

## **Teacher's Guide – The Other Half of Life**

The Other Half of Life is based on the true story of the MS St. Louis and illuminates this lesser-known, yet important part of the Holocaust. The book encourages readers to consider the origins of persecution, other countries' reactions and responsibilities to persecution, and the humanitarian treatment of refugees. The following is a teacher's guide to be used alongside the book. **Warning: it contains plot spoilers.**

### **Brief history of the MS St. Louis**

The MS St. Louis, a luxury ocean liner usually reserved for travel by affluent Europeans, left Hamburg, Germany in May of 1939 with over 900 refugees. The majority of the passengers were German Jews escaping Hitler's regime. Most of the passengers had quota numbers for admittance into America but waiting any longer in Germany had become unthinkable. The ship was bound for Cuba--the passengers had landing permits from the Cuban government and there they could wait in safety for their numbers to come up for America.

Aboard the ship, the passengers were treated to a strange mix of luxury—fine food and drink—and rude treatment from the mainly Nazi crew. But the hardest blow came when at the last minute the Cuban government declared the landing permits invalid.

Stranded in the Havana harbor, the captain of the ship and the passengers desperately tried to change the Cuban government's mind. After several days, the captain had no choice but to set sail back to Europe. Still, the captain—an upstanding man who did not bow to Nazi rules—motored slowly along the Florida coastline while appealing to other countries for admittance.

Several countries turned the ship away, including Canada and the U.S. Finally, France, Holland, Belgium and Great Britain agreed to take the passengers and save them from being returned to Hitler's Germany.

Unfortunately not long after the war began, and in 1940 France, Holland and Belgium became occupied territory. Some of the St. Louis passengers survived the war and ended up emigrating to the U.S. or other countries. However, 254 of the passengers perished in the Holocaust.

Further Materials for Additional Research

### **Books**

Morse, Arthur D. *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Empathy*. Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1983.

Ogilvie, Sarah A., and Scott Miller. *Refuge Denied: The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

Thomas, Gordon, and Max Morgan Witts. *Voyage of the Damned*. Mattituck, NY: Amereon House, 1974.

### **Videos**

The Double Crossing: The Voyage of the St. Louis. Holocaust Memorial Foundation of Illinois and Loyola University, Chicago. Distributed by Ergo Media, Inc. Teaneck, NJ, 1992.

Sea Tales: The Doomed Voyage of the St. Louis. Distributed by A&E Home Entertainment, New York, 1996.

### **Websites**

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website  
<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/stlouis/>

### **Pre-Reading Activities**

1. Ask students to write a few paragraphs detailing what they know about the following: concentration camps, Nuremberg laws, Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass.)
2. Ask students to imagine how Jews in Germany were able to immigrate to other countries. What would they have to do to leave the country? How would they travel? Would they be able to bring luggage? Would families travel all together? Where would they go and why?
3. What was America's involvement in World War II and the Holocaust?

### **Thematic Connections – Questions for Group Discussion**

#### *Identity*

Does Thomas see himself as Jewish? Why or why not?

On page 10, Thomas says of the many people on board the ship: “all of them used to be somebody else.” Name two characters who “were something else” before the Nazis came to power. How have these characters dealt with this loss of identity?

On page 38, Thomas says, “people shouldn’t ever be divided up in such a way.” What specifically is he talking about and, on a more general level, what does he mean by this statement? Who is “divided up” and how?

### *Persecution*

On page 45, Thomas describes a cartoon he saw in the Nazi propaganda newspaper, *Der Sturmer*. What is the purpose of this cartoon and how was it part of the Nazi effort to disenfranchise the Jews?

Find three examples of how the crew perceives the Jewish passengers as being different from the usual passengers. What blanket stereotypes do these instances speak to?

The characters in the book describe their experience of living in Germany under Nazi rule. What types of persecution did they face?

### **Chapter Questions**

(Based on Bloom's Taxonomy)

#### Ch. 1-2

Where are Thomas's parents? Why is he traveling alone?

What does Thomas carry in his pocket?

Who is Herr Kleist?

How do Thomas and Herr Kleist react to the steward who shows them to their cabins?

What are the two classes on board and how do they differ in terms of how they can use the services of the ship?

#### Ch. 3-4

What does Thomas think about Priska when he first meets her? Does he want to have dinner with her family?

What news do Thomas and Priska overhear on deck?

What happens when Manfred interrupts the shuffleboard game? How does Thomas react?

What is *Der Sturmer*?

What story does Thomas tell Priska? Why does he tell her?

#### Ch. 5-6

Where does the ship stop and why?

What does Thomas notice about the captain? Why is it significant?

Why is Thomas eager for the ship to disembark?

What do we learn about Thomas's brother?

Why does Thomas want to show Manfred he knows chess?

What prank does Thomas get involved in? Who catches them?

What kind of badge does the Ortsgruppenleiter wear?

What made Priska's family decide to leave Germany?

#### Ch. 7-8

What is Thomas's frame of mind when Manfred asks him to play chess?

What kind of a player is Manfred?

What does Thomas learn from Manfred?  
What does the Ortsgruppenleiter steal?  
How does Priska treat her father?  
What do the Ortsgruppenleiter and the captain disagree on?  
Why does Thomas agree to let Priska help him monitor the Ortsgruppenleiter?

#### Ch. 9-10

How do Thomas and Priska feel about movies?  
What happens before the movie begins?  
What do Thomas and Priska learn about the voyage?  
What are the three levels of Jewish faith?  
How does Thomas feel during the service?  
Why does Thomas want to fight Manfred?  
What chess piece does Thomas carry and why?

#### Ch. 11-12

What law upset Wilhelm the most, and why?  
Why does Thomas take no pleasure in beating Wilhelm?  
What is Priska's favorite chess piece and why? What does this say about her personality?  
Name two things Thomas knows about the Ortsgruppenleiter.

#### Ch. 13-14

What are two of the costumes passengers wear? What do you think the ball means to them?  
Who does Priska ask to dance?  
What does the 'J' stand for on Thomas's papers?  
What is the Arrieta?

#### Ch. 15-16

Why does Thomas buy a pineapple?  
Explain the difference between hope and faith as Priska sees it.  
What strategy does Thomas use in playing Franz?  
What was the outcome of the game between Thomas and Franz?  
What do the captain and Holz clash over?  
What decision does the captain make and how do the passengers feel about it?

#### Ch. 17-18

Why does Professor Affeldt think the Nazis sent the passengers on the St. Francis?  
What did it mean that the moonlight disappeared from the deck?  
What does Priska reveal about her family?  
Why won't Thomas go home to his mother?  
What does Thomas find in the cane?  
What does the captain know about Manfred?

Ch. 19-end

What countries will take the passengers?

What pact do Thomas and Priska make?

What happened to Priska?

How many of the passengers died in the Holocaust?

What did Thomas do during the war?

What happened to the captain?

### **Vocabulary**

Have students look up any words they do not understand. Here is a list of more difficult words.

kindred (p. 3)

confiscated (p. 6)

affluent (p. 6)

cultured (p. 21)

discreetly (p. 21)

pertinent (p. 22)

gluttonously (p. 27)

sabotage (p. 40)

savory (p. 42)

defame (p. 44)

scourge (p.45)

brokered (p. 49)

meticulous (p. 49)

dignity (p. 51)

befriended (p. 54)

nationalism (p. 56)

intuition (p. 60)

feigning (p. 60)

chided (p. 61)

stalemate (p. 63)

disgruntling (p. 64)

accountable (p. 68)

infractions (p. 69)

foremost (p. 75)

methodically (p. 78)

lamented (p. 81)

ingenious (p. 84)

inexplicable (p. 90)

infatuated (p. 93)

perceptible (p. 101)

instinctively (p. 103)  
cavalier (p. 105)  
sheepishly (p. 108)  
congregation (p. 108)  
parchment (p. 108)  
intolerable (p. 110)  
brethren (p. 110)  
predicament (p. 110)  
disunity (p. 110)  
idolatry (p. 110)  
sages (p. 110)  
lenient (p. 113)  
reconcile (p. 113)  
revelation (p. 116)  
leer (p. 117)  
refuge (p. 124)  
succumb (p. 125)  
personify (p. 129)  
berated (p. 136)  
contrite (p. 139)  
validity (p. 140)  
ingenuity (p. 144)  
entreating (p. 148)  
havoc (p. 149)  
jeopardy (p. 152)  
logistics (p. 155)  
dissuade (p. 167)  
aberration (p. 170)  
capitalized (p. 173)  
infiltrated (p. 174)  
innately (p. 178)  
furtively (p. 179)  
pendulum (p. 181)  
galvanized (p. 192)  
ruse (p. 197)  
mutiny (p. 205)  
appraising (p. 215)  
voracious (p. 227)

### **Comprehension Guide/Quiz Questions**

Based on Bloom's Taxonomy

Knowledge

List three instances that passengers cite of how life has changed for Jews in Germany.  
Recall the reasons why Thomas is reluctant to leave Germany.

### Comprehension

Explain in your own words why Thomas feels he let his father down.  
Describe how Thomas and Priska seem to differ in terms of their personalities.

### Application

Find a situation in the world today where people are hoping to leave their homeland because of persecution. What kind of persecution are they facing?  
How could Thomas's chess game against Franz serve as a parallel to what is going on in his life at that point in the story?

### Analysis

Compare and contrast Thomas and Manfred's chess strategies.  
What does Thomas actually know for a fact about the Ortsgruppenleiter and what does he assume based on these facts?

### Synthesis

Whose perspective and outlook on the voyage and the events that unfold do you most identify with—Priska or Thomas? Why?  
Summarize Priska and her father's relationship. What events do you think contributed to this relationship?

### Evaluation

What do you imagine Manfred did during the war?  
Do you think Thomas and Marianne had a happy marriage? Why, or why not?

## **Multiple Intelligence Projects**

Multiple Intelligence theory is based on the work of Howard Gardner at Harvard. The thrust of his research shows that people have a variety of intelligences, not just the two that schools typically focus on (math/language) and that many students can reach higher degrees of success when they are allowed to use the one at which they excel.

### *Verbal/Linguistic*

On page 230 Thomas explains that he has told his children very little about his voyage on the St. Francis. Imagine you are Thomas and you have decided to write a letter to your children where you describe the voyage and specifically your emotions both during the voyage and reflecting back on it 70 years later.

### *Logical/Mathematical*

Make a timeline of each day aboard the ship and, where you can, outline the significant events that happened on that specific day.

### Visual/Spatial

Design a plan for a museum exhibit of the voyage of the St. Francis. Using diagrams or actual photos found online or in books about the St. Louis show what the exhibit would include.

### *Body/Kinesthetic*

Pick a scene from the book that you feel is the most powerful. Rewrite that scene as a play.

### *Musical/Rhythmical*

At the beginning of the voyage, a band is playing. Several couples are dancing while Thomas feels the music is out of place. Describe a time in your life when music was playing and you felt it was interpreted differently by people given their state of mind.

### *Intrapersonal*

#### Individual Project

People in THE OTHER HALF OF LIFE make many assumptions about each other. The crew assumes things about the passengers; Thomas assumes things about Priska and Manfred. Describe a time in your life when someone has assumed something about you, or you assumed something about someone else. What were those assumptions based on and how were they flawed?

#### *Group Project*

Divide the class into two groups. Have each group take opposite standpoints in the debate of the following question. Challenge each side to support their arguments with direct citations from the book or other relevant sources.

Should the U.S. have let the St. Louis passengers in?

### Questions for Discussion or Short Writing Assignments

What are the dynamics of Priska's family and how does she hope this will change?

On page 38, Thomas says of Manfred elbowing him, "It felt like a subtle statement of power." What does he mean by this?

Why is Thomas conflicted about playing Manfred early on in the book? Later on, what does playing Manfred come to symbolize and what strategy does Thomas use to beat him?

How does Thomas feel about joining Priska for Shabbat service? What does he think afterwards about the service and the role of religion in his life?

Why did Priska lead Gunther on by dancing with, and kissing him?

What individual reasons kept the passengers in Germany for as long as they stayed? What made them finally decide to leave? Why would others stay?

Why does Thomas marry Marrienne? Is this a betrayal of Priska?

### **Longer Writing Assignments or Essays**

Explore chess strategy as a theme throughout the book. How can chess be seen as a metaphor for life, or for how the passengers face persecution? Consider specifically the vocabulary of chess: stalemate, sacrifice, attack etc.

Should the U.S. have let the passengers of the St. Louis into the country? Why or why not? How should a country decide its policy toward refugees?

The book is told from Thomas's perspective. Pick another character in the book and retell the events of a specific day aboard the ship from that character's point of view.

Examine the characters of Kurt, Manfred, and the Captain. How could they be seen as representing various positions on the German people's response to Nazism? What actions (or inactions) inform their characters?