Defying the Nazis VR

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ABSTRACT
"Defying the Nazis VR" uses CGI, motion graphics, and archival documentary footage to re-create a heroic episode from World War II in VR, experimenting with the emotional power of virtual reality and with the medium as an educational tool.

Keywords: History, documentary, virtual reality, World War II, refugees.

Index terms: K.4.0 [Computers and Society]: General; K.8.m [Personal Computing]: Miscellaneous

1 INTRODUCTION
Los Angeles-based creative studio VR Playhouse and director Elijah Allan-Blitz immerse viewers in the arduous immigration journey of WWII refugees in the "Defying the Nazis VR" experience. The immersive 360° short film is a companion to the PBS documentary Defying the Nazis: The Sharps’ War from award-winning filmmakers Ken Burns and Artemis Joukowsky. The film follows Waitstill and Martha Sharp, an American couple who undertake a courageous mission to help refugees escape Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II. This powerful and emotional VR piece recreates a 1939 voyage in which Martha accompanied twenty-nine boys and girls on an ocean liner to America. Viewers can feel what it was like to make this journey. As they go, they’ll hear excerpts from the film’s interviews with survivors, detailing first the sorrow of saying goodbye to their families, most for the last time, and then the joy upon reaching the New World. Inside our virtual space, a new context in which to explore the Sharps’ story and the film’s themes has been created.

“Defying the Nazis VR drives home awareness of the hardships that thousands of refugee families are enduring amid the current European migrant crisis,” says VR Playhouse CEO Christina Heller. “With this immersive story, the past is rendered palpably present.”

The VR Playhouse team paid careful attention to detail, maintaining period authenticity for the piece in order to craft a more relatable experience for viewers. They used images from the actual vessel, the SS Excambion, as inspiration for their CG ship, as well as referenced historical images of 1940s NYC for crafting the CG Statue of Liberty and New York City skyline. To create realistic depth and texture, they shot live-action actors on a green screen and composited them into the lower deck of the ship. The goal was to maintain historical accuracy while creating an emotionally vivid and reverent depiction of the travelers’ stories.

“What we were creating was not an accurate representation of the actual journey, but rather a representation of the multiple memories of this journey,” notes VR Playhouse Creative Director Dylan Southard. “Virtual reality provides a unique platform to explore the concept of visualizing memories and sharing history in a way that is dynamic and emotionally engaging. This is the future of museums exhibits.”

The experience premiered in September 2016 as part of the launch of Time Life’s LIFE VR app.

VR Playhouse is a Los Angeles-based creative studio and full-service production company specializing in virtual and augmented reality. With a fervent passion for transporting viewers through meaningful experiences in immersive media, founders Christina Heller and Ian Forester have amassed a specialized team with diverse backgrounds ranging from production to animation, journalism, VFX, theater and live events. From creative to production and distribution, VR Playhouse delivers complete projects through its cohesive VR pipeline. Boasting a broad range of projects in the commercial, live sports, cinematic narrative and high-end real estate industries, VR Playhouse’s original VR content transports viewers into unexplored times and locations, allowing audiences to transcend their daily lives and experience new perspectives and emotions.