

A Study Guide

based on the film

René and I



A film by Gina M. Angelone

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Using *René and I* in the classroom

Before viewing the film, discuss the timeline of the Nazi campaign to transform Germany into a racial state and how it affected Renate and René Guttman and their parents.

René and I is a 75-minute documentary film that tells the story of young twins René and Irene, who spent more than a year in Auschwitz under the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele. Of the 3,000 twins experimented on by Mengele and other Nazi doctors, only 160 survived. While this documentary is the story of the Nazi racial state and the Holocaust, it is also a story of love and courage, of the complexity of the human psyche and of the resilience of the human spirit. Irene and René's story provides unique insight into the childhood experiences during the Third Reich. Their experiences show the impact on young people and their families.

Background – The Holocaust

The Holocaust was an extreme result of destructive elements such as racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism, which can be seen in our world today. Study of the Holocaust, especially through the personal stories of survivors, provides invaluable lessons regarding the process of how prejudice, even against the youngest children, led to the genocide of the Holocaust. This knowledge helps students recognize and combat such elements and their effects in their own lives.

The Nazis transform Germany and the countries they conquer into a Racial State. More than one million children are killed in the Holocaust. René and Irene were among those who survived. Anne Frank was killed.

René and Irene were arrested, taken to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and then to the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Separated from their mother, they became part of the experiments and systematic killing performed by Dr. Josef Mengele and his staff as part of their goal to create a “master race.” René and Irene were part of the Nazi “Final Solution” or genocide, in which more than one million children were killed.

This study guide, along with visits to the classroom by survivors and witnesses to the Holocaust, is intended to enhance the classroom experience by engaging students in dialogues about the Holocaust, and the need to combat all forms of prejudice.

Learn More →



Watch and listen to Irene Hizme/Renate Guttman's Personal Story on the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website at <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/media>

Learn more about the history of the Holocaust and how prejudice led to genocide. Visit The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum online at www.ushmm.org.

ADL: Pyramid of Hate lesson
<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/pyramidofhate/vhfmmain.htm>

The Holocaust and Human Behavior at Facing History and Ourselves: www.facinghistory.org.

Selection of Jews at the ramp in Auschwitz-II (Birkenau), May/June 1944.

What is Race?

By the mid 1800s, some scientists began using the term “race” to describe groups of people who shared a genetic heritage. Their goal was to explain human behavior by categorizing people. Many of them wanted to prove their own group genetically superior. While these ideas have little validity, they gained popularity. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were obsessed by “race,” claiming that there was a superior “Germanic race”, which they called “Aryans.” For the Nazis and Hitler the goal was to create a pure master race, which he thought was blond, blue eyed, and tall. These ideas became government policy and the ideology was spread in the media, in classrooms, and then was put into practice through the victimization of many groups. These included Jews, the handicapped, African-Germans, and Romas [often called Gypsies].

The policies included forced sterilizations to make it impossible for the victims to have children. “Racial Hygiene” offices were opened, examining people and registering them by “racial” characteristics, including eye color and head size. The Nazi policies of racial purity claimed that “inferior” people included Jews, Gypsies, Africans and Slavs.

The campaign for a “master race” began with the murder of German and Austrian handicapped patients, described as “useless eaters” in small gas chambers. The racial campaign of the Nazis was expanded to all areas they occupied, leading to the arrest and deportation of Jews and others to concentration camps, the massive murder by the mobile killing squads in areas of Eastern Europe in the newly conquered Soviet territory, and in the death camps. After the Wannsee Conference in 1942, the German government moved to the “Final Solution of the Jewish question” which was the Genocide of the Jews of Europe, the murder of millions of innocent people.

Today, scientists dismiss race as a scientifically-meaningless concept, showing through genetic research that there are as many differences between people in the same ethnic group as between people of different ethnic groups.

From a Name to a Number



Auschwitz survivor, author and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel describes the dehumanization process as an attempt to reduce a person to a prisoner, a prisoner to a number, and the number to ash to be dispersed.

René Slotkin with the tattoo the Nazis put on his arm when he was 6 years old in Auschwitz.

What is Anti-Semitism?

A form of prejudice or discrimination that includes hatred, distrust, injustice, or unfair treatment directed toward Jews. Historically based on religion, Jews are persecuted for their beliefs or other aspects of their religion. In Christian Europe, anti-Semitic movements have often been based on the refusal of Jews to accept Jesus of Nazareth, who was born a Jew, as the messiah and have sometimes been fueled by the false accusation that Jews were responsible for the death of Christ, which was at the hands of the Romans.

By the end of the 19th century, political groups and their leaders used anti-Semitism and new false scientific theories about “race” to create the belief that Jews were not a religious group, but were genetically different from other people and made being Jewish based on a person's genes or their blood not religious practice. In fact, Jews are not a race even by 19th century definitions. There are many Semites who are not Jews, including Arabs and many Jews. Those who converted to Judaism and their decedents, are not Semites. Semites are simply a branch of the Caucasian or white race, another delineation that has been called into question.

Adolf Hitler made German Jews the scapegoats for the loss of World War I, the economy, and other problems. During World War II, Nazi leaders used the words “Jewish problem,” which required, they said, a “Final Solution”—to kill all of Europe's Jews. The Nazis made many groups of people “enemies of the state.”

Historical Events

1932 – 1933

- Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party receive more than 33% of the vote in the parliamentary election, more than any other party. January 1933, Hitler is appointed Chancellor, head of the German government.

1935

- **Nuremberg Race Laws** – Jews are defined as people who have Jewish grandparents, regardless of whether that person identifies as being Jewish, belonging to a religious community. They are identified with special ID cards. Those who had converted to Christianity are considered Jewish by blood. Businesses and property are “Aryanized.” Jewish doctors and Jewish lawyers can not treat or represent non-Jews.

March 16, 1938

- A wave of anti-Semitic violence and civil unrest sweeps through Czechoslovakia. The Czech government requests protection from Germany; on March 16, Adolf Hitler declares that Czechoslovakia no longer exists.

November 9 & 10, 1938

- **Kristallnacht, the Night of the Broken Glass** – The Nazi government incites mobs to burn synagogues and loot Jewish homes and businesses. Nearly 30,000 German and Austrian Jewish men and boys are arrested and deported to concentration camps.



Herbert and Ita Guttman live in Dresden, Germany. They flee to Czechoslovakia after the Nazi laws take away their livelihood.



Ita Guttman's passport



December 21, 1937

Twins René and Renate are born on December 21, 1937, in Teplice Sarnow, Czechoslovakia. The family moves shortly thereafter to Prague.



René and Renate with their parents in Czechoslovakia.

Learn More

The process leading to the mass murder of the Holocaust begins with small steps. Study the propaganda campaign, party platform, and election results for the Nazi party.

Discussion

How does a small extremist group, such as the Nazi Party, gain control of a society? Link: <http://www.ushmm.org/propaganda/timeline/>

1932 – 1938

- ➔ A few months after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Germans, René and Renate's father, Herbert Guttman, is arrested and taken away from his family. They never see him again. They later learn that he was killed in Auschwitz in December 1941.



Herbert Guttman before the war and as a prisoner in Auschwitz.

- ➔ Four-year-old René and Renate are deported with their mother to Theresienstadt concentration camp, 40 miles north of Prague. After Jewish Danish citizens were deported to Theresienstadt, the Danish government demanded that the Red Cross visit what the Nazis called a “ghetto” at Theresienstadt.



René, Renate, and their mother were photographed in Theresienstadt concentration camp, and the photo was sent back to family members.

“It looks like a professional photograph. I remember hugging my mother, but you can see the tremendous fear and sadness in the eyes. It was used to fool the world of their intentions toward the Jews.”

– Irene Hizme

March 15, 1939

- German troops invade Czechoslovakia, violating its treaties with Great Britain and France. The racial state of Germany is installed in Czechoslovakia.

September 1, 1939

- Germany invades Poland, WW II begins.

Spring 1940

- Germany conquers Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxemburg, Holland, and France.
- All Jews over the age of six are ordered to wear the yellow star in Germany, and later in countries occupied by Germany.

1941

- German Army invades the Soviet Union. German killing squads begin murdering Jewish men, women, and children.

January 20, 1942

- **Wannsee Conference** – Nazi leaders meet outside of Berlin to discuss the “Final Solution to the Jewish question,” the mass murder of all Jews in Europe.
- Six death camps are located in occupied Poland at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, and Majdanek-Lublin.

September 1942

- To quash rumors about the killing centers, the Nazis permit the Red Cross to visit Theresienstadt. In the weeks before, the deportations to Auschwitz intensify and the Nazis arrange an elaborate hoax.

Discussion

What crime did René and Renate commit that would lead to their arrest?

1939 – 1942

February 1943

- Soviet Army defeats Germany.

"We were separated from our mother. I remember her piercing cry, which went up to heaven, and that was the last time I saw my mother. Then René and I were separated. All 3,800 people were sent to the gas chamber that night."

"We lived in constant fear of visits to Dr. Mengele. Children who could not work were sent to the gas chamber and killed. He was our savior and our demon at the same time. I felt like the 150-year-old woman. I had seen things that no one should ever see."
— Irene Hízme

November 1944

- Auschwitz crematoria ordered dismantled, and prisoners begin death marches toward Germany.

January 1945

- Nazis begin to evacuate Auschwitz prisoners on "death marches" toward Germany as Soviet troops are moving in from the east. The inmates were moved westward in the dead of winter.

January 27, 1945

- Soviet troops enter Auschwitz and liberate the camp.

April 30, 1945

- Adolf Hitler commits suicide in his bunker in Berlin.

May 8, 1945

- World War II ends in Europe as the German Army surrenders unconditionally to the Allied Forces.



Auschwitz – Birkenau

René and Renate are in Auschwitz-Birkenau for one year and one month.

➔ December 15, 1943

Just before their sixth birthday, René and Renate are deported in a cattle car to Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Poland with other Czech families on a transport with 2,491 Jews. They are placed in a special Family Camp in Birkenau.

After six months, the twins are separated from their mother, who is sent to the gas chambers, and they are taken by Dr. Josef Mengele as part of his gruesome experiments using twins, gypsies, dwarfs, and those with abnormalities. Irene is experimented on and René is not. They are in separate quarters. They are placed in a hospital where they are measured and x-rayed. Irene remembers blood is taken from her neck. She receives injections that made her sick.

Irene is hidden by a nurse under her long skirt and saved from one of the purges of the hospital. Of the more than 3,000 twins, only 160 survive.

➔ Liberation and Life

René survives a death march where thousands die of exposure and disease. René is sent to an orphanage with Czech nuns and taken out of the orphanage by Dr. Kalina. After Communists take over Czechoslovakia in 1947, Dr. Kalina flees, leaving René with his sister. He is later adopted by the Mann family.



Renate is found in Auschwitz by a Polish woman, Mrs. Mucha, and taken to her house to live. Her name is changed to Irenka.

1943 – 1947

Irenka is taken by the Vaad Hatzallah, a Jewish organization, from the home in Poland to the Jewish Orphanage in Fublaines, France. Her name becomes Irene.

➡ October 21, 1947

Rescue Children representative Rabbi Novick chooses Irene with a boy named Charles to come to the United States to promote help for orphans. The November 17, 1947 issue of *Life* magazine features Irene and Charles.



Jewish orphanage in Fublaines, France



She is moved to the Slotkin family and adopted. The Slotkins hire a private investigator to look for Irene's brother René. As a result of the *Life* magazine story seen by Dr. Kalina in Israel, René is located in Czechoslovakia and the family enlists help to acquire papers to bring him from behind the Iron Curtain to America, which leads all the way to help from the White House.



➡ March 29, 1950

At the age of 12, Irene and René are reunited. They have not seen each other in six years. Both Irene and René never speak of Auschwitz until 40 years later.



➡ February, 1985

Mock trial of Joseph Mengele at Yad Vashem Jewish orphanage in Jerusalem, Israel.

"I buried the nightmare of Mengele and Auschwitz deep inside of me. I became all American. I felt I had to be ashamed of it until Jerusalem 1985."
— Irene Hizme

➡ Justice

December 9, 1946

The Nazi Doctors trials start in Frankfurt, Germany. See US Holocaust Memorial Museum online exhibition at www.ushmm.org/research/doctors/

Dr. Josef Mengele escaped justice, fleeing to South America where he died in 1979. The Office of Special Investigations of the US Justice Department prosecutes Nazi criminals and collaborators who found haven illegally in the United States. Visit www.justice.gov/criminal/osi/ to learn more about the Office of Special Investigations.

Discussion

Many Nazi doctors and others said that they were just following orders. What criminal responsibility do you think they bear for their actions?

Making A Difference



René Slotkin and
Irene Hizme

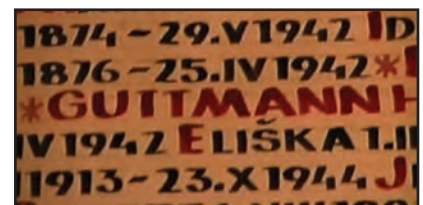
"We are constant reminders of governments who did not act, of nations who closed their borders in the face of people fleeing death; we are constant reminders of doctors who participated and planned in the murder of Jews, Gypsies and the disabled; we are constant reminders of thousands who betrayed their neighbors for pennies; we are constant reminders of hundreds of train conductors who took their unsuspecting victims in sealed cattle cars to the death camps without giving it a thought. We are constant reminders of a highly civilized society that turned itself into an evil one and that the Holocaust is a paradigm of human indifference.

Truth is on our side. We must never be silent in the face of hatred and bigotry and we must remember that the road to Auschwitz is paved in silence."

My parents really lived...I am glad my parents' names are up there for all the ages."



Irene speaking at Ohav Tzedek
Synagogue in New York



Irene Hizme with her daughter at the
Memorial to the 80,000 Jewish victims
of the Holocaust in Bohemia and
Moravia in the Pinkas Synagogue in
Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Learn more about this memorial at www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/a-ex-pinkas.htm.

*"It is really our triumph. We overcame and we have raised families.
We have become productive people in society and so – we won."*