Survivors of the Holocaust-True Stories of Six Extraordinary Children-

Edited by Kath Shackleton Illustrated by Zane Whittingham

Sourcebooks-2019

Grades 5 and beyond.

Teaching Guide: Dr. Rose Cherie Reissman

Topics: Holocaust children experiences, human rights, respect, diversity, racial/religious discrimination, advocacy for positive change, character education, reading for global citizenship.

Genres: graphic memoirs, holocaust interviews, oral histories, non-fiction World War II, survivor memoirs, holocaust memoirs, testimonials, social justice/global studies non-fiction, social and emotional survival non-fiction narratives.

Summary:

This is an emotionally compelling and beautifully formatted child accessible graphic narrative, which communicates through the lens of six elders what it was like to be a Jewish child during the Holocaust. Unlike print sources, Kath Shackleton, editor of these authentic memoir vignettes collected as part of Leeds Holocaust Survivors Friendship Association, has decided to showcase these true accounts in the format of a collection of graphic narrative chapters featuring the solo hand-drawn digital illustrations of Zane Whittingham. This illustrator has deftly formatted the narratives with depictions of the six children that feature their faces portraying the horror, shock, and incomprehensible fear as well as the determination to survive that is at the core of their testimonies. Key themes and terms as well as generous sprinkling of punctuation marks like questions and exclamations drive these stories emotionally home for the target young student global citizens. The format fuels and works synergistically with the World War II facts about the political crusade to eliminate Jews through anti-Semitic government sanctioned laws regulating socialization, business, education, commerce and ultimately the right to exist.

As a middle school and beyond nonfiction work, this collection of memoir snapshots includes a foreword, which contextualizes how these particular six accounts were initially transcribed as testimonies through the Leeds Holocaust Survivor Friendship Organization. The format of this graphic narrative evocatively presented account is followed with much needed back material. “What Happened Next” presents photos of the “children” as they were aged seniors when they gave their accounts as oral history testimonies through their association. Students can find out what they did in their adult lives after their horrific childhood experiences. A glossary provides definitions of Holocaust domain terms and key World War II political vocabulary that may be unfamiliar to the students.

Unlike other timelines, the timeline presented following the glossary has bold typefaces and clearly summarizes the events in terms the target readers can comprehend. The work provides an excellent listing of available online sources for young readers to learn more about the content.

Obviously, there are vast resources available to teach about this time. What sets this under one hundred page visually appealing graphic narrative apart is its potential as a teacher/student accessible introduction to this era through six relatable children’s eyes in a format with emotional immediacy as well as authentic informational material. It can be used within the span of a period to three periods or as part of a set of American History or Global Studies World War II themes. It can also be used as a single period sample of a Holocaust Graphic Narrative and an introduction to the lengthier Maus award-winning work.

Before the text:

Essential Questions:

Challenge the students to react to the following. Simply preface the questions by assuring the students that there is no single correct answer, since there are an infinite number of personal definitions for this answer. Do tell the students that young as they are, they most probably meet the definition.

Essential Questions:

What does it mean to be a survivor? To define this word- start by thinking natural disaster-hurricane, blizzard, tornado, tsunami, wildfire- manmade disaster- building collapse, car accident/crash, crane collapse, bridge collapse, war- health disaster/crisis- cancer, Covid, heart attack, kidney failure, asthma attack and family/friend-loss, divorce, geographic separation, betrayal, relationship split, bullying, manipulation, physical abuse, and beyond.

As you think about this range of disasters- natural, health, manmade, family and relationship, in what ways even at your young age, have you already survived at least one of these external situations?

Settle on at least one of them and explain how this disaster affected you as a current young person. Detail the ways and strategies in which you “coped” with this disaster. What tools did you use? Who in your family, among your friends or within your adult school network, supported you in “surviving”?

As a “survivor” of this single disaster, what did you learn about your own personal strength and resilience? How can you “carry forward” that learning to help others? Why might you want to share your insights about survival with others? Explain.

Note to teachers: Even before Covid and the shutdown of majority of schools, followed by a slow, blended learning at some sites, young students already realized that they were “survivors.” Prior to Covid, many students shared the following aspects of survivor status: lengthy debilitating illnesses at home or hospital, geographic separation from a single or both parents, loss of beloved family members due to cancer, war, heart and kidney failure, betrayal by best friends, loss of homes due to refugee status, frequent displacement neighborhood to neighborhood/switching schools, splits within family units due to divorce, dissolving relationships and survival of adult abuse in some format. Many students are if prompted and some minus prompting able to share how their own “survival” resilience using strengths from within with tools available to them at home help them cope and thrive despite challenges. Among the tools and resilience strengths that students have mentioned are: reading, drawing/making art, painting, building robots, Lego building, Minecraft communities, cooking for the family with lovely presentations of food, helping younger siblings, designing, taking photos, filming, using Facebook, tik tok, snapchat, video games, helping adults with shopping, cleaning, using tech, and even walking outside and looking up at the sun shining the trees.

These questions and the answers the students think about and provide using their own “survivor” experiences will immediately connect them to the events that happened over ninety years ago, somewhere far from their school in a world not yet connected by technology.

Teachers can have them write reflections or share their own autobiographic memoir snapshots of their survival and resilience or draw/illustrate their experiences. These products will again serve to connect them with the survivors of the account and how they communicated their experiences.

Teaching Survivors of the Holocaust as a text

Begin by showing the cover to the work with the title.

Ask the students why they think they had the pre-discussion about what it means to be a survivor. Have them explicitly explain the connection and allow some of them who share an international displacement or political survivor experience to explicitly share that link if they are comfortable doing so.

Next, ask them to free associate what the word “Holocaust” means to them and their prior knowledge of that word in the context of their personal reading or studies in Social Studies or family discussions or media exposure. List and record what the students say to revisit after study of the book. DO NOT comment or correct any inaccuracies because the concept is that the students discover the accuracy through the work and use of its back material.

Depending on the time within the class or library schedule, the teacher may decide to use just one of the stories or have the students share one as a group and then independently or in small groups read and react to the rest of the stories.

One story can also be read as suggested to the whole class and then the other stories can be read jigsaw puzzle style by various groups. If this approach is used, the groups can come together afterward to share their responses. This will allow for a community discussion of the stories and their relevancy plus impact.

Story

Trude’s Story

Read the story aloud or have the students read it silently independently.

Focus questions:

1. What one object was key to Trude in this account? Why is it so important to her?
2. In what ways did the political events of the Holocaust adversely affect Trude’s childhood? Why do you think she suffered so much, since she was not physically hurt and did not experience the tortures of the Concentration Camps?
3. What “answers” has Trude searched for her entire life? In what ways has the impossibility of a final answer shadowed Trude her entire life? Do you think this is understandable on her part or foolish? Explain your answer.
4. What aspects of Trude’s experience are still part of many children’s lives today? In what way does her story demonstrate how deep and long lasting emotional pain and separation from birth families can be?
5. Trude was born in Czechoslovakia in the 1930’s. Do you and she share any connecting emotions or concepts of family? Detail your reaction.
6. If you could write a note to Trude after reading her story, what would you say? Since she may never know what actually happened to her mother, what would you advise her to do about it? How can she move forward?

Heinz’s story

Before they actually read it, ask them to focus on the following:

1. In what ways does Heinz experience multiple discrimination in more than one country? How does he cope with this discrimination?
2. How does Heinz’s family help him to survive?
3. What emotions and fears does Heinz experience which are part of being a young adult no matter where you grow up?
4. The word “internment” is used here. The word “Based on the context what does that word mean?
5. Were the British justified in using “internment” as a policy against the Jewish resident “aliens”? Why yes or why not. Explain.
6. These events took place over 80 years ago, as someone growing up today in the 21st century, does this legal discrimination, internment, displacement and “alien” hatred resonate with any current online or broadcast events? Has any member of your family or relatives not in this country had refugee, flight or discrimination experiences like these? If so , what does it say for our learning from the past, that these painful experiences continue for many into the 21st century.

Personal Response: As someone living today, almost the same age as Heinz was when these events started, how do you feel reading this account? Do you connect in any way with his emotions or actions? What do you learn about survival from his story?

Ruth’s Story

Focus Questions:

1. What words that Ruth uses to describe her childhood displacement are words that are familiar to you from today’s current events and news coverages or personal experiences? Select at least three familiar words.
2. Geography is very important in Ruth’s story and a specific clock time. How does the illustrator of this graphic novel, Zane Whittingham, use specific images to underscore these themes?

(Answers: clock in the opening image and the final image, Liverpool Street Station sign, maps, transportation images, Ramsgate, 110 Downing Street.)

1. In what ways did the actions and perseverance of Ruth’s mother help save the family?
2. Often in survivor stories, the individual’s survival hinges on luck and timing. How is this true of Ruth’s story?
3. Do you or your family have any memories of your first step or arrival at a special or positive destination that would change your life? It could be a new school, a new home or a special building or institution or travel site. Describe it and share illustrations or photos.

Martin’s Story

Focus Questions

1. What makes Martin’s story most terrifying? What aspect of this terrifying incident does he find somewhat “lucky”? Why would that be a positive?
2. How did Martin, an eight year old-the age of a third grader- experience dual national rejection?
3. In what way did Martin and his sister survive? Although he survived what aspect of the war, did he experience as a child? How does the illustrator Zane Whittingham emphasize the combat that Martin experienced as a child? What images does he use?

(guns,bombs,airplanes, bombs in the opening illustration and bursts of bomb fire in the final illustration).

1. Martin and his sister were among the lucky survivors of the Holocaust, but what emotional damage did Martin take away from these experiences as a young child living in England?
2. Are there children today around the world who have similar fears and terror to what Martin experienced? In what ways can we help or support them? How can they cope with these experiences?

Suzanne’s Story

Focus Questions:

1. Suzanne is just a pre-school child in Paris when the Germans occupy it. She is NOT taken by the Nazis from her home, but her parents are. She is rescued by their neighbor non-Jewish Madame Collumb. Does this mean that Suzanne is not a victim of the Holocaust, since she was saved from being taken? Why yes or why not? Explain your answer.
2. Many images of the cute little Suzanne show her hidden under a table, bed, behind a windowpane or underneath ground. Why does the artist use these images for her story?
3. In what ways, although she is rescued from going to the camps, does hiding out from the Nazis make tiny Suzanne grow up overnight?
4. What does Suzanne, who survived, mean when she complains, “nobodyever said, ‘I’ll explain what happened to you. I will explain what war means.” Should Suzanne complain or cry, since she did survive while her family did not? What explanation is there for her?
5. Read the ending of Suzanne’s story. Did her story end happily? Look at the last page. Are there any conflicts that end, but various persons involved, as soldiers or family members do not learn about the end until long after?

Arek’s Story:

Focus Questions:

1. Based on the opening graphic, what aspect of the Holocaust is Arek’s story focused on? How do the images and composition of the first graphic contribute to that theme?
2. Even though he is not an adult, Arek’s decision-making saves his life. In what ways do his observations of what goes on during the selection; help him go to the direction that will lead to survival?
3. What does Arek lose at the beginning of his prison experience, which he can never recover? In what ways would that be a recoverable loss today? Why
4. Often we learn lessons about good nutrition and why it is necessary for healthy growth. How does Arek’s story amplify those lessons in a very authentic way? How does nutrition affect his daily life in the story?
5. What Arek’s message? Since the mid 1940’s have other children experienced some of the conditions he describes? What actions can your generation take to ensure this does not continue to happen?

After study of the stories:

1. Challenge the students to follow up on the actual photo and life of one or more of the story persons. What surprises them about how the individual moved forward as an adult? Which one still is focused on solving a mystery? In what ways have all the storytellers tried to influence future generations to prevent the suffering they went through. Do you think they are successful in their attempts? Create a short poem or image paying tribute to the one who moved you the most.
2. Arek actually was a concentration camp survivor, but Suzanne and Trude never experienced the camps. Did they “suffer” less because they did not suffer physically as much? Is mental anguish as strong as physical suffering? Over a lifetime does mental anguish go away?
3. Look at the timeline of events. Which events most directly affected students your age and younger? Why? Which events were ones in which a peaceable protest or citizens speaking up against the event or personality might have changed the follow up events. Pick at last one or two.
4. Look at the events from June 6 1944 to August 1945, how have alliances shifted from then until now? Which words and terms from this 80 years back timeline, are still used today.
5. This book received the Children’s Choice Book Award and became an animated television series.

Watch the excerpt- and catch some of the storytellers in person.

Is this topic a good one for an animation? What is Trude’s message? Do you agree with her?

What relevance does this book have for a student who lives in the United States in 2024? Is it just a well-done graphic narrative about a long ago horrific time or is it relevant to current students who are not Jewish. Create a commercial promoting this work or a poster or explain in a video why it is no longer relevant except for World War II study.

<https://youtu.be/dFLXflmcvzc?feature=shared>

Final Student Projects

1. Revisit your answers to the questions about what it is to be a survivor and what you thought about the Holocaust at the beginning of this study. Which of your assumptions are proven by this text and which assumptions were factually incorrect. Was this work worth reading as an informational graphic narrative? Explain why or why not. Is there any other media format beyond animation, it would suit. Could it become a song or television show or a documentary talking with other survivors? Choose a format and write a proposal for that format.
2. Do you have someone in your life who is a survivor and has a story you could audio record or video or just write up. Begin your own connection to carry forward key stories within your own family to inspire others.