

PRISONER *of* HER PAST

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION GUIDE

Albo ty. Pamiętasz to zdjęcie.
To twój dziadek.

EST. 1966
KARTEMQUIN 
FILMS

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This discussion guide is intended for community organizations hosting screenings of the film *Prisoner of Her Past*. It is designed to encourage discussion around a wide range of issues addressed in the film. Depending on the nature of your screening event, you may want to pick and choose from the below topics or create your own list. This guide is a jumping-off point for your community screening and can be followed as closely or loosely as you would like.

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REPORT TO US ABOUT YOUR *PRISONER OF HER PAST* EVENT:

Please send us as much information as you can about the event you hosted, including photos, interviews with participants and speakers and potential further actions/next steps.

Send it to:
info@kartemquin.com

Thank you!

FROM HOWARD REICH

Though “Prisoner of Her Past” has been shown around the world and has aired on PBS in the United States more than 510 times in 140 markets, its greatest power may be in the classroom. I say that because of so many experiences I’ve had speaking to college, high school and middle-school students across the country. Let me tell you about one of them.

A couple of years ago, I was showing the film to high schoolers attending a special summer session at Northwestern University. It was a wonderful gathering of youngsters of many races and ethnicities, yet I wondered whether “Prisoner of Her Past” would mean anything to them. Could kids in 21st Century America really relate to the story of my mother, who is reliving traumas she experienced in Eastern Europe during WWII?

It all seemed a bit remote. But the young men and women who crowded into the classroom gave me a swift education in their sophistication, sensitivity and wisdom.

We were screening “Prisoner of Her Past” for journalism students at Northwestern’s National High School Institute, famously known as the “cherubs” program. Bringing the film here was going to be particularly meaningful for me, because I had been a journalism “cherub” myself – in 1971!

But as the students settled into their seats – talking, laughing, joking – I feared they might feel that “Prisoner of Her Past” belonged to some distant time and place. Once the screening began, their silence seemed to confirm my suspicious.

As the story progressed, however, they gasped at particular passages, laughed at others, then – at the film’s end – burst into shattering applause. The house lights went up, and they proceeded to shower me with savvy questions. **How did it feel to switch from being a lifelong print journalist to working in film?** (Thrilling and scary.) **How did I deal with the emotion of telling such a personal story?** (With some difficulty.) **How did I get people in Poland and Ukraine to open up to me?** (They seemed eager to talk). **How did my family respond to the idea of making the film?** (With tremendous support.)

The questions kept coming for over an hour.

Then something even more startling happened. After the Q-and-A session ended, a large group of kids surged to the front of the room to tell me their own stories, one-on-one. Many wept as they recounted what happened to their grandparents in Europe, and how similar their family narratives were to mine. Others told me about relatives who experienced horrors in Japan during World War II ... and only reluctantly told their grandchildren the tale. Over and over, I was struck by the maturity of these students, their awareness of the suffering of their elders and their own heroism in sharing this information with me. Many said they were determined to tell these stories through the course of their careers, to keep the memories alive, to try to help others.

This session was not unique. I’ve seen it repeated uncounted times as I’ve spoken to students across the United States.

The students tell me how much the story of “Prisoner of Her Past” means to them and how much it applies to the traumas they see around them, whether in person, via friends or on the TV news.

To me, that’s the ultimate value of “Prisoner of Her Past” – its ability to enlighten students about the world they live in, and about themselves. --- **Howard Reich**



Filmmakers Gordon Quinn and Howard Reich

SCREENING GOALS

This section of the Community Guide is to help you come up with some goals that you want your screening of *Prisoner of her Past* to achieve. Below are some ideas you can aim for at your community screening.

- **Have a Community Discussion to Encourage Action**

A community screening can be an effective way to partner with organizations whose work you want to highlight and help spread their mission to your audience. These may be organizations such as Care, Human Rights Watch, UNIFEM, or local organizations doing work related to genocide, childhood trauma, disaster relief, and refugee assistance. Even though *Prisoner of her Past* is about events that have already happened, it can be used to unite people around an issue that is still occurring, just as in the film, when Howard Reich uses his mother's story to help young Katrina survivors.

- **Educate about the Holocaust**

Organize a screening of *Prisoner of her Past* at your local history museum, community center, or faith-based institution. The documentary contains a wealth of information about the Holocaust in Poland, where over two million Jews were executed, more than from any other country. The film also raises issues about the aftermath and repercussions of genocide.

- **Raise Awareness about PTSD**

PTSD is an issue that faces not only veterans but anyone who has survived a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster or war, as you have seen in *Prisoner of her Past*. If members of your community have been affected by a traumatic event, a screening of *Prisoner of her Past* will encourage support for their struggle and start a dialogue about the issue.

- **Engage Elderly Communities**

The issues addressed in *Prisoner of her Past* are shared by many members of the aging and elderly community. It can be screened at an assisted living center or nursing home, a senior citizens community, or any institution with elderly members. Organizing a screening of *Prisoner of her Past* is an effective way to start a community discussion around the issues of aging.

- **Reach Out To Refugees**

Displaced people are everywhere. They have fled their homes for a host of reasons, including famine, war, political persecution and natural disaster. Work with a local refugee assistance organization in your area to bring potential speakers to your event and to raise awareness in your community about the issues and needs of displaced people who live in your town.

Selected Individuals Featured:

- Howard Reich – *Chicago Tribune* journalist, author of *Prisoner of her Past: a Son's Memoir*
- Sonia Reich – mother of Howard Reich
- Leon Slominski – cousin of Sonia Reich
- Peter Slominski – son of Leon Slominski
- Irene Tannen – aunt of Sonia Reich and Leon Slominski
- Barb Reich-Abramovitz- sister of Howard Reich
- Shirley Fadim - Sonia's cousin (who met her at the boat when she arrived in the USA)

Topics and Issues Relevant:

- The Holocaust
- Childhood Trauma
- PTSD and late-onset PTSD (also called Delayed-onset PTSD)
- Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma
- Aging & Mental Health
- Women and War
- Effects of War on Civilian Populations
- Surviving Disaster
- Child survivors of Hurricane Katrina
- Journalism

DISCUSSION IDEAS

Resiliency and Survival

Shirley Fadim, Sonia's cousin, says of Sonia: "[She was] a very stubborn little girl, and that's why she survived." Do you agree? What other attributes and personality traits do you think might help someone get through a disaster?

Telling Your Story

In *Prisoner of her Past*, psychologists place much emphasis on the value of telling your story after something painful or traumatic has happened to you. Though this is not necessarily a panacea, in many cases it is believed to help. What elements of your own life can you see in the film? Do you know someone who has experienced trauma who might benefit from telling their story? In what way can telling the story help a trauma survivor to heal? Are there instances in which not telling a story may be preferred?

Escape

Howard Reich used immersion in music and the piano to escape the fighting of his family. Do you have something you use to escape when you are feeling stressed? If so, talk about what it is and why you think it helps.

Talking Back

If you could ask any character from the film a question, who would you ask and what would it be? Think about any unanswered questions the film left you with. What are you curious about now that you did not think about before watching the film?

Sharing Stories of the Holocaust

Howard Reich did not know the extent of the Holocaust's effect on his mother until she showed signs of late-onset PTSD. This caused him to delve more deeply into her past. How do you think the lives of Howard and Sonia would have been different had she been able to speak with him about what happened to her during the Holocaust? Do you think it is important to share these stories? Why or why not?

Trauma in Children vs Adults

Based on the stories in *Prisoner of her Past*, how do you think the effects of childhood trauma differ from trauma experienced as an adult? What solutions do you foresee for helping children who have experienced trauma? What special considerations should be taken into account when attempting to help children who have experienced trauma?

Diagnosing PTSD

Do you think some of the actions described by Howard and his sister in the film, before Sonia runs away from her home in Skokie, may also qualify as symptoms of PTSD? What different kinds of PTSD are there, and how do you distinguish normal responses to trauma from this illness? Is there even a normal response to trauma?

ORGANIZATIONS RELATED TO *PRISONER OF HER PAST*:

Below is a list of organizations you may want to include as a partner, panelist, or speaker at your *Prisoner of her Past* event. These are national organizations whose missions are related to the issues addressed in the film.

- UNIFEM <http://www.unwomen.org>
- Care <http://www.care.org>
- Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org>
- OWL <http://www.owl-national.org/>
- Red Cross <http://www.redcross.org>
- About Face <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/AboutFace/>