will be your best friend,” said Lisa Jura’s mother as she placed her daughter on the train to London. It was this advice that gave Lisa the strength to survive the war. And she was not the only one who turned to music during the Holocaust. For many, music — whether playing or listening to it — was a saving grace during this dark time in history.



▲ Wladyslaw Szpilman

The Pianist

Wladyslaw Szpilman was a pianist whose memoirs inspired the Academy Award-winning film *The Pianist* starring Adrien Brody. With the help of friends, Szpilman evaded capture multiple times while hiding in Warsaw. In 1944, he was discovered by a German officer named Wilm Hosenfield. Szpilman explained he was a musician, and Hosenfield was so moved by Szpilman’s piano playing that he helped Szpilman find another place to hide. Hosenfield gave Szpilman clothing and food, enabling him to evade capture and survive the war.

TO DO:

Think about a time in your life when you worked hard at something and succeeded. If your life was a movie, what songs would accompany that period of time and why? What song would represent the start of your goal and what song would you choose to symbolize any challenges you may have faced along the way? Make a playlist of five songs that chronicle this time in your life, and give it a title. For each song, write a short description of why that song fits with your story. Share your playlist with classmates or family.



▲ Esther Bejarano performs with German rap group Microphone Mafia

The Girls Orchestra of Auschwitz

Esther Bejarano, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and Fania Fenelon were all members of the Girls Orchestra of Auschwitz. The women would play at the gate as new trains of prisoners arrived and were sent to the gas chambers or put to work. Their ability to play ensured their safety within the camp, but music was also a means of psychological escape from the daily horrors of Auschwitz.

The Lady in Number 6

Alice Herz-Sommer, whose story inspired the 2013 Academy Award for Best Short Documentary *The Lady in Number 6*, was a pianist and survivor of Theresienstadt. This concentration camp served as a center for Nazi propaganda that boasted the rich artist community by allowing visitors from other countries and film crews to enter the camp. Herz-Sommer said, "Whenever I knew that

I had a concert, I was happy...we performed in the council hall before an audience of 150 old, hopeless, sick and hungry people. They lived for the music. It was like food to them. If they hadn't come [to hear us], they would have died long before. As we would have." Herz-Sommer continued playing piano until her death at age 110 in February 2014.



▲ Alice Herz-Sommer

THE PIANIST OF WILLESDEN LANE STUDENT GUIDE



WRITTEN & EDITED BY

Emily Goodridge, Rachel Lerner-Ley, Phaedra Scott and Lianna Salva

SPONSORED BY



The Laub Foundation

IMPACT
CREATIVITY

