



SOLIHULL PUPILS MEET BEBA, A SCHOOLGIRL IN WARTIME VILNA

An online exhibition uncovers the story of World War II through the eyes of a Lithuanian girl. **Peter Watts** speaks to the teacher bringing it into the classroom

Teaching the Holocaust remains a requirement for British schools, but for educators it can be difficult to find new and engaging ways to explore the topic. That's what makes an autobiography written in the early 1930s by a young Jewish girl named Beba Epstein so compelling. Epstein wrote about her life in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania), and then saw that carefree existence destroyed in the Nazi invasion of 1941.

Four years ago, a cache of artefacts relating to Jewish life in pre-war Lithuania was discovered in the Martinas Mazvydas National Library Vilnius. Among them was Beba's writing, telling of her daily life in Vilna in the 1930s. Beba was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust, eventually settling in America, where she gave survivor testimony.

Now her autobiography is the focus of the first exhibition in a new online museum of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, based in New York. Click on Beba Epstein: The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Girl and you can find out that the first movie Beba saw was Uncle Tom's Cabin and she loved swimming and running. But visitors can also learn about pre-war Vilna, or Poland in the 1930s or the rise of antisemitism across Europe in the period. Over 200 photographs, film clips, maps and notebooks

from the YIVO archives are featured.

In the UK, Solihull School in the Midlands has used the material in lessons around Holocaust Memorial Day. Mark Penney, head of the preparatory school, says, "This extraordinary YIVO resource has an authentic voice, which does an incredible job of amplifying the brutal reshaping of Beba's life. Education is about what society we want to live in."

This is the sort of response that YIVO curator Karolina Ziulkoski hoped to generate when she created the exhibition. The resource, which is also being used in schools in Melbourne and California, gives an overview of the Holocaust that is broader and more personal than the usual focus on concentration camps and state-empowered antisemitism. Beba's autobiography celebrates her pre-war life before uncovering her war experience, which included time in hiding, in the Vilna ghetto, in concentration camps and in forced labour. The difficulty she later had moving to the USA is illustrative of what some survivors experienced, and the exhibition presents a complex picture of what life was like for those who lived through the Holocaust.

It is also a life that schoolchildren can

understand because the focus remains on an ordinary little girl. "What struck me was how similar her life was to that of children today, irrespective of time, nationality and faith," says Ziulkoski. "She talks about her love of swimming, summer camps, reading books, going to the cinema. Because of prejudice, everything was destroyed."

The exhibition also draws parallels with today's world. The section on immigration reveals that Beba would not be eligible to move to the United States in 2020. "It helps us see that the Holocaust had tentacles that reached back into the early 1930s and which were to do with subtle shifts in social attitudes," says YIVO director Jonathan Brent. "Who were the onlookers who sat on their hands? Who were the people who

took money to save a little girl and then let her go when the money ran out? What about the fact that America didn't let Jews in – is that part of the Holocaust? It is about xenophobia, immigration and economic systems. It's not just about Auschwitz."

This is precisely why Solihull School believes that Holocaust education is so important for its children. "A bigot isn't born a bigot, they become a bigot because of the influence of the people around them," says Penney. "A school is the only place where we have the ability to stop that bigotry taking hold. We'd like to trigger a lifelong passion in students so they play their part in ensuring this rise in intolerance doesn't happen again." ■

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Beba Epstein: The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Girl is at The YIVO Bruce and Francesca Cernia Slovin Online Museum. museum.yivo.org. **Peter Watts** is a journalist. His latest book is *Altered States: The Library of Julia Santo Domingo*.

