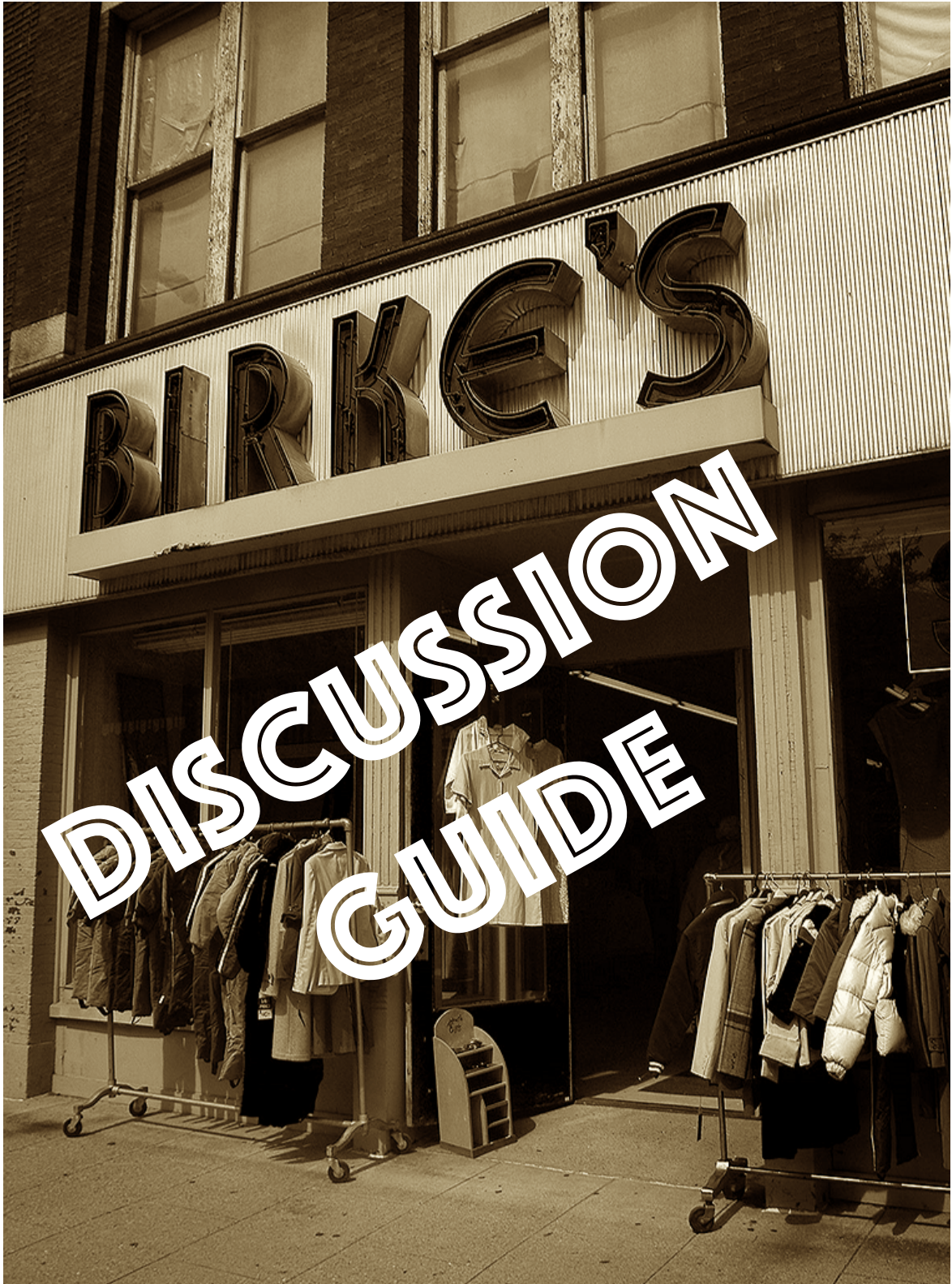


# *Browsing Through Birke's*



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on behalf of the Tsongas Industrial History Center.

[asacramone55.wix.com/tihc](http://asacramone55.wix.com/tihc)

# *Browsing Through Birke's*

## Discussion Guide



## Foreword from Steven D. Grossman

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*Browsing Through Birke's* has been the most enriching and rewarding labor of love I have ever undertaken. Period. Bar none.

The Birke family came into my world at the suggestion of an old friend, who had settled around Lowell in the early 1990's. She thought the store and the family who ran it would interest me as a subject for a documentary film. How right she was. As soon as I walked into the classic early 20th century four-story brick façade structure, childhood memories of exploring G. Fox's Department Store in downtown Hartford, Connecticut with my maternal grandmother known as "Baba" came flooding back to me. The scale, the humanity, the anachronistic but now newly "vintage" clothing stock, the sui generis feel and smell of the place I daresay, all walloped me with an admixture of nostalgia and a strange romance. I was hooked, and knew right then and there that I should endeavor to find some way to capture this story.

A good documentary starts with a resonant empathy on the part of the filmmaker, followed by a compelling and hopefully co-operative subject. In the vibrant and voluble Szifra, and her dignified, humane, and remarkably well-adjusted mother Sally, I struck the mother lode.

Szifra had already established herself as the meticulous and probing family historian, so she provided me with all the documents and interview transcripts in her possession. With that strong foundation, I was well on my way. Again, Szifra could not have been more graciously welcoming and collaborative. She and her former husband Jaluut hosted me in their colonial home—another environment that re-ignited my love affair with the Northeast!—on two separate occasions, and facilitated my filming in so many generous ways.

We discussed what would constitute telling and iconic scenes, and off I went. Szifra also invited lifelong customers of the Lowell landmark to stop by the store for sit-down interviews. Everyone positively loved waxing nostalgic about the salty, crusty Holocaust-surviving patriarch and sole proprietor, whose last name became synonymous with quality garments at a fair price... and with uncensored, politically incorrect and periodically downright offensive banter!

Once I had gathered all this pithy material... the darn thing virtually edited itself! Film is a medium of juxtaposition, back to the Eisensteinian fundamentals of  $1 + 1 = 3$ . Animated by that philosophy, the opening several minutes juxtapose and interweave the present with the past: mounds of clothing tumbling down a staircase with mounds of the brittle skeletons of holocaust victims bulldozed into mass graves; the local T light rail train winding through Lowell and the surrounding region, transmogrifies into Nazi cattle cars hauling perplexed and frightened Eastern European Jews to death camps.

Juxtaposition came in handy as well when contrasting Nathan Birke's caustic, impatient, intolerantly judgmental exterior, with his tender and unshakably loving commitment to his family. Nathan had already been dead for several years when I came into the picture. But he was easy to evoke, despite his corporeal absence, as was the entirety of the store's impact on the

downtown Lowell community, thanks to the gracious, vivid and completely unaffected accounts of Sally and Szifra. Their lucid testimony gave the film its substance, its through line, its vivacity.

Some final technical observations: The film was shot on a now very ancient and quite obsolete relatively low-res format called “Hi-8”, with its old fashioned and yes, outdated looking 4:3 square aspect ratio, and edited essentially without a budget by a crew of one, Yours Truly. The final cut was fine-tuned on what was then a very new, very revolutionary and very expensive, but not as user-friendly as it would become, non-linear system, Media 100. I did not have complete mastery of it at the time, so some of the timing of the aforementioned juxtapositions—such as the opening sequence—perhaps foregrounds the hideous shots of decaying remains from the liberated camps too much, and lingers on them a bit too long for my subsequent taste and 20-20 hindsight. But I was under the gun at the time, it was not so very easy (at all!) to re-cut once you did your “on-line” edit, and since there is no way to return to the original elements, the film as released in late 1995 must stand as the final, definitive version.

I can only hope to experience the richness of the “Browsing through Birke’s” documentary filmmaking encounter at least one more time in my career. I am so very grateful that this film is undergoing a renaissance of sorts, due to the enthusiastic efforts of UMass Lowell’s Tsongas Industrial History Center.

Steven D. Grossman  
South Pasadena, CA

## The Documentary

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### *'No browsing through Birke's!'*

Nathan and Sally Birke may be known to locals as the sweet lady and harsh man that owned and operated Birke's Department Store in Lowell, Massachusetts, but their story does not begin there. The experiences behind Nathan and Sally's behavior are traumatizing, as survivors of the Nazi regime, they faced many challenges throughout their life even after escaping the Holocaust.

They met one night in Sally's home, Nathan was a young, intelligent and intuitive business associate of her father. From that night they traveled down a long and horrific road eventually leading them to Lowell.

After losing all of their material possessions, their family members, and their memories, Sally and Nathan decided they must leave Europe and make a fresh start. They finally made it to Lowell, Massachusetts and saved enough money to open a clothing store that would turn into Birke's Department Store. The store would prove to be therapeutic in different ways for each of them, and their customers.

Birke's Department Store became a staple for the entire Lowell area, but it is only one example of how refugees and immigrants have started new in Lowell. As a major relocation city for immigrants and refugees, Lowell has become a place for opportunity, and a place for healing. Holocaust survivors, like the Birkes, became members of the community; since then, many other refugee groups have made Lowell their home. Armenians and Cambodians both came here after going through similar experiences as the Jews during the Holocaust. Though these people have been through such traumatic events, they have found a safe haven in Lowell, and a new life of opportunity.

This discussion guide embraces the histories of these Genocides and shows members of the educational community how to tackle these tough subjects. The documentary presents certain themes that might not be exact to all refugees experiences, but that relate to refugees and reflects the effects of war, mass murder, and loss.

## Meet the Birkes

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### Sally Birke

Sally is the loving and caring mother and wife. She gives the store a warm and friendly feel that contrasts Nathan's harsh exterior well. Sally offers food to customers and kind words to them as well.

### Szifra Birke

Szifra is the family historian of sorts. She has an interesting relationship with her father, Nathan. Szifra helps viewers see the different sides to her parents and understand the people behind Birke's Department Store.



### Nathan Birke

Nathan is the king of Birke's Department Store. He decides who can shop there, he decides who will get kicked out. He seems to have a tough shell but he is soft on the inside.

## The Community

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Lowell, Massachusetts is home to many immigrants and refugees. There are so many assistance programs for people settling in the city. The assistance programs offer help with everything from living situations to medical help both mental and physical. Each new group of people brings culture and diversity from all parts of the world to this wonderful community. There are grocery stores from many different nations. An Indian grocery store is right down the street from a Cambodian grocery store. The restaurants range from Greek to Thai to Portuguese and so much more. Then, there are stores like Birke's, opened by refugees and immigrants. The city of Lowell is a second chance for people like the Birkes who have been through so much and just need a fresh start.

## The Filmmaker

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Writer, producer, cameraman and editor Steven D. Grossman received his Master's in Visual Anthropology from USC in 1992. While there, he garnered the prestigious Focus Award for his sound recording and design work on *Stat*, an intimate portrait of the challenges faced by an emergency room doctor. Subsequent awards include a local Los Angeles Emmy for his writing, producing and cinematography contributions to a 36-episode series adapted from the textbook *Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, co-produced by PBS affiliate KOCE. Steven currently enjoys a thriving career in the educational, documentary, event videography and market research arenas. He would welcome any questions or comments about *Browsing Through Birke's* at [cameramansdg@yahoo.com](mailto:cameramansdg@yahoo.com).

## Szifra Birke

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Professionally, Szifra (SHifra) Birke is an executive coach and one of only a handful of professionals working at the intersection of emotions and wealth. Her forward-looking work with entrepreneurs, wealthy families and their financial advisors is grounded in over 30 years of experience in behavioral health and helping people with transitions. She has been featured in Business Week, Investment News, Dow Jones Newswire, the Christian Science Monitor and the Boston Globe. Szifra is an author and the producer of Shrink Rap, a syndicated cable TV show broadcast since 1997. She earned a BA in Psychology and Education from Boston University, and an MS in Professional Counseling from Purdue University. She grew up fully involved in her family's retail businesses, including managing "Sue's Teen Shop" while she was still in high school, and has co-owned a number of other small businesses over the years.

Personally, Szifra has been involved in projects about the Holocaust, immigrants, and emotions since 1973 while a graduate student at Purdue.

## The Tsongas Industrial History Center

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The Tsongas Industrial History Center is a hands-on center where students learn about the American Industrial Revolution through activities and tours of the sites where history—and science—happened. Students "**do history**" by weaving, working on an assembly line, role-playing immigrants, voting in a town meeting, or becoming inventors. Students can also "**do science**" as they use the engineering design process, manipulate simple machines, create canal systems and test water wheels, measure water quality, trace the flow of groundwater pollution, or discover river cleanup techniques.

Tsongas Industrial History Center is a **professional development** provider, offering teachers exciting workshops and primary-source-based teaching activities. Teachers can earn professional development points and even graduate credit for their activities at the Center.

The Tsongas Industrial History Center is an **education partnership** between the [University of Massachusetts Lowell Graduate School of Education](#) and National Park Service at [Lowell National Historical Park](#), which each provide a portion of the funding and staff to operate the Center.

The Tsongas Industrial History Center is grateful to receive operating support from the [Massachusetts Cultural Council](#).

## Suggested Guidelines for Viewing the Documentary in an Educational Setting

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The Documentary contains visually graphic material and some inappropriate language. Please view the entire film before a student viewing to gauge whether or not this is appropriate for your classroom age for educational purposes. Suggested grade level is ninth grade and above.

Discuss topics with respect. Many people have been through these situations or similar situations as shown in *Browsing Through Birke's*.

This documentary will bring about emotions, express yourself in an appropriate way.

These topics are heavy. Prepare students with the information surrounding the situation depicted in *Browsing Through Birke's*.

Questions will come up. Make sure to stress how sensitive this topic is.

Critical thinking is important when handling this type of subject matter. Explain critical thinking and how to verbalize thoughts.

## Teaching strategies for conversation on the film:

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- Group Discussions
- Reverse Classroom
- Reflection Papers

## Previewing

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The documentary, *Browsing Through Birke's*, is a collage that includes humor, vintage fashion, the Holocaust, and the trauma that genocide survivors have been through, how they deal with their feelings, and the aftermath of these experiences. It showcases how the Birke family dealt with trauma like Sally who could only face her loss once a year on Yom Kippur; or obsessively dealing with it like Nathan did, hanging all articles on the Holocaust in his store. It shows how a department store can be a form of therapy for survivors, and how a strange city can become home.

Most importantly, this film shows the effects of horrific events and how they can differ in each person. This can be a day to day struggle and the healing process is slow and for most a life long commitment. This is a different way to teach students about difficult topics in history; topics that are hard to explain but can be shown through several outlets, like this film. *Browsing Through Birke's* will help students connect historical events to the effects that they have on the people that experienced them and how these historical events can still impact the world that we live in today. The film humanizes history and the past, which is a difficult task. We must use the past to help prevent genocide from recurring as it has so many times throughout history.

## Vocabulary and Understanding:

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- What is a refugee?
- What is an immigrant?
- What is a genocide?
- What is PTSD?
- How are these historical events relevant to today?
- What can we learn from them?

## Points of Reflection from the Film:

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- What did you learn from the film?
- In what ways did Sally and Nathan's family deal with the events they had lived through during the Holocaust?
- This film reflected a fairly complete family history going back three generations of Birkes, how far back does your family history go? What historical and world events shaped your family history?
- Have you or someone you've known lived through traumatic events such as this and do you recognize coping strategies similar to the Birke family's?
- Based on the Birke's telling of their coming to America and starting new lives here, how average do you think their experience was as new immigrants? Do you have family or friends with similar stories and backgrounds? How did they rebuild their lives here?
- Some of the imagery in the film is very graphic, and it is obvious the intent is to stress how horrific the events of the Holocaust were for those who survived. How important do you feel it is to the telling of history to keep such visual reminders?
- The world has changed in so many ways since the Holocaust, yet with regards to immigrants and refugees some of the same issues still exist. Think about current events, can you name

major areas of needed improvement in local and national support systems for refugees and immigrants?

## The City of Lowell:

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- Why should the community help heal its residents?
- What programs are available in the city of Lowell?

The questions from The Importance of Teaching History, Points of Reflection from the Film, and The City of Lowell sections, should be revisited after viewing the documentary.

# Viewing

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## **Part I: The Birke Family History**

- Sally had a humble beginning in Poland. She had to leave school at the age of 13 to help support her family. Nathan was the opposite, he was 13 years older than Sally and was highly educated. He was a wealthy business man by age 32 and a business associate of Sally's father. One day he was riding in his horse and buggy and saw Sally's father walking home. He offered her father a ride home and once they had arrived at Sally's home, it was past the country wide curfew imposed by Hitler. Sally's father insisted Nathan stay the night in order to avoid trouble with the Nazis. This is when Nathan and Sally first met.

## **Part II: Effects**

- Sally

Sally was separated from her family when she and Nathan went to Russia to get her brother. After not being able to return home, she was also not able to find her brother. She lost all of her family in the Holocaust and two infant boys while in Russia. She lost her families home and all of their personal possessions. Yet after all she went through, she stilled stayed positive. This does not mean she did not have strong feelings. She dealt with them on a daily basis, and faced them on Yom Kippur

Sally suffered great loss, but if you walked into Birke's department store, she was the friendly and welcoming face behind the counter. She would make you feel like family, maybe because she was missing her family that she lost. She would offer treats to customers, definitely using food for comfort, greet them with a smile, and have a friendly conversation with them. She would give advice, and help customers deal with her husband's rough exterior.

- Nathan

Nathan definitely had a rough exterior but it was clear why. He had lost everything, had to constantly start over moving from place to place; so it made sense that when he finally settled in Lowell and opened Birke's department store, he really wanted to feel grounded. This might explain why he felt the need to only allow shoppers who met his standards. He left Europe with no possessions, and he opened Birke's to create a way to provide for his family.

Nathan had strong opinions, in Birke's his word was gold. It was his place, he owned it, and he finally had permanency in his life.

- Szifra

From the time I was a teen, I had visual Holocaust intrusions in my daily life—and over-identified with my parents' losses. I felt responsible to be a good student and kid, not bring any other pain into their lives —also perhaps to please my dad and keep him from getting angry and yelling.

Being with my dad at the store was often embarrassing, sometimes mortifying. He could be shockingly insulting to customers. Sometimes I could successfully get him to simmer down a bit. Often, though, I just went to another part of the store to get away.

Though not a Zionist, when I was about 9 my dad took me out of school to see the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion- speak at Brandeis University. After agreeing that I'd say hello when Ben-Gurion walked past us, I was totally overcome by the pomp and circumstance— and I froze. Next thing I know, I'm in the aisle tumbling into this head of state who is surrounded by guards and dignitaries. My dad had pushed me! On the way home in response to why he pushed me (made more polite for this guide): "You wasn't going to say hello... He puts his pants on the same way as anybody; I never want you will never be afraid of people!!"

### **Part III: Similar Events**

- **Armenian Genocide**

The Armenian Genocide took place 1915 to 1924. The Ottoman Empire, specifically the Turkish government and people, rounded up the Armenian minority in what is now the Republic of Turkey and murdered all healthy men. Then they rounded up women and children as well as the old and the sick and sent them on a 'death march' to the Syrian desert. During this march they were denied food and water. To this day Turkey refuses to recognize this killing of an estimated 800,000-1,500,00 people as a genocide.

- **The Holocaust**

The Holocaust took place from 1933 to 1945. The Nazi regime, under Adolf Hitler, came to power and systematically started murdering many people. This began with members of opposing political parties, like communists, and led to an all-out, "ethnic cleansing" directed at Jews. During this time, Jewish men, women, children and elderly were sent to concentration camps where they would work until they were eventually killed. An estimated 6 million people were murdered during the Holocaust.

- **Cambodian Genocide**

The Cambodian Genocide took place from 1975 to 1979. The Khmer Rouge regime was led by Pol Pot, his goal was to 'restore' Cambodia to an agrarian society and eliminate any outside influence that differed from his vision. The Khmer Rouge executed anyone who was involved with the prior regime, including leaders, educators, police, military, and anyone who did not fit the simple agrarian mold. It is estimated that 2.2 million Cambodians were murdered by Pol Pot and his regime.

- **Similarities between them**

There are common themes in all of these historical events. Each genocide began with a political party coming to power. Hitler believed that he must expand Germany and in order to do that he needed an ethnically pure population. The Khmer Rouge regime wanted to take back control of Cambodia and expel all Western influences. The Ottoman Empire wanted an ethnically

pure society with only Turks in order to be strong enough, in their opinion, to expand. Regardless of the reasoning, these regimes set goals of themselves, found a position of power, and implemented their visions. Each one of these events occurred over a number of years and the devastation was endless. They did not care if you were a man, a woman, a child, or elderly; murder in these situations did not discriminate.

#### **Part IV: Community Resources**

- International Institute of New England
  - Helps to resettle refugees in Lowell.
- Catholic Charities
  - Many programs to help immigrants and refugees new to Massachusetts
- Metta Health Center
  - Lowell Community Health Center; provides refugees with health and human services.

## Post Viewing

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It is important for students to recognize that people go through horrible things like this more often than they are aware. That means that the person or student next to them could have gone through a similar situation. There is always more to someone's story.