

# The Sound of Willesden Lane



## Overview

In this activity, families will explore the story of Lisa Jura, a talented young musician who dreams of becoming a concert pianist. Through her story, families will build on their understanding of the Kindertransport by discussing important themes from the text such as perseverance and resilience. After discussing the text, families will reflect on visual testimony from another Kindertransport survivor and continue to deepen the connection between music and testimony by listening to excerpts from the music that would become Lisa's lifeline during and after the war.

**Note:** For additional resources and more information about Lisa's story, please visit [www.holdontoyourmusic.org](http://www.holdontoyourmusic.org).

## Starting the Conversation at Home

*Hold On to Your Music* is a powerful biographical narrative of music, hope, and survival set in Europe during the Holocaust. In this book, adapted for a younger audience, authors Mona Golabek and Lee Cohen tell the story of Lisa Jura, Golabek's mother. In 1938, 14-year-old Lisa was a talented young musician who dreamed of becoming a concert pianist. When Hitler's army invaded the family's hometown of Vienna, Austria, Lisa's parents made the difficult decision to send her to London as part of the Kindertransport, a rescue mission that took nearly 10,000 Jewish children to safety in Britain. There, separated from her family, Lisa built a community with other refugees in a children's hostel on Willesden Lane and fought to realize her dreams against a backdrop of war, loss, and despair. Her music became a lifeline—not only for herself, but also for those around her—and helped form a web of support and connection that enabled people of all ages to maintain hope, endure tragedy, and rebuild their lives.

## Discuss

One way to help your child and family make connections between historical events and individual experiences is through the use of a story. As you read the excerpt from *Hold On to Your Music* at the bottom of the **Background and Discussion Starters** handout. Discuss with your family the emotions and feelings that Lisa and her family may have experienced. Next, take a moment to discuss with your family why the story's title, *Hold On to Your Music* is so important. This conversation can help set the stage for connecting music and testimony.

## Listen

Music has a profound impact on our lives, from helping us relax to reminding us of specific events or special moments from our past. Music and artistic expression can also be a form of testimony. To deepen the connection with Lisa's experience, use the Sounds From *Hold On to Your Music* handout to help support conversations and reflection. As you and your family listen and reflect on the music, a short background has been provided to help establish the context of the song within the Lisa's story. Be sure to revisit the story to provide more context for the music and the moments from Lisa's story.

### Watch

The events of Lisa's story and the stories of others who were rescued on the Kindertransport may seem overwhelming to comprehend. Another way to help your child and family make connections between historical events and individual experiences is through the use of testimony. To help students connect their understanding of the Kindertransport and strengthen a sense of empathy, begin by watching the following clip from [Vera Gissing \(3:00\)](#), a Holocaust survivor who was rescued by the Kindertransport. In this clip of her testimony, Vera describes leaving her family and the emotions that she was feeling as they said their goodbyes.

After watching and listening to Vera discuss her experience, consider the following questions as a family:

- How does Vera's experience seem similar to Lisa's story in *Hold On to Your Music*?
- How did Vera and her family demonstrate bravery and perseverance in the face of adversity?

**Note:** For more support and strategies for using clips of testimony with your family, please visit [teachingwithtestimony.com](http://teachingwithtestimony.com).

### Act

Listening to music may seem like something that is lost in our daily routines, but actively listening to someone else's creation or musical testimony can be a profound way to share in someone else's experience. Music can be a source of hope, much like it was for Lisa, but it can also serve as a mirror and window for us as individuals. Actively listening can challenge our assumptions while helping us empathize with someone else's story. Outlined below are next steps that you and your family can consider for taking informed action, or you can work as a family to create your own!

- **Expand Your Experience:** Select a new genre of music and explore its roots. Musical traditions have a rich and complex history that can help provide insight into other cultures and experiences.
- **Share Your Song:** Ask each family member to identify a song that they really connect with. Encourage each person to spend time reflecting on why the song creates such a strong reaction or feeling.

**Create a Playlist:** As a family, spend time curating a playlist of music that you believe speaks to an important issue from the past or present. You may ask each family member to do some background research before choosing songs. Be sure to get each family member to share some history of the song and why they selected it.

**The Willesden Project** brings the power of music, technology, and story to reshape the ways in which students learn about the history of the Holocaust and resonant themes. Learn more at: <https://iwitness.usc.edu/willesdenproject>.

## Background and Discussion Starters for *Hold On to Your Music*

### Background on the Kindertransport

Kindertransport, a German term meaning “children’s transport,” was the informal name of a series of rescue efforts that brought thousands of children to Great Britain from Nazi-held lands between 1938 and 1940. After Kristallnacht, an organized massacre of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, the British government eased immigration restrictions to allow children under the age of 17 to enter Great Britain from Germany and German-annexed territories (including Austria and Czechoslovakia). Private citizens or organizations had to guarantee payment for each child’s care, education, and eventual emigration from Britain. In return, the British government agreed to allow unaccompanied refugee children to enter the country on temporary travel visas. It was understood that parents or guardians could not accompany the children, but once the war ended, the children would return to their families. In all, the rescue operation brought about 9,000–10,000 children from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland to Great Britain. Some 7,500 of these children were Jewish. Many children from the children’s transport program became citizens of Great Britain or immigrated to Israel, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Most of them would never again see their parents, many of whom were murdered during the Holocaust.

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### Getting the Conversation Started

Below are helpful supports for getting your child and family engaged and connected.

- Discover what your child already knows. Use the summary information to connect to their prior knowledge. Ask what else they want to know and read or research together to learn more.
  - Be sure to investigate unfamiliar words to build vocabulary. Depending on the age of your child, they may need extra support to understand words with context and meaning. This is a great practice to model in and out of school.
  - When discussing the story, a starter question has been provided, but also ask open-ended questions that deepen the conversation during the story and while listening to the music.
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### Excerpt from *Hold on To Your Music*

In this excerpt, Lisa’s family is saying goodbye as she departs on the train to make her way to London alone.

*Malka looked at her daughter, who was next in line, and held her close. “You must make me a promise.”*

*“What is it, Mama?”*

*“You must promise me...that you will hold on to your music. Please promise me that.”*

*“How can I?” Lisa sobbed. “How can I without you?” She dropped her little suitcase and embraced her mother tightly.*

*“You can and you will. Remember what I’ve taught you. Your music will help you through—let it be your best friend, Liseleh. And remember that I love you.”*

### Sounds from *Hold On to Your Music*

**Directions:** The musical selections included below represent important moments from Lisa's story. As a family, use the reflection questions below to help deepen your connection to *Hold On to Your Music*. You can use them to reflect on other pieces of music you listen to as well!

- How does this piece of music make you feel? Why?
- What images come to mind as you listen?
- Do the music's pace and tone create a feeling or experience?
- What does this song make you wonder?

#### Track 3: [Prelude in E Minor \(Fredrick Chopin\)](#)

**Story Context:** As the story opens, Lisa is told by her piano teacher that he can no longer be her teacher because of new laws that prevent the instruction of Jewish children. When Lisa arrives home frustrated and heartbroken, her mother joins her in a duet.

#### Track 5: [Clair De Lune \(Claude Debussy\)](#)

**Story Context:** As Lisa prepares to depart from her family in search of safety on the Kindertransport, she gathers her belongings, including a copy of sheet music called "Clair De Lune" by Claude Debussy.

#### Track 8: Piano Concerto in A Minor (Edvard Grieg)

**Story Context:** As bombs fall on the city of London during the "blitz," the children at Willesden Lane seek shelter in the basement. Lisa, frustrated with events out of her control, dangerously begins to play Grieg's "Piano Concerto in A Minor" during the bombing raid.

### Survivor Biography

Vera Gissing (née Diamant) was born on July 4, 1928, in Prague, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic). Her father owned a wine and spirits business, and her mother Irma ran the business office. She had a sister, Eva, who was four years her senior. On March 15, 1939, Čelákovice was occupied by the German armed forces. Unbeknownst to the rest of the family, Irma put Vera and Eva's names down on the list for Kindertransport. In June 1939, the sisters left their home and were separated. Vera was placed with a foster family in Liverpool, and Eva went to a school in Dorset. While in Whitchurch, Vera started attending a school for Czech refugee children in Whitchurch, England. After the war, Vera freelanced as an interpreter, translator, and editor for various British publishers and wrote children's books and an autobiography, *Pearls of Childhood* (1988). She is known for her work on *The Power of Good: Nicholas Winton* (2002), *All My Loved Ones* (1999), and *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport* (2000)