

A PROMISE TO MY FATHER



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Discussion Guide

For community screenings, panels, and workshops, and for college courses and seminars

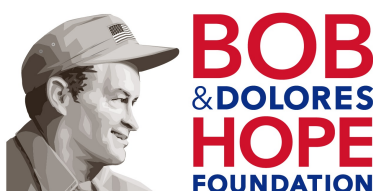


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Facilitation Guidelines

Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end your meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality and only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that bothers you, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.

Introduction to the Film



A Promise to My Father follows Holocaust survivor Israel “Izzy” Arbeiter on an emotional and courageous return to the places where his life was forever changed. Decades after World War II, Izzy embarks on a powerful journey back to Poland and Germany to honor a vow he made to his father during the Holocaust: to survive, remember, share their story, and maintain their traditions. As part of this pilgrimage, he attempts to recover personal artifacts his family buried beneath their home in Plock, Poland, in 1939, just before the German invasion.

The film traces Izzy’s path through loss, survival, and remembrance culminating in his return to Treblinka’s death camp and Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was imprisoned and endured unspeakable horrors. Along the way, he reflects on the impact of dehumanization, the cost of silence, and the ethical choices that define humanity. More than a historical recounting, *A Promise to My Father* is a testament to resilience, the power of recollection, and the enduring importance of standing up against hatred and intolerance.

Letter from the WWII Foundation

Storytelling is at the core of the WWII Foundation, an organization founded in 2011 with a mission to raise awareness and appreciation, through film, of the many sacrifices made by American men and women in securing our basic freedoms. Humankind is hardwired to respond to “once upon a time,” and the Foundation is singularly positioned to leaven the facts and statistics of history, bringing them to life through stories. Our goal is to instill the lessons the War taught us and make them accessible, relatable, and impactful at no cost to students, educators, veterans, or the public. We don’t produce World War II films. We produce documentary films on individual personal stories from World War II. I think there’s a significant difference.



We educate younger generations about the war. We do not approach this in the way WE think is best. We teach based on how students are learning and what tools they themselves are utilizing today to explore history, whether that be through strong visual storytelling in films that capture their attention and imagination or by utilizing new storytelling technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR).

We distribute much of this content through social media channels, as well as via traditional national and international television networks. We film all these documentaries, narrated by some of the biggest names in television, music, sports, and the movies, in the locations where the events unfolded during the war. Often, we bring back a veteran or survivor with us to where their own individual WWII story began and ended. Our studio is in Europe, the Pacific, and the Far East.

We hope these award-winning films, which rank among the top five most-requested programs nationally by PBS and its affiliates, will motivate not only students but also everyone to learn more about this critical period in world history. The lessons of which still strongly resonate today. We make all these resources available for free to anyone who wants to explore World War II’s impact on the lives of those who lived through it.

- Tim Gray, Writer, Producer, and Director, The World War II Foundation and Tim Gray Media

To learn more about the WWII Foundation visit <https://wwiifoundation.org/about/>

Healing Through Recollection: The Lifelong Impact of the Holocaust



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yad_Vashem_Hall_of_Names_by_David_Shankbone.jpg

The impact of the Holocaust did not end for survivors when Allied forces liberated the concentration camps in 1945. For most, if not all survivors, the physical and emotional toll of what they endured affected the rest of their lives. Individuals like Israel “Izzy” Arbeiter carried profound psychological scars shaped by the loss of their families, homes, and identities. Many experienced nightmares, unprocessed grief, depression, and survivor’s guilt—the painful question of why they lived when so many others did not.

In *A Promise to My Father*, Izzy retraces the harrowing journey from what was once his vibrant hometown of Plock, Poland, through Nazi labor camps, to the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As he walks through the remnants of the sites where he was once imprisoned and brutalized, his reflections reveal how some of the most painful moments of his life still live within him. One of the most powerful moments in the film occurs when Izzy describes recognizing he had been liberated and yells through tears, “Who am I?” This simple but powerful question captures the deep disorientation, isolation, and identity loss that many survivors experienced after the war. The Nazis’ dehumanization process, which included tattooing numbers on prisoners’ arms and stripping them of their loved ones, culture, and names, was designed to erase both individual and collective identity. Izzy’s return to these places decades later is both a confrontation with that erasure and a quiet, powerful reclamation of self.

By telling his story, he shows that recollection can be a path to healing. He honors those who helped him survive, mourns those who were lost, and safeguards personal artifacts that symbolize resilience, continuity, and remembrance. These moments are about more than just looking back. They are about finding peace, sharing truth, and using memory as a powerful act of resistance against erasure.



Discussion Questions

- 1.** What does the film teach us about the connection between memory and identity? How do our personal and collective memories shape who we are?
- 2.** What are different ways the emotional and psychological impact of the Holocaust might be reflected in the lives of survivors like Izzy? How might those effects show up in their memories, relationships, identity, or daily lives, even many years after liberation?
- 3.** How can preserving and sharing personal stories serve as a form of healing and a way to protect the truth for future generations? Can you think of a time where you felt better after sharing a personal story or truth?
- 4.** Izzy told his story with emotional rawness and unfiltered truth, even when some parts were difficult to hear. How does this candid level of truth-telling shape our understanding of the Holocaust and deepen our empathy and responsibility as listeners?
- 5.** In what ways does Izzy's story help us better understand modern-day conversations about oppression, trauma, identity, injustice, and healing? How can we apply these lessons today?

Historical Witnessing: Listening, Learning, and Recognizing Injustice



Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have to remember, teach, and understand the human experiences behind historical events. Beyond remembrance of the Holocaust, survivor stories play a crucial role in preventing future atrocities.



The Holocaust did not happen overnight. It was the result of rising hate, policies, propaganda, and indifference.

Centering survivor stories increases the ability to recognize antisemitism, racism, and injustice and how they can begin in small, often overlooked ways. In *A Promise to My Father*, Israel “Izzy” Arbeiter brings the gradual stages of genocide to life by guiding viewers through his deeply personal journey from the rise of antisemitic laws in Poland, to the loss of his family, and ultimately to his imprisonment in Nazi labor camps and at Auschwitz. His journey illustrates how the Holocaust followed the systematic path outlined in [Gregory Stanton’s 10 Stages of Genocide](#), which emphasizes how this process can be identified and interrupted if people are empowered to act. The ten stages of genocide are: classification, symbolization, discrimination, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, persecution, extermination, and denial.

Izzy describes how Nazi forces occupied Poland where the Jewish population was immediately **classified** and segregated away from their homes. They were then **symbolized** by forced identifiers such as armbands and yellow badges shaped like the Star of David. The creation of ghettos and antisemitic laws, such as Germany’s Nuremberg Laws of 1935, reflect the stage of **discrimination**, stripping the Jewish population of rights, employment, and citizenship. **Dehumanization** followed, as Jewish people were portrayed as subhuman and subjected to treatment that stripped them of dignity, identity, and personhood. The genocide became more structured through **organization**, with the German government overseeing the creation of military and paramilitary forces such as the SS to carry out increasingly violent and oppressive policies. **Polarization** followed through widespread media and propaganda that fueled public hatred and normalized violence.

As the regime progressed toward **preparation**, the Nazis coordinated the “Final Solution,” a formalized plan to exterminate the Jewish people and other marginalized groups leading to mass deportations to concentration camps like Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau, where Izzy was imprisoned. He shares detailed stories of the **persecution** that occurred inside of the camps including the sorting process where some victims became forced labor, while others faced

immediate death, marking the shift into **extermination**.

A Promise to My Father also highlights denial, as Izzy recalls how the Nazis attempted to erase evidence of their crimes by burning bodies, destroying records, and covering up mass graves. He even confronts a former German soldier who denies responsibility or accountability for his role in the genocide. By tracing the evolution of genocide through Izzy’s lived experience, *A Promise to My Father* helps viewers grasp how oral testimonies are not only essential for learning about historical events, but also help to recognize dangerous patterns and safeguard humanity against future atrocities.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Izzy’s story and the stories of other survivors help transform the Holocaust from a historical event into a human experience in ways that facts, timelines, or statistics alone cannot?
2. In addition to tattooing numbers on victims, what were other ways the Nazis tried to control and dehumanize people during the Holocaust? What messages were these actions meant to send, and how did survivors like Izzy respond to or resist that dehumanization?
3. In *A Promise to My Father* and in Holocaust history more broadly, how did gradual changes in policy, laws, forced identifiers such as the Star of David badges, or restrictions on daily life for Jewish communities, set the stage for more violent and widespread actions later on?
4. How did propaganda like media, public speeches, and messaging shape public opinion and make discrimination during the Holocaust seem acceptable or justified? Can you think of other times in history or today when propaganda has been used to spread injustice?
5. What role do we play as listeners and learners in preserving the truth of events like the Holocaust? What responsibilities come with being a “witness” to a survivor’s story?

Preserving Culture as Resistance



In *A Promise to My Father*, Israel “Izzy” Arbeiter reminds us that survival is not only about staying alive, it’s also about holding on to identity, memory, and meaning in the face of unimaginable loss. Throughout the film, Izzy reflects on the profound significance of preserving historical artifacts and honoring cultural traditions. As he retraces his steps through the sites of his family’s separation and his own imprisonment, he holds close the memory of his loved ones through the preserved items that remain: photographs, documents, a family ring, and other historical documents. These artifacts are evidence of life before genocide, proof of an identity that the Nazis sought to erase, and physical links for the generations that come after.

Cultural traditions are practices that carry meaning across generations, such as lighting candles, telling stories at the dinner table, observing holidays, speaking a language, or even sharing recipes. These practices connect individuals to a larger cultural and familial identity within communities. Artifacts help sustain these traditions by anchoring them in something tangible such as photos, creative works, traditional clothing, or handwritten recipes that keeps memory alive and invites continuity even after displacement and loss.

Yet preserving tradition takes commitment, especially when that tradition has been threatened with erasure. That commitment is embodied in the promise Izzy made to his father before they were separated: to survive, to tell their story, and to make sure that the traditions continue on. In choosing to remember and share, he carries forward both personal and collective resilience.



This reflects a broader truth: When oppressive regimes attempt to destroy a community of people, they don't only target bodies, they target heritage. Holding onto culture, rituals, and heirlooms becomes a radical statement: We were here. We are still here.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do oppressive regimes often try to erase cultural practices and family histories, making it challenging, and even risky, to preserve cultural traditions during times of oppression or displacement? What does that tell us about the power of tradition?
2. Think about some of the difficult or tragic events you've seen in the news, whether in your community, across the country, or around the world. How might traditions like storytelling, food, language, or holidays help communities come together, honor what was lost, and begin to heal?
3. In what ways do physical artifacts, like photos, letters, or belongings, serve as more than just objects? What meanings do they carry?
4. Preserving cultural traditions is not a passive act. It takes intention, effort, and courage. What are some examples in the film of Izzy holding onto or reclaiming culture and what emotions did those moments bring up? Can you think of a time when you or someone in your family or community took steps to keep a cultural tradition alive? Why was that important?
5. Why is preserving tradition an act of resilience? How can people today help ensure that traditions are not lost?

The Power of Small Acts: Courage in the Face of Cruelty



United Nations <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/holocaust-remembrance-dignity-and-human-rights>

A Promise to My Father reminds us that even in the most inhumane conditions, small acts of kindness can have extraordinary impact. Israel “Izzy” Arbeiter’s life was spared due in part to the moral courage of individuals who chose to help him, at great personal risk. People like Hanna and Roth, whose actions—providing shelter, sharing food, or simply offering a moment of humanity—may have seemed small, but ultimately became acts of survival. The choices that they made did not just affect Izzy’s life; they shaped the lives of his children, grandchildren, and the many people he went on to educate. These upstanders weren’t powerful officials or political leaders. They were ordinary people who chose compassion over fear, and justice over silence. Even in oppressive systems, individuals still have the power to choose what is right.

Throughout the Holocaust, countless individuals, both Jewish and non-Jewish, engaged in everyday acts of compassion and resistance in defiance of Nazi control. In some cases, resistance took the form of secret religious rituals, underground education, and the creation of poetry, songs, and diaries, like Anne Frank’s diary (published posthumously after the war as *The Diary of a Young Girl*). Historians like Emanuel Ringelblum, who spearheaded the Oyneg Shabes Archive in the Warsaw Ghetto, risked their lives to document daily realities, understanding the urgent need to preserve historical truth. Rescue efforts by people like Irena Sendler, who helped 2,000 children escape out of the Warsaw Ghetto, or people who hid Jewish families in their homes, showed how ethical decisions could save lives despite great personal risk. Even in concentration camps, people resisted through everyday defiance: sharing food, offering comfort, or refusing to abandon their moral compass. These actions, large and small, demonstrate that in the face of terror, people still had the power to choose empathy, courage, and resistance.



One of the film's most powerful calls to action is its emphasis on the power and responsibility of witnessing. When Izzy speaks to students and revisits the places where he suffered, he's not just remembering, he's teaching. And for those who hear his story, it becomes more than history; it becomes a responsibility. To bear witness is to take what we've heard and use it to promote empathy, challenge hate, and build understanding in our own communities.

Discussion Questions

- 1.** How can ordinary people make extraordinary choices, even in dangerous or unjust systems? How do small acts of kindness, like sharing food or offering shelter, become powerful acts of resistance in tough times?
- 2.** How does learning about Izzy's experience challenge you to think about your own values, choices, and role in standing up to injustice?
- 3.** What does it mean to be a witness to someone else's truth, and how can we carry that forward?
- 4.** Think about a time when you saw someone stand up for what was right, even when it was difficult. What impact did that have?
- 5.** In what ways can each of us be "witnesses" today in our own communities? How can we respond when we see injustice or hate?

Additional Resources

About Life After the Holocaust

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/about-life-after-the-holocaust?series=89>

Defining 'Genocide' After World War II

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/defining-genocide-after-world-war-ii>

Emanuel Ringelblum and The Oyneg Shabes Archive

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/emanuel-ringelblum-and-oyneg-shabes-archive>

Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. London: Longman, 1989. (Note: First Published in 1947)

Nazi Propaganda

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-propaganda>

Meet the Hero: Irena Sendler

<https://www.lowellmilkencenter.org/programs/projects/view/life-in-a-jar/hero>

Survivor Reflections and Testimonies

<https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-reflections-testimonies>

The Aftermath of the Holocaust: Effects on Survivors

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-aftermath-of-the-holocaust?>

The Genocide Education Project

https://genocideeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten_stages_of_genocide.pdf

The Nuremberg Race Laws

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/nuremberg-laws>

The Stages of Genocide - Graphic Novels

https://www.dhhrm.org/graphic_novels/

Timeline of WWII

<https://wwiifoundation.org/timeline-of-wwii/>

Visual History Archive - (Free registration)

<https://vha.usc.edu/home>



Film Credits

DIRECTOR

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Tim Gray

PRODUCER

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EDITOR, VIDEOGRAPHER

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Roger Cichy

Educating for Global Understanding

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