

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE FROM HOLIDAY HOUSE

THE CAT WITH THE YELLOW STAR: COMING OF AGE IN TEREZIN

BY SUSAN GOLDMAN RUBIN WITH
ELA WEISSBERGER



INTRODUCTION

The Holocaust refers to the genocide of European Jews by the Nazis during World War II (1938-1945). The Holocaust was not just about the concentration camps. The Holocaust began long before with laws and prohibitions imposed on Jews in Eastern Europe that changed their everyday lives. *The Cat with the Yellow Star* chronicles these changes in the life of one eight-year-old girl, Ela Stein, whose comfortable normal life came to an abrupt end when the Germans invaded Sudetenland, part of Czechoslovakia. By the time she was twelve, she was imprisoned in Terezin. This is her story of those years in her own words.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

- ❖ In *The Cat with the Yellow Star*, we learn about Ela's life in Lom u Mostu, Sudetenland, before the invasion of the Nazis through five photographs and their captions:
 - Title page: Ela posing
 - Contents page: Ela on vacation
 - Page 4: Ela and her family on a trip to the sandstone formations at Cesky Raj
 - Page 5: Ela's father's birthday celebration
 - Page 6: Ela's family's home until 1938

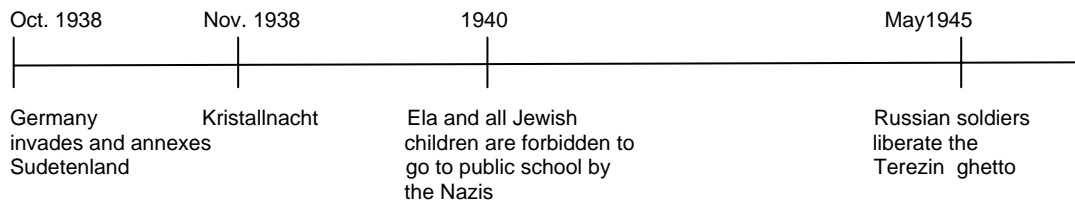
What do these pictures tell you? How are they like photographs of you and your family? Look at the picture on page 4 of Ela on the family trip. What do you suppose she was thinking about when the picture was taken?

- ❖ "Every day Ela watched longingly as her old friends walked by carrying book bags and soccer balls." (p. 8)

After Kristallnacht, Ela, her sister, and their mother fled to Prague with the hope of resuming a normal life, but by March 1939 the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia and Ela's world was turned upside down again. How did things change? What laws did the Nazis impose on the Jews? How did Ela react to the new restrictions? How would you react if you had to wear a label signifying that *you* were different from everyone else?

- ❖ Make a time line of the events that happen in the book starting with the invasion and annexation of Sudetenland by Germany in October 1938 and ending with the liberation of Terezin by the Russians in May 1945. Include on the timeline not only the large-scale events but also the laws that the Nazis imposed on the Jews and the changes in Ela's daily life.

Here is a sample timeline:



- ❖ *The Nazis ordered Ela and her mother, sister, grandmother, and Uncle Otto to go on the . . . transport. . . . Every person was allowed to bring only 110 pounds. . . . Ela's mother told the girls, "Wear as many dresses and sweaters as you can. They probably won't weigh us."* (p. 9)

110 pounds sounds like a lot. But is it really? If you were in a situation in which everything you could use to survive could weigh only 110 pounds, what would you take? Would it be pots and pans, food, or video games? Make a list of the things you would bring. Weigh them and stop when the total reaches 110 pounds. How long could you survive before the items you took ran out? Would you change any of your choices?

Think of the word "transport." What does it mean to you? What did it mean to the Jews of Eastern Europe?

- ❖ *"My mother was the best thief in Terezin. . . . She didn't steal for herself . . . She exchanged vegetables for a little piece of bread or sugar so that we could have more. Many times she would give me a little package for those kids who didn't have parents."* (p. 12)

Ela says these words proudly. Isn't being a thief against the law? Was she really proud that her mother was a thief? Was her mother really a thief? What did her mother take? From whom did she steal? What would have been the consequence if her mother had been found out?

- ❖ Life for Jews during the Holocaust was about survival. Ethics and moral values changed. What does this tell us about people in desperate times?

What did the Jews in Terezin do to show that survival did not have to mean "every man for himself"? Talk about what they did as a community. How did these things keep the community intact?

- ❖ The Terezin ghetto was filled with musicians, composers, writers, and artists. They chose to perform a children's opera, *Brundibár*, composed by Hans Krása. It has been said that *Brundibár* is a simple tale about standing up to bullies and overcoming adversity with a little help from your friends (Sam Hurwitt, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11/13/05). But *Brundibár* is more than that. What do you think the real message of *Brundibár* is? Tell the story of the opera.

In the end, the children and the animals sing a victory song of their triumph over *Brundibár*. Why was it important to the people of Terezin that the children were victorious? But there is an irony about their victory. What do you think that is?

Why do you think those in Terezin chose to do a children's opera as opposed to one performed by adults? How did it affect the children and adult prisoners? How did the Germans react to the opera?

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- ❖ Read *Brundibár* by Tony Kushner, with illustrations by Maurice Sendak, then go to the website: <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/soundcheck/episodes/10292003>

Click on “Listen to the Whole Show,” and hear an interview of Tony Kushner, who wrote a new libretto for *Brundibár* in English. Listen too to a portion of a production of *Brundibár* sung by the Young People’s Chorus of New York City. You might notice that the words to the victory march sung in this performance are different from that of the song found on page 24 in *The Cat with the Yellow Star*. This is because the words in *The Cat with the Yellow Star* are a translation into English of the original libretto.

- ❖ “When we were performing *Brundibár*, we forgot . . . all our troubles. Music was part of our resistance against the Nazis. Music, art, good teachers, and friends mean survival.” (p. 35)

Art transcends time and circumstance, lifts the human spirit, and offers us reasons to hope. There have been several world events in recent years that have had a tragic impact on the lives of many: the tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean basin, hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, and the war in Iraq, to name a few. Create poems, stories, songs or paintings in response to these or other events. How did making these things help you cope? Perform or display your work. How does sharing your work affect others?

- ❖ Children who were prisoners in Terezin found solace in writing poems and drawing pictures. After the war many of these poems and artwork were discovered and published in a collection called *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. The children’s words survived even though many of the children didn’t.

Go to the website of Wings of Witness at www.wingsofwitness.org/butterfly.htm and read the poem, “The Butterfly,” written on April 6, 1942, by Pavel Friedman. (He died in Auschwitz on September, 29, 1944.) Talk about what the poem means to you. Read it aloud with your classmates. Write a poem in response.

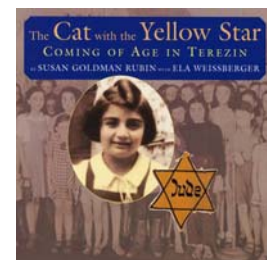
- ❖ Look at the picture on page 27 that Ela drew. There are corrections made by her teacher Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. Research in books and on the Internet to learn Friedl’s story. For more about this famous artist who was a prisoner in Terezin with Ela, read *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin* by Susan Goldman Rubin, or visit <http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/afdb.htm> or <http://sharat.co.il/lel/friedl/home.html>
- ❖ Personal memoirs have recently come under scrutiny in the media and elsewhere because they present history through the recollections of a single person and are therefore “less than true.” How does *The Cat with the Yellow Star* stand up to this scrutiny? Is Ela a reliable witness? Do you trust her perceptions? Do you trust her memory? Compare and contrast this book with Anne Frank’s diary. How is this book different from histories you have read of the Holocaust? How is it the same?

This guide was prepared by Clifford Wohl, Educational Consultant.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS
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SUSAN GOLDMAN RUBIN is the author of *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin*, a Sydney Taylor Award Honor Book, a National Jewish book Award finalist, and one of the *Booklist* Top Ten Art Books for Youth. Her other books include *The Flag with Fifty-six Stars: A Gift from the Survivors of Mauthausen*, which *Publishers Weekly* called "compelling" in a starred review. She lives in Malibu, California. You can learn more about Susan by visiting her Website at www.susangoldmanrubin.com

ELA WEISSBERGER was liberated from Terezin in May of 1945. She studied ceramics in Prague before emigrating to Israel in 1949. She later moved to the United States, where she and her husband raised two children. Today she runs an interior design business in Tappan, New York, but travels extensively to speak about her experiences during the Holocaust.

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