



Sarah's Key 2010/12a

Synopsis of the film

Sarah's Key opens in Paris 1942, with Sarah Starzynski and her little brother Michel in bed at home in their apartment. It is the picture of a carefree childhood. Suddenly a knock at the door brings us into the reality of the situation – as the police batter down the door and demand to know where their father is.

The film is a fictionalised dual tale of Sarah's experiences as a little Jewish girl and of Julia, a journalist living in modern day Paris. Julia's family own the apartment where Sarah's family lived in 1942, and they are renovating it. At the same time, Julia's political magazine is commemorating the Vel' d'Hiv Roundup of July 1942. Julia's colleagues are unaware of the atrocity, thinking that those responsible must have been the Nazis, but Julia is keen to make them aware that the Vichy government in France and the police rounded up the Jews of their own accord.

Sarah has hidden her little brother in a locked cupboard in the apartment when the police come for them, thinking that they will only want the men and boys. Unfortunately they have been taken to the Velodrome d'Hiver and are forced to remain here for days. A woman plans to escape and Sarah wants to give the key to the locked cupboard to her so she can rescue Michel. However her father does not think the escape plan will work and refuses. When the woman escapes and Sarah's father realises that Michel's fate may be even worse than what they are experiencing in the Velodrome, he panics and begs the guards to take the key and let him out. His pleas fall on deaf ears.

Throughout the rest of the film we witness Sarah's separation from her parents, her desperation to get back to Paris to save Michel, and the kindness of strangers who help her to finally reach Paris.

In the meantime we have also learned that Julia's husband's family may have taken over Sarah's apartment in the days after the roundup of the Parisian Jews, and she is

horrified to think they might have profited from Sarah's deportation. Eventually she finds out that her father in law was in the house the day that Sarah returned to rescue Michel. Julia becomes almost obsessed with finding out what happened to the Starzynski children, and she tracks down the family who took care of her and the family she went on to have in New York. The final part of the film looks at Sarah's family and how her experiences impacted on their lives. Her son is then able to learn about her story, which he never knew. Whilst looking through her old diaries, he finds the key to cupboard where Michel was hidden; Sarah had never let it go.

When it was made and where

The film was made in Paris in 2010, and is in French with English subtitles, and parts of the film are also in English.

HMDT Review

Please note that the review may act a spoiler for the film.

Sarah's Key is a very modern film, which explores the impact of the Holocaust and World War Two on society today. The film focuses on the behaviour of the French and their attitudes to the Jews, who like many in Nazi Germany considered their nationality more important than their religion. During the Vel' d'Hiv Roundup, a woman from the building opposite shouts down 'you had it coming', and a man in the same building replies, 'you stupid woman, we'll be next!' highlighting how many did not speak up during Nazi occupation.

In the camp that Sarah is deported to with her family, we witness a guard acting with kindness towards Sarah. The first two times he places his foot on something she is looking for, only to allow her to have the item as she looks up at him. The final time, she is trying to escape to get back to Michel, and he gives in and helps her to flee the camp. The random acts of compassion, as well as the woman's unkind words, suggests that not every guard was bad, and not every member of the public was good.

The film also deals with the guilt of surviving when others didn't. Sarah is clearly unable to live with the fact that she trapped her brother, even though she thought at the time she was saving him. Her sad life in New York along with her suicide in the 1960s give us an insight into how those left behind after the Holocaust were sometimes unable to live with the fact they had survived when many they loved did not.

The film is an impassioned account of why we should continue to share the stories of the past. Sarah's son is able to deal with his mother's past and realise that there is more to his life too. Sharing Untold Stories allows us to remember those who suffered

terrible experiences at the hands of the Nazis or complicit governments in Occupied Europe, with dignity and respect.

These questions will help those watching *Sarah's Key* explore the film for Holocaust Memorial Day.

1. why does Sarah think that hiding Michel in the cupboard is the safest option?
2. why does Julia worry that her husband's family moved into the Starzynski apartment in August 1942?
3. Julia's co-workers know very little about the Vel' d'Hiv Roundup. Do you think this is indicative of modern knowledge about the Second World War?
4. why does Julia's father in law not want his mother to find out about the apartment's history?
5. why is Julia so keen to find out what happened to the Starzynski children?
6. why does the guard help Sarah to escape?
7. why do the Dufares protect Sarah and help her get to Paris?
8. it appears that Sarah starts to feel guilty as she gets older. Do you think this is the case?
9. why do you think Sarah leaves the Dufares without saying goodbye or leaving a forwarding address?
10. what do you make of the fact that William Rainsferd (Sarah's son) knows nothing of her experiences in the Holocaust? This seems to be a fairly common occurrence. Do you think this is because people spoke about their lives less in the past, or do you think it is because people find it hard to share their experiences in the aftermath of atrocities?

You can use HMD resources to find out more about

Thomas Buergenthal, a Holocaust survivor who experienced life in the camps
<http://hmd.org.uk/resources/for-adults/books-for-adults-a-lucky-child>

Other victims of Nazi persecution <http://hmd.org.uk/genocides/victims-of-nazi-persecution>

A podcast featuring Martin Winstone who wrote *The Holocaust Sites of Europe*, a book about all sites where murders and internments of the Holocaust took place
<http://hmd.org.uk/resources/podcasts/martin-winstone-the-holocaust-sites-of-europe>