For teachers · A talk by Elizabeth Rodgers, co-director of the PBS documentary Exodus 1947

Discussion Guide

How a Bunch of Nobodies Changed the World

July 2027 marks the 80-year anniversary of the Exodus voyage.

This guide helps you prepare students for Elizabeth Rodgers' 40-minute illustrated talk about how a bunch of nobodies changed the world and lead a discussion afterward. It works best for grades 8 through 12 and college classes, inside a unit on the Holocaust, World War II or human rights. The talk supports Holocaust and genocide education.

Background in brief

Share these points before the talk so students arrive with a framework.

- After World War II ended in 1945, about 250,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors were living in displaced persons (DP) camps across Europe. Many had no homes to return to.
- In 1947 a group of volunteers, many of them young Americans with no sailing experience, crewed an old ferry renamed the Exodus 1947. It carried about 4,500 survivors toward Palestine, then under British control.
- The British Navy attacked the ship at sea. Bill Bernstein, an American volunteer officer, was one of the three people killed.
- The survivors were sent back to Europe, and the world watched. The story helped shape public opinion in the months before Israel was founded in 1948.
- The talk shows this through Bill Bernstein's own letters and home movies.

What students take away

1. History is made by people, not only by governments. A few ordinary volunteers changed the course of events.
2. The Holocaust did not end in 1945 for its survivors. Liberation led to a different kind of camp.
3. Primary sources make history personal. Letters and home movies show a real person making real choices.
4. A question to carry home: when people are in trouble and nobody in charge is coming to help, what will you do?

Before the talk

1. What do you think happened to Holocaust survivors after the war ended?
2. Have you ever seen something unfair and wished someone would step in? What stopped people?
3. What can a letter or a home movie tell you that a textbook can't?

After the talk

1. Bill Bernstein and his friends had no experience, no money and no orders. Why do you think they went anyway?
2. What risks did the crew take? What risks did the passengers take?
3. The ship never reached its destination. Was the voyage a failure? Why or why not?
4. How did the world find out what happened on the Exodus? What role did the press play?
5. Which moment from the letters or home movies stayed with you most, and why?
6. Where today do you see people in trouble with nobody in charge coming to help? What could a small group do?

Going further: take a stand

Ask students: What injustice would you stand up for today? Does taking a stand make you uncomfortable? Why? Give them a few minutes to write, then talk it through in pairs or as a class.

bring the story to your classroom

Book the talk

In person, on Zoom, as a screening with the PBS documentary, or as a school assembly sized to a class period.

ElizabethRodgers.com/speaking.html