

# ISAAC NIEDERMAN: STUDY GUIDE

## BACKGROUND

Isaac Niederman was born on May 6, 1923, in Satu-Mare, Romania. Until the end of the First World War, the region (Transylvania) belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Isaac's grandfather Josef Leopold Niederman served in Kaiser Franz Josef's army during World War I. Isaac grew up listening to his grandfather's stories about the 'good old days' when the Jews lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Isaac's family was Orthodox, and he attended synagogue twice a day. His father was Jakob Niederman. Jakob and his brothers Abraham Hirsch and Bernard (Berl) owned a wine business ('Berkovich-Niederman') that had been in the family for three generations. Isaac had four brothers: Bernard (a printer of Jewish literature); Moses (excellent in math); Karl (teacher and gifted painter); and Herschel ('the little one'). Isaac had two sisters: Miriam and Rachel. Isaac's mother Hana died of leukemia in 1943.

In the documentary, Isaac tells us that anti-Semitism was intense *before* the war.

## WORLD WAR II

Romania's neighbor Hungary was allied to Nazi Germany. In 1938, the Hungarian government, led by Admiral Miklos Horthy, passed anti-Semitic decrees. In 1940, Hungary shared in the 'spoils' of Nazi aggression; Romania was forced to cede northern Transylvania to Hungary, the so-called Vienna Award. Isaac was sixteen years old. Jews were beaten and robbed by *Hungarian* police. For three and a half years the Hungarian and Romanian Jews, however, were not subjected to wholesale murder. That changed in the last year of the war.

## DEPORTATION to AUSCHWITZ- BIRKENAU

As the Red Army approached in the spring of 1944, the Nazis (assisted by collaborators) rounded up and deported the Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Jakob Niederman and three of his children (Moses, Herschel, and Miriam) were gassed on arrival, along with Isaac's sister Rachel, her husband Chastkel, and daughters (two years old) Hana and (four years old) Rebecca.

*See: Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz, by Olga Lengyel. She lived in Cluj, capital of Transylvania, and was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944.*

## ‘LABOR BATTALION’

Isaac avoided deportation to Poland. In May 1944, with other Jewish men who were young, healthy, and exploitable as slave laborers, he was ordered into a Hungarian labor battalion (“Labor Battalion Satu-Mare”) and sent to Budapest to clean up the rubble left from Allied bombings.

## ADOLF EICHMANN

SS officer Adolf Eichmann and his ‘commando’ of Nazi killers arrived in Budapest in March 1944 and began organizing the ‘evacuation’ of Hungarian (and Romanian) Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. An Austrian from Linz, Eichmann played a leading role in the expropriation and deportation of Jews from all the countries of Europe to the death camps in occupied Poland.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Before World War II, Adolf Eichmann organized the expropriation and expulsion of Jews who wanted to flee Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. During the war, his organizational ‘skills’ were easily redirected to the tasks of mass-robbery and mass-murder.

After the war, Eichmann escaped to Argentina and raised his family. Israeli agents kidnapped him in 1960 and brought him to Israel, where he was tried, found guilty, and hanged. His ashes were dumped in the Mediterranean Sea.

# RAOUL WALLENBERG

As Isaac relates in the documentary, he escaped from the labor battalion and went to the offices of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish 'diplomat' who tried to save Jews in Budapest. Wallenberg handed out fake Swedish 'passports,' known as 'Schutz-passes.' He provided diplomatic 'safe houses' where Jews were 'protected' from the Nazis and their Hungarian fascist allies, the Arrow Cross. One hundred and twenty-four thousand Jews remained alive in Budapest at war's end.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Teachers can use Isaac's experience with Wallenberg to tell Wallenberg's story of rescuing Jews during the last months of the war in Budapest. Wallenberg was sent to Budapest by the U. S. War Refugee Board. It was established in 1944, when the inaction and deceit of the Roosevelt administration on Jewish rescue was exposed.

## POST-WAR

Isaac returned to his hometown Satu-Mare after the war. The family home was in ruins, and only his grandfather's room was intact. Isaac estimates that three hundred of his relatives were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. With a group of Jewish survivors, Isaac traveled (illegally) to Italy. He crossed the Austro-Italian border (evading British troops) and (by way of Naples) found his way to a 'Displaced Persons' camp at Santa

Maria del Lauca on the Adriatic coast. He met his future wife Dora there; “big bargain,” she joked. Dora’s experiences are the subject of another video in this documentary series. She is a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Stutthof. Dora and Isaac were married in 1948.

## BRITISH POLICY on PALESTINE

After the war, a Jewish organization named ‘Berihah’ secretly transported Jewish survivors to British-controlled Palestine. Isaac and Dora availed themselves of this organization and several times tried to reach Palestine, but the British authorities always turned them back. The state of Israel was established in May 1948. By that time, Isaac and Dora had decided to ‘try out’ the United States, and the couple arrived at New Orleans in 1950. Isaac worked as a silver polisher for a jewelry company, and Dora owned and operated a dry cleaning establishment. Owing to her nightmarish experiences during the war, she was unable to have children.

# ISAAC NIEDERMAN: GLOSSARY

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Define the following glossary terms and explain their relevance to Isaac's story:

1. Austro-Hungarian Empire –

2. Sabbath (Sabbat) –

3. Nazi ghetto –

4. Admiral Miklos Horthy –

5. Ferenc Szalasi –

6. Arrow Cross –

7. 'Labor battalion' –

8. Auschwitz-Birkenau –

9. 'Angel of Death' –

10. Budapest –

11. Adolf Eichmann –

12. Raoul Wallenberg –

13. 'Eden hat' –

14. 'Schutz-pass' –

15. Red Army –

16. NKVD –

17. Mauthausen –

18. 'Displaced Person' camp –

19. Palestine –

## ISAAC NIEDERMAN: KEY QUESTIONS

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions using information and quotes from the documentary and study guide:

1. Describe Isaac's life before the war, including an account of his family and its livelihood.

2. Based on Isaac's account, what relationship existed between Jews and non-Jews in Satu-Mare before the war?



3. Under what circumstances did the Hungarian Army occupy Satu-Mare in 1940? For the Jews, what was the result?

4. Describe the steps taken by the Hungarians and the Germans to identify, isolate, rob, and deport the Jewish people of Satu-Mare.

5. What happened to Isaac's brother Bernard?

6. What was the fate of Isaac's brother Karl?

7. What was a 'labor battalion'? How many were in Isaac's labor battalion? How many survived the war?

8. What happened to Isaac's mother? What happened to his father and siblings (Moses), Miriam, and Herschel?

9. Who was Adolf Eichmann? What was his role during the Holocaust? What happened to him after the war?

10. Who was Raoul Wallenberg? How did he help Isaac (and other Jews) in Nazi-occupied Budapest? What happened to Wallenberg after the war?

13. In your view, what explains Isaac's survival?

14. Based on Isaac's account, describe the last weeks in Nazi-occupied Budapest, including his 'liberation' by Red Army soldiers in January 1945.

15. Describe Isaac's return to Satu-Mare after the war. What did he find? How long did he stay? Why did he leave?

16. What was British policy after the war regarding Jewish

emigration to Palestine? How did this affect Isaac?

17. How did Isaac find the strength *during* the war to keep going? How did he find the strength *after* the war to keep going?

18. Describe Isaac's attitude about God, including an account of his conversation with a rabbi in Italy.

19. What is Isaac's message to young people?

