

# LESSON: Willie Hilton

## Grade Level:

This unit was developed for secondary students. The approach and materials for this unit follow the [Age Appropriate Guidelines from the USHMM](#).

## Subject:

History; English/Language Arts; Multi-disciplinary.

## Rationale:

The stories of individuals during the Holocaust can help us understand various facets of history through the eyes of those who lived through it. This story helps to broaden understanding about the experience of a young Black American soldier whose military service during World War II was fought on two fronts, at home and abroad.

## Overview:

### Key Question(s):

- Who was Willie Hilton? What was his experience during World War II?
- How did Willie come to find himself in Europe during World War II?
- What role did Willie's unit play in liberating a concentration camp during World War II?
- How did Willie's experience overseas shape his view on things that were occurring on the home front?

### Educational Outcomes. At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

- Define the Holocaust, World War II and related terms such as concentration camp, Double V Campaign and segregation.
- Identify who Willie Hilton was and what his experience was like during World War II.
- Compare and contrast information shared in text and in a podcast.
- Discuss how Willie found himself in Europe during World War II.
- Identify the role Willie played in liberating a concentration camp and the lasting impact this experience had on Willie and other soldiers.
- Analyze how Willie's experience in Germany further shaped his perspective on segregation in the United States.

## Teacher preparation

It's important for teachers to familiarize themselves with the [Pedagogical Principles for Teaching the Holocaust](#). We encourage teachers to familiarize themselves with background knowledge on the Holocaust by viewing this [site](#) at the USHMM and view the [Introduction to the Holocaust](#). Additional information on teaching about this topic can be learned from the full-length version of [The Path to Nazi Genocide](#).

In addition, we suggest:

- Prepare access to handout and student packet.
- Check access to related links.
- Consider having students complete the [What was the Holocaust? Activity](#).
- Identify any terms students may be unfamiliar with in the written text or the podcast.

## Materials

- Willie Hilton's narrative in [To Life: The Past is Present](#)
- Paul Parks testimony from [Echoes and Reflections](#)

## Lesson:

### INTRODUCTION

1. If students have not previously discussed the Holocaust, begin with an overview of the term, Holocaust, as defined by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

*The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored, persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945 across Europe and North Africa. The height of the persecution and murder occurred during World War II. By the end of the war in 1945, the Germans and their collaborators had killed nearly two out of every three European Jews. The Nazis believed that Germans were racially superior.*

*They believed Jews were a threat to the so-called German racial community. While Jews were the primary victims, the Nazis also targeted other groups for persecution and murder. The Nazis claimed that Roma, people with disabilities, some Slavic peoples (especially Poles and Russians), and Black people were biologically inferior. The regime persecuted other groups because of politics, ideology, or behavior. These groups included Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, gay men, and people the Nazis called "asocials" and "professional criminals."*

For younger students, or students previously familiar with this event in history, you can utilize this shortened definition:

*The state-sponsored systematic murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. Sinti-Roma, Poles, people with physical and mental disabilities, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents were also targeted by the Nazis.*

2. Share with students that today we will be learning about the story of Willie Hilton. Willie was a young Black man from Newport News, Virginia who encountered the Holocaust as an American soldier who witnessed the atrocities of the concentration camps.
3. Begin by asking students about what life was like for Black Americans in the United States in the 1930s. What challenges might Willie have faced? What factors may have shaped his decision to join the US Army?

## **RESEARCH/ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION**

1. Explain to students that they will be assigned one of two ways to learn about Willie's story - through a podcast or through a written narrative. Each group will seek to answer the following questions:
  - a. Who was Willie Hilton?
  - b. In 3-5 sentences, summarize Willie's experiences during World War II.
  - c. How was Willie's perspective on his experiences shaped by his pre-war life in the United States?
  - d. Many Black soldiers shared that they felt like they were fighting a war on two fronts - the war abroad and the war waged on Black Americans in the United States. How does Willie share information about this experience?
  - e. What were the advantages and disadvantages to learning about Willie's story through your assigned medium?
2. Task students to first review their sources and answers to these questions as individuals; then ask them to discuss the answers to these questions with others who shared their medium (text or podcast).
3. Once this initial period of sharing is complete, ask students to view the testimony of Paul Parks. What parallels do they see between Willie's experience and that of Paul Parks? How do their experiences help to shape advocacy for Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement?
4. Upon discussing this topic, ask students to craft a list of how things learned about the Holocaust can inspire advocacy in their communities today?

## **CONCLUSION**

1. Share with students this [Action Planning Document](#).
2. Ask students to complete the document as individuals or as a class.
3. Upon completion, ask students to discuss whether or not they wish to put their plans into action and what support they may need to do so. This can be done via an exit ticket or full class discussion.