

# MARTHA, A SHORT FILM

EXAMINING THE IMPACT AND LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH ONE FAMILY

## LESSON



### LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to...

- understand the impact and legacy of the Holocaust through short film.
- gain perspective of the Holocaust through a descendant of a Holocaust survivor.
- connect to one Jewish family's storytelling journey using the student's personal experience of storytelling to build relevance.

**SUGGESTED DURATION: 60  
MINUTES OR  
ONE CLASS PERIOD**

**GRADES: 10+**



<https://www.nfb.ca/film/martha/>

### INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM:

The Canadian short film Martha features Vancouver filmmaker Daniel and his grandmother, Martha. It tells the story of Martha's family and their experiences during the Holocaust, including persecution by the Nazis, internment in a ghetto, and deportation by cattle car to the Auschwitz death camp. It is a story of loss and generational trauma, but also of determination and resilience.

## ACTIVITY 1: MARTHA, DAN, AND INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT

In this lesson, students will watch the short film, *Martha*, and examine the film through individual and group activities.

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1. The day before the lesson, assign the student homework [Storytelling and Memory](#). Students will be expected to hand in the sheet for completion but not for content review (due to privacy).
    - Alternatively, this activity sheet can be done as a bell-ringer activity for 5 minutes or turned into a virtual discussion post.
  2. To start the lesson, the educator shares their own story with students based on the storytelling and memory activity sheet. Afterwards, please open the floor for students to share their stories.
  3. Ask the class the following question and have a group discussion.
    - Do you think the story you wrote down, and the others presented, are important to live on through memory?
  4. The educator briefly introduces *Martha*, then plays the film in its entirety.
    - Educators can choose to have students take notes or write down questions during the film, if it is not distracting.
  5. After the film, the educator passes out [Student Reading: Intergenerational Trauma](#). Students have 5 minutes to read and another 5 minutes to discuss with a classmate next to them.
    - Students can discuss either two items that stood out or two questions they have.
    - This is also a good time to cover any general questions or misconceptions from students about the film before moving forward.
  6. The educator now divides students into two topic-based groups.
    - One group will learn about and complete an activity on the Holocaust's impact on Martha's life.
    - The other group will learn about and complete an activity on the Holocaust's impact on Dan's life.
  7. Each group is provided with a reading of either [Student Reading: Biography of Martha Katz](#) or [Student Reading: Thoughts and Reflections by Dan Schubert](#), and an activity sheet, either [Activity: Martha Katz](#) or [Activity: Dan Schubert](#).
  8. During the group work time, which lasts 20 minutes, students are expected to do the following:
    - Read the Student Readings either individually or select a classmate to read aloud.
    - Complete activity sheet via group discussion. Students should visually organize their discussion either with a mind map, a table, 2D art, or written paragraphs.
    - If students have school-provided electronic devices, they can rewatch scenes from the film to inform their responses.
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9. Each group summarizes their discussions in front of the whole class. The summary should include the following:
    - A verbal presentation of answers to selected questions.
    - A display of the visual reflection of the discussion.
    - A question posed to the other group that connects the group's topic with the other topic.
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10. The educator should gather the class back together for one last discussion based on the two questions posed by the groups. The educator can decide if this is a collective discussion or if students should write their thoughts as an exit slip.
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## BONUS ACTIVITY

### 1. BUILDING HISTORICAL CONTEXT MARTHA'S STORY

Students utilize their historical knowledge and understanding to build context and relevance of Martha Katz's story in the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre's archive.

- This activity asks students to visit [collections.vhec.org](http://collections.vhec.org) and use simple or advanced search options to investigate the stories of Vancouver survivors as related to Martha's story. Students might search for survivors who were from Hungary, those who were imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau, or young girls who experienced the Holocaust.

### 2. FILM POSTER FOR MARTHA

Students will create a film poster based on the short film *Martha*.

- This activity allows students to reimagine and create a film poster for the film *Martha*. Tapping into creative skills, students can produce a poster that reflects their interpretation of the film's major themes.

## STUDENT HOMEWORK: STORYTELLING AND MEMORY

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete the following activity before class on \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_.  
Your answers should be in complete sentences.

Watch the 12-minute TedTalk about the power of oral storytelling and history from a member of the Choctaw Nation (Oklahoma, USA).



**Write down one reflection below after hearing from Seth in the video.**

**Seth mentions a few stories he was told as a child. Think of a story you were told when you were younger and write it down below. Consider who told you the story, where it came from and the language it was told in.**

**The story:**

<b>Who told you the story?</b>	<b>Where did it come from?</b>	<b>What language did you hear the story in?</b>
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**Do you think it's important that this story continues to live on through memory? Why or why not?**

## STUDENT READING: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

# INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Learning about intergenerational trauma helps us understand how personal struggles may be linked to larger historical events.

### **What is trauma?**

Trauma occurs when someone experiences something deeply upsetting, like violence, abuse, war or genocide. These experiences can cause lasting emotional and physical symptoms. Some symptoms of trauma are depression, anxiety, fatigue, mood swings, memory loss, stomach problems, headaches, chronic pain, and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

### **What is intergeneration trauma?**

Intergenerational trauma occurs when the emotional or physical effects of trauma are passed down from one generation to the next within a family. In other words, the trauma doesn't only affect the person who originally experienced it. It can also impact the emotional and physical health of the person's descendants (their children and grandchildren). This happens even though the children and grandchildren did not experience the traumatic event themselves and were not alive at the time.

### **Who experiences intergenerational trauma?**

Intergenerational trauma was first observed in Holocaust survivors and their children. Researchers found that the children of survivors had trauma symptoms and emotional patterns similar to their parents. The descendants of survivors often had high rates of anxiety, depression and PTSD. Some also had physical symptoms, like stomach pain, digestive issues or weakened immune systems. This was true even when parents had not told their children about their Holocaust experiences.

Intergenerational trauma does not only affect the families of Holocaust survivors. It also occurs in other groups that experienced large-scale trauma and oppression. For example, intergenerational trauma affects Indigenous peoples whose ancestors were displaced, mistreated or sent to residential schools. The descendants of war refugees, genocide survivors and enslaved people also show signs of intergenerational trauma that affect their mental health.

### **How does intergenerational trauma occur?**

Intergenerational trauma can be passed from parents to their children in two ways: through biology and through behaviour.

**Biological Transmission through Epigenetics**—Trauma can be passed down through families because of changes in genes. This field of science is called epigenetics. Studies of Holocaust survivors showed changes to a gene called FKBP5. This gene controls how the body handles stress. These changes to the parent's FKBP5 gene were passed on their children and grandchildren. It made them more sensitive to stress, increasing their chances of developing anxiety, depression or PTSD. Epigenetic changes can affect people for many generations after a large-scale traumatic event.

**Behavioural Transmission**—People who survive severe trauma often develop coping habits that affect their relationships with their children. They may become emotionally distant, withdrawn, or overly protective. They may find it hard to talk

about painful events. Many survivors see the world as a dangerous place where bad things might happen at any moment. These patterns of behaviour can impact the emotional well-being of their children and grandchildren.

### **Intergenerational Patterns of Resilience**

While trauma can be passed down through generations, so can resilience. New research shows that severe trauma can lead to intergenerational patterns of resilience, strength and the ability to overcome challenges. Survivors often develop coping strategies that help them build healthy lives and strong relationships. These strategies can positively affect their children and grandchildren by helping them face life's challenges, find purpose and use their talents and skills.

### **Healing**

For Holocaust survivors, talking about their painful experiences can help their children develop strength and coping skills. These children may go on to achieve great things, show more empathy, choose careers that help others and feel responsible for sharing their families' stories to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.

Therapy and self-expression can help descendants understand the source of their emotions and behaviours. This allows them to develop ways to cope. Community healing efforts, cultural traditions, education and open conversations about trauma are all important ways to break the cycles of intergenerational trauma.

Personal stories, like Dan Schubert's film "Martha," aid in this healing process. Films, art and memoirs create connections between the descendants of Holocaust survivors. Through these shared experiences, they find common ground. They find comfort and strength in sharing both laughter and pain. By bringing intergenerational trauma into the open, the families of survivors can begin to heal and find strength.

\*Adapted from "What is Intergenerational Trauma" by Dr. Abby Wener Herlin and Echoes & Reflections, "Understanding Trauma."

**STUDENT READING: BIOGRAPHY**

# MARTHA KATZ

Martha (néé Adler) Katz was born in Berehove, Czechoslovakia in 1929. Berehove is in a city in central Europe and what is now the country of Ukraine.

Jews had lived in Berehove since the late 1700s. Jewish life and culture was prosperous in Berehove. Jews established synagogues and Hebrew schools. Many owned and operated factories, banks, and vineyards and participated in professional life as doctors and lawyers. By the late 1930s, almost 6,000 Jews lived in the city including Martha, her parents and six siblings.

In the 1930s the Jews of Berehove were subject to anti-Jewish laws instated by Hungary, an ally of Nazi Germany, meant to isolate, humiliate, and segregate Jews from daily life starting in 1938.

In the early months of 1944, the Nazis invaded Hungary and began their occupation of Berehove and the surrounding areas. The Nazi authorities established a Jewish council and a ghetto, and all Jews were forced to move into the ghetto. Only six months later, in May 1944, an estimated 3,600 Jews from Berehove were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Many of those deported were the elderly, women, and children—including Martha and members of her family.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Martha was separated from her mother and two younger brothers. Martha's mother and her two brothers were selected to be murdered in the gas chambers. She never saw them again.

Martha and one of her sisters, Rosie, were selected for slave labour upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. At one point in the camp, Martha fell ill with a fever. She had a personal encounter with Dr. Josef Mengele. Known as the "angel of death," Mengele is notorious for conducting inhumane and unethical medical experiments on Jews—specifically Jewish children—at Auschwitz. Martha remembers Mengele singling her out with the phrase "diese bleibt," or "this one stays." She later learned that the other prisoners in that barrack were taken to the gas chambers and murdered.

After the Holocaust and World War II ended in 1945, Martha found herself in Vienna, Austria as a displaced person. She married Bill Katz, another Holocaust survivor. Shortly after, Bill and Martha immigrated to Winnipeg, Canada. They had two children. Martha opened a grocery store called "Martha's Grocery" which brought adventure and stability to the Katz home. Martha and Bill had four grandchildren and two great grandchildren. Martha passed away in 2024 in Los Angeles, California.

## STUDENT READING: THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

# DAN SCHUBERT

Daniel “Dan” Schubert is a writer and director based in Vancouver, Canada. His short film, *Martha*, tells the story of his family’s traumatic past. That past was something he started to learn about at a young age. Read Dan’s thoughts below:

“I was about five years old when the tattoo of numbers and letters on my grandmother’s arm first piqued my interest. I asked my mom why Grandma Martha had a tattoo. She said that back in the Second World War, she and Grandpa Willie were both in something called “concentration camps.” In my youthful naïveté, I literally thought concentration camps were camps where people went into tents and “concentrated” on something really hard.

As I grew older, the reality of what my grandparents went through was shockingly normalized. I accepted that this thing my family called the Holocaust, was simply part of the fabric of my family’s history. They talked about it semi-regularly and I gradually became aware of the unfathomable, horrific trauma that my grandparents and their families endured.”<sup>1</sup>

Dan’s creative process was inspired by both his personal history and current events. The project catalyst was a far-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA in 2017 where participants shouted antisemitic phrases and held up Nazi flags. Read Dan’s reflection on this below:

“I had always said that I was going to do it, but I never did,” he said. “Charlottesville was kind of a big thing for me, I just couldn’t believe that was happening.

“And I said, ‘Well, something has to be done about this.’ I decided I could at least tell her story.”

Although in the past Katz hesitated to discuss her time at Auschwitz, she eventually agreed to go along with her grandson’s project.

“She wanted to do it for her grandchildren, great-grandchildren, the generations that will come after,” Schubert said.<sup>2</sup>

In one of the film’s more emotional scenes Dan and Martha visit the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. Dan considers confronting the painful events as both a grandson of a survivor and a film creator:

“That was tough,” Schubert said of visiting the museum with his grandmother. “And that was tough as a grandson to have to be there for her and also make sure, frankly, that I wasn’t like, exploiting her grief. It felt like there (were) times where I was—to be candid—I was a little worried about that, because she was very, very upset.”

It’s her temerity and her toughness that ... makes a difference for me,” he said. “It’s a good lesson for people to see that someone who’s so small in stature can make such a difference.”

<sup>1</sup> “Typical Ignorance,” Dan Schubert, Zachor (Fall 2022), [www.vhec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022\\_issue2\\_fall.pdf](http://www.vhec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022_issue2_fall.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> “Doc puts personal face on horror of Holocaust,” Randall King, Winnipeg Free Press, January 27, 2021. [www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/movies/2021/01/27/doc-puts-personal-face-on-horror-of-holocaust](http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/movies/2021/01/27/doc-puts-personal-face-on-horror-of-holocaust).

## STUDENT ACTIVITY: MARTHA KATZ

1. Consider the actions of Martha throughout the film. What do they reveal?

2. How does the Holocaust impact Martha?

3. In what ways does Martha tell and share stories?

4. Does Martha change in any way by the end of the film?

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**5. What coping mechanisms do you notice from Martha?**

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**6. How do you describe Martha's relationship with her grandson Dan?**

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**7. At the end of the group's presentation, please pose a question to the other group that connects Martha and Dan's story.**

**List your question below:**

**STUDENT ACTIVITY: DAN SCHUBERT**

1. Consider the actions of Dan throughout the film, what do they reveal?

2. How does the Holocaust impact Dan?

3. In what ways does Dan tell and share stories?

4. Does Dan change in any way by the end of the film?

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**5. What coping mechanisms do you notice from Dan?**

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**6. How do you describe Dan's relationship with his grandmother Martha?**

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**7. At the end of the group's presentation, please pose a question to the other group that connects Martha and Dan's story.**

**List your question below:**