

“We were masters of our own fate in the cave. There was no one to whom we owed our safety or upon whom we depended. After our men came in from the outside and scraped off the mud which clung to their clothing, they were free men.” – Esther Stermer

NO PLACE ON EARTH

EDUCATION GUIDE

Sliding through a muddy hole in the ground, five Jewish families escaped into a pitch-black world to hide from the Nazis in 1942. With courage and ingenuity, these men, women and children were determined to keep their families alive and avoid capture in southwestern Ukraine, a region where less than 5 percent of all Jews survived and virtually no families made it out of the Holocaust alive. They endured by creating an underground world of their own in two gypsum caves. By the time they left the second cave in April 1944, they had spent 511 days underground, the longest uninterrupted underground stay in recorded human history.



NO PLACE ON EARTH

tells this incredible story of resilience, a story that was uncovered decades after WWII by an intrepid American cave explorer named Chris Nicola. After stumbling across decaying everyday objects in a Ukrainian cave, Nicola pieced together the remarkable story of these families. In *No Place on Earth*, many of these survivors tell their astonishing story for the first time on film.

This film, directed by Janet Tobias, offers a gripping educational platform for young people to learn about the strategies of survival these families used, the unique physical and political adversities they faced, and the power of personal testimony in exploring the past. How did they survive? This film tells their astonishing story.

Curriculum Links:

No Place on Earth is a great fit with history, social studies, global studies and cultural studies courses. There are also many cross-curricular links including STEM-related activities and explorations. The film is recommended for mature middle school students, high school students, college students and general audiences.

Terms to Define:

The terms below are used in *No Place on Earth*. Define these terms using a dictionary or online resource to further explore and understand the film.

| | |
|----------------|---------------------|
| <i>Fuhrer</i> | <i>liberated</i> |
| <i>Gestapo</i> | <i>speleologist</i> |
| <i>ghetto</i> | <i>Weimar</i> |
| <i>grotto</i> | |

Discussion Questions:

1. How did caver Chris Nicola piece together the story of the Ukrainian families who lived in the cave during the Holocaust? What were some of the clues that were most helpful to him?
2. What was life like in Ukraine for Jews before the Nazis invaded? Why do you think the situation changed so quickly?
3. The families in the cave relied upon a few of the young men to forage for food and supplies. What were the risks of sending these men out of the cave?
4. Why was it important for the families in the cave to have more than one exit?
5. What were some of the physical effects of staying in the cave for so long? What were some of the strategies the families used in order to stay alive? For example, conserving body heat was critical. What are some of the ways they could have done this?
6. What are some of the characteristics the individuals in the cave needed in order to survive? How did life in the cave change over time?
7. Why do you think many of the cave survivors did not tell their stories publicly until decades later? What emotions do you think they experienced when they told their stories and returned to the cave?
8. Why do you think this story is important to save for future generations?





Activities:

1. MAPPING THE CAVE IN SPACE AND TIME. Popowa Yama, also known as Priest's Grotto, is the name of the second cave in which the survivors lived. Search for this location online and locate it on a map. After watching *No Place on Earth*, create a timeline charting the cave survivors' story, from the beginning through the conclusion of their time underground. As you continue your studies of the Holocaust, you can create a broader timeline charting other events during this time period using Timeglider™ or another online timeline program.

2. EXPLORE IWITNESS. IWitness is an educational website developed by USC Shoah Foundation's Institute for Visual History and Education. IWitness brings the human stories of the Institute's Visual History Archive to secondary school teachers and their students via engaging multimedia-learning activities. Visit iwitness.usc.edu to register for this resource and to find activities connected to *No Place on Earth*.

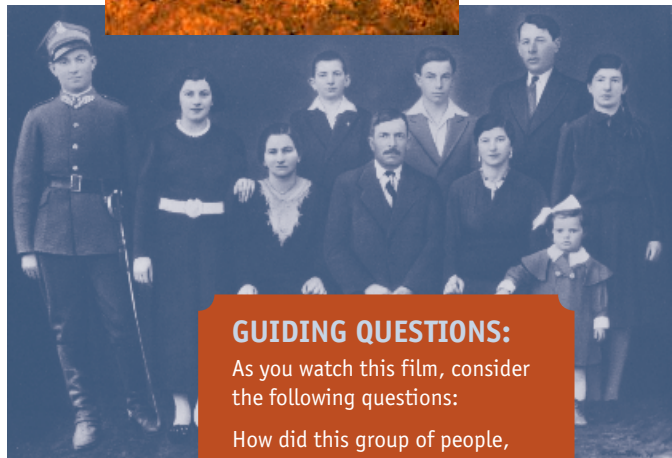
3. PRIMARY SOURCE EXPLORATION. Oral testimonies are powerful primary sources. Visit www.noplaceonearthfilm.com/dig-deeper/the-stermers/esters-memoir/ to read a passage from Esther Stermer's granddaughter Sima. What does Sima reveal about survival strategies? What other kinds of primary sources could you use to understand this story? Visit the web links at the end of this guide to find additional primary source links (example, see the photographs on the *No Place on Earth* website).

4. CAVE SURVIVAL. The stories in this film help us understand the conditions the cave survivors faced. Visit www.noplaceonearthfilm.com/dig-deeper/the-stermers-caves to learn more about caves.

5. FURTHER EXPLORATIONS: UKRAINE AND THE HOLOCAUST. In this film, we learn that only 5 percent of Jews in the Ukraine survived the Holocaust. Before the war, Ukraine was home to one of the largest Jewish populations in the world. How did the Nazis decimate such a large percentage of the population? Research this topic and use multiple sources to back up your arguments in a research paper, persuasive essay or oral presentation.

What is a gypsum cave?

Gypsum caves are very rare. These caves contain gypsum crystals, which can grow to be very long and produce a maze-like system. The chemical formula for gypsum, which is comprised of calcium sulfate dehydrate, is $\text{CaSO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$. The structure of Ukraine's gypsum caves provided the Holocaust survivors with a unique underground hiding place. What are the uses of gypsum today? Research the mineral to learn more.



GUIDING QUESTIONS:

As you watch this film, consider the following questions:

How did this group of people, ranging in age from 2 to 75, manage to survive underground for the longest period of time in history?

If you were in a similar circumstance, do you think you could survive?

What characteristics would you need in order to make it through this ordeal?



Common Core Standards Links:

The activities in this guide fulfill or can be adapted to fulfill many of the goals of the Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies and Speaking and Listening for grades 6-12 including:

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words
- Determine the central ideas or conclusions of a primary or secondary source
- Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources
- Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content
- Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events
- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one on one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners
- Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task



Websites:

No Place on Earth film sites:

www.noplaceonearthfilm.com

www.magpictures.com/noplaceonearth

www.history.com/shows/history-films/articles/no-place-on-earth

Learn more about the Holocaust on History.com:

www.history.com/topics/the-holocaust

Visit HISTORY Classroom

www.history.com/classroom

USC Shoah Foundation

sfi.usc.edu

iwitness.usc.edu

Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center

www.ilholocaustmuseum.org

Generation Europe Foundation

www.generation-europe.eu

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