

AMERICANS AND THE HOLOCAUST



Community Read: *When the World Was Ours* by Liz Kessler

Discussion Questions

Questions revised and inspired by:

[Simon & Schuster Curriculum Guide](#) and [Hay Festival's Extracts and Notes](#)

By: Allie Barton, Darrie Breathwit, and Robin Miller

1. Leo's father, Mr. Grunberg, takes a photograph of the three best friends and later gives each child a copy as a token of the wonderful day they shared together. The photo has significant symbolism for Leo, Elsa, and Max throughout the book. There are many instances where Leo, Max, and Elsa look at or think about the photo and remember. What does the photo come to mean to each of them as the story progresses?
2. The story is told from the perspectives of the three main characters: Leo, Elsa, and Max. Leo and Elsa are Jewish; Max is not. Why do you think the author chose to tell Leo's and Elsa's stories in the first person, while Max's story is narrated in the third person? Who did you most identify with out of the three characters? Why that person?
3. Anti-Semitism is defined as hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people. How did the Nazi regime use language and humiliation to chip away at the Jewish identity and to create a false narrative that served as a steppingstone to greater atrocities? Max often has an "uncomfortable wiggly feeling" when he's confronted with anti-Semitism. Have you ever been in a situation where someone said or did something that made you uncomfortable, and what did you do about it?
4. Why do you think Max always chooses to side with the Nazis, even when deep in his heart he knows that what he sees and participates in is hateful and evil?

This exhibition was made possible by the generous support of lead sponsor Jeannie & Jonathan Lavine. Additional major funding was provided by the Bildners—Joan & Allen z"l, Elisa Spungen & Rob, Nancy & Jim; and Jane and Daniel Och.

The Museum's exhibitions are also supported by the Lester Robbins and Sheila Johnson Robbins Traveling and Special Exhibitions Fund, established in 1990.

ALA American
Library
Association

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM

PRESENTED BY:

Metropolitan
LIBRARY SYSTEM

AMERICANS AND THE HOLOCAUST



5. The passage below is from Elsa's journey to Theresienstadt:

Slowly, the train clanks into movement. We settle into a jagged rhythm, swaying together, gripping arms of people we cannot even see, pressing feet and knees against people we hardly know. As we rock and sway and breathe each other's breath in and out, sharing the air as if it was a prize in a game of pass the parcel, I find myself noticing how easy it is for something absurd to become almost natural. How rapidly something unthinkable can become commonplace. How easily we let the inconceivable become a new normal. How quickly we learn to stop questioning these things.

Can you think of any examples from modern day experiences—either your own or in the news or the world around you—where the 'unthinkable' has become 'commonplace'? Can you talk about what this was and how you adapted to the new 'normal'?

6. Throughout the story, even in some of the darkest of times, Elsa tries to hold on to a tiny glimmer of hope. What enables her to cope with the terrible things she experiences?
7. In the book's final chapter, a teacher visits ninety-one-year-old Leo, asking him to share his story with her students. Leo makes a deal with the teacher saying, "I'll tell you my story...But my story is a baton, and in telling it I pass it on to you." What do I do with it?" she asked me. I held her eyes for a long time, to make sure she saw me. Really saw me. "You listen well," I said. "And then you do all you can to make sure it never happens again—to anyone. And where you see injustice, you say so, and you encourage others to do the same. Those are my terms."

What is the baton for you, and what will you do with it?

This exhibition was made possible by the generous support of lead sponsor Jeannie & Jonathan Lavine. Additional major funding was provided by the Bildners—Joan & Allen z"l, Elisa Spungen & Rob, Nancy & Jim; and Jane and Daniel Och.

The Museum's exhibitions are also supported by the Lester Robbins and Sheila Johnson Robbins Traveling and Special Exhibitions Fund, established in 1990.

ALA American
Library
Association

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM

PRESENTED BY:

Metropolitan
LIBRARY SYSTEM

AMERICANS AND THE HOLOCAUST



8. At Max's last meeting with Elsa, he reaches the conclusion that 'It wasn't work that set you free, it was love.' Was it work or love that ultimately set Max free? Do you think Max would have murdered Elsa if he hadn't been killed first?
9. The cover design for the book is very striking. What did you think the book was about when you saw the cover for the first time? Did the cover or title say anything different to you *after* you read the book?
10. What is something that stayed with you after finishing the book?

Suggested Activities for Families to Explore More at Home:

- In the first chapter, Leo, Elsa, and Max have the best day ever and feel as if they are the "Queen and Kings" of Vienna. Draw a picture that captures the happiest day of *your* life.
- Imagine the photograph that Leo's father took and then write ten words that capture the spirit of these children before their lives were turned upside down.
- [Explore stories of The Righteous in the Yad Vashem database.](#) "The Righteous" are those non-Jews who took great risks to save their Jewish neighbors during the Holocaust. They offered extraordinary kindness, friendship and hope during a time of great darkness and cruelty.
- This book was inspired by an experience the author's dad had when he was a young boy. The author's father was eight years old when he and his family escaped Nazi-occupied

This exhibition was made possible by the generous support of lead sponsor Jeannie & Jonathan Lavine. Additional major funding was provided by the Bildners—Joan & Allen z"l, Elisa Spungen & Rob, Nancy & Jim; and Jane and Daniel Och.

The Museum's exhibitions are also supported by the Lester Robbins and Sheila Johnson Robbins Traveling and Special Exhibitions Fund, established in 1990.

ALA American
Library
Association

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM

PRESENTED BY:

Metropolitan
LIBRARY SYSTEM

AMERICANS AND THE HOLOCAUST



Czechoslovakia. Just like Leo in the book, her father's family were saved by a British couple they had met years before at a chance meeting. The author's great-aunt Elsa was murdered at Auschwitz and her great-grandmother spent four years at Theresienstadt. How much do you know about your family's history? Choose a family member to interview and see if you can find a story from their own childhood. The library also subscribes to Ancestry.com so come to your library to research your family history!

- [Sacher torte](#) is a delicious chocolate cake that Leo and his friends and family enjoy both at the beginning of the book and at the end. Immerse yourself in the story by making your own!
- You can also utilize the library's database, [A-Z World FOOD](#), where you can explore recipes and food culture by country, including Austria! Visit to visit all the library's databases, including A-Z World Food. Or visit Le Madeleine at 1954 24th Ave Norman, OK (405-416-1942) to enjoy a slice! (In November 2022, it was \$47.99 per cake or \$7.99 per slice.)
- The library has some great databases where you can research some of the real-life places and events in the book. Visit [our Research databases](#) and check out:
 - [A-Z World Travel](#): This database contains travel guides for over 200 cities in the world. Each guide contains helpful information about a particular city's food and restaurants, attractions, and more. Search for Vienna and explore the city that Leo, Elsa, and Max called home. Can you find the information about The Giant Ferris Wheel in Vienna? If you were to visit Vienna today, what attractions would you want to see?
 - [The Jewish Exponent](#): This historical newspaper provides genealogists, researchers and scholars with online, easily searchable first-hand accounts and unparalleled coverage of the politics, society and events of the time. Coverage: 1887 – 1990

This exhibition was made possible by the generous support of lead sponsor Jeannie & Jonathan Lavine. Additional major funding was provided by the Bildners—Joan & Allen z"l, Elisa Spungen & Rob, Nancy & Jim; and Jane and Daniel Och.

The Museum's exhibitions are also supported by the Lester Robbins and Sheila Johnson Robbins Traveling and Special Exhibitions Fund, established in 1990.

ALA American
Library
Association

UNITED STATES
MEMORIAL
HOLOCAUST
MUSEUM

PRESENTED BY:

Metropolitan
LIBRARY SYSTEM

AMERICANS AND THE HOLOCAUST



- [Testaments to the Holocaust](#): Provides access to the Documents and Rare Printed Materials archives of the Wiener Library in London, the first archive to collect evidence of the Holocaust and the anti-Semitic activities of the Nazi Party during World War II. It contains thousands of eyewitness accounts, photographs, propaganda materials, Wiener Library publications, and biographical details of major figures in the Nazi Party.
- [World History in Context](#): World History in Context provides an overview of world history that covers the most-studied events, periods, cultures, civilizations, religions, conflicts, wars, ideologies, cultural movements, and people.

This exhibition was made possible by the generous support of lead sponsor Jeannie & Jonathan Lavine. Additional major funding was provided by the Bildners—Joan & Allen z"l, Elisa Spungen & Rob, Nancy & Jim; and Jane and Daniel Och.

The Museum's exhibitions are also supported by the Lester Robbins and Sheila Johnson Robbins Traveling and Special Exhibitions Fund, established in 1990.



PRESENTED BY:

