

uncle



chatzkel

TEACHERS NOTES

SUBJECT AREAS: Holocaust studies, Jewish history, cultural identity, English, media, studies of society, history LEVEL: 13 to 18 year olds, general interest

Uncle Chatzkel is a Film Australia National Interest Program produced in association with ROBE Productions and SBS Independent, and developed with the assistance of the New South Wales Film and Television Office.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Franco di Chiera (Film Australia), Brian Sherman (Robe Productions)

PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/WRITER: Rod Freedman

CO-PRODUCER: Emile Sherman

COMPOSER: Guy Gross

CINEMATOGRAPHER: Nicholas Sherman

EDITOR: James Manche

SOUND RECORDISTS: Leo Sullivan, Henrikas Stutas

ABOUT UNCLE CHATZKEL

Uncle Chatzkel portrays the patient triumph of one man's dignity and intellect over genocide, oppression and personal adversity.

Chatzkel Lemchen has lived through the Russian revolution, two world wars, a communist regime and the transition of Lithuania from Soviet republic to an independent state. During the Holocaust his parents and children, along with many of their fellow Jewish citizens, were killed by the Nazis and their Lithuanian supporters. He and his wife were sent to separate concentration camps in Germany.

Chatzkel survived through his skills as a linguist and lexicographer, and his dictionaries helped preserve the Lithuanian language during the Soviet era. At 93 he still lives and works in Vilnius, Lithuania, providing a bridge between Lithuanian, Russian and Yiddish cultures. Now regarded as a national treasure, Chatzkel displays the strength of a survivor, the insight of an intellectual and the humour of a wise man.

One of seven siblings, Chatzkel was the only member of his family to remain in his homeland. His sister Gita migrated to South Africa in 1913, later moving to Australia. Filmmaker Rod Freedman is Gita's grandson and Chatzkel's great nephew. Although Chatzkel had received his country's highest honours, Rod and the rest of his Australian family were barely aware of him. Rod had only seen old photographs and had never even spoken with him on the telephone. The journey to meet his great uncle is an intense and enlightening experience, raising questions of personal identity and relationship to his Jewish Lithuanian roots.

Chatzkel lived in a world removed from his relatives, separated by the Iron Curtain, by physical and psychological barriers. When he finally meets some of them, he is confronted with unexpected emotions.

Chatzkel's enthralling accounts of the turning points in his life have great historical and contemporary relevance. In Freedman's documentary, they are combined with powerful Russian and Lithuanian archival footage, some seen for the first time.

The result is a film of great scope, one that helps us to better understand the relationship of the present to the past through the story of an extraordinary individual, Uncle Chatzkel.

ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Listed here are suggested follow-up activities, based on the video Uncle Chatzkel, for teachers and students interested in the study of Jewish history.

- Discuss the hardships of the Jews living in Lithuania at the time.
- What type of homes and towns did people live in?
- Describe Uncle Chatzkel's success despite the adversity he suffered.
- Jewish books were being sorted to go into "a museum of extinct people". Discuss this statement. Do you think that the Nazis were successful in achieving their aim?
- Uncle Chatzkel was described as "one man—a complete institute". What does this tell us about his work?
- What aspects of Jewish life are portrayed in the video? Describe the festivals that are celebrated.
- A statement in the video was how unusual it was for a Jew to become an expert in the Lithuanian language. Discuss what this shows us about the status of Jews living in Lithuania at that time.
- Plan a visit to a museum or cultural centre such as the Jewish Cultural Centre and National Library, Kadimah in Elsternwick Victoria, the Jewish Museum in Sydney or the Migration Museum in Adelaide.
- Meet with and/or interview Holocaust survivors who came from Lithuania.

THE STORY BEHIND UNCLE CHATZKEL

Produced under Film Australia's National Interest Program, Uncle Chatzkel is a film that is at once universal and personal. For filmmaker Rod Freedman, Uncle Chatzkel is a deeply moving experience that raises questions about identity and rediscovering family heritage. For Film Australia's executive producer Franco di Chiera his interest was immediately engaged, as considers that "this is no ordinary story. It is the story of a remarkable man in remarkable circumstances and of a family caught up in some of the most traumatic periods of the twentieth century."

The legacy of these past events half a world away still resonate within Australian society as Brian Sherman, ROBE Production's executive producer elaborates: "As we have seen in recent times, many of the atrocities committed during the Second World war continue to have repercussions within Australia. The lasting value of Uncle Chatzkel's story cannot be underestimated." In the following pages, Freedman recounts how he came to make the documentary, reconnecting his family's present with the past:

The Yiddish author, Sholom Aleichem, wrote 'We Jews are People of the Air because we don't have roots'. Making the documentary Uncle Chatzkel has revealed a past that my family put far behind us for three generations. In 1913, my grandmother Gita left Lithuania for South Africa, migrating to Australia in 1965. Nearly a century later, I returned to our former homeland to meet one relative who'd never left, my 93-year-old Great Uncle Chatzkel.

Our meeting took place in June 1997 but my journey to him had really begun years earlier. In London in 1980, I tape-recorded an interview with my Great Aunt Anna about her memories of life in the old country. The tape began, 'My dearest family, at last I am going to tell you something about your roots...' She told me about her brother, Chatzkel, who was something of a legend in the family. A linguist and lexicographer, he had not only survived the Russian revolution, two world wars and the Holocaust – his dictionaries were helping to preserve the Lithuanian language during the Soviet era.

It was obvious that Anna would have loved to see him, but it didn't seem possible. He lived in Lithuania, behind the Iron Curtain, where even having contact with people from overseas could put him under

suspicion from the authorities. He'd considered emigrating but wouldn't have been allowed to take anything with him. 'So what can he do?' Anna sighed. During our time together, Anna gave me a real treasure—a photo of our Lithuanian family taken in 1913. For the first time I saw my great grandparents. In front of a window with wooden shutters, dressed for the occasion, they gazed solemnly at me, surrounded by their children. This was the last time they were all together.

I've always been fascinated by old photographs. When I was in my twenties, my friends were amused at my habit of buying old pictures of complete strangers, framing them and hanging them in my bedroom. Looking back, I think I was searching even then for a connection with my past. I framed that photo from Anna and gave it pride of place on my wall. A few years later, Anna passed away. By that time, both my parents and all my grandparents were dead. The door to my past seemed firmly shut...or so I thought.

In 1996 my cousin's children, Emile and Ondine Sherman, were in Europe and spontaneously decided to visit Chatzkel in Vilnius for a few days. When they returned and I saw his picture in colour, I was shocked to realise that my Great Uncle Chatzkel actually lived in the present! The whole family began talking about him. "Since my relatives arrived in Australia from South Africa in 1965, we've rebuilt our lives and developed an extended family of about fifty people. Uncle Chatzkel, however, lived in a parallel world and none of us in Australia ever thought of calling him, let alone visiting. The older members of our family were stunned to think that you could just go to Lithuania! Why was this place so distant in the mind, so apparently unreachable? In a family of travellers, why hadn't anyone visited him before? Why did we know so little about our past? Were we afraid of something? Did we feel guilty that he was alone and perhaps in need, while we had prospered in Sydney? What would happen if we did open that door?"

At Passover in April 1997, Emile told the gathered family about his visit to Lithuania and I introduced my friend and colleague, Nicolai Sherman, to Emile and his father, Brian Sherman. Nicolai is a Russian-born cinematographer. When he boldly suggested, 'Why not go to Lithuania to film Uncle Chatzkel?' I

saw the door open and was determined to walk through it.

I convinced Brian that Nicolai and I could record Uncle Chatzkel's story but it should be done professionally – we'd need a budget. Brian agreed and thereafter financed the three weeks of filming, acquisition of archive materials, translations from Lithuanian, Yiddish and Russian to English and logging of over forty hours of material shot on Betacam SP and DVCAM. Brian, whose enthusiasm and generosity enabled this film to commence, eventually came on board as ROBE Production's executive producer with Emile taking the role of co-producer. We didn't know how we'd finish the film, but we knew we had to start before it was too late. Uncle Chatzkel was 93, after all. Fortunately, Film Australia came on board with two-thirds of the budget and we are able to proceed to the next stage.

When we finally telephoned Uncle Chatzkel, with Nicolai translating, he sounded frail but sharp. He said that he was very old, that it was the right time to do this thing and that he was ready to tell all that he knew. I researched and read everything I could. I explored the internet, finding the Jewish Museum in Vilnius along with an extensive Jewish genealogy on the web. I met a writer, Rose Zwi, who showed me images of Zagare in the old days. I soon realised that this was much more than a family reunion – the Holocaust in Lithuania had been particularly horrific and I had to confront those stories, that brutality.

There were times when I had second thoughts. The idea of filming, which had seemed simple at the start, became a cumbersome reality—all the equipment, the arrangements, the responsibility, the family's expectations. At one stage, Uncle Chatzkel sent a telegram suggesting a postponement. It started me thinking of what this meeting and the film meant for him. Later, his friend explained that he had been bemused. 'I am an ordinary man,' he had said, 'not unusual, what do they expect from me?'

A turmoil of excitement and trepidation remained with me. The morning in Vilnius when I finally approached Uncle Chatzkel's front door, my heart was thumping. I knocked, the door opened. "Uncle Chatzkel, I'm your great nephew, Rodney, from Australia!" A short, dapper, white-haired man dressed neatly in a suit bowed slightly and extend-

ed his hand. He started to talk and became emotional. We were both overcome and hugged each other. In a moment, we bridged three generations. The years and distance receded and we were no longer strangers, but family.

From that first day together, Uncle Chatzkel and I felt no reserve, sharing jokes and weeping. I was amazed to discover that some of the photos in his desk were of me and my family. I saw myself with sticky-out ears aged 5, aged 13 in my barmitzva suit and long-haired at my graduation in the early seventies. I had asked Uncle Chatzkel to prepare for my visit by collecting together all his photos and documents. When I saw this wealth of material, I began to realise the visual possibilities for the film.

Nicolai and I had already arranged to meet Lithuanian television people and found a great sound recordist, Henrikas Stutas. We recorded some eight hours of Uncle Chatzkel's recollections and stories, all fitted around Chatzkel's demanding work schedule. Speaking neither Lithuanian, Russian nor Yiddish—Uncle Chatzkel's main languages—I worked with an interpreter for the interviews and later had the tapes transcribed and translated in Lithuania for use in editing.

Then when we'd completed the main interviews with Uncle Chatzkel, we set out to gather other material that would illustrate his life as a teacher, translator and intellectual. Archival footage of World War I and the Russian Revolution came directly from a St Petersburg connection of Nicolai's. The Lithuanian State Film Archives supplied pre-World War II footage and excerpts from a wartime anti-Semitic propaganda film that had never been released.

At the Vilna Ghetto State Jewish Museum, Deputy Director Rachel Kostanian and archivist Judita Rozina provided archival photographs and documents about Chatzkel. The Museum had published a book about him for his 90th birthday. He had, by this time, been officially recognised by the Lithuanian government as a national treasure.

I visited Papile, the small town where Uncle Chatzkel was born, but there was nothing to see of the old days – the place has been virtually destroyed by two world wars. In nearby Zagare, however, I had the privilege of meeting Isak Mendelson, the last Jew in the town. As a boy, he

was a neighbour of Chatzkel's family and showed us their old house and wool-dyeing factory.

Zagare was the place I'd been dreading as it was where my great grandparents were murdered. In October 1941, over 3000 Jews were massacred in beautiful Naryshkin Park. All over Lithuania are these places of massacre, deceptively tranquil. A map of these sites and a map of Jewish settlements are almost the same – 94 percent of the country's Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

It is in these places that the contrast with Australia is most obvious. It's one thing to read about the Holocaust, it's quite another to stand in the place where one's family has been slaughtered and try to absorb the spirit of the place.

Making this film has not only linked me to my own past; it's been a way of commemorating my family and a culture that was almost annihilated. It has also been a privilege to get to know an extraordinary individual whose quiet strength and dignity has enabled him to survive and transcend unthinkable oppression, my Uncle Chatzkel.

The family photo at the centre of Rod Freedman's search.
Uncle Chatzkel is the small boy in the centre back row.



ABOUT THE WRITER

The activities for teachers and students were kindly prepared by Rachelle Lever, NSW Board of Jewish Education Resource Centre, Bondi Junction © 2000

ORDERING THE VIDEO

To order a copy of Uncle Chatzkel, or to find out more about Film Australia programs and accompanying teachers notes, please contact:

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