

My Father's Secrets



Teacher Resource Package Prepared By:

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Synopsis

Country of Origin: France/Belgium

Release Year: 2022

Director: Vera Belmont

Runtime: 74 minutes

Language: French

Themes: Holocaust, Coming of Age, Generational Trauma, Father-Son Relationships

Based on the graphic novel by renowned Israeli author and cartoonist Michel Kichka, *My Father's Secret* is a poignant story of a family living in the shadow of the Holocaust. Growing up in 1960s Belgium, Michel and his younger brother Charly know that their father is hiding a secret but his refusal to speak about his past casts a shadow on their otherwise happy childhood. Similar to *Maus*, the choice to render the story through animation allows the viewer to process a tale of generational trauma at a distance while underscoring the transformative power that art played in Michel's relationship with his father.

Curriculum Links

My Father's Secrets can be used as part of the Grade 6 Social Studies curriculum and as part of the Media Literacy component of the English curriculum from Grades 5-8.

Context: Introduction to the Holocaust

Though the film takes place after WWII, the Holocaust looms large throughout the film as it is Henri's experiences as a concentration camp survivor that forms the secrets of the title. Before viewing the film, teachers may want to devote a lesson or two to about the Holocaust so that they can better understand the nature of the secrets that Henri is keeping from his children. There are a number of websites that primary school teachers can access for more information about teaching the Holocaust in the late primary or middle school years such as the ones listed below:

Holocaust Educational Trust

[https://www.het.org.uk/images/downloads/Primary/A Guide for Primary School Teachers.pdf](https://www.het.org.uk/images/downloads/Primary/A_Guide_for_Primary_School_Teachers.pdf)

University of Toronto Libraries (list of Holocaust related books with specific age recommendations:

<https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/c.php?g=252107&p=1670633>

Scholastic

<https://classroommagazines.scholastic.com/support/holocaust-teacher.html>

Echoes and Reflections

<https://echoesandreflections.org/>

For specific information about Belgium Jewry during WWII, teachers can consult the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/belgium>

Classroom Exercise: Identifying Photos

Though most of the film is animated, there are a few instances where real photographs relating to the Holocaust are used. Listed below are 5 photographs that feature in the film. Teachers can use these photos as part of their background lesson before screening the film:



Photo 1: Entrance to Auschwitz with Arbeit Macht Frei (Work Makes You Free) sign

Photo 2: Railroad leading to Auschwitz Birkenau

Photo 3: Homosexual prisoners wearing pink triangle in Sachsenhausen Camp, 1938

Photo 4: Warsaw Uprising photo 1943

Photo 5: Deportation Wagon

Focus Question: Why does the director insert these real photos into an animated film?
What effect does it have on the viewer?

Context: Eichmann Trial

Henri only begins to open up about his war experiences after Adolf Eichmann was tried and executed in Israel. In order to understand the significance of this event, students should become familiar with who Eichmann was, what crimes he committed and how he tried to justify his actions by claiming that he was just a cog in the Nazi machinery.

There are several age-appropriate resources that teachers can access about Eichmann and his trial before watching the film. Listed below are some classroom resources teachers can access:

Holocaust Education Map

<https://teachholocaust.org/lesson/the-eichmann-trial/>

Yad Vashem

<https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/eichmann-trial-classroom-use.html>

Remember.org

<https://remember.org/eichmann/timeline>

Remember.org

<https://remember.org/eichmann/study>

Focus Question:

Why was Henri able to overcome his shame and talk about his war experiences only after Eichmann was tried and executed?

Key quote: "I lost a son and I have three other children. Not a day goes by when I don't think of them. We the survivors stayed silent for years. We were ashamed at what the Nazis did to us, making us subhuman, humiliating us a little more every day. We were ashamed of having survived, of not having to be able to save those nearest to us, those dearest to us. But not talking about them was akin to murdering them all over again." (Henri, in answer to Michel's question at 25 year liberation of Auschwitz event)

Context: Graphic Novel to Animated Film to Political Cartoonist

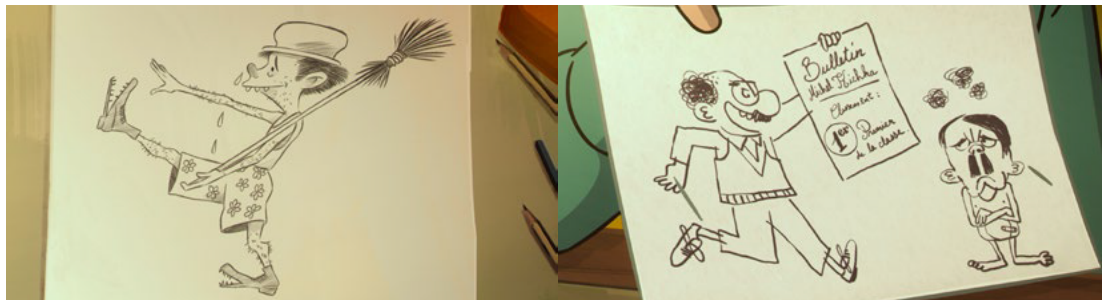
My Father's Secrets is based on the graphic novel *Second Generation: What I Didn't Tell My Father* by political cartoonist, Michel Kichka. The choice to adapt the book to an animated film is not just appropriate to the novel's style of storytelling, but it also relates thematically to the father-son relationship between Michel and Henri. Though their relationship is fraught with unspoken issues, father and son bond over their shared love of caricature. As Michel notes, "we'd found a common language that didn't need words."

While animation makes some of the more disturbing elements of Henri's concentration camp experiences more accessible to a younger audience, the added element of caricature illustrates how humour can be weaponized to reduce a frightening situation or tyrannical figure into something ridiculous. In teaching Michel how to caricature Hitler, Michel proudly tells his son that "you are my revenge against Hitler."

In addition to being the author and illustrator of graphic novels, Michel Kichka is one of Israel's leading political cartoonists. As part of media literacy studies, teachers could build from the caricatures depicted in *My Father's Secrets* to explore the way editorial cartoons can make effective political commentary through caricature. Kichka belongs to an organisation called Cartooning for Peace that encourages students to engage with global issues by making them accessible through caricature. Education is a major part of their mandate and teachers can find valuable resources on their website (<https://www.cartooningforpeace.org/en/educational-projects/>) to use in their classrooms to further explore how effective cartoons can be in conveying a serious message.

Related Activity

Below are two caricatures that appear in the film. Students should look at them and answer the questions below:



1. Who is being caricatured?
2. How does the imagery lampoon the person being mocked?
3. What is the effect on the viewer?
4. Find a political cartoon in your local newspaper or online and discuss what makes it effective.
5. Draw your own cartoon based on an issue that features prominently in the news (e.g. climate change, free speech, Canadian politics, etc.)

Theme: Trauma and Inherited Trauma

Though it is only Henri who suffered the trauma of Auschwitz firsthand, the rest of his family bear the burden of second generation, inherited trauma. Without even knowing the details of their father's experience, Henri's children grow up under the shadow of the Holocaust. Where some survivors process their trauma by talking about the camps, Henri chooses silence. Though his rationale for this may be to protect his children, the result has the opposite effect; his children absorb his dark moods and internalise his silent suffering. It is no surprise that Michel suffers nightmares and Charly wets the bed. The two daughters, on the other hand, deal with the overwhelming sadness that permeates the house by leaving Belgium as soon as they are old enough to do so. In real life, Michel's brother committed suicide. Though the film portrays Charly's death as an accident, Michel's outpouring of repressed rage after the funeral reflects the pent up resentment he has carried towards his father due to what he perceives was his emotional neglect of his children. The relationship between Henri and Michel can only be repaired after Henri finally opens up to Michel about his experiences and the two visit Auschwitz together: "I was finally let into the most intimate part of his life. It was all for me. He finally agreed to share his past. He asked me to pass it on which is what I am doing today."

Focus Questions

1. Why do Michel and Charly try to find out what their father is doing in his study even when they know it is something that will upset them?
2. In what ways can we see that their father's secrets take an emotional toll on the two boys?
3. How do Michel's two sisters deal with their father's secrets? Why do you think they differ in their attitudes to Michel and Charly?

4. Though she was never in a concentration camp, Michel's mother was hidden during the war and bears her own scars. How does this affect the way she raises her children?
5. Why do you think Michel insists on keeping his father's last name even when it is suggested that he change it to something more Hebrew-sounding when he moves to Israel?

Theme: Religion and Prejudice

Though he is born into a Jewish family, religion does not play a large role in Michel's life. His father refuses to set foot in a synagogue because he believes that God has abandoned the Jewish people. By the same token, both of Michel's parents are wary of all non-Jews, believing that they are all anti-Semitic. When Michel tries to tell Henri that his teacher saved Jews during the war, his father is dubious; in his opinion, it was far more likely that the teacher was complicit in ridding Belgium of Jews than he was in saving them. Similarly, Michel's mother is worried about her sons going to the parties of non-Jewish girls and refers to Michel's girlfriend Marilyn as a "goy", a Yiddish derogatory term for non-Jews. Marilyn's father is no more welcoming of his daughter's Jewish boyfriend whom he refers to as "that little Jew." At school, Michel is accused of killing Christ, but all is forgiven when he scores a goal for the football team. Mutual distrust between Jews and Christians is obvious in various points of the film, but for the most part, it is evident mostly in the older generation.

Focus Questions:

1. Why does Michel's dad allow Michel to have a bar mitzvah even though he does not believe in God? Why is it important for Michel's mother for her son to have a bar mitzvah?
2. What replaces religion as a source of expressing Judaism for the Kichka family?
3. What are the advantages of being one of only a handful of Jews at school? What are some of the disadvantages? Provide specific examples.
4. One of the few boys who immediately accepts Michel and Charly at boarding school is Bouba, from the Belgian Congo. Why is he immediately friendly towards the boys?
5. Why do you think Michel moves to Israel after rejecting his parents' negative attitude towards non-Jews?

General Discussion Questions

1. The film begins with Michel and Charly needing to be bailed out of a police station by their mother. Why does their father refuse to ever set foot in a police station?
2. What is the first clue that Michel's parents are different from other people's parents? What is the "telephone number" on their arm?
3. Why does Michel's mother seem so overprotective of her children?
4. Michel sneaks into Henri's office and sees drawings of Auschwitz. He says "I was afraid I wouldn't recognise [my father]. But more afraid that I would recognise him." What does he mean by this?
5. Why does Henri panic when a ticket inspector enters their train carriage en route to boarding school?
6. Why does Henri become so obsessed with telling his Holocaust experiences to everyone after the Eichmann trial except for his own children? What effect does that have on the family?
7. Why does Michel feel guilty after Charly's death? How does the relationship between the two brothers change over the course of the film?
8. How is Michel's life on kibbutz different than his life in Belgium? How does he change as a person?
9. Why is it significant that the film is animated rather than live action? Do you think it would be more or less effective if it weren't animated? Why?
10. As they travel together to Auschwitz, Michel draws a caricature of his father wearing all of his medals. Do you see Henri as a hero? Why/why not?

References

(All websites cited are from May, 2023)

Holocaust Educational Trust

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