

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE

An Educator's Guide to Discussing the Holocaust
and Using Literature to Learn from the Past

*“We wore masks and spoke lines that were not our own. This happened to me, and I still don’t understand how it happened at all.”—Irene Gut Opdyke, *In My Hands**



Why Teach the Holocaust?

by ROSE and MICHAEL BROCK

This watershed event in history is often daunting to educators, given the complexities of the issues involved with the topic, its disturbing characteristics, the difficulty of tackling historical events whose full effects have yet to be realized, and its tendency to consume large amounts of instructional time relative to its specificity. Acknowledging these challenges, teaching the Holocaust across the curriculum could not be a more relevant subject for the classroom today than at any other point in the last century. In spite of efforts by survivors, scholars, educators, civic leaders, and citizens to uphold the mandate “Never again!” genocide continues to plague humanity. According to the activist agency Genocide Watch, within the lifetime of today’s graduating seniors acts of genocide or “ethnic cleansing” have been perpetrated in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, East Timor, and Sudan. Additionally, high-profile Holocaust denials have made recent headlines, issued from sources ranging from heads of state to religious leaders. The passage of time exacerbates this problem. The generation who lived through the catastrophe of World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust—those who can bear most vivid witness—are passing from us. With them fade the scars of memory, but we who follow have not learned the lessons they taught. As educators, we must make this relevant for young people today.

A truism in times of war is that those in affected societies who are least involved in perpetrating the conflict are also the most vulnerable to suffer its horrors. Historically, the “most vulnerable” in wartime have been women and children, and as a collection, these five novels certainly speak to that point. However, they also present young characters that show all readers that the most vulnerable need not suffer idly. They provide voices for those like them who during the Holocaust also were not idle. The heroine of *In My Hands*, Irene Gut Opdyke, is the historical touchstone for characters like Liesel Meminger (*The Book Thief*), Misha Pilsudski (*Milkweed*), Kalinka (*The Winter Horses*), and Bruno and Schmuel (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*). Each of these young characters, in ways great and small, makes some effort to cast aside their vulnerability and act for humanity in the midst of barbarity. The Holocaust provides striking examples of human resiliency in the face of the greatest adversity, particularly on the part of those who seem least likely to summon it.

In a larger sense, teaching the Holocaust also provides students with unique opportunities to learn about themselves and about the people they want to become. Examples from this catastrophe bear out the very worst human qualities, and the very best. Using the books suggested here as teaching resources provides remarkable opportunities for this level of learning. By inviting students to sharpen their focus on personal perspectives—real or fictitious—they are able to get a sense of what it is like to be an individual in the midst of landmark events, and the role each person can play in their unfolding.

Students taking up these texts face developmental challenges and are learning life skills for which the Holocaust is a particularly suitable subject. Young adults are primed to investigate themes such as identity and intolerance, family and friendship, innocence and loss, fear and courage, anger and forgiveness, and anxiety and hope. We as teachers should be emboldened by these rich concepts to develop lessons for this daunting historical subject. Utilizing these works of fiction can provide powerful insight into the spirit of the human qualities that were most essential in surviving the horrors that serve as their setting, so long as the instructor dutifully distinguishes between the literary liberties taken by their authors and the realities of the documented history. Succeeding in this important task bolsters the authenticity of work by paying due respect to the actual events of the Holocaust while maintaining the literary relevance of the work for the student and for our curricula.

Ultimately, interpersonal relationships have a far greater influence on the results of our development as individuals than larger institutional events. While the events around us often compel us to make choices, it is typically the impact that our decisions will have on ourselves and on those important to us that ultimately guides that process. Each of these books drive home that point, as their characters are defined by relationships that are created, developed, and tested by the historical processes occurring around them, their value as characters of praise or scorn is determined by their commitment to those relationships. The Holocaust is unique as a topic of study in that we have no choice but to be awed by the ability it has to illustrate how our value as individuals has more to do with how we treat those around us than with the times in which we live. Teachers seeking an approach to introducing this complicated subject would be well served to start with the strength of character in individuals attempting to overcome adversity, and the power of their relationships with others to embolden them to succeed, even in the face of an attempt to destroy them. Even students who are most skeptical about the ability of ordinary people to make a difference can acknowledge the resolve we all have to act on behalf of friends and family. To be sure, the Holocaust is a daunting topic for instruction. However, if we effectively utilize the resources now available, we can provide students with an unparalleled learning experience. Few other subjects offer young people the chance to develop respect for the vital importance of preserving dignity and human rights as well as an appreciation of history and a love for quality literature.

BOOK STUDY

- **THE BOOK THIEF** by Markus Zusak
- **THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS** by John Boyne
- **MILKWEED** by Jerry Spinelli
- **THE WINTER HORSES** by Philip Kerr
- **IN MY HANDS: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer**
by Irene Gut Opdyke with Jennifer Armstrong

Curricular Connections

- As a pre-reading activity, have students complete an anticipation guide structured in the following manner:

Before Reading	After Reading	Statements
		Following a leader who improves a country by promoting job creation, rebuilding community awareness, and instilling a sense of pride and patriotism is always a good idea regardless of how that process is carried out.
		It is acceptable to remove a member of a society if he or she is thought to be inferior.
		Losing some individual freedom is acceptable if it benefits the community or society as a whole.
		If you disagree with a rule, law, or public policy, it is better to remain silent than speak out and risk punishment.
		A civilized society would ensure that its functions never allow a child to be harmed intentionally.

- Instruct students to complete the guide by placing a “+” sign in the box next to the statements for which they agree, and a “0” next to those for which they disagree. They must commit to agreement or disagreement—there are no conditional responses. Assure students that there are no correct or incorrect positions.
- Once students complete the guide, read each statement aloud and have students who agree show it by standing or raising their hands. Each student should be permitted to provide their rationale for agreeing if they wish.
- Repeat the process after reading each book, giving students the opportunity to provide their rationales for keeping or changing their positions.
- This activity can be effectively coupled with a KWHL chart for the Holocaust.
- The social and ethnic antagonisms that resulted in the Holocaust go far beyond the Nazi regime in Germany. Have student groups investigate the fate of a selected group of Holocaust victims (Jews, Roma, Poles, homosexuals, communists, mentally/physically disabled, etc.) as a historical process. Groups should develop time lines plotting the history of antagonism toward their subject, culminating in the Holocaust. Groups may present their findings, emphasizing the causes and effects of the points of their time lines. When applicable, groups should refer to examples from or allusions in the texts.
- Three of the books utilize Poland as part of their setting (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *Milkweed*, *In My Hands*). Task students with creating “A Brief History of Poland,” emphasizing the region’s role and location as a cultural crossroads as they

do so. Assign student groups a time period to investigate (a century per group should be sufficient). Groups may develop presentations of their era to the class, or members of each group can come together in a jigsaw activity to discuss their time frame.

- Each of the books provides a unique perspective on the concept of family. Instruct individual students, student pairs, or student groups to develop a comparison of the treatment of the concept of family in at least two of the texts. This can be done as a short graphic organizer activity (e.g., a Venn diagram or double-bubble Thinking Map), or as a more elaborate activity such as an essay.
- The language that authors use in their works is essential to getting across their intended meaning. Select four quotes from one or more of these novels that seem to signify key ideas that the author hopes that readers take from the book(s). These might be quotes spoken by characters or might be from the narration, and page numbers should be included with the quotes. Have students develop a chart with the following four columns: 1. Quote, 2. Page Number, 3. Relevance to the Novel, and 4. Intended Meaning for Readers. The intended meaning should have relevance not only to the characters in the text, but also to the lives of anyone who reads the book(s).
- In each book, there is at least one character whose actions put them at tremendous personal risk. This risk is typically physical, emotional, or psychological, or is a combination of these. Risk management is a valuable skill for teens to learn and utilize now and in their futures. Have students select a character from one of the books (or compare characters across texts) and develop a simple risk management plan for them, citing examples from the texts to support the points of their plans. Some of the broad information their plans could include would be:
 - Identifying and characterizing risks
 - Determining the vulnerability of themselves and people/things important to them to the threats they identify
 - Assessing the risk involved if the threats are realized (what is the best-case scenario, worst-case, etc.)
 - Determining ways to reduce the threats
 - Prioritizing risks and developing a strategy to manage them based on their priority

A risk management analysis can also be developed, where students critique their character(s) on their ability to manage their risks through the course of the text(s).

After being selected by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a National Teaching Fellow, **Dr. Rose Brock** is now part of a national corps of educators who serve as the core of the museum's efforts to ensure quality Holocaust education in secondary schools selected. In addition, she works as a Library Media Specialist at Coppell Middle School West in Coppell, Texas. **Michael Brock** teaches AP European History and IB History of the Americas HL at Coppell High School in Coppell, Texas.

the book thief

Markus Zusak

A Michael L. Printz
Honor Book

A Sydney Taylor
Book Award Winner

Grades 7 up

Alfred A. Knopf PB: 978-0-375-84220-7

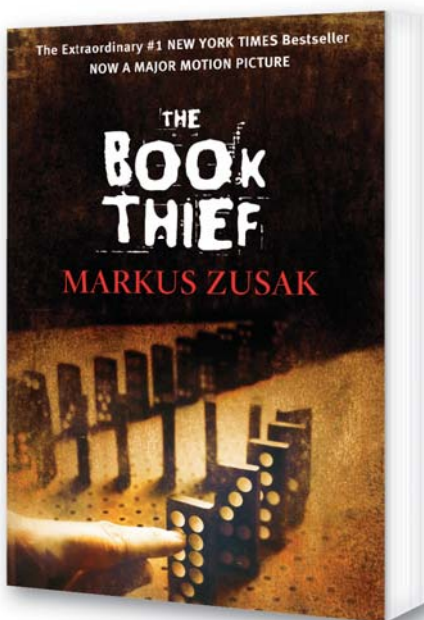
Move Tie-In PB: 978-0-385-75472-9

HC: 978-0-375-83100-3

GLB: 978-0-375-93100-0

EL: 978-0-307-43384-8

Listening Library CD: 978-0-7393-3727-1



ABOUT THE BOOK

Liesel Meminger is only nine years old when she is taken to live with a foster family, the Hubermanns, on Himmel Street in Molching, Germany, in the late 1930s. She arrives with few possessions, but among them is *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, a book that she stole from her brother's burial place. During the years that Liesel lives with the Hubermanns, Hitler becomes more powerful, life on Himmel Street becomes more fearful, and Liesel becomes a full-fledged book thief. She rescues books from Nazi book-burnings and steals from the library of the mayor. Liesel is illiterate when she steals her first book, but Hans Hubermann uses her prized books to teach her to read. This is a story of courage, friendship, love, survival, death, and grief. This is Liesel's life on Himmel Street, told from Death's point of view.

*"The Book Thief deserves a place on the same shelf with *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. It seems poised to become a classic."*—USA TODAY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the symbolism of Death as the omniscient narrator of the novel. What are Death's feelings for each victim? Describe Death's attempt to resist Liesel. Death states, "I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both." (p. 491) What is ugly and beautiful about Liesel, Rosa and Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, Rudy Steiner, and Mrs. Hermann? Why is Death haunted by humans?
2. *The Grave Digger's Handbook* is the first book Liesel steals. Why does she take the book? What is significant about the titles of the books she steals? Discuss why she hides *The Grave Digger's Handbook* under her mattress. Describe Hans Hubermann's reaction when he discovers the book. What does the act of book thievery teach Liesel about life and death? Explain Rudy's reaction when he discovers that Liesel is a book thief. How does stealing books from the mayor's house lead to a friendship with the mayor's wife? Explain how Liesel's own attempt to write a book saves her life.
3. Liesel believes that Hans Hubermann's eyes show kindness, and from the beginning she feels closer to him than to Rosa Hubermann. How does Hans gain Liesel's love and trust? Debate whether Liesel is a substitute for Hans's children, who have strayed from the family. Why is it so difficult for Rosa to demonstrate the same warmth toward Liesel? Discuss how Liesel's relationship with Rosa changes by the end of the novel.
4. Compare and contrast the lives of Liesel and Max Vandenburg. How does Max's life give Liesel purpose? At what point do Liesel and Max become friends? Max gives Liesel a story called "The Standover Man" for her birthday. What is the significance of this story?
5. Hans Junior, a Nazi soldier, calls his dad a coward because he doesn't belong to the Nazi Party. He feels that you are either for Hitler or against him. How does it take courage to oppose Hitler? There isn't one coward in the Hubermann household. Discuss how they demonstrate courage throughout the novel.
6. Describe Liesel's friendship with Rudy. How does their friendship change and grow throughout the novel? Death says that Rudy doesn't offer his friendship "for free." (p. 51) What does Rudy want from Liesel? Discuss Death's statement, "The only thing worse than a boy who hates you [is] a boy who loves you." (p. 52) Why is it difficult for Liesel to love Rudy? Discuss why Liesel tells Mr. Steiner that she kissed Rudy's dead body.
7. Liesel Meminger lived to be an old woman. Death says that he would like to tell the book thief about beauty and brutality, but those are things that she had lived. How does her life represent beauty in the wake of brutality? Discuss how Zusak's poetic writing style enhances the beauty of Liesel's story.

Prepared by Pat Scales, Children's Literature Consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

the boy in the striped pajamas

John Boyne

An IRA Teachers' and
Young Adult Choice

Grades 7 up

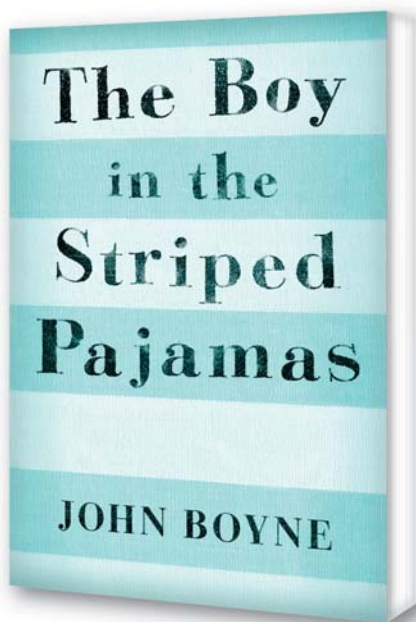
Ember PB: 978-0-385-75153-7

Movie Tie-In PB: 978-0-385-75189-6

HC: 978-0-385-75106-3

EL: 978-0-307-49423-8

Listening Library CD: 978-0-7393-3705-9



ABOUT THE BOOK

Bruno is only nine years old when his father, a commandant in Hitler's army, is transferred from Berlin to Auschwitz during the Holocaust. The house at "Out-With," as Bruno calls it, is small, dark, and strange. He spends long days gazing out the window of his new bedroom, where he notices people dressed in striped pajamas and rows of barracks surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Bored and lonely, and not really understanding the circumstance of his new existence, Bruno sets out to explore the area and discovers Shmuel, a very thin Jewish boy who lives on the other side of the fence. An unlikely friendship develops between the two boys, but when Bruno learns that his mother plans to take her children back to Berlin, he makes a last effort to explore the forbidden territory where the boy in the striped pajamas lives.

"Highly discussable and recommended."

—*Newsletter of the Association of Jewish Libraries*

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. At age twelve, Gretel is the proper age for membership in the League of Young Girls, a branch of Hitler's Youth Organization. Why do you think she is not a member, especially since her father is a high-ranking officer in Hitler's army?
2. Describe Bruno's reaction when he first sees the people in the striped pajamas. What does Gretel mean when she says, "Something about the way [Bruno] was watching made her feel suddenly nervous"? (p. 28) How does this statement foreshadow Bruno's ultimate demise?
3. Bruno asks his father about the people outside their house at Auschwitz. His father answers, "They're not people at all, Bruno." (p. 53) Discuss the horror of this attitude. How does his father's statement make Bruno more curious about Out-With?
4. Explain what Bruno's mother means when she says, "We don't have the luxury of thinking." (p. 13) Identify scenes from the novel indicating that Bruno's mother isn't happy about their life at Out-With. Debate whether she is unhappy being away from Berlin, or whether she is angry about her husband's position. How does Bruno's grandmother react to her son's military role?
5. When Bruno and his family board the train for Auschwitz, he notices an overcrowded train headed in the same direction. How does he later make the connection between Shmuel and that train? How are both trains symbolic of each boy's final journey?
6. Bruno issues a protest about leaving Berlin. His father responds, "Do you think that I would have made such a success of my life if I hadn't learned when to argue and when to keep my mouth shut and follow orders?" (p. 49) What question might Bruno's father ask at the end of the novel?
7. A pun is most often seen as humorous. But, in this novel, the narrator uses dark or solemn puns like Out-With and Fury to convey certain meanings. Bruno is simply mispronouncing the real words, but the author is clearly asking the reader to consider a double meaning to these words. Discuss the use of this wordplay as a literary device. What is the narrator trying to convey to the reader? How do these words further communicate the horror of the situation?
8. When Bruno dresses in the filthy striped pajamas, he remembers something his grandmother once said. "You wear the right outfit and you feel like the person you're pretending to be." (p. 205) How is this true for Bruno? What about his father? What does this statement contribute to the story's overall meaning?
9. Discuss the moral or message of the novel. What new insights and understandings does John Boyne want the reader to gain from reading this story?

Prepared by Pat Scales, Children's Literature Consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

milkweed

Jerry Spinelli

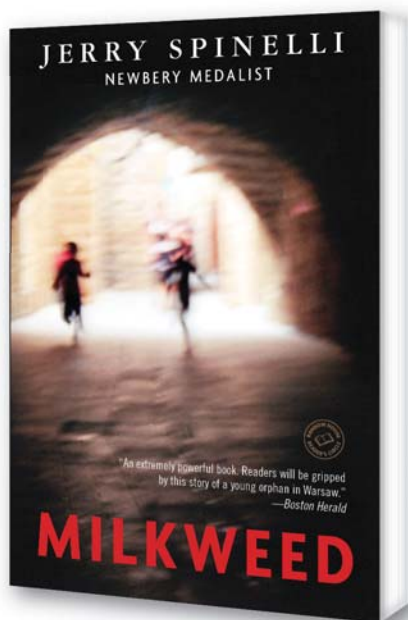
An ALA-YALSA Best
Book for Young Adults

Grades 7 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-440-42005-7

Alfred A. Knopf PB: 978-0-375-86147-5

EL: 978-0-375-89037-6



ABOUT THE BOOK

Young Misha Pilsudski lives on the streets of Warsaw, Poland, and struggles with his identity. When he enters the Jewish ghetto and sees firsthand the evil acts of Hitler's Nazi soldiers, he realizes it's safest of all to be nobody.

Milkweed opens in 1939 and tells the story of a homeless, nameless boy—a “nobody” until he takes up with other street kids and embraces the identity of a gypsy: Misha Pilsudski. Misha is fascinated by the Jackboots, and spends his days stealing food for himself and the orphans. When he meets Janina Milgrom, a Jewish girl, and follows her family to the Jewish ghetto, he loses his fascination with the Nazi soldiers. He slips in and out of the cracks of the walled ghetto, getting food for the Milgroms. For the first time in his life, he has a family until resettlement and deportation snatch them away. This good-hearted boy is once again a “nobody” and eventually makes his way to America, carrying only the memories of his adopted family with him.

★ “Add [this] stirring title to the Holocaust curriculum; the youth of the protagonist allows [students] to ask questions and get answers that will help readers learn the history.” —*Booklist*, Starred

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Uri advises Misha and the other homeless boys that an important survival skill is to remain invisible. How does Misha have a difficult time remaining invisible? What other survival skills do the boys employ? What does Misha teach the Milgroms about survival? What is the greatest threat to the survival of the Jews in the ghetto?
2. Discuss what Misha Pilsudski means when he says, “Thanks to Uri, in a cellar beneath a barbershop somewhere in Warsaw, Poland, in autumn of the year 1939, I was born, you might say” (p. 31) How does the made-up story of his life become so important to him? How does Misha’s identity change throughout the novel? What gives him a true identity at the end of the novel? Discuss Uncle Shepsel’s efforts to give up his identity as a Jew. How is this related to survival?
3. Uri is described as “fearless on the streets.” (p. 80) What does Uri teach Misha about fear? Janina has led a privileged life and doesn’t deal with fear until her family is moved to the ghetto. Discuss how Misha helps her cope with her new life. How does fear eventually kill Mrs. Milgrom? At what point in the novel does Misha display the most fear? How does he deal with it?
4. Ask students to discuss how Misha’s relationship with the Milgrom family changes throughout the novel. At what point does Mr. Milgrom invite him to become a part of the family? Why are Uncle Shepsel and Mrs. Milgrom so reluctant to accept Misha as family? Ask students to discuss how Misha’s desire for family comes full circle by the end of the novel.
5. Brainstorm the qualities of true friendship. Discuss the friendship that develops between Misha and Janina. Engage the class in a discussion about why Misha is such a good friend to the orphans. Why does Dr. Korczak, the head of the orphanage, call Misha a “foolish good-hearted boy”? (p. 65)
6. When Misha comes to the United States, he shares his memories of his life in Poland on the street corner. He says that “running” is his first memory. (p. 1) What might he say is his last memory? Misha won’t share Janina with his family, but he pays tribute to her memory by naming his granddaughter for her. Discuss why he wants to keep that memory to himself. Discuss the symbolism of the milkweed. How does planting milkweed at the end of his yard preserve his memories of Poland?

Prepared by Pat Scales, Children’s Literature Consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

the winter horses

Philip Kerr

New!

Grades 7 up

HC: 978-0-385-75543-6

GLB: 978-0-385-75544-3

EL: 978-0-385-75545-0



ABOUT THE BOOK

It will soon be another cold winter in the Ukraine. But it's 1941, and things are different this year. Max, the devoted caretaker of an animal preserve, must learn to live with the Nazis who have overtaken this precious land. He must also learn to keep secrets—for there is a girl, Kalinka, who is hiding in the park.

Kalinka has lost her home, her family, her belongings—everything but her life. Still, she has gained one small, precious gift: a relationship with the rare wild and wily Przewalski's horses that wander the preserve. Aside from Max, these endangered animals are her only friends—until a Nazi campaign of extermination nearly wipes them out for good.

Now Kalinka must set out on a treacherous journey across the frozen Ukrainian forest to save the only two surviving horses—and herself.

This sensitive, inspiring tale captures the power of sacrifice and the endurance of the human spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In the note at the beginning of the novel, the author shares that while there is no real evidence that the heroes of the story existed, “if there is one truth greater than all the others, it is that there are times when history must take second place to legend.” Do you agree? How do you define *legends*? What role do they play in our cultural consciousness?

2. When discussing Przewalski's horses, Captain Grenzmann tells Max, "But if you'll forgive me for saying so, I think they're rare for a very good reason." (p. 9) Compare and contrast Max and Captain Grenzmann's explanation of why these ancient horses are almost extinct. How does their understanding of this reality capture the differences in their core belief systems?
3. After learning that the captain has renamed the horse Molnija, Lightning, Max tells Grenzmann, "I can't say I hold with giving animals new names any more than I hold with killing them for no good reason." (p. 39) In your opinion, why does Max feel so compelled to speak out against the actions of the soldiers? Do you think it's wise of him to do so? Why or why not?
4. Kalinka tells Max, "Tell me about yourself. How did you come here? And when? And why? Please, Max. It's been a long time since anyone told me a story at bedtime." (p. 61) What can be gleaned about Kalinka from the questions she poses to Max about his life? What does her acknowledgment that much time has passed since she's had the luxury of a bedtime story tell us about her experiences?
5. When sharing about the tragic fate of her family, Kalinka tells Max, "As we were being marched to the botanical gardens, along Haharina Avenue, a door on the street opened for a moment, and someone just pulled me through and then closed it behind me again. It was a woman I'd never seen before. A woman who wasn't a Jew. She took me to the back door of her building and told me to run away as quickly as possible and not to turn back, no matter what I heard. That my survival depended on running away. So I did, I ran away. And I've been running ever since." (p. 47) Why do you think this stranger chose to help save Kalinka's life? Do you believe the actions of a single person can make a difference? Why or why not?
6. After criticizing him for accepting an invitation to dinner with the German soldiers, Kalinka changes her attitude as she tells Max, "You've achieved a great deal. Thanks to you risking your life, there are two Przewalski's horses still alive. Not to mention me." (p. 97) In what ways does Kalinka understand all that Max is risking for her and the horses? Do you find her to be sufficiently grateful for his sacrifice? Why or why not?
7. While discussing the special ingredient she uses that makes her food so special, Kalinka's mother confesses, "I make everything with love, Kalinka. In my experience, that always makes things taste a lot better." (p. 160) Why is this lesson being passed from mother to daughter such a significant one? In considering your own family, what are some lessons that have been passed on to you?
8. After meeting Captain Stammer, Kalinka thinks, "Yes, it's true what you wrote, Max. Not all of the Germans are bad. If there are others as nice as that captain, then maybe there's hope for them yet. And perhaps not just for them, but for mankind in general." (p. 246) Consider this statement in the context of the events of the Holocaust. In your opinion, what can readers take away from the lesson Max offers to Kalinka?

Prepared by Dr. Rose Brock, a teacher and school librarian in Coppell, Texas.

in my hands:

memories of a
holocaust rescuer

Irene Gut Opdyke

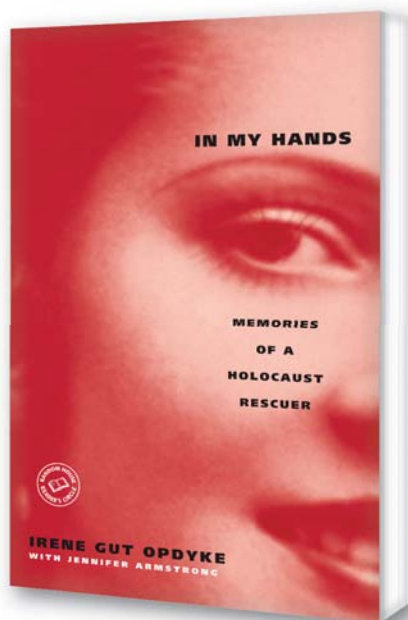
with Jennifer Armstrong

**An ALA-YALSA Top Ten
Best Book for Young Adults**

Grades 9 up

Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-553-49411-2

EL: 978-0-307-55702-5



ABOUT THE BOOK

In the fall of 1939 the Nazis invaded Irene Gut's beloved Poland, ending her training as a nurse and thrusting the sixteen-year-old Catholic girl into a world of degradation that somehow gave her the strength to accomplish what amounted to miracles. Forced into the service of the German army, young Irene was able, due in part to her Aryan good looks, to use her position as a servant in an officers' club to steal food and supplies (and even information overheard at the officers' tables) for the Jews in the ghetto. She smuggled Jews out of the work camps, ultimately hiding a dozen people in the home of a Nazi major for whom she was housekeeper. An important addition to the literature of human survival and heroism, *In My Hands* is further proof of why, in spite of everything, we must believe in the goodness of people.

★ "The narrative pours out in a hurried rush. . . . It effectively captures the bedlam and turmoil that is war, where every decision could be one's last." —*Booklist*, Starred

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When Germany invades Poland, Irene is separated from her family and loses her country. She says, “In the war, everything was unnatural and unreal.” (p. 1) What is life like during wartime? How does Irene react to her new circumstances? How does she manage to adapt to her new reality?
2. Irene asks “Was that girl me? In the war . . . we wore masks and spoke lines that were not our own.” (p. 1) Discuss the different masks that Irene wears during the war. How much do you think her flair for acting contributes to her survival? What role does she finally define for herself?
3. “I did not ask myself, Should I do this? But, How will I do this? Every step of my childhood had brought me to this cross-road; I must take the right path, or I would no longer be myself.” (p. 126) How does Irene grow into her role as a rescuer? What is her first small step? How does she gradually increase the risks she takes? What skills does she acquire that help her succeed? How does her telling her story now relate to her resistance during the war?
4. Discuss how being female affects Irene throughout the war. She often refers to herself as “only a girl.” (p. 108 and 110) What are some other advantages and disadvantages of her being “only a girl”? How do you think she views this status in the end?
5. Major Rügemer agrees that he will not turn the Jews hidden in his basement over to the Gestapo if Irene will become his mistress. She describes this relationship as “worse than rape.” (p. 191) In what ways is it worse? Does she believe she has any choice? What does she imagine the people she is hiding would want her to do?
6. Irene faces the threats of torture and imprisonment in Siberia. She is raped by a Russian soldier, blackmailed by a German officer, and separated for years from her family. She knows that the fate of her Jewish friends is in her hands. What does she risk to help? What is her biggest sacrifice?
7. Irene often says that she had no choice but to act as she did and that God put her in the right place to act. But, in her epilogue, she tells us, “God gave me this free will for my treasure. I can say this now. I understand this now. The war was a series of choices made by many people.” (p. 235) Were Irene’s actions predestined or the result of her free will? How is free will an important idea in understanding the Holocaust?
8. On the first page of Irene’s story, an image of a bird represents a horrible scene she witnessed during the war: “There was a bird flushed up from the wheat fields, disappearing in a blur of wings against the sun, and then a gunshot and it fell to the earth. But it was not a bird. It was not a bird, and it was not in the wheat field, but you can’t understand what it was yet.” (p. 1) What does she need to make the reader understand? Why do you think she begins and ends her story with a reference to this incident?

Prepared by Karen Iker, who has a master’s degree in American literature.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—Resources for Educators
USHMM.org/education/foreducators
- Genocide Watch
GenocideWatch.org
- Yad Vashem Holocaust Resource Center
YadVashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/index.asp
- Florida Center for Instructional Technology Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust
FCIT.USF.edu/Holocaust
- University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies Educational Resources
CHGS.umn.edu/educational
- Simon Wiesenthal Center Library & Archives:
Wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=lsKWLbPJLnF&b=4441267
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