



A Curriculum Guide to:

## ***When the World Was Ours***

By Liz Kessler

### **About the Book**

In 1936, Leo, Elsa, and Max are closer than any three friends could be, and they are on top of the world as they ride a Ferris wheel in Vienna, Austria, to celebrate Leo's ninth birthday. As they look out over their beautiful city, Leo thinks that nothing can ever come between the happy trio. Little does he know that over the next ten years, with the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany, nothing could be further from the truth. As Jews, Leo and Elsa must endure the fear, intimidation, and violence perpetrated by Hitler's systematic campaign to eradicate European Jewry, while Max's fate lies in the hands of his father, a high-ranking soldier in Hitler's SS, who indoctrinates Max in the ways of hate and anti-Semitism. In *When the World Was Ours*, readers will not only witness the atrocities of this horrific period in history, but marvel at the strength and resilience of the Jews who were forced to endure unspeakable acts of inhumanity, and at the

bravery and kindness of those who in many different ways stood up against the horrors of the Nazi regime.

### Discussion Questions

The questions and activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (.RL.9-10.1, 2, 3, 4, 5)

1. In chapter one, which is told from Leo's point of view, the joy and innocence of the day is evident. How does Leo reveal his innocence when he thinks, "Nothing would ever come between the three of us"? How does this line foreshadow what's to come? 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. Discuss the significance of the photograph as it appears throughout the story. How does the photograph's symbolism change for each child?
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?
3. When readers meet Max, it's clear that he feels unloved by his father, a man who blames everyone for his troubles, rants and raves, and is obsessed with efficiency and discipline. Max adores Mr. Grunberg, Leo's father: "He loved the way Mr. Grunberg made them all feel included, as though they were all part of the same gang. He couldn't get enough of that feeling." Discuss examples of how Max's need to belong drives his fate. How does the emptiness inside Max make him susceptible to Nazi indoctrination?
4. Anti-Semitism is defined as hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people. Readers first get an inkling of Mr. Fischer's anti-Semitic beliefs in chapter four, when he barely looks at or speaks to Mr. Grunberg. Mr. Fischer complains about Mr. Grunberg, saying, "He thinks he's such a big shot. With his fine waistcoats and his shop—thinks he's better than the rest of us. They all think that!" Readers come to learn that he is referring to *all* Jewish people. Discuss Mr. Fischer's use of the pronoun *they*. How is this broad categorization of a group of people dangerous? Later in the book, Mr. Fischer makes his anti-Semitism plain to Max, forbidding him to see Leo and Elsa: "Your friendship with people like them is over." Beyond the realization that he cannot see his friends again, why do his father's words make Max feel physically ill?
5. Elsa and her family move to Prague, Czechoslovakia, thinking they will be safe from the fear and humiliation they faced in Vienna. Shortly after the family settles into their new home, Elsa's father, Vati, announces to the family that he is joining the army to fight the Nazis. He says, "What is that safety worth if we don't fight to keep it?" What do you think of Vati's decision?

Discuss how you do or don't feel safe in the world. If your safety were threatened, do you think you would fight to keep it? How would you decide whether or not to act?

6. Discuss how Leo and the other Jewish children feel being singled out and humiliated by the headmaster at the special assembly. Give other examples of how the Nazi regime used humiliation and shaming to break the spirits of the Jewish people. How did physically separating the children and casting them as outsiders encourage the false narrative that Jews were the "lesser race"? After it's made clear that non-Jewish students are to have absolutely no contact with their Jewish classmates, Max begins to pull away from Leo: "It didn't even feel like a decision that he made. It was pure instinct." What "instinct" could cause Max to abandon his best friend?

7. Throughout the book, Jews are compared to animals. How does this language serve as a stepping stone to greater atrocities? Discuss present day examples of how language fuels extremism against minorities. How can you relate what you witness in the present day to events in *When the World Was Ours*?

8. Discuss the Nazi regime's systematic removal of the rights of Jewish people, citing specific examples from the book. How do the Nazis create a state in which it's a "crime" to be Jewish?

9. Over and over again, readers are witness to the abject cruelty perpetrated by official Nazis as well as ordinary citizens against people of the Jewish faith. Discuss how this extreme hatred grew to rationalize the removal of Jews to ghettos and concentration camps, and ultimately to the systematic murder of six million Jews, nearly two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe. Consider the book's rare examples of kindness, such as the Stewarts' sponsorship of Leo and his mother in England. How do the Nazis use fear to discourage people who might have wanted to help the Jews?

10. Leo witnesses a horrific scene of cruelty and humiliation: his father, on his hands and knees, being made to scrub a cobblestone street as Mr. Fischer looms over him, screaming hateful orders. How does this image impact Leo? What does it say about the perception and abuse of power? Later, Leo shares, "People laughed at us every day now. They called us names whenever they saw us." What do you think the perpetrators meant to accomplish by constantly humiliating Jews? How does humiliation chip away at one's identity? For those doing the humiliating, how does it chip away at one's humanity? Although no fault of their own, why do Leo, Elsa, and other Jewish characters in the story feel shame as a result of these humiliations?

11. During this period in history, many people chose to ignore what they were witnessing, perhaps out of fear or hatred, or a feeling of helplessness. Max realizes fairly early on that his father hates Jews and is a key player in why he loses his two best friends. It's clear that Max has

moments that pull at his conscience: “And if there were times when teachers said things that made him itch under his skin, he wouldn’t show it.” Discuss additional scenes in the story where Max’s conscience is tested. Why do you think he always chooses to side with the Nazis, even when deep in his heart he knows what he sees and participates in is hateful and evil? Discuss the moments before Max is shot and killed. Do you think Elsa was right, that she had “lost” Max? Do you think he would have murdered Elsa if he hadn’t been killed first?

12. Luck comes up throughout the story for each of the three main characters. For Max, he feels lucky that he is part of “the superior race”: “When they had lessons about how to be a good Nazi, or why the German race was superior to all others, Max didn’t think about the ones who might be left behind. He comforted himself in the knowledge that he was one of the lucky ones.” On the cattle car to Auschwitz, Elsa feels a sense of luck as the dead are discarded from the train, thinking that she and her family will have more air to breathe. Discuss how the concept of luck evolves for the three friends, and at what cost.

13. One of the most despicable acts of cruelty practiced by the Nazi regime was the separation of families. Both Leo and Elsa endure the pain of having a family member taken from them, leaving the remaining members to struggle to survive. Discuss the choices that parents had to make during this period, such as sending their children away so that they might live. Discuss specific moments in the story that illustrate the heartache behind choices parents had to make on behalf of their children, many of which could mean the difference between life and death.

14. Reread the pages where Leo and his mother are trying to leave Germany. How are they treated by the guards? What does Leo mean when he mumbles under his breath, ““We’re just Jewish . . . don’t worry, you won’t catch it.”” On one of the cars, Leo and his mother are treated kindly by a Roma couple who say, ““We are your friends.”” How is this simple act of kindness a light in Leo’s and his mother’s journey to freedom? How did you feel when they finally crossed the border out of Germany?

15. Welded onto the gates at both Dachau and Auschwitz is the sentence “Arbeit Macht Frei,” which means: “Work sets you free.” Discuss the irony of this phrase, given what these concentration camps were built to do. Discuss Max’s reactions to being in this environment. When Mr. Grunberg calls out to Max at Dachau, Max says, ““You’ve got the wrong person.”” Why does Max react this way? How is Max’s reply both correct and incorrect? How has he become a different person from the boy that Mr. Grunberg knew in Vienna?

16. As the story progresses to 1941, Elsa and her mother have been evicted from their apartment and relocated to a tenement building with other Prague Jews. Even though conditions are miserable, Elsa feels that, “Being so close to so many Jewish people is almost fun, in a strange

sort of way. It's like we're one big family, a community of people all in it together." Compare her feelings to how Max feels about being part of his Hitler Youth group.

17. Discuss examples of the lies and false narratives that the Nazis relied on to achieve their goals. How does Max lie to himself? While the family is being relocated to a place that will prove to be more miserable than anything Elsa could have imagined, the guard says, "It is a nice place. A new ghetto especially for you lucky Jews. It's called Theresienstadt. You will be happy there. You will like it. We will look after you there." Why does Elsa allow the guard's false words to create a "tiny flame of optimism [that] glimmers like a flickering candle in the dark"?

18. As the story progresses to its conclusion, Elsa's situation becomes more and more desperate. Discuss examples of what Elsa, her family, and the other characters in the story have to endure just to survive. Elsa and her mother witness a woman scraping the last crumbs "with spoons to find one more mouthful." Her mother nudges her and directs her to stop staring at the woman, saying, "Only by turning away can you give them back the dignity they have forgotten they possess." Explain what Mutti means by this statement.

19. On the train ride to Auschwitz, Elsa, her family, and hundreds of others are packed into cattle cars with very little oxygen. Many do not survive the journey. The train makes stops along the way to discard the dead. After the first stop, people in the car begin to recite *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer of mourning. How is this act one of defiance, strength, and faith? How do these people demonstrate their solidarity in their Jewish identity? At Auschwitz, Elsa is forced to sleep on a narrow bunk with other people, so crowded that they have to move in unison during the night. Often Elsa will quietly reach across her body to touch her sleeve. Why does this small gesture calm Elsa, and what does it symbolize?

20. Discuss the final moments of Elsa's and Max's lives. Why does Elsa think showing Max the photograph might change him or the situation? At seeing Elsa, Max finally feels the pain of the truth: the loss of his best friends, his home, his city, and himself. Discuss Max's realization: "It wasn't work that set you free. It was love." Rephrase this thought in your own words. Why does "the gentleness in his hands" as Mr. Grunberg lifts Elsa's and Max's bodies from the mud feel like "an act of rebellion in itself"?

### Extension Activities

1. **A Picture Paints a Thousand Words.** In chapter one, Mr. Grunberg takes a photograph of Leo, Elsa, and Max on the Ferris wheel in Vienna. It's a picture of youth, innocence, and the joy of life and time spent with cherished friends. Reread the first three chapters of *When the World Was Ours*, which describe this scene from the points of view of the three children. Imagine the photograph and re-create it in pencil. Below the picture, write ten words that capture the spirit of these children before their lives would be turned upside down.

2. **How Could This Happen?** Hitler's rise to power and the horrific events of what is now called the Holocaust did not happen overnight. Many events and situations that took place over the twelve years that Hitler led Germany are referred to and described in *When the World Was Ours*, such as the Anschluss, the Kindertransport, the Judenrat, Kristallnacht or the Night of Broken Glass, the Theresienstadt Ghetto, and the Dachau and Auschwitz concentration camps. Discuss what you've learned about the history of Nazi Germany with your classmates. What do you think were the most influential or telling moments leading to the extremity of this regime? What were the warning signs? Then, in small groups, research one of the above topics described in the book. Present your findings to the class as a PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation.

3. **The List.** The Nazis systematically removed the rights of Jews so they could intimidate, humiliate, and ultimately exert total control over their lives. Jews also had to abide by a continuously growing list of restrictive laws. Readers see Leo's list of things he is no longer allowed to do. Reread this list and discuss what it must have been like for children like Leo to endure such restrictions on daily life. Next, create a list of things that you would miss if you were suddenly told you could no longer participate in them. Share and discuss your list with a partner or small group.

4. **Pack a Bag.** Over the course of the story, the three children need to move from place to place. When Elsa and her family leave Vienna for Prague, she fusses over what to pack in her suitcase. As the story progresses, the contents of her bag that she takes to the tenement, the ghetto, and ultimately Auschwitz dramatically change. What do you think these objects represented for Elsa? Think about an important object that you own. Is it one of monetary or sentimental value? How would you feel if you had to part with it? Write an essay about what you most value and why you think it means so much to you, and how that might change or evolve in certain situations.

5. **Never Again?** In the book's final chapter, a teacher visits a ninety-one-year-old Leo, asking him to share his story with her students. She relates her concern about the rise of Fascism in Europe, and believes that Leo's story is valuable and should be told to young people. The teacher in the story is correct: a disturbing rise in Fascism, nationalism, and extremism has been taking root all over Europe and the world. For example, on August 11, 2017, neo-Nazis and white nationalists marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, carrying torches and chanting, "Jews will not replace us." On July 3, 2020, the *New York Times* ran an article titled: "As Neo-Nazis Seed Military Ranks, Germany Confronts 'an Enemy Within.'" Research events and movements that have taken place over the last five years that target Jews and other minorities. Participate in a class discussion drawing connections between language, justifications, and hate strategies that appear in *When the World Was Ours* to similar things happening in the world today.

*This guide was created by Colleen Carroll, reading teacher, literacy specialist, curriculum writer, and children's book author. Learn more about Colleen at [www.colleencarroll.us](http://www.colleencarroll.us).*

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