

Potsdam Revisited: High School Oral History Activity

I. Context

The Potsdam Revisited Oral History Activity provides an exciting opportunity for students, using the example of Stuart Canin and the [Potsdam Revisited](#) project, to help preserve and reflect on the memories of the more than half a million Jewish veterans who fought in World War II and the early Cold War, as well as the second and third generation memories of these veterans' descendants.

Interviewing Jewish veterans—and their descendants—is an invaluable way of exploring how the experiences and remembrances of military service contribute to the formation of American-Jewish identity, and the profound social and political impact of war on the lives of veterans and their descendants.

Why oral history?

1. Serves as an immediate link from the present to the past in an understandable and human way.
2. Fills an information gap when less and less information and reflections are recorded in written form.
3. Provides a natural opportunity to obtain information related to ordinary people.
4. Oral history preserves for future generations a sound portrait of who we are in the present and what we remember about the past.

These student-led projects will form part of the Library of Congress's [Veterans History Project](#) - a major initiative focused on collecting, preserving, and reflecting on the firsthand testimony of veterans. Submissions to the VHP are permanently preserved in the Library of Congress's archive. Although interviews with veteran's descendants are not eligible for the Veterans History Project, they will be featured on the Potsdam Revisited website, alongside the interviews with veterans.

II. Learning Objectives

The Potsdam Revisited Student Activity is designed to develop historical research, verbal and written communication, and media arts skills. Using the [remarkable story of Stuart Canin](#) as its jumping off point, the activity invites students to engage with the history of the Potsdam Conference and experiences of American GIs and their descendants, through facilitated interviews between participating students, veterans and descendants of veterans living in the Bay Area.

Students will be able to:

- Define social history and formulate questions about social history topics.
- Analyze, interpret, and conduct research using oral histories.
- Use oral history interview techniques to gather information about social history.
- Interpret recent changes social life in the United States using existing oral histories and by conducting original oral history interviews.
- Demonstrate the literacy skills required to identify and analyze visual, oral, and written primary sources

III. Student Activity

Prior to the students undertaking the interviews, we recommend assigning two class units to familiarize students with the Potsdam Revisited project, oral history, and to provide the necessary preparation to allow them to execute the interviews in accordance with the Library of Congress's requirements.

First Unit

Begin the class by screening [The Rifleman's Violin](#) starring Stuart Canin [14 mins]. **Available for participating educators as an online link or as a DVD, both free of charge.**

After screening *The Rifleman's Violin*, facilitate a discussion about oral history and its value as a historical research method. The prompts provided below and Prof. Deborah Dash Moore's interview questions can help guide the discussion. If time permits, precede this discussion with some of the icebreaker questions below, which were developed by Alison Dills, an AP European History teacher at Balboa High School, San Francisco.

Ice Breaker Questions:

- Have you ever been invited to an event but had no idea what to expect when you arrived? Maybe you felt underprepared, or that you wouldn't be able to keep up or fit in. Were you surprised by the outcome? Tell a story illustrating what happened.
- While packing for a trip, have you ever worried about what to bring? Think of an example of a personal possession that wasn't necessary for your trip but that you brought anyway. How did this personal item add or detract from your experience?
- What music has helped you through an odd or difficult situation? What did the music do for you? How did it help you feel better or more comforted?

Oral History Questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you didn't learn in your textbook?
- What is the historical value of an oral history interview?
- What does *history from below* mean? Why is it important?
- What makes a good oral history interviewer?
- How should an interviewer deal with bringing up the potentially traumatic experiences of war?
- What happens if an interviewee says something that contradicts what you have read or heard elsewhere?

Key Terms:

- **History from Below:** a type of historical narrative that attempts to account for historical events from the perspective of common people, rather than leaders.
- **Oral History:** a method of gathering and preserving historical information through personal testimony and recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life.

- **Open-Ended Question:** a question that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" or with a specific piece of information, but allow the interviewee to give a free-form answer.

Professor Deborah Dash Moore's Interview Questions

Educators should share with students Professor Deborah Dash Moore's questions for Jewish veterans; these are contained in the **resource guide**. After reviewing the questions students should devise and then share potential follow up questions, and consider what Professor Dash Moore is trying to achieve with the questions she has written. These questions should inform students' own oral history interviews.

Second Unit

Following on from the first unit that aimed to familiarize students with the Potsdam Revisited project and some of the key principles of oral history, the second unit is a more hands on workshop style lesson, designed to prepare students to carry out their interviews with Jewish veterans and their descendants.

Educators should familiarize students with the four forms that need to be completed for their interviews to be accepted by Library of Congress:

1. Biographical Data Form: Citizen Film will send educators the completed Biographical Data Forms for the veterans students will be interviewing. Students should use the information on these forms, such as rank and location of service, to help shape their interviews.
2. Veteran's Release Form
3. Interviewer's Release Form
4. Audio and Video Recording Log

All these forms and information about how and when they should be completed can be found in the Veteran's History Project field guide: <https://www.loc.gov/vets/pdf/fieldkit-2013.pdf>.

Review the **Interview Tips** provided in the Resource Guide. It is important that these tips are followed closely as they match the requirements of the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project and failure to **do may result in student's work being rejected**.

Educators may find it helpful to stage a mock interview through which the technical aspects of the interview and students interviewing technique are both considered. The resource guide provides some basic guidance on interview technique.

If the activity is forming part of a media arts syllabus educators may wish to make time for a discussion of the portrait photography element of the student activity, as described in the assignment checklist below.

Assignment Checklist

At the end of the second unit provide students with this assignment checklist that they will need to successfully complete the activity.

- **Record an interview** with a veteran or a descendant; make sure this interview meets the Library of Congress's requirements as outlined in the resource guide.
- Before or after the interview take a **photographic portrait** of your interviewee. The photograph will be featured on the Potsdam Revisited website.
- Complete the required **forms**.
- Write a **250-word reflection** on the interview process. These prompts may help guide this reflection: Was the interview as you expected it to be? What were the challenges? What did you learn? What historical event or behaviors would you like research further based on the interviewee's testimony?

Submitting Materials

Send Citizen Film interviews, photographic portraits and student reflections as digital files [email to potsdam@citizenfilm.org]. Alternatively, you can email the material in the form of links via, Soundcloud, Vimeo, Flickr, etc. but please make sure the platform and settings you use enable us to download the content.

Submit the documents required by the Library of Congress, as outlined above, to our physical address:
Citizen Film
1426 Fillmore St #201
San Francisco, CA 94115

We will feature these interviews, photographic portraits and student reflections on the Potsdam Revisited website and forward physical copies of the material and forms to the Library of Congress for preservation in their archive.