

An Introduction to the Holocaust in Poland



BIG SONIA

SURVIVOR. GRANDMA. DIVA.



INFLATABLE FILM & ARGOT PICTURES PRESENTS A FILM BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY

IN ASSOCIATION WITH SIFF / TRUE PRODUCTIONS & WOMEN YOU SHOULD FUND & BYEN | DIRECTED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI & TODD SOLIDAY | PRODUCED BY LEAH WARSHAWSKI | ORIGINAL SCORE BY BRAD ANTHONY LAINA | EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TOM WRIGHT
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JOURNEYS IN FILM
educating for global understanding



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About *Journeys in Film*

Teaching Core Curriculum with Film

Founded in 2003, Journeys in Film operates on the belief that teaching with film has the power to help our next generation gain a richer understanding of the diverse and complex world in which we live. Our goal is to help students recognize cultural biases and racism (including their own), cultivate human empathy and compassion, develop a deeper knowledge of universal issues and current challenges, and encourage civic engagement as competent world citizens.

Award-winning feature films and documentaries act as springboards for lesson plans in subjects ranging from math, science, language arts, and social studies to other topics that have become critical for students to learn about: human rights, environmental sustainability, poverty, hunger, global health, diversity, gender, and immigration. Prominent educators on our team consult with filmmakers and cultural specialists in the development of curriculum guides, each one dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the culture and issues depicted in a specific film. The guides complement teachers' existing lesson plans and meet mandated curricular requirements, providing teachers with an innovative way to fulfill their school districts' standards-based goals.

We prepare teachers to use film effectively in the classroom through customized professional development workshops and online webinars.

Journeys in Film is an organization with proven results. Individual teachers worldwide and entire school districts in the U.S. have employed our interdisciplinary film-based curricula.

- Millions of students have learned about our multicultural world through Journeys in Film's middle school series, based on films from Iran, South Africa, South Korea, the Maori of New Zealand, Tibet, India, China and Saudi Arabia.
- Students are becoming inspired by the courageous contemporary and historical figures portrayed in films such as *Hidden Figures*, *The Post*, and *He Named Me Malala*.
- Films like *Schindler's List*, *Defiant Requiem*, and *Big Sonia* not only teach about the Holocaust, but also demonstrate how one person can make a difference in the lives of others.
- Teachers are using our outstanding documentary series to teach about historical events, American prison systems, the critical role of photojournalists, and positive psychology.

Journeys in Film guides help teachers integrate these films into their classrooms, examining complex issues, encouraging students to be active rather than passive viewers, and maximizing the power of film to enhance critical thinking skills and to meet the Common Core Standards.

Why teach with film?

Today's students are the most visually literate generation in history. According to the Social Science Research Network, 65% of people are primarily visual learners. Today's students are more affected by media than ever before. They seldom need to be coaxed into watching films; after all, everyone loves a good movie. Through their own desire to be entertained, students become captivated learners.

Films have long been overlooked as an educational tool. We teach our students literature that originates from many places around the world, but we tend to forget that what often spurs the imagination is both visual and auditory. Film, which in minutes can be screened and beamed to every country in the world, is this extraordinary educational tool that goes right into the heart of different cultures. One of its strengths lies in its ability to present information rapidly and convey atmosphere, making that world come to life. It allows viewers to "feel" and thereby develop empathy skills, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of students connecting personally to the content, which in turn helps with understanding and analyzing concepts.

In teaching with films, we encourage our students to be critical consumers of what they see and teach them to consider the perspective of the filmmaker and challenge generalizations. Analyzing film and media is an empowering skill and one that is increasingly important for young people. To this end, it is imperative to integrate the film into a larger lesson, using it as a launching pad for historical and cultural exploration, as well as an examination of narrative perspective, character development, and media literacy.

In one 7th grade student's words, "I like Journeys in Film because it just doesn't teach you like a book. It's better when you can actually see it happening. Films give a first-hand view of places and stories."

Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Directors' Statement



Sometimes the really big stories come from the smallest places. As filmmakers, we travel all over the world chasing stories about people making an impact. In making *Big Sonia*, we realized some of those stories are right in our own backyards and that you don't have to go far to come home.



When we began filming in 2011, Leah's grandmother Sonia Warshawski was 85 years old, and we had just started dating. On the heels of our last feature documentary, *Finding Hillywood*, our intention was to make

a short film about Sonia's small tailoring shop, John's Tailoring, and the steady stream of loyal customers that came in for the conversation as much as for tailoring. Sonia's extended family had joked for years about using the shop as the subject of a reality show. We'd all long witnessed Sonia holding court from her counter-top podium, doling out marriage advice, recommending books about WWII to teenagers, and doing interviews for local news stations. We knew Sonia had a gift for making anyone in her shop feel like the most important person in the world. And we knew the shop was her own refuge from the horrors of her past as a teenage Holocaust survivor.

However, once we started filming for our short, our anticipated *weeks* of production turned into *months*. It soon became apparent to us that customers were drawn to John's Tailoring not just for gossip and a bit of human connection, but for their

own redemption. They came in because Sonia sets a glowing example of how an ordinary person can move past deep personal and historical trauma to find peace and heal others.

Still, our time with Sonia revealed her complex side. Her interactions with customers — many of whom she sees as her best friends — are very different from her relationships with her own family, which have often been tense and tender, overshadowed by decades of survivor's guilt and post-traumatic stress. During the course of production, we began to perceive the trauma suffered not just by Sonia, but by my aunts and father, who had survived their own brand of trauma in a household gripped by grief and loss. We also began to see the ways in which Sonia's pain had branded Leah, as a third-generation survivor, the grandchild of refugees, and the child of a parent who'd long grappled with his own mother's distance and pain.

Then, suddenly, the plot turned. Sonia got an eviction notice for John's Tailoring, her home-away-from-home for 35 years. Her panic was palpable. And while we knew Sonia would survive the physical loss of her shop, we were also compelled by her store's powerfully symbolic role as a forum for human connection--a stronghold and a place of safety for Sonia and so many others. We continued to fundraise and film, and our "short" turned into a feature. Oh, and somehow in the middle of it all, we got married. The store was now woven into the fabric of our lives, too.

Despite featuring a Holocaust survivor, *Big Sonia* is not a "Jewish movie." And it's not a "Holocaust movie." More than anything, *Big Sonia* is a story about humanity: our human potential to overcome even the worst of the world's sins and atrocities with love, compassion and understanding. It's a tale about survival, yes, but not only the heroic kind—the kind

that was forced upon Sonia and is forced upon other victims of genocide and hatred. It's also about the everyday acts of survival we must all undertake just to be human: to overlook slights and disappointments, to rise above bigotry and ignorance and self-doubt, to push for peace and forgiveness even when our instincts urge retribution or bitterness.

We premiered *Big Sonia* at bi-coastal film festivals the day after the 2016 presidential election. At the time, we had no way of knowing that the themes of our film would find new relevance in our current political moment. Sonia's life story has been called an antidote to the hate and fear we see around us, and we hope that is true. But the real lesson of *Big Sonia* is that we've *all* got the capacity to combat the worst humanity has to offer. Like Sonia, we all have the opportunity to create for others the places of comfort and connection where survival takes root.

With love and gratitude,

Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

Co-Directors

Big Sonia

Introducing *Big Sonia*

Teaching about the Holocaust is essential, and yet recent statistics show that many Americans simply do not know about it.¹ Sometimes the overwhelming numbers that died as a result of Hitler's rise to power is hard for the human mind to comprehend. In this film, however, the viewer learns about the Holocaust through the eyes of one person who lived through it and her family, who were forever shaped by the events of the 1940s.

Teenage Sonia Warshawski was living with her mother, father, sister, and brother in Międzyrzec, Poland, when the German army invaded. Her father and brother were shot, her sister disappeared and her survival was uncertain, and Sonia and her mother were forced to work as slave laborers until the day they were deported to the Majdanek death camp. After her mother died in the gas chamber, Sonia was sent first to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then to Bergen-Belsen, where she was finally liberated as the war drew to a close.

This film by her granddaughter gives students insight into both the horrors of the Holocaust as a whole and the profound effect that it had on one individual and succeeding generations. Now in her nineties, Sonia is a vibrant, busy woman who loves interacting with family and with the customers who come to her tailor shop. She speaks to school groups, prison inmates, and others about her experiences. Her story is one of unimaginable suffering, but also of hope, of resilience, and of a refusal to let herself hate. Classes viewing this film will have a memorable experience, a blend of factual knowledge of history and the personal story of a remarkable woman.

Film credits:

DIRECTORS: Leah Warshawski & Todd Soliday

WRITTEN BY: Eric Frith

PRODUCER: Leah Warshawski

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Dwayne J. Clark, Thomas Lee Wright

CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Claude and Bertina Thau,
Ni'Coel Stark

MUSIC: Brad Anthony Laina

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Todd Soliday

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/study-shows-americans-are-forgetting-about-holocaust-n865396>

An Introduction to the Holocaust in Poland

Enduring Understandings

- The actions and decisions of political leaders affect families on a deeply personal level.
- The Holocaust was the result of a series of events over a long period of time.
- First-hand accounts of events provide history with a sense of humanity and generate empathy for those who lived through those events.

Essential Questions

- What were the events that led to the separation of Sonia Warshawski's family?
- What was life like in a concentration camp?
- How were some of the camps liberated?
- How were other families affected by these same events?
- Did these kinds of events continue to happen after World War II?

Notes to the Teacher

For students who sometimes think their own parents are ancient, *Big Sonia* will be an eye-opening film. Sonia Warshawski is a 91-year-old Holocaust survivor who runs her own tailor shop and still finds time to speak to school groups, prison inmates, and others about the occupation of her home country of Poland by Hitler's army and its effort to destroy the Jewish community there. This lesson gives students some initial context for viewing the film and then asks them to research additional information.

In this lesson, students will research the historical events of the 1930s and 1940s that shaped the lives of families and individuals like Sonia. In small groups, students will use the IWitness video testimonies available from the archives of the USC Shoah Foundation as well as other resources to gain a broader perspective on the experiences of people in this time. Their research will be presented to their classmates in the form of a slide show, video, blog, or other style of oral presentation.

To use the IWitness archive at USC, go to <https://iwatch.usc.edu/SFI/>, which will require you to create an educator account prior to the start of the lesson. You should use your school email to set up your account to gain access to the full range of resources that the website has to offer. Once you have your account set up, you will want to watch the "What is IWitness" video on the homepage just to acclimate yourself with the project broadly so that you can provide guidance to students as they do their research.

The presentations require that the students use both primary and secondary sources in their research. Be sure to remind

students that primary sources are first-hand accounts of an event from people who were alive at the time. Examples of primary sources are the IWitness videos, diaries, letters, interviews, newspaper articles, documents, artifacts, and photographs. Secondary sources are one step removed from primary sources and often contain analysis or interpretation of how an event affected history. They often quote and refer to primary sources in their text. Examples of secondary sources include documentaries, textbooks, and other books about a subject written by people who did not experience events directly, and scholarly articles.

The lesson begins with a review of events leading up to the occupation of Poland by Germany and eventually to the ostracization of certain groups of people. Useful timelines for preparing yourself to review these events for your students can be found at these websites:

<https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1933-1938>

<https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1939-1941>

Both of these sites are part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website. This is an excellent resource for your students to use for their presentations as well.

If time permits, the Shoah Foundation also has testimonies from people who experienced other genocides and attempts by governments to eliminate groups of people; they would be very useful if you choose to develop an extension activity exploring other countries and places in the world that have traumatic histories.

For guidance on general principles for teaching about the Holocaust, you will find excellent advice at <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines>.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

Duration of lesson

3-4 one-hour class periods plus time to view the film

Assessments

Oral presentations

Research organization worksheets

Materials

Copies of **HANDOUTS 1** and **2**

Access to the internet through computers, iPads, or other personal devices for the following websites:

The USC Shoah Foundation

<https://sfi.usc.edu/collections>

The End Genocide website

<https://www.endgenocidenow.org/world-genocides>

The US Holocaust Memorial Museum site

<https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide>

Procedure

1. Before viewing *Big Sonia*, take sufficient time to go over with your students the events from 1933 to 1939 leading up to the invasion of Poland, drawing on your own knowledge and the first timeline suggested in Notes to the Teacher.
2. After reviewing the events that occurred from 1933 to 1939, tell students that they are going to view a film about a Holocaust survivor named Sonia Warshawski. Write her name on the board. Explain that they won't see the same horrors and hear the same stories they perhaps already know about the atrocities suffered by so many during this incredibly dark period in history. Tell them that this story is subtler than that and, most importantly, it is a story about hope. Explain that Sonia Warshawski is a Jewish woman from Poland who survived the Holocaust and started a new life with her husband in the United States. The film is about her choices and how she has made a life for herself as a mother, a widow, and a businesswoman while slowly affecting the lives of those in her community. The world continues to change around her and Sonia learns how to survive every step of the way.
3. Next, inform the students that after viewing the film, they will be doing research projects in small groups about various events in Sonia's life in the period leading up to and during the Holocaust.
4. Show the film, which has a run time of 93 minutes.
5. After viewing the film, ask students to make a list of the various events that occurred in Sonia's lifetime that led to the Holocaust and one of the events that happened during

her time in captivity. You may need to prompt them with questions to help them remember what they saw. For example: When did Germany occupy Poland? Why did the Nazis move into Poland? What happened to Sonia's family once Poland was occupied? Where did she go with her mother when the Nazis found their hiding place? What was life like in the concentration camps? What happened during liberation?

6. These questions should help your students compile a list of events similar to the ones below. These events will be the basis for their presentations. You should have at least one event for each of the small groups that will be researching these topics; a few more to give every group a choice would be a good idea.
 - A. September 1, 1939—German invasion of Poland
 - B. May 20, 1940—Auschwitz Concentration Camp is established
 - C. November 15, 1940—The Warsaw Ghetto is sealed
 - D. September 1, 1941—Jewish badges are required
 - E. April 1941, 1941—Krakow ghetto is sealed
 - F. October 1942–November 1943—Operation Reinhard
 - G. April 15, 1945—Liberation of Bergen-Belsen camp
7. Arrange students into groups of 2 or 3 based on the topic they are most interested in. Have them do some initial research on their event and determine which aspects of the event they would like to highlight in their presentation. Explain to them that they are responsible for researching more than what happened during their event. They must also research how people felt, what it was like to live under the new conditions, and what the motives were behind the event. Remind them that Sonia's experiences with some of these events are mentioned in the movie, but there is

room to explore each of them with greater depth. Push your students to consider what they would do if they faced these situations.

8. Distribute **HANDOUT 1: RESEARCH ORGANIZATION** and explain that it is designed to help the students approach researching their topic from both an academic and an empathetic view.
9. Allow students one class period to do their research and ask you questions. If you have not reviewed primary and secondary sources, you may want to work with your librarian to remind them of the difference. Encourage students to use the USC Shoah Foundation—<https://sfi.usc.edu/collections>, the End Genocide website—<https://www.endgenocidenow.org/world-genocides>, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum site —<https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide> when doing their research; be sure to demonstrate how to access the websites. Students can also use clips from interviews, interactive maps, diary entries, etc. to enhance their findings.
10. Once students have completed their research, they should begin creating their presentations. They have a choice of how they would like to present their findings. Once they decide if they will be making a video, slide show, or some other type of oral presentation, give them the rubric for the presentation. Review the rubric with the class. It is important that they see everything that is required of them before they begin creating their presentations. There is some flexibility in the rubric to allow for their creativity and to encourage them to work together. It is up to your discretion if you will allow another class period to create the presentations.

11. During the third or fourth class meeting, allow students to present their research. Each presentation should run no longer than 8 minutes but should be at least 6 minutes to really cover the event. After each presentation, allow time for the audience to ask questions.

Extension Activity

After they complete their presentations, consider assigning students an extension assignment that explores other genocides that have occurred. The USC Shoah Foundation site contains many interviews from survivors of genocides and massacres in other parts of the world.

For homework or classwork, ask students to watch an interview on the USC Shoah Foundation website from a survivor of a massacre other than the World War 2 Holocaust. Ask them to write a 3–5 paragraph paper that either compares the experiences of their chosen interviewee to the experiences of the people they researched in their project OR let them write a reflective response that asks them to consider why genocides and massacres happen.

**Handout 1 ► P. 1**

Organizer for Research

Student name: _____

Event to Research: _____

Directions: Use at least two primary sources such as interviews and two secondary sources such as historical research to learn about your event. Remember to include responses to the “W” Questions (Who, What, Where, When, and Why) to explain the event. Also include research that explains what happened to the people involved in the event. How were they affected? How did their lives change? Continue on a separate sheet of paper if necessary.

Primary Source 1:

Title _____

Author _____

Publication _____ Date _____

URL _____

Information found/significance:



Handout 1 ► P. 2

Organizer for Research

Primary Source 2:

Title _____

Author _____

Publication _____ Date _____

URL _____

Information found/significance:

Secondary Source 1:

Title _____

Author _____

Publication _____ Date _____

URL _____

Information found/significance:

**Handout 1 ► P. 3**

Organizer for Research

Secondary Source 2:

Title _____

Author _____

Publication _____ Date _____

URL _____

Information found/significance:

Additional Source:

Title _____

Author _____

Publication _____ Date _____

URL _____

Information found/significance:



Handout 2

Presentation Rubric: An Introduction to the Holocaust in Poland

Student name: _____

| Category | 10 | 7 | 4 | 1 |
|------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Research | Student accurately quotes, cites, and references researched material. Contains an MLA- or APA-formatted Works Cited page at the end of the presentation. | Student mostly quotes, cites and references researched material. Contains an MLA- or APA-formatted Works Cited page at the end of the presentation. | Student attempts to quote, cite, and reference researched material. Contains an attempted Works Cited Page at the end of the presentation. | Student makes no attempt to quote, cite, and reference researched material. Does not contain a formatted Works Cited page at the end of the presentation. |
| Content | Demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of the topic and answers all research questions. | Demonstrates some knowledge of the topic and answers at least 5 research questions. | Demonstrates knowledge of the topic and answers at least 3 research questions. | Reflects little to no understanding of the topic and does not answer the questions. |
| Analysis | Presentation clearly assesses the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources. | Presentation mostly assesses the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources. | Presentation attempts to assess the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources. | Presentation does not assess the impact of the event on the people involved by using primary sources. |
| Presentation | Presenters were engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Engaged their classmates through interactive, creative activities. | Presenters were mostly engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Engaged their classmates through interactive, creative activities. | Presenters struggled to be engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Attempted to engage their classmates. | Presenters were not engaged and enthusiastic about their topic. Did not engage their classmates through interactive, creative activities. |
| Length | Presentation is at least 6-8 minutes in length. | Presentation is at least 5 minutes in length. | Presentation is at least 4 minutes in length. | Presentation is fewer than 4 minutes in length. |
| Group Work | Presentation clearly illustrates that the group worked well together. | Presentation attempts to illustrate that the group worked well together. | Presentation was clearly designed by only one or two members of the group. | Presentation was created and delivered by one group member. |
| Primary Sources | Includes at least 3 primary sources in the presentation. | Includes at least 2 primary sources in the presentation. | Includes 1 primary source in the presentation. | No primary sources in the presentation. |

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