



Fate did not let me go

Discussion Guide and Lesson Plans For Educators

INTRODUCTION

August 24, 1942. Trapped by history, a loving mother writes a farewell letter to her son just days before she dies in the Theresenstadt concentration camp during the Holocaust. Lost for nearly 50 years, the letter mysteriously reaches her son in 1985 when he is 79 years old.

The Fate Did Not Let Me Go film shares the inspiring story of Valli Ollendorff and her timeless letter to her son Ulrich. More than a mother's farewell, the letter's message of faith, hope and love stands as a triumph of the human spirit in history's darkest hour.

For years, the letter remained a family secret. When Ulrich passed away, his family asked their rabbi to read the letter at his eulogy. The impact of the letter - and its expression of love that transcended time and space and even death itself - was so great that the family realized it was much more than a private letter. It was a letter that could inspire every person it touched.

The Ollendorff family has created a documentary film, a photo book and a website (www.fatedidnotletmego.org) so that they could share Valli's remarkable strength and wisdom with others.

A discussion guide and classroom lesson plans have been created to assist educators in bringing this extraordinary journey to their classrooms. The story teaches us about history, strength in the face of hardship, fate, values, love, communication and strong family bonds. It can also spark a poignant discussion in your classroom about the impact of the Holocaust - a discussion that students will remember for years to come

The discussion guide and lesson plans are intended to be used in conjunction with showing the film in your classroom. To order copies of the film (DVD or VHS) at a special discounted price visit www.fatedidnotletmego.org or contact info@fatedidnotletmego.org.

VIDEO DISCUSSION GUIDE

> CONTEXT

Fate Did Not Let Me Go is applicable in many different subject areas, such as social studies, English, world history, and even current events. ***We recommended presenting the film in context of a unit on the Holocaust, World War II or for Holocaust Remembrance Day (May 5, 2005).*** Student's factual knowledge of the Holocaust will allow the discussion to have a stronger impact on them. Visit the resources for additional websites that include Holocaust information, lesson plans and other relevant resources.

> AGE GROUP

The discussion guide and classroom activities are geared toward middle and high-school students.

> DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Fate Did Not Let Me Go discussion questions are divided into four sections: history, family, communication and fate. You may choose to ask questions from one category or ask several questions from various categories.

You might also want to review the classroom activities for additional resources that can enhance students' discussions and inspire them to turn their learning into positive action.

History

- What does the story of the Ollendorff family tell you about the Holocaust? About that period of time in history?
- Anne, Ulrich and their newborn son, Stephen, left Berlin the day after the Krystalnacht, or the "Night of Glass". What happened on the "Night of Glass"? Why is it called the "Night of Glass"?
- What was happening that influenced Anne and Ulrich's decision to leave? What was happening that led the others in the Ollendorff family to decide to stay?
- In addition to being a Holocaust story, how is it also an immigrant story? What did you learn about the experience of immigrants in this documentary? (Refer to the separation of wife/baby from husband, learning a new language, letters, establishing oneself in a new environment.)
- Before you view the film, write down your notions of the Holocaust. After viewing the film, now comment on what you wrote down.

Family

- What does the Ollendorff story teach you about family? About bonds and connections? Do those bonds and connection resonate with you?
- Why do you think Valli Ollendorff stayed behind in Germany?
- Valli's grandson suggested that she might have stayed behind in Germany because she may not have realized how dangerous the situation was. What do you think? Can you put that sentiment/situation into a modern context? Do you think people today have a false sense of security? Why or why not?
- What did you learn about Valli through her letter? Were you able to determine her values and what she believes to be important?
- Valli's letter refers to her great suffering, but also her joy. Does this make sense to you? Can you think of an experience where you or others have experienced these two feelings together?
- What do you think was the impact of the letter on Ulrich? Why do you think he kept it in his room and did not share it?
- What was the impact of the letter on the grandsons, Stephen and David? What do you think it taught them?
- Why do you think Valli still referred to her adult son as a "boy" in the letter? What do you think that meant to her? What does it mean to you?
- Think about how families have changed since the 1940s. If you were making this a modern story about families, how would it be different?

Communication

- What does Fate Did Not Let Me Go teach you about the power of communication? About letters?
- What are the themes of the letter? What are the lessons and wishes expressed in the letter?
- In the film, Rabbi Jack Bemporad stated it was a "letter of wisdom." What is the wisdom that he refers to?
- Would this letter have been as powerful if it were an email? Why or why not?
- The letter reached Ulrich 43 years after the death of his mother. If the letter had reached Ulrich within a few weeks of his mother's death, how would the impact have been different?
- Where do you imagine the letter was for all of those years? If you found it in a trunk in your attic, would you have gone through the effort to race down the recipient and send it? Why or why not?
- If you were writing a farewell letter to a loved one, what would you want to say?

Fate

- Valli writes, "Fate did not let me go." What do you think she means by that?
- Do you believe in fate? Do you believe you can escape fate?
- What does Valli's statement of "Fate did not let me go" teach you about her own beliefs?
- Do you think it was fate that this letter eventually reached Ulrich?

ACTIVITY 1. YOUR OWN LETTER OF HOPE

> OVERVIEW

Valli's letter is a farewell letter to her son. It is full of love, hope, dignity and wishes of success. In this activity, students are asked to write their own Letter of Hope that highlights their own values, emotions and hopes for their lives and their world.

> MATERIALS

Fate Did Not Let Me Go film, writing materials, paper, Valli's Letter of Hope.

> TIME

1-2 classroom periods or portions (The film is approximately 25 minutes long)

> STEPS

1. Watch Fate Did Not Let Me Go film.
2. Facilitate a discussion with the students, focusing on what the letter taught them. (You may also skip this step and go to Step 3 if you want students to work personally through their thoughts and reactions from the film and not be potentially influenced by their peers.)
3. Ask students to write their own Letter of Hope (1-2 pages) that highlights their own personal values and hopes for the future that they would like to share with their friends or families. You may assign this step as a homework assignment.
4. Ask for a few volunteers to read their letters.
5. Facilitate a discussion on the similarities, differences, and themes in the letters. How are they similar and different from Valli's letter?

> VARIATIONS/FOLLOW-UP

- Show/send the letters to the students in three or six months (even the next school-year) so that they can react to what they wrote from the distance of time and discover if they would change any piece of their letter or add anything.
- Create a wall of letters or a book with the messages of hope that can be distributed to other students, parents, teachers and/or friends.

Note: Students may send their letter to a loved one by email at <http://www.fatedidnotletmego.org>. Click on the "Share a Message of Hope"

ACTIVITY 2. A MODERN DAY LETTER OF HOPE

> OVERVIEW

Combining research and creative writing, students investigate modern day situations where family members can be separated (war, immigration, illness or death) and create a fictional Letter of Hope, capturing their subject's personal and political situation.

> MATERIALS

Fate Did Not Let Me Go film, writing materials, paper, Valli's Letter of Hope.

> TIME

1-2 classroom periods (Film is approximately 25 minutes long)

> STEPS

1. Watch Fate Did Not Let Me Go film.
2. Facilitate a discussion with the students, focusing on what the letter taught them about political situations where families are separated and broken. (You may also skip this step and go to Step 3 if you want students to work personally through their thoughts and reactions from the film and not be potentially influenced by their peers.)
3. Ask your students if they can relate aspects of Valli's situation to any modern situation (i.e., family broken apart, families separated by racism).
4. Ask students to write a modern fictionalized Letter of Hope (1-2 pages), drawing from their own research. The letters must use a basis of fact and refer to factual details to contextualize the author's situation. In addition, the letter must also express the author's or the fictionalized character's hopes, dreams, values and messages, as framed by his/her situation. You may assign this step as a homework assignment. This exercise works best if students are studying current events or given enough time to read a newspaper or watch foreign news.
5. Ask a few students to read their letters and provide factual information and sources that they used to research the current situation.
6. Ask students to highlight the various themes and differences in the letters. Ask them to explain how the various political situations changed the tones of the letters. How are they similar and different from Valli's letter? How does their research on modern day political situations help them understand or raise questions about the Holocaust?

> VARIATIONS/FOLLOW-UP

- Ask students to stay up-to-date on the situation they selected as their topic for this assignment. A few weeks or months later, ask them to write another letter, pointing to new information.
- Ask students to write a response letter (e.g., if the original letter was from a mother to a daughter, the response would be from the daughter to a mother) or write a newspaper article on the situation if the letter was discovered 50 years after it was written.
- For older students, assign sections of Terry Anderson's book, Den of Lions.

Note: Students may send their letter to a loved one by email at <http://www.fatedidnotletmego.org>. Click on the "Share a Message of Hope"

ACTIVITY 3. VOICES

> OVERVIEW

Students use the context of the Fate Did Not Let Me Go film to interview people who lived during the Holocaust (and/or their families) to gain a deeper perspective, as well as factual information about the time period and events.

> MATERIALS

Fate Did Not Let Me Go film, writing materials, paper, tape-recorders and tapes (optional), computer, layout/design software (if students create a newspaper)

> TIME

1-2 classroom periods (Film is approximately 25 minutes long)

> STEPS

1. Show Fate Did Not Let Me Go film.
2. Facilitate a class discussion on the film, especially focusing on the historical and social context of the Ollendorff story. You can ask students to create or you can hand out a timeline of the events of the Holocaust and ask students to pay attention to the dates in the film and add them to the timeline.
3. Explain to your students that their assignment is to find a person that lived during the Holocaust (or was affected by the Holocaust) and interview them (i.e., neighbors, grandparents, aunts/uncles, friends). Give your students class time to come up with questions. Explain to your students that the Ollendorff story gives a voice and a message of hope to a particularly difficult time. Their job is to provide more voices to tell the story of the Holocaust, using the themes of Fate Did Not Let Me Go as a lens or backdrop. Students interview, transcribe (or take notes) of the interview. They are also asked to write down five (or more) new things they learned from the interview subject.
4. Students are asked to share pieces of the interview in class, especially relating it to the film and what they learned.

> VARIATIONS/FOLLOW-UP

- Students create a special edition of your school's newspaper or a newsletter, using the voices of people who lived during the Holocaust. This newsletter can be created in honor of Holocaust Remembrance Day (May 5, 2005). Students take their interviews (and/or select certain interviews or sections of them), add pictures, develop the stories of the subjects, and create articles to commemorate the day. In addition to the interviews, the newsletter can include information about the Fate Did Not Let Me Go story, community events, school events, diversity and tolerance workshops, assemblies, services or any other activities or actions your school may be organizing.
- Students read each other's interviews and develop their own opinion articles (or op-eds) based on the collective information they have learned (from other work your class may have done to study the Holocaust, the Fate Did Not Let Me Go film, interviews, etc.).
- Read Anne Frank's Diary.

ACTIVITY 4. TIME-CAPSULE

> OVERVIEW

Using the theme of elapsed time in the Ollendorff's story — the time between when the letter was sent and when it was delivered — ask students to think about what messages and objects they would like to be remembered by and create a commemorative time capsule.

> MATERIALS

Fate Did Not Let Me Go film, items to be placed in time-capsule, paper, writing materials, Valli's Letter of Hope.

> TIME

2 or more class periods, depending on the scope of the time capsule project.

> STEPS

1. Purchase the time-capsule container in advance. Some websites with helpful information include <http://www.si.edu/scmre/takingcare/timecaps.htm>, <http://www.affordabletimecapsules.com>, and <http://futurepkg.com/>. Keep in mind that you do not need to purchase a time capsule. Depending on the time you are planning to store it, you can use a safe, a steel box or even a large plastic container (for short-term storing).
2. Show the Fate Did Not Let Me Go film.
3. Facilitate a discussion on the film, the events of the Holocaust, especially focusing on what the letter taught them about the Holocaust, Valli as a person, and the Ollendorff family. You can ask them to write down a list of values and messages the Letter of Hope conveys to them.
4. Ask students what they know about time capsules or if they have ever created one. Ask students to comment on how Valli's letter is like an unintentional time capsule.
5. Ask students to reflect quietly on how they would like to be remembered: What are the traits and characteristics that personally represent them, their class, and/or America?
6. Ask them individually to write a list of objects along with what the object represents and means to them.
7. Share the list with the class. You can develop strategies on how to select objects: 1) each student gets to put in one object; 2) the class votes on 10-15 objects based on a brainstorm list; or 3) teams select two-to-three objects of their choice. Also decide on logistical information (with the class), such as, how long the time capsule will be buried, where it will be buried, who buries it (the class, individuals in the class, the school administration, etc.), and if there should be a burying ceremony.
8. Each object should relate to the values/messages that your class believes are important in this time.
9. Ask students to bring in the objects. Make sure you give them enough time if they need to create something, like a letter. Make sure you check out what paper preserves best, etc. Check out <http://www.si.edu/scmre/educationoutreach/tcmake.htm> or <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/timecapsule.html> for more information. More caution on preservation is relevant for capsules that you intend to bury for long periods of time.

10. Your class can create a letter that contains the list of the items included in the time capsule and why your class is creating one (be sure they reflect back on the values/messages the students selected). Assign a student, yourself or a school administrator to be in charge of remembering the opening date.
11. Seal and bury the time capsule (see step 7). You can also register the time capsule with the International Time Capsule Society: <http://www.oglethorpe.edu/itcs/questionnaire.htm>

> VARIATIONS/FOLLOW-UP

- Select a theme for the time capsule, such as objects related to Holocaust Remembrance Day (May 5, 2005).
- Ask people who lived through the Holocaust era to contribute items to the time capsule and make a cross-generational time capsule.



ACTIVITY 5. CANDLES OF HOPE

> OVERVIEW

Challenge your students to display actions of honor, courage, and tolerance to commemorate Holocaust Remembrance Day (May 5, 2005).

> DEFINITIONS

- *Actions of honor:* Performing acts that reflect your own belief system, such as your values, that are intended to make an impact on the greater good. Example: Return a found wallet to the owner.
- *Actions of courage:* Taking appropriate risks that demonstrate your commitment to helping others, a greater good and your values. Example: Stand up to your peers who are teasing your classmate.
- *Actions of tolerance:* Taking action that exemplifies your belief in diversity and that all people should be treated the same, in spite of their economic, religious, racial, sexual orientation and ethnic differences. Example: Attend a cultural event to gain more understanding of a religion that is not your own.

> MATERIALS

Fate Did Not Let Me Go film, Candle of Hope template, writing materials.

> TIME

This project is best suited to span over a few weeks, 10-20 minutes per day.

> STEPS

1. Show the Fate Did Not Let Me Go film.
2. Facilitate a discussion about the film, especially focusing on the themes of honor and hope that are represented in the letter.
3. Explain to your students that in the spirit of the Ollendorff story (which reveals the sheer strength of love and bonds), you are challenging them to display actions of honor, courage and tolerance, leading up to Holocaust Remembrance Day (May 5, 2005).
4. Discuss the definitions of honor, courage, and tolerance and how they relate to the Holocaust and the film. Ask your students to identify examples of actions that relate to these values. Make sure you designate what are appropriate and safe actions. Challenge the students to be aware of their behavior and to observe their peers.
5. Ask your students how many actions they can display over the time period (your choice—can be a week, two weeks, one month). Challenge them to meet that goal (i.e., five hundred actions among the class).
6. Fill out the Candle of Hope template for either every action your students take or highlight special actions, and hang them in your classroom, hallway or assembly. In this way, your school's physical space reflects the powerful actions performed by your students.
7. At every class (over the time period you designated), ask each participating student to report on their most prized action and the total number of actions performed. Discuss the themes, always bringing it back to the film and the Ollendorff story. Create a grid that allows you to add up your class's total for each day.

8. At the end of the designated time period, tally up the total number of actions displayed. Ask students to reflect on the Candle of Hope project (what they learned, what surprised them, what disappointed them, if they saw growth in themselves or their peers, if they went out of their way to display the acts or they carried on as normal, etc.).
9. Celebrate the success of your class.
10. Announce the total number of actions performed at your school's Holocaust Remembrance Day activities.

> VARIATIONS/FOLLOW-UP

- Set up a friendly competition between classrooms, challenging each other to perform more acts.
- Instead of students reporting their own actions, ask students to observe their peers and document what they observed.
- Instead of or in addition to using the Candle of Hope template, ask students to donate a penny for each action displayed; donate the total money raised to a charity, Holocaust survivor or Jewish organization.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

➤ **TIMELINE OF THE HOLOCAUST:**

- <http://www.neveragain.org/time.htm>
- <http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/timeline/timeline.htm>
- <http://library.thinkquest.org/12663/timeline/?tqskip1=1&tqtime=1126>
- <http://www.remember.org/shoah/timeline.html>
- <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/resources/education/timeline/index.html>

➤ **RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS:**

- <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/resources/questions/index.html#2>
- <http://www.remember.org/educate/>
- <http://www.pbs.org/holocaust/classroom.html>
- <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/>

➤ **RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS:**

- <http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/power.htm>

➤ **SURVIVOR STORIES:**

- <http://www.holocaustsurvivors.org/>
- <http://www.shoahfoundation.org/>
- <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/>

➤ **MEMORIAL:**

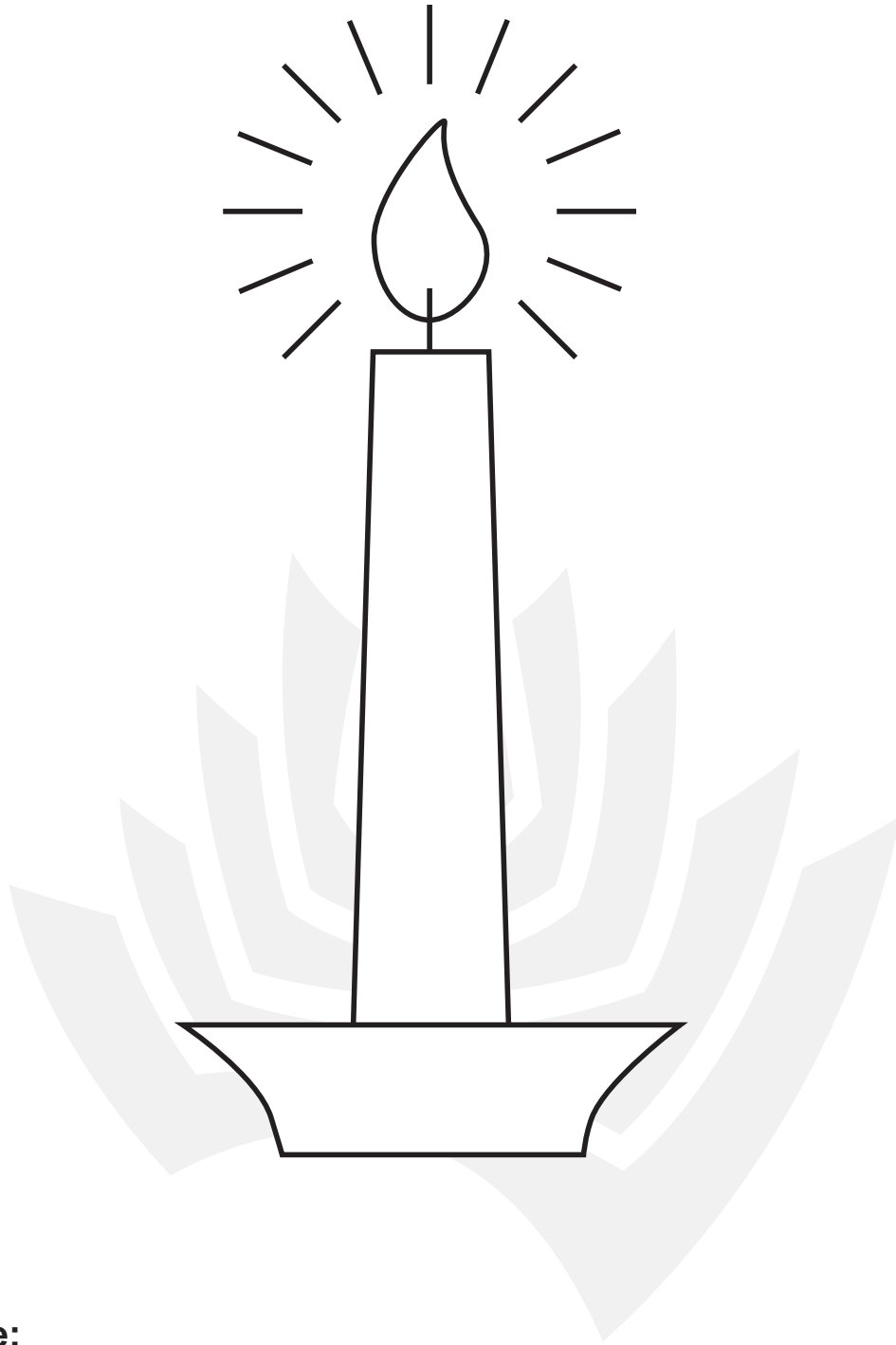
- <http://www.neveragain.org/map.htm>

➤ **LINKS:**

- <http://www.nhmccd.edu/contracts/lrc/kc/holocaust-internet.html>
- <http://www.lr.k12.nj.us/Site/cherokee/library/assignments/holocaust.htm>

➤ **VALLI OLLENDORFF'S LETTER OF HOPE:**

- <http://www.fatedidnotletmego.org/schoolguide/images/letter.pdf>



Name: _____

Grade: _____

My hope for the future: _____
