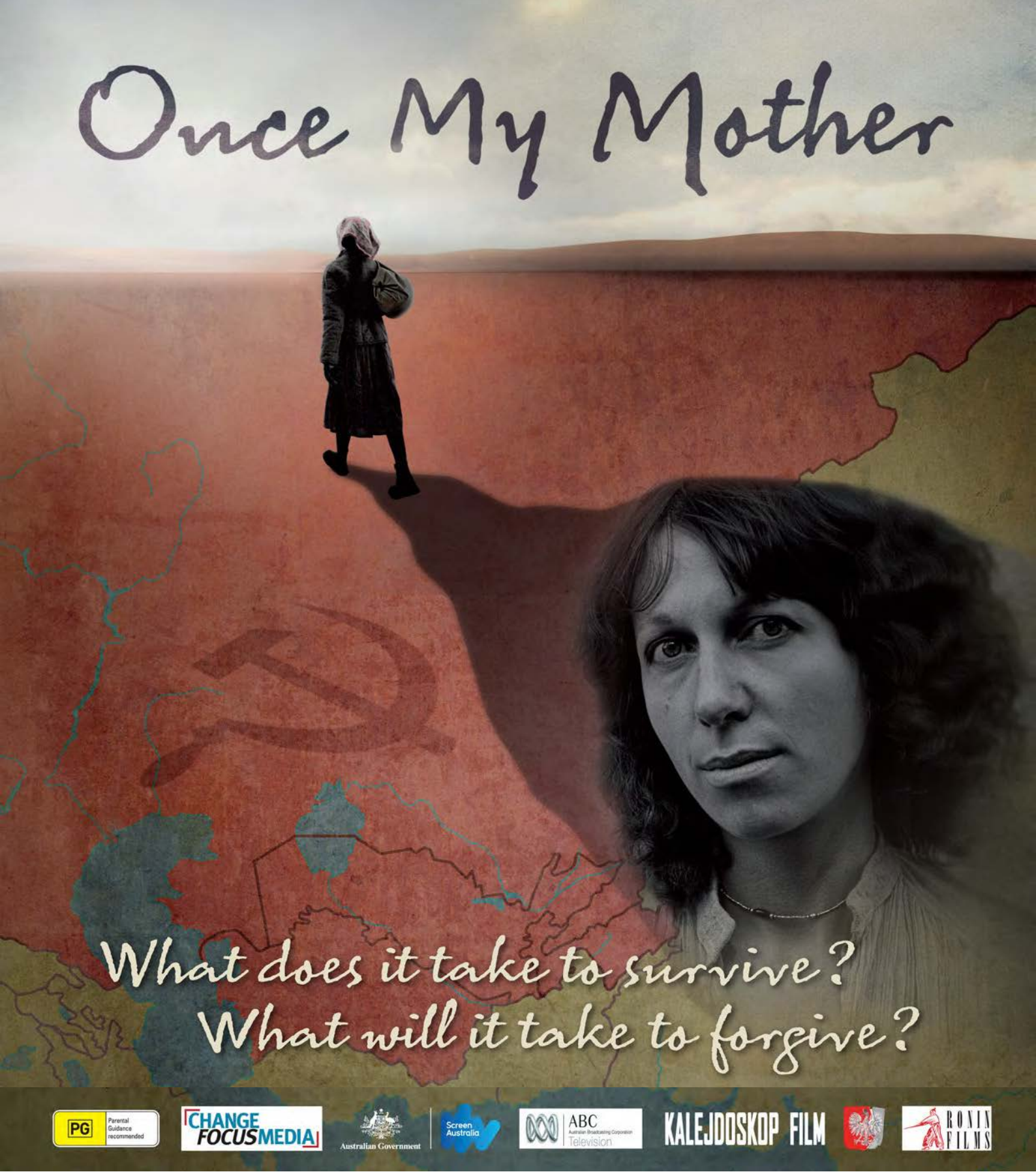
Once My Mother



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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA

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Historians can tell lies. Their sins are the sins of omission. They choose what to put in, what to leave out. When I go searching for your story in the history books, the chapter on your story is missing.

Sophia Turkiewicz

Overview

Once My Mother (2013) is a documentary film by filmmaker Sophia Turkiewicz about her struggle to reconcile with her refugee mother for abandoning her in an orphanage as a child. The story takes in the sweep of their two lives, beginning with her mother, Helen, born in Poland in the early 1920's, and covering her epic journey from a Siberian gulag to Uzbekistan, Persia and Africa before finally finding safety in Australia with her young daughter, Sophia. It is a story of survival and forgiveness. The story raises a number of interesting questions about the nature of memoir and biography, about how we tell stories, about memory and forgetting, about knowing some things but not others. In telling her mother Helen's story, Sophia is also telling us her story. An experienced filmmaker, Sophia draws on a number of sources to tell this story about her relationship with her mother, including conversations and interviews with her mother.

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Did she ever truly know this woman who became her mother? Does she have it in her heart to forgive her? And is it too late?

Synopsis

Abandoned in an Adelaide orphanage at the age of seven, Sophia feels betrayed by her mother, Helen. In early adulthood, Sophia still feels angry and resentful. Her mother is now married with two more children. Sophia rejects her new family and refuses contact with her mother.

In her twenties, Sophia is a filmmaker living in far away Sydney, embracing her independence, but deep down blaming her mother when things go wrong in her life. Yet Sophia finds herself drawn back to her mother's life, using Helen's stories as inspiration for her films but disguising them as fiction.

Thirty years on, Helen has dementia. Sophia starts to question their deeply troubled relationship. She digs out an unfinished documentary film about Helen that she'd started as a film student years before and finds herself compelled to finish it.

Returning to her mother's former homeland of eastern Poland, in what is now Ukraine, Sophia begins to trace her mother's traumatic childhood. Orphaned as a young girl, Helen grows up in a rural Polish village. As an adolescent, she's illiterate and homeless, somehow surviving on the streets.

As Sophia re-examines her mother's life, she discovers the historical truth behind Helen's deportation to a Siberian gulag. Helen was one of almost two million Poles who were incarcerated in Russian gulags during World War Two. The truth behind this little-known episode of history reveals a dark story of betrayal involving Stalin and the Allies.

Miraculously given their freedom, Helen is part of a vast exodus of Poles who travel from Russia with no food or organised transport. Over months, they trek thousands of miles to Uzbekistan and, eventually, freedom in Persia. Most of the Poles perish on this treacherous journey. Helen is one of the few survivors and she's sent to a Polish refugee camp in Lusaka, Africa. Here she meets Valdiero, the love of her life, an Italian prisoner-of-war who becomes Sophia's father.

Finally, a decade after leaving Poland, Helen and her baby daughter arrive in Australia as refugees. Not long afterwards, she abandons Sophia in an orphanage.

With growing insight, Sophia starts to reassess her troubled relationship with her mother. But as Helen slips out of reach, Sophia must confront her own demons. Did she ever truly know this woman who became her mother? Does she have it in her heart to forgive her? And is it too late?

The Filmmakers

Once My Mother is a Screen Australia and Change Focus Media production in association with Kalejdoskop Film, Poland. The film is a feature-length documentary and runs for seventy-five minutes.

Screenwriter/Director: Sophia Turkiewicz

Sophia was born in a refugee camp in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. She arrived in Australia as a young child. Sophia grew up in Adelaide, South Australia, where she completed an Arts degree at Adelaide University. She became a primary and high school teacher before being selected for the prestigious first intake of full-time students at the newly created Australian Film, Television & Radio School.

Since graduating from AFTRS in 1978, Sophia has worked in the film and television industry as a drama director. Her credits include the feature film *Silver City* (1984), which was released internationally in 1984 and won three AFI Awards, as well as Best Film at the 1984 Sydney Film Critics Awards. Her television work includes both adult and children's drama (*Something In The Air*, *Escape Of The Artful Dodger*, *Mirror Mirror*, *A Country Practice*) and telemovies *(Time's Raging* [1985], *I've Come About The Suicide* [1987]). She spent six years as a lecturer in the Directing Department at the Australian, Film, Television and Radio School before leaving in 2008 to work on her own projects, including making *Once My Mother*, her first documentary.

Producer: Rod Freedman

Rod Freedman is an independent director, producer and executive producer whose documentaries have won Australian and international awards and screened in dozens of film festivals. Rod and his partner, Lesley Seebold, run Change Focus Media, producing television documentaries and educational programs. Rod is particularly interested in stories about people and their life-journeys. His films include *Uncle Chatzkel* (2000), *Welcome to the Waks Family* (Barbara Chobocky, 2003), *One Last Chance – War Criminal* (Rod Freedman, 2000) and *Wrong Side of the Bus* (2009).

Associate Producer: Bob Connolly

Bob Connolly is an Australian film director/producer and author. He is best known for his documentaries, including *The Highlands Trilogy* (Bob Connolly & Robin Anderson, 1983–1992), *Rats in the Ranks* (Bob Connolly, 1996), *Facing the Music* (2001) and *Mrs. Carey's Concert* (2011).

Associate Producers, Poland: Janusz Skalkowski and Kamil Skalkowski. **Editor:** Denise Haslem. **Narrator:** Jen Vuletic. **Composer:** Cezary Skubiszewski

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Background

Trace Helen's journey on online maps from Poland in 1939 to a Siberia gulag, then to Uzbekistan, to Persia (Iran), to Lusaka in Africa and finally to Australia. Her journey across continents is not an uncommon one for people displaced from their country of birth through wars and conflicts and genocide, particularly during the first half of the twentieth century.

The background information about Helen's life before settling in Australia is recreated in this film to make it absolutely clear that 'the past' is not some time that is finished or over; it is integral to the present and to how people now live their lives. Life in 'the past' may well have happened in foreign countries where things were done differently, but these events and attitudes are integral to the present, not simply 'another country'. Memories of what happened remain alive for generations, shaping the present and the future.

Glossary – Gulag

1. A network of forced labour camps in the former Soviet Union where thousands of prisoners were held between the 1930s and 1950s under the Stalinist regime. The word 'gulag' is from an acronym made from the Russian term for *Chief Administration of Correctional Labour Camps*.

2. A forced labour camp or prison, especially for political dissidents.

3. A place or situation of great suffering and hardship, likened to the atmosphere in a prison system or a forced labour camp.

The term 'gulag' is today used to describe places where people are detained under isolated and very difficult conditions. For instance, Guantanamo Bay prison is often described as a 'gulag'.

Curriculum Guidelines

Once My Mother would be a fascinating film text for middle and senior secondary students of Twentieth Century European History, Australian History, Migration Studies, Media and Film Studies, Family Studies, Biography and English. It would be an excellent film to explore and inspire students in cross-curriculum projects investigating concepts of identity, belonging, alienation, inheritance and generational change. Teachers can watch a trailer of the film at <http://www.oncemymother.com>.

Studying family heritage can help students make sense of their identity and at the same time allow them to place themselves and their family in an historical context. It also provides valuable knowledge and understanding of how Australia became a multicultural society and the difficulties experienced by many people resettling here after years of trauma and instability.

Compare the current ways that refugees are integrated into Australian society with the post-war refugee scheme (two-year work contracts/building the Snowy Mountain scheme etc).

(Some background that may be of interest: IRO [International Refugee Organisation] was created in response to the vast numbers of civilians displaced during World War Two. This organisation took charge of the relief work for the Poles who had escaped from the Soviet gulags. IRO eventually became UNHCR, the organisation which continues to care for displaced civilians from the world's current trouble spots.)

Once My Mother is an example of an approach to storytelling where layers of complexity are overlaid and threads unravelled to present an often searingly honest account of family relationships, particularly between a mother and daughter. At the same time, the documentary tells a story of generations, of the enormously disruptive and difficult lives experienced by many post-war migrants who came to Australia at the end of the Second World War and of how their experiences affected their children, many of them now in their sixties and part of the 'baby boomer' generation. Their expectations and educational opportunities were very different to those of their parents, many of whom are now very old and increasingly less able to testify and bear witness to their earlier lives.

One of the key tasks for all students of English Language and Literature is to recognise that written and visual texts are created by authors who tell stories and share experiences that may be similar or different to students' own experiences. They enlarge our world and often give us cause to think about our own lives and experiences in relation to those of others.

While some students may have parents or grandparents who came to live in Australia from another country, for many students the story told in this film about the mass movements of people in Europe before, during and after the Second World War may well be quite new to them. Films such as *Once My Mother* – that tells the story of one family – go well beyond the often horrifying statistics of what happened in Europe in the first part of the twentieth century. They put faces and names and a human scale to these horrific statistics.

Most World War Two stories focus on the soldiers and battles of the war. In Sophia's story, the focus is on the civilian population and the impact of their lives.

For Media Studies and Film students, this documentary offers a fine example of ways of telling and constructing contemporary stories from a range of historical archives, drawing on public and private sources. Whose story is it and why is the telling of it so important? Why can this be done so vividly on film rather than simply through the written word?

Later in this guide there is a brief account of the major political events in Europe – particularly as they related to Poland and its people – between the 1930s and 1950s. There are also references to several interactive maps that help explain the political geography of Poland. Teachers may find it useful to work through this material before watching *Once My Mother,* depending on their students' knowledge of European politics and history at this time.

Every family has an interesting story to tell and at least one really interesting character or event in their immediate past.

STUDENT ACTIVITY

Pre-viewing questions

Talking about family

- 'Every family has an interesting story to tell and at least one really interesting character or event in their immediate past.' Do you agree?
- What part (if any) does family history play in your life?
- Is there a particular member of your family who acts as the keeper of your family history? What are the benefits of having such a family history? What are the potential problems of delving into family history? Are there limits to what should be revealed about family history?
- How much (if anything) do you know about the early years of your grandparents' lives?
- Do you have grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and/or nieces and nephews, stepsisters and stepbrothers who are an important part of your daily life?
- Do you know any of the details of your own family's stories, e.g. their life before coming to Australia, whether they fought in any wars, their educational ambitions, sporting skills etc?
- For what reasons do you think some family members become estranged or separated from their immediate family?
- 'You can choose your friends, but not your family.' Apart from the more obvious truths of this common saying, what do you think it implies?
- Why is it important to record interviews or conversations with elderly people?
- Why do you think some people do not want to talk with family about their experiences, particularly wartime experiences?

Read through the following sets of questions before watching the film. It may be useful to print Worksheets 1 and 2 to use for note-taking. These notes will help you discuss the film afterwards.

Perhaps half your group could take notes about Helen's life and the other half could focus their attention on various stages in her daughter Sophia's life. You will be separating out the interlocking narratives in the film, but once you have the information you will be better able to make the connections and comparisons.

Use the questions and some of the information given in the Worksheets and in the Polish history section later in this guide to help you with this viewing activity.

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Student Activity 1

Helen

- Using Worksheet 1, create an outline of the facts of Helen's life as they are revealed in the film, i.e. Helen's birthplace and earliest years as a child – Helen was born in Oleszow, a village in eastern Poland that is now part of the Ukraine. (It is not always possible to be absolutely precise about dates as children like Helen would have had little chance to celebrate their birthdays or have identity documents.) Beside each place where she lived, write down approximately how old she was at this time. If Helen was sixteen in 1939 when she was living on the streets of Lwów in eastern Poland, she would have been born in 1923.
- What happened to Poland in the 1930s? How did this have hugely disruptive consequences for Poles such as Helen?
- Why did Helen not learn to read and write as a child? What were some of the consequences for her growing up illiterate?
- What were the geopolitical circumstances that led to Helen leaving Poland and eventually finding herself in Siberia?
- Why did Stalin send so many Poles to Siberia? What work were they given there?
- What was the incident in Lwów (now Lviv) that precipitated her being sent to Siberia?
- Having seen the archival images of the Siberian Labour camps and heard something of Helen's story of life there, can you conceive of what it would be like – even for a week, let alone a year – to be in such a place? Write an imaginative diary for a week, either as a prisoner or one of the prison guards, describing your daily activities as well as your observations of people or events that you might see occurring on each new day.
- In what sense is it 'thanks to Hitler' that Helen is able to leave the Labour Camp in Siberia?
- Why was it that Polish people in particular had such a difficult time in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century?
- How far was the Siberian Camp from Buzuluk, where the Polish army was intending to train Poles for war service?
- Why did the Poles then have to walk another 2000 kilometres to Tashkent in Uzbekistan?
- The Poles were released from Siberia to form an army. Why might Helen's lack of education be a reason for not being selected for the army?
- When and where did Helen finally feel free?
- How did the move to Lusaka in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) come about?
- What was one of the most significant things that happened to her in Lusaka?
- How did an Italian soldier and a Polish woman each come to be in Africa at the end of World War Two?
- Four years or so after the war ended in 1950, why did Helen come to Australia to live? Why could she not go to England or a country closer to Poland?
- After all the things that have happened to Helen, what is the news she gets in Perth that causes her enormous distress?
- What were Helen's reasons for placing her daughter in an orphanage when Sophia was seven?
  What were some of the difficulties for unmarried mothers in the early 1950s, as Helen explains them to her daughter many years later?
- What did Helen decide to do so she could have her daughter living with her?
- In what ways are social attitudes and daily life different today for single mothers?

Worksheet 1 – Helen. *See page 9 for table.*

Helen remembers

Identify the context of what Helen is referring to in the following quotes. What is behind these often apparently quite matter-of-fact observations?

Use these excerpts from the soundtrack to discuss what they reveal about Helen and her past as she reflects on it as an older woman.

I'd like to know how my mother looked.
Everyone went to school except me. I couldn't write my name. I was embarrassed.
My uncle threw me out. He said he didn't have time for me.
People were frightened. They didn't know what they'd be doing in the war – what war means.
I was very upset and doctor come in and say they have to send me back to place where there was more Polish community.
I couldn't find a job when Sophia was small. They didn't like it in hotel or somewhere if you bring children.
I don't want another country; that's my first and the last.

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WORKSHEET 1 – HELEN

TIME FRAME	AGE	PLACES WHERE HELEN LIVED	IMPORTANT PERSONAL EVENTS/FAMILY TIES	POLITICAL EVENTS
1923 | 1932		Oleszow, Poland (now part of Ukraine)		
	10–15			
				Stalin turns on Hitler and joins forces with the Allies. Attempts made to train an army of Poles
		Persia (now Iran)		
			'I am the first thing you have that belongs to you' (Sophia)	
				Australia is part of a post-war resettlement program
		Adelaide, South Australia	Marries	

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She's not only forgetting her stories, she's also forgetting me, her daughter.

SOPHIA

Student Activity 2

Sophia

- Using Worksheet 2, create an outline of the facts of Sophia's life as they are revealed in the film, i.e. Sophia's birthplace and where she spent her earliest years as a child – Sophia was born in Lusaka in Northern Rhodesia (now the capital of Zambia).
- How did Sophia come to be born in Africa at the end of the war?
- Beside each place where she lived, write down approximately how old she was at this time. Sophia was born in 1946, just after the war had ended.
- What were the circumstances that led to Helen and Sophia coming to live in Australia in the early 1950s?
- Where was she living between the ages of seven and nine?
- Why did Sophia's mother feel she could not care for her daughter in the early years of their life in Adelaide?
- How did Sophia regard this decision as a child?
- Why did she leave home as a sixteen-year-old?
- Why was Sophia embarrassed by her mother's lack of education? Is her embarrassment understandable?
- Was Sophia's rejection of her family understandable/justifiable? What could she have done differently?
- Sophia was lucky enough to get educated. How did this affect her relationship with her mother?
- What were the reasons Sophia joined the Communist Party?
- Sophia feels a sense of urgency in finding out as much as she can about her mother's life. Why is this the case?
- In what sense is meeting her father in Italy so important to Sophia?
- How does Sophia's mother see a parallel between her placing of her daughter in the orphanage when she was seven and the place where she is now living as an old woman?
- At the end of the film, Sophia 'forgives' her mother, then asks to be forgiven herself. Elaborate on this idea. What does it mean to forgive? To be forgiven?
  As this story unfolds, Sophia's quest for reconciliation has an urgency because her mother is suffering from dementia. Why is this so important?

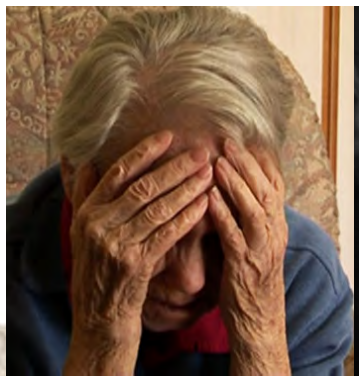
Worksheet 2 – Sophia. *See page 11 for table.*

Sophia reflects

In the Press Kit notes to accompany this film, Sophia Turkiewicz writes about the renewed urgency she felt about getting down the story of her mother's life before her mother was no longer able to remember details of her past. Born in 1923, Helen was close to ninety in 2012. Sophia explains:

Thirty years later, my mother has dementia. I've still not forgiven her. I remember the film that I'd abandoned and feel compelled to complete it. I start digging. Communism has fallen and eastern European archives are now open to the public. I learn the remarkable historical details behind my mother's Siberian survival story. It's an epic tale of betrayal, involving the Allies' relationship with Stalin. With this knowledge, I start filming my mother anew, trying to fill in gaps I'd left all those years ago. But she's not only forgetting her stories, she's also forgetting me, her daughter. I'm desperate to complete her story before it's too late. Perhaps this is how I can reconcile with her?

Sophia Turkiewicz, writer and director of *Once My Mother*, expresses her feelings about her mother. She reflects on how she remembers feeling at different times in her life.



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WORKSHEET 2 – SOPHIA

TIME FRAME	AGE	PLACES WHERE SOPHIA LIVED	IMPORTANT PERSONAL EVENTS/FAMILY TIES/ MILESTONES	POLITICAL EVENTS AND IDEAS
1946 | 1949		Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia, Africa		
	7–9			
				Becomes interested in Communism
1976				
			Makes *Silver City,* a feature film	
2012			Makes *Once My Mother*	

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Director's Statement – by Sophia Turkiewicz

First and foremost, *Once My Mother* is a compelling survival story. The tragedy of my Polish-born mother's early life – and the epic scale of her wanderings – before she found 'home' in Australia attests to her determination to survive. Why did she survive while so many of her countrymen and women fell by the wayside? What gave her this strength and resolution? Was it her childhood years surviving on the streets? Was it some imagined future that gave her the will to keep going?

At an emotional level, *Once My Mother* is a personal story exploring the issue of 'forgiveness' as seen through the prism of that most primal of bonds: the parent/child relationship. The film explores this bond by investigating a troubled relationship with my mother, ranging from my childhood, through to adulthood and middle-age, when each of our roles has been reversed and my mother has become dependent on me.

The story raises questions: How does one learn to be a parent? Can one learn the role and be a 'good' parent without an example? What is needed for a successful journey into adulthood? What is one's responsibility towards an ageing parent? What does it take to forgive? Why is 'truth' so important – both personally and politically?

Through these personal explorations, I reveal a remarkable, little-known story of almost two million Poles who were sent to Siberia and then miraculously released, embarking on a chaotic exodus which took them to Uzbekistan, Persia, India, Africa and beyond. This story has been airbrushed from the history books, both in Eastern Europe and in the West. Some prominent Western historians argue that this 'forgetting' was deliberate because of the ambiguous wartime relationship between the Western Allies and Stalin.

Once My Mother is also a portrait of a 'typical' Australian family, viewed over two generations. Through personal footage – ranging from Super 8 and mini-DV 'home movies' shot over many years, my 16mm student films shot in the mid-70's, my 35mm professional films and recently shot professional material – we see the characters of myself and my mother develop on screen. As our two stories play out, our younger selves morph into our mature selves, ageing with each decade. We see Helen's decline from bright and engaged woman telling her poignant stories, to the person who no longer remembers them. We see my own changes, from bewildered young girl to angry adult, and finally, mature woman reflecting on my primary and most difficult relationship.

Augmenting this footage is a range of historical material, some not seen publicly before. Archival footage, graphics and maps give a sense of the scale of Helen's epic journey and also reveal the constantly changing terrain through which she travelled. Helen's feet are the repetitive drumbeat that pulses through these landscapes, moving through bleak, snow-laden taiga forests, crossing treacherous rivers, struggling across mountains, using railway lines as a compass, searching for grass to eat on the endless plains, steppes and barren deserts of Uzbekistan and beyond.

A series of impressionistic, dramatised recreations filmed in Poland and Ukraine, that focus on small details from Helen's early life, are integrated into the film. Along with fictional films that I've made over the years, in which I happily plundered my mother's life for stories, these elements add another textural dimension to the story and expand the form of the traditional documentary.

Award-winning composer Cezary Skubiszewski's evocative music expands the emotional impact of the story. Visuals are also augmented by sound design that resonates with the motifs of the story, for instance train journeys, sounds of camps, wind and snow.

Read through the excerpts from the film's soundtrack below and identify what it is that Sophia is referring to and the context in which the remarks/observations/reflections are being made.

Use these excerpts as points for discussing the film.

It is here I found I could love you and hate you in equal measure. Over the years I played my role as dutiful daughter. I played my role well. But some part of me never forgot you had abandoned me.

I've become the mother now. It's my job to care for you. That's what mothers do.

I need to know who you were – this woman who became my mother.

I did not ask this question – 'If you were this motherless orphan, how could you wish the same destiny on me?'

Eventually I stop listening … your stories are a burden. They make me feel responsible for your blighted life.

I'm ashamed of you now. You're uneducated, you don't speak English; I don't want my new friends to see me with you.

For the first time I see you through other people's eyes.

Some historians say this forgetting is deliberate … that those who liberate you from Siberia, then give your country away, don't want their dealings with Stalin examined.

I gather, I shape, I invent, I choose what to put in, what to leave out, and turn your truth into my fiction.

You are proud of me. I secretly know I have not done your story justice.

I know you should have been here with me [at the 1984 AFI awards] *but I can't bring myself to invite you.*

At the heart of my life is a puzzle – my missing father.

Was my journey to Italy the first steps of my journey back to you?

Now when I think of your stories, I see that they're my stories. They tell me who I am.

Read through Sophia Turkiewicz' Director's Statement before responding to the questions in the third student activity.

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Student Activity 3

Telling Stories

- Who is telling this story and why is this important?
- Could it have been told by anyone else?
- Whose story is it?

1. Why do we tell stories about our family and our lives?
2. How do we bring these stories to life so that they become something other than photo albums, diaries, newspaper clippings or home movies?
3. How can the story of an individual be both unique to that person and, at the same time, tell a more universal story?
4. What distinction would you make between autobiography, memoir and biography, whether in prose or on film? Are any of these forms of expression likely to be any more 'truthful' than another?
5. Is it ever possible to really know another person and understand their motivations and inner demons?
6. What do you think the overarching theme of this story is?

Now think about how *Once My Mother* is told:

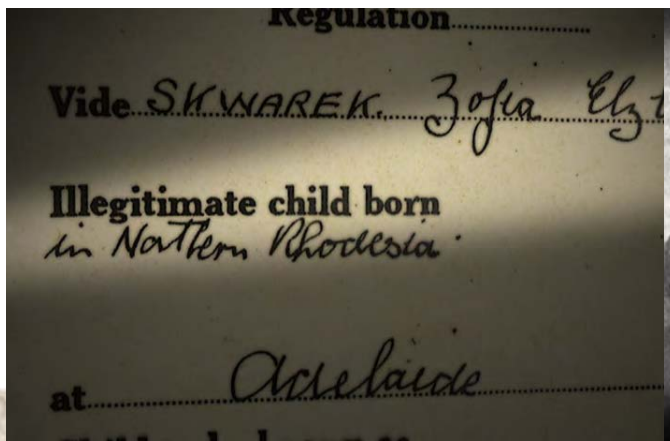
- As an experienced filmmaker, what advantages does Sophia have in telling this story?
- What material is available to her (and us) today that earlier historians and storytellers did not have?
- What were the principal records on which earlier writers and filmmakers relied?
- What is archival footage and how can it be integrated into the story of people's lives to bring the past to life?
- List some of the primary sources that Sophia is able to use to provide a visual picture of her mother's life before she came to Australia. What would be some of the difficulties faced by a documentary filmmaker such as Sophia in sourcing and putting all the archival material together in a coherent and dramatic way?
- While there is quite a lot of film and photographic material from the period between 1930 and 1950 on which Sophia can draw to provide compelling visual evidence of how her mother survived during this period, how much of it is of Helen's actual life as it is reconstructed visually by her daughter?

When I was young I had used your life to learn my skills as a storyteller.

Sophia.

- How does Sophia's trip to Poland, which includes video footage of the place where her mother was born, bring the past to life for both Helen and Sophia?
- How much can photos tell us, beyond offering a visual record of people and places?
- How can historical records, including contemporary maps, be used to bring a story to life, particularly one that spans several generations?
- How do you think present-day technical tools – such as Photoshop etc. – might affect how we view archival footage in the future?
- Have you watched any of the series from both the United Kingdom and Australia shown on television over the past few years – *Who Do You Think You Are?*? Why do you think many of the individuals who choose to explore their family history with the help of genealogists find it so rewarding to discover the history of their ancestry?
- *When I was young I had used your life to learn my skills as a storyteller.* – Sophia

  How do Sophia's earlier films relate to the story she now feels compelled to tell about her mother?
- When did she first begin documenting her mother's life? How old was Sophia when she began this documentary project? Why do you think she abandoned it?
- While many writers and filmmakers use their family life to make films or to write memoirs, can we ever know how accurately they reflect the life and relationships of the person who is central to the memoir? Is recreating the past inevitably difficult and likely to be contended by other witnesses to events? Is it important for the author to acknowledge that some things can never be known?
- Once you've identified the over-arching theme, go through the film and work out how this theme is set up, explored and resolved in the story.
- For the voiceover narration, Sophia uses a second-person device to tell the story. What difference (if any) would it have made if Sophia had chosen to tell the story as a third-person account?



What does Sophia believe she has achieved by the end of this film?

- Outline the ways in which Sophia, in her earlier films has 'mined her mother's life, plundered it and masked it as fiction'.
  How do these different ways she has told her mother's story lead her to realise that they are all partial and not completely accurate accounts of her mother's life?
- *Now, when I think of your stories, I see that they're my stories. They tell me who I am and I know you now. You're the woman who was once sent to hell and came out with love in her heart.* – Sophia
  Are all generational stories in families so powerful and emotionally wrenching?
- Is either conflict and rejection or complete acceptance a common dynamic in relations between parents and their children, or does the intensity of feelings change and mellow over time, mediated through maturity, understanding and becoming a parent?
  At what stages in the lives of parents and their children are relations often quite tense and difficult?
  Is it usual for children to reject the values of their parents at different stages in their life as they struggle to find their own meanings?
- This film is titled *Once My Mother*. Do you think this title accurately reflects the content of the film?
- Write a piece about this documentary that could be published in an online 'What's on?' television guide or a piece for the television pages of a newspaper. Outline the main thrust of the program without giving away too much about how the process of understanding unfolds. Decide who you think is the most likely audience for this film.
- *I want to acknowledge her life and to pay tribute to those hundreds of thousands of other Poles who lived through this period.* – Sophia

What do you think is the most interesting aspect of Sophia Turkiewicz' film about her relationship with her mother? Share your views with others who have watched *Once My Mother*.

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Background History

A brief overview of Polish history during World War Two

Poland has had a long and troubled history, which can partly be accounted for by its position in Europe, bordered by powerful countries such as Germany and The Soviet Union. Its history is long and complex and the information below only covers the period during World War Two, when Helen was a young girl and woman.

See an animated map of the war in Europe from 1939–1945 at <http://c3.ort.org.il/Apps/WW/page.aspx?_item=0e45a1be-144c-4dee-b919-4e2ba98c7aad&_pstate=item&box=e4b8e529-3402-411d-bb44-57b80f06af12&page=c1133131-9b1b-469e-a08e-0ae9eb685f98&ws=496fe4b2-4d9a-4c28-a845-510b28b1e44b>.

Alternatively, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Second_World_War_Europe.png> for a map showing how Poland was squeezed and divided up by Russia and Germany.

Poland between 1939 and 1945

World War Two began at dawn on 1 September 1939 with a massive German invasion of Poland. Fighting began in Gdansk (at that time the Free City of Danzig) when German forces encountered a stubborn handful of Polish resisters at Westerplatte. The battle lasted a week. Simultaneously, another German line stormed Warsaw, which finally surrendered on 28 September. Despite valiant resistance, there was simply no hope of withstanding the numerically overwhelming and well-armed German forces; the last resistance groups were quelled by early October. Hitler's policy was to eradicate the Polish nation and Germanise the territory.

Hundreds of thousands of Poles were deported en masse to forced-labour camps in Germany, while others, primarily the intelligentsia, were executed in an attempt to exterminate spiritual and intellectual leadership.

The Jews were to be eliminated completely. At first they were segregated and confined in ghettos, then shipped off to extermination camps scattered around the country. Almost the whole of Poland's Jewish population (three million) and roughly one million other Poles died in the camps. Resistance erupted in numerous ghettos and camps, most famously in Warsaw.

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territory. The Poles were granted an 'amnesty' on the basis that they would form an army to fight Hitler.

A nationwide resistance movement, concentrated in the cities, had been put in place soon after war broke to operate the Polish educational, judicial and communications systems. Armed squads were set up by the government-in-exile in 1940 and these evolved into the Armia Krajowa (AK; Home Army), which figured prominently in the Warsaw Rising.

Soviet invasion

Before the War started, Stalin and Hitler signed a secret pact (the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact) to divide Poland between themselves. On 17 September, 1939, sixteen days after the Nazi invasion, the Soviet Union moved into Poland and claimed the country's eastern half. Thus, Poland was yet again partitioned. Mass arrests, exile and executions followed, and it's estimated that between one and two million Poles were sent to Siberia, the Soviet Arctic and Kazakhstan

in 1939–1940. Like the Nazis, the Soviets set in motion a process of intellectual genocide.

The course of the war changed dramatically when Hitler unexpectedly attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. The Soviets were pushed out of eastern Poland by the onslaught and all of Poland lay under Nazi control. The Führer set up camp deep in Polish territory and remained there for over three years.

After Hitler's surprise attack on the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa, 22 June, 1941), Stalin was persuaded to release the Poles from Soviet prison camps because of Hitler's overwhelming success in penetrating Soviet

Amazingly, considering the Soviet treatment of Poles, Stalin turned to Poland for help in the war effort against the German forces advancing eastwards towards Moscow. The official Polish army was reformed late in 1941, but was largely under Soviet control.

Hitler's defeat at Stalingrad in 1943 marked the turning point of the war on the eastern front, and from then on the Red Army successfully pushed westwards. After the Soviets liberated the Polish city of Lublin, the pro-Communist Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) was installed on 22 July 1944 and assumed the functions of a provisional government. A week later, the Red Army reached the outskirts of Warsaw.

Warsaw at that time remained under Nazi occupation. In a last-ditch attempt to establish an independent Polish administration, the AK attempted to gain control of the city before the arrival of the Soviet troops, with disastrous results. The Red Army continued its westward advance across Poland and, after a few months, reached Berlin. The Nazi Reich capitulated on 8 May 1945.

At the end of World War Two, Poland lay in ruins. Over six million people – about 20 per cent of the pre-war population – lost their lives, and out of three million Polish Jews in 1939, only between 80,000 and 90,000

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survived the war. Its cities were no more than rubble; only 15 per cent of Warsaw's buildings survived. Many Poles who had seen out the war in foreign countries opted not to return to the new political order.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin agreed to leave Poland under Soviet control. They agreed that Poland's eastern frontier would roughly follow the Nazi–Soviet demarcation line of 1939. Six months later, Allied leaders set Poland's western boundary along the Odra (Oder) and the Nysa (Neisse) Rivers; in effect, the country returned to its medieval borders.

References and Resources

Read about and watch clips from Sophia Turkiewicz' 1977 graduation film from the Australian Film Radio and Television School, referred to in this documentary. http://aso.gov.au/titles/shorts/letters-poland/

Information about Sophia Turkiewicz award-winning Australian film, *Silver City*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver_City_(1984_film)

Watch interviews with Sophia Turkiewicz (Director) and Rod Freedman talking about making *Once My Mother*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DdBKGgY0JM

Stories We Tell (Sarah Polley, 2012). This recent Canadian film uses the documentary format to explore the nature of storytelling and memory in a family.

Explore a National Government website that has an enormous and well indexed collection of images of immigrants. https://www.destinationaustralia.gov.au/site/

The historical information in this guide is adapted from the Lonely Planet guide to Poland and from the relevant section of Wikipedia's History of Poland site. http://www.lonelyplanet.com/poland/history/ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Poland_(1939-1945)

WEBSITES:

KRESY-SIBERIA FOUNDATION. This organisation was founded in 2001. Its objective is to 'record, research and remember' the lives of Poles who were deported to USSR during World War Two. The Kresy-Siberia Virtual Museum is on this website: <http://kresy-siberia.org/muzeum/?lang=en>

KARTA – A Polish independent non-governmental organisation involved in the documentation and dissemination of the recent history of Poland and Central and Eastern Europe, to spread tolerance and democracy http://www.karta.org.pl

MEMORIAL – A Russian human rights organisation whose main task is the 'awakening and preservation of the societal memory of the severe political persecution in the recent past of the Soviet Union' http://www.memo.ru/eng/

GULAG: Many Days, Many Lives – This organisation presents the history of the Russian gulag system through a browseable archive of video, art, artifacts, photographs, and the life stories of former Gulag prisoners. http://gulaghistory.org/about/

BOOKS:

Michael Hope, *Polish Deportees in the Soviet Union*, Veritas Foundation Publication Centre, London, 2005.

Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, Basic Books, 2010.

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Keith Sword, *Deportation and Exile: Poles in the Soviet Union 1939-48*, St Martin's Press, in association with School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London.

Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland*, Oxford University Press.

Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland Vol 2*, Columbia University Press, 2005.

Katherine R Jolluck, *Exile & Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War Two*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002.

IMMIGRATION MUSEUMS

Most Australian states have Immigration Museums or Centres where the diverse backgrounds and journeys of people who have come to live in Australia are documented, explored and celebrated. Investigate your state Immigration Museum through an online search.

In Victoria, this museum is on Flinders Street, Melbourne, and includes immigrant stories and timelines. The stories change regularly and represent a diverse array of time periods, motivations and cultural backgrounds. Around the walls of the Victorian Museum is an immigration timeline that highlights key events in the history of immigration to Victoria and its impact upon Australia's Aboriginal communities.

There's also a Migration Museum in Adelaide: <http://migration.historysa.com.au>

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