

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Teachers' Workshop 2017
Think – Pair – Share Strategy
“Orphaned and Stateless”

Background

To find the thousands of children lost in the post-war chaos and reunite them with their families, teams from the Red Cross and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency combed Europe looking for “unaccompanied” children. Relief organizations cooperated to gather and distribute names of refugees in the various Displaced Persons camps and orphanages.

Some of the orphans were gathered up in makeshift orphanages by Jewish groups and international organizations. Ancient monasteries, hotels and buildings that once served as Nazi headquarters were converted into dormitories, dining rooms and classrooms. Basic supplies were scarce. Children were dressed in clothing made from whatever material was available including: mattress ticking, red fabric from Nazi flags, and old Hitler youth uniforms.

Orphans also found themselves in Displaced Persons camps. Many of these camps were housed in former labour or concentration camps. Nutrition, sanitary conditions and accommodations were often poor. The United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Agency and other welfare organizations provided basic necessities. Camp life was often surprisingly culturally rich and included marriages, births, schools, clubs, training and employment.

Examine the Paper Trail – A Case Study: Kloster Indersdorf Orphanage

The United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Agency conducted the greatest relief operation in history which was a unique experiment in international cooperation. It also played a central role in providing care for young people by establishing the only international children’s centre. Kloster Indersdorf was housed in a sixteenth century monastery, ten kilometers from the concentration camp Dachau, Germany.

“Word spread quickly throughout Germany that a home for children had been created. In a steady stream, desperately needy children came to its doors. They ranged in age from two to eighteen, were from twenty-four different nationalities and many different backgrounds. A large number were found by the American military or by UNRRA personnel. Others arrived at odd hours after making their way to Indersdorf on their own. Whatever the hour, the slightest drumming of small fists on that ancient door would bring Greta [Fischer, UNRRA worker] running from her bed down the winding, creaking stairs and along the drafty corridors. Pushing open the heavy door she would often find shivering in its shadow young orphans looking up at her with frightened and searching eyes.” -Martz, Fraidie. *Open Your Hearts*, 102.

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Finding badly needed baby bottles, toilet training potties, children's clothing and other supplies became a most urgent matter. Even basic supplies were scarce as the demand from civilian, population for food, clothing and basic necessities was enormous during this period.



Ingenuity was used to create some semblance of normal childhood life. Rooms were cleared for dormitories and classrooms. Bales of red flag material stored by the Nazis were converted into toddlers' overalls and blouses for the older girls. For the fortunate ones, their stay at Kloster Indersdorf was short but for the Jewish children there were no homes to return to and no new lands that wanted them.

“We were everything to those children. But beyond everything – mother, father, doctor, nurse and teacher – we knew that a vital part of our work was to help the children talk about what had happened to them. Millions of unrepeatable stories of pain and suffering that the mind could not comprehend – we knew that these stories had to come out. We also felt a strong responsibility to history and recorded as many of the children's stories as possible. In order to do this we had to function with just the right amalgam of bravery and numbness. To cry with the children would not have helped them. Being so busy every minute of the day helped to keep us normal.”

–Greta Fischer, UNRRA Worker in Martz, Fraidie. *Open Your Hearts*, 102.

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Discussion Questions

Why were the orphanages established and by whom?
What did orphanage workers, teachers and other helping agencies do?
What did you learn from the photographs and documents?

For More Information...

The above information is based on the exhibit *Open Hearts – Closed Doors*, produced by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC). All of the information provided is found in the VHEC Teacher's Guide. The PDF document can be found here www.vhec.org/images/pdfs/openhearts_guide.pdf. For more information on this exhibit and other exhibits on the Holocaust at the VHEC please visit www.vhec.org.