Protecting the life stories of Holocaust survivors



Holocaust survivors and refugees are sharing their life stories with future generations. Credit: The Fed.

The My Voice project is using tales of shattered lives rebuilt to spread a message of hope and resilience across generations.

“Listen Juliette, I need you to tell my life story – my whole life story – before I die”.

These are the words of Margit Cohen, a survivor of the Nazi regime who came to the UK on the Kindertransport in 1938. It was Margit’s request in 2015 which started the My Voice project.

Over ten years later, the project team, led by Juliette Pearce, has supported Holocaust survivors and refugees now living across the North West of England and London to tell their stories, ensuring they are saved for future generations.

So far, it’s published 50 life story books, with another 12 on the way. Some have also been developed into short films featuring the survivors. And through partnership with schools across Greater Manchester, the stories are being used to teach students about the Second World War.

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Raphi Bloom, Director of Fundraising, Marketing and Communications at The Fed

Preserving the heritage

A historic photo of Ike Alterman showing what his book cover would look like.

Ike Alterman, born in 1928 in O?arów, Poland, offers a detailed account of his life story. Credit: The Fed.

We've supported the My Voice project with over £295,000 to collect these unique stories, which were at risk of being lost as the individuals grew older.

Juliette says: "We were trusted to share the terrible, horrific times they had, but also the happy childhoods they lost and how they rebuilt their shattered lives here.

"It was an honour, but the promise was to make sure that people hear their stories and share their messages of hope and resilience."

Today, as well as being available in both paperback and eBook on the My Voice website, the stories are preserved in institutions including the University of Manchester John Rylands Library, The Wiener Holocaust Library, Yad Vashem and The Auschwitz Museum.

Engaging a younger generation

Another way the project's promise is being fulfilled is in schools across the North West, where the books have been embedded in the curriculum, changing the way the Holocaust is taught.

"Schools feel that to talk about 6million people being killed is very difficult," says Juliette. "But to have one story, to really engage with that story, and then to either meet that person or to talk to us about it, it's a powerful moment for the young people studying."

Raphi Bloom, Director of Fundraising, Marketing and Communications at The Fed, the organisation behind the project, adds: "When we take Ike Alterman, one of the survivors, into a school where they've studied his book and you have 300 pupils who know his story, it's like a rock star has walked into the room."



Wellington High School is one of the schools that have been engaged in the project. Credit: The Fed.

One Year 9 student from Wellington High School reflects on hearing the survivors stories, saying: “It has made me appreciate the small things in my life and has massively affected the person I am becoming. I will remember this for the rest of my life.”

Our funding has also supported the project to develop an ‘intergenerational guardian programme’, where sixth formers take on one of the life stories and become its guardian, committing to share it, and its lessons.

“They take it very seriously and produce some incredible work,” Juliette says.

People-centred approach

The project wouldn’t be possible without a dedicated approach to ensuring the wellbeing of participants. “We have a ‘safely in, safely out’ approach for everybody, meaning if you prioritise safety in your practice, you will experience it in your outcomes,” describes Juliette. “We interview storytellers in their own homes and ensure they feel comfortable. We help them understand the whole process and what they are signing up for, and we hold their hands throughout. It is very cathartic for many of them.”



Ike Alterman and other Windermere children in the Lake District. Credit: The Fed.

Volunteers play a central role in making this possible. The My Voice team train volunteers to provide emotional support and help capture the stories, as well as supporting the survivors with shopping and running essential errands. “Our incredible volunteers are befrienders, transcribers, editors,” Juliette adds. “We couldn't do it without them.”

Their hard work has now been acknowledged with the Queens Award for Voluntary Service, and the My Voice project team is exploring ways to share its approach with other groups working with trauma survivors.

Running a community heritage project?

Juliette and Raphi share their advice:

- **Stay true to your strategy and have a clear vision** of how you’ll achieve it.
- **Communicate well** at every level and bring everyone along.
- **Use the support available** from the Heritage Fund and others with a wealth of experience.
- **Be bold**. If you’ve got an idea about heritage that needs to be preserved, ask for support.

If you’re thinking of applying for funding, get inspired by other projects sharing community heritage.



A behind the scenes tour of the newly renovated Boston Lodge. Credit: Chris Parry.



More than a cell – statue of Henrietta Lacks (1920-1951) by Helen Wilson-Roe in Royal Fort Garden, Bristol. Photo: Bhagesh Sachania Photography.



A woodworking workshop at Abney Park.

Saving heritage: nine ways projects are protecting the past