

ENGAGEMENT GUIDE FOR

NICKY & VERA

A Quiet Hero of the Holocaust and the Children He Rescued

by PETER SÍS



INTRODUCTION

Peter Sís's *Nicky & Vera: A Quiet Hero of the Holocaust and the Children He Rescued* is a beautifully illustrated picture book about a man, a child, and the Holocaust. Some users might question its appropriateness for young children, but *Nicky and Vera* is a valuable resource that may be used with young children, with some important caveats. The recommended age group is 6–9 years old, though discretion should be used in the presentation of this material to children at the lower end of this age range. Older children may also enjoy it.

The *Nicky* of the book's title is Nicholas Winton, an Englishman who worked with many others to devise and execute creative schemes to rescue nearly 700 Czechoslovakian children from almost certain death. When the Germans closed the borders, rendering further rescues impossible, Mr. Winton returned to his quiet life in England. He boxed up the records of the children he'd saved and didn't mention anything about this episode in his life until decades later, when his wife came across the boxes in the attic where he'd stored them.

The *Vera* in the title is Vera Gissing, one of the children Nicky rescued, around whose story the book revolves. Vera Gissing has also written about her life and experiences, including in her memoir, *Pearls of Childhood*.

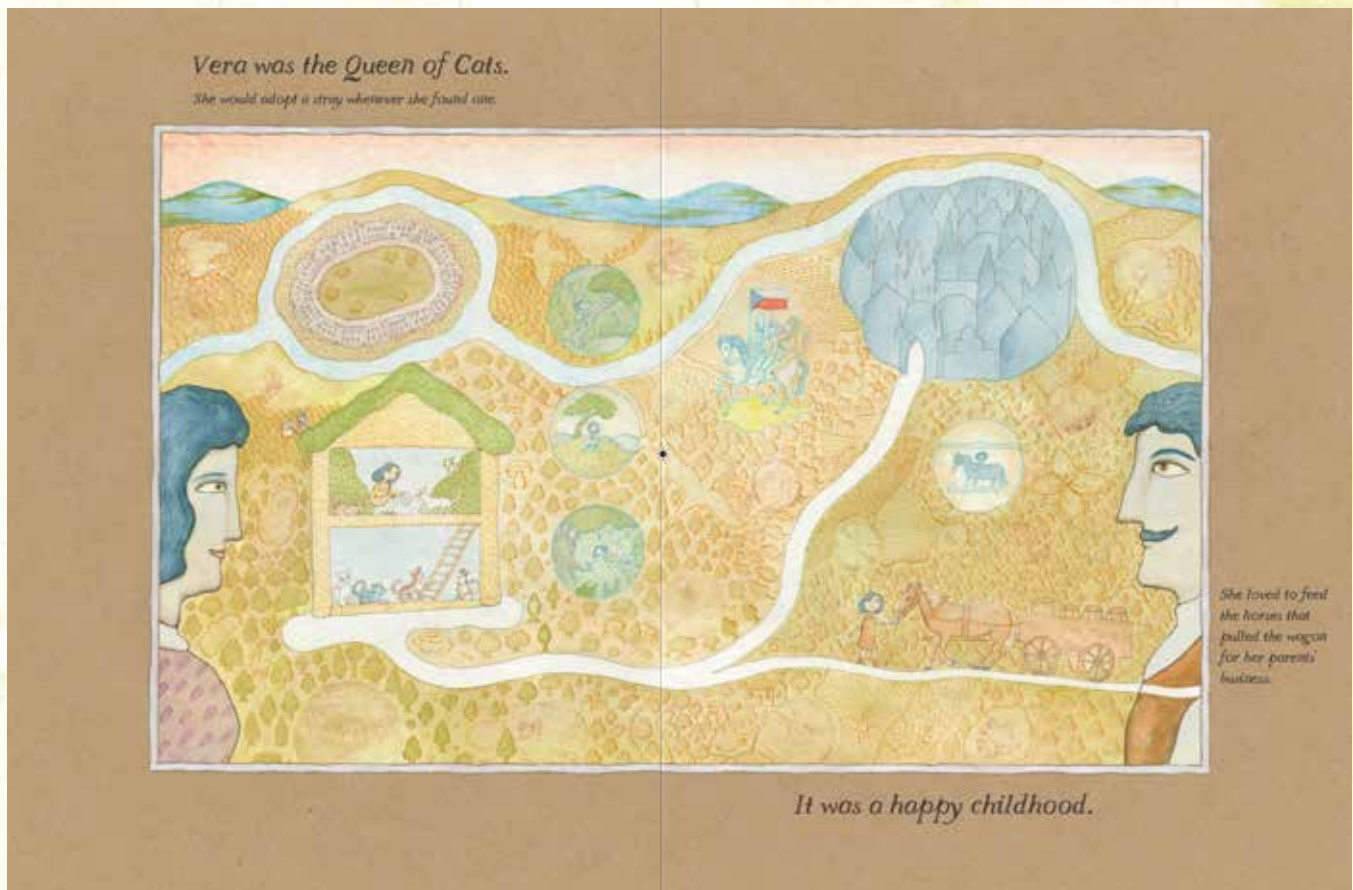
The illustrations in *Nicky & Vera* are filled with imagination and possibility. They are thought-provoking, surprising, and delightful, the kind of pictures that make children want to create their own art. The story is told lightly and factually, with no judgment or editorializing, as the best children's stories are. It is both heartbreaking and encouraging. It inspires questions and reflection, or is just a great story, depending on a child's mood and the situation. In spite of being set against the backdrop of the Holocaust, *Nicky & Vera* is positive and hopeful in tone and message. It reminds us of the importance of each of us doing what we can—no matter how small or unconventional our best might be—to make the world a better place.

In *Nicky & Vera*, Peter Sís tells the intertwined stories of Nicholas Winton and Vera Gissing. Nicholas Winton was a young man heading off on a ski vacation when he learned about the plight of hundreds of thousands of mostly Jewish families crowding into Prague as they attempted to escape the Nazis. After discovering that normal channels for helping the families were blocked or too time-consuming, Winton discovered a way to rescue at least some of the children. He set up headquarters in his hotel room, where he recorded the

names and photos of children whose parents were desperate to get them to safety. He then returned to England, where he worked with others to raise money and find foster families willing to take the endangered children. He and many others did what was necessary, arranging travel and visas, bribing officials, and forging documents. Over the next several months, Winton and his colleagues arranged for 669 children to take trains across Europe to England and safety.

Vera grew up in a peaceful rural Czechoslovakian village. She had a happy life, with pets and friends and a strong extended family. But then the Germans threatened—and eventually occupied—her country. She observes changes as the German army advanced: giving a barefoot new girl in her class a pair of shoes, and wondering why there is suddenly extra food and clothing in her family's cellar.

Nicky & Vera is an inspiring book about the importance of standing up to racism and cruelty, a story of one person's response to terrible injustice and suffering and the countless lives that were impacted as the children he rescued grew into adulthood.



IS NICKY & VERA A BOOK FOR YOUNG CHILDREN?

The recommended age range for *Nicky & Vera* is 6–9, which most experts say is too young to begin Holocaust education, for the obvious reasons of the horrors and evil involved. A six-year-old is far too young to hear about children being sent to toxic showers, or to see photos of the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Because of this, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum recommends starting Holocaust education at age eleven, and suggests avoiding the subject entirely before the age of eight.

And yet, **with careful guidance**, *Nicky & Vera* can be a good book for a child as young as six, for the reasons listed below. Of course, adult discretion is advised. *Nicky & Vera* is not the right book for a particularly vulnerable, fragile, or emotionally challenged six-year-old, and may not be appropriate for older children who have suffered from traumatic separations or are otherwise struggling with emotional issues.

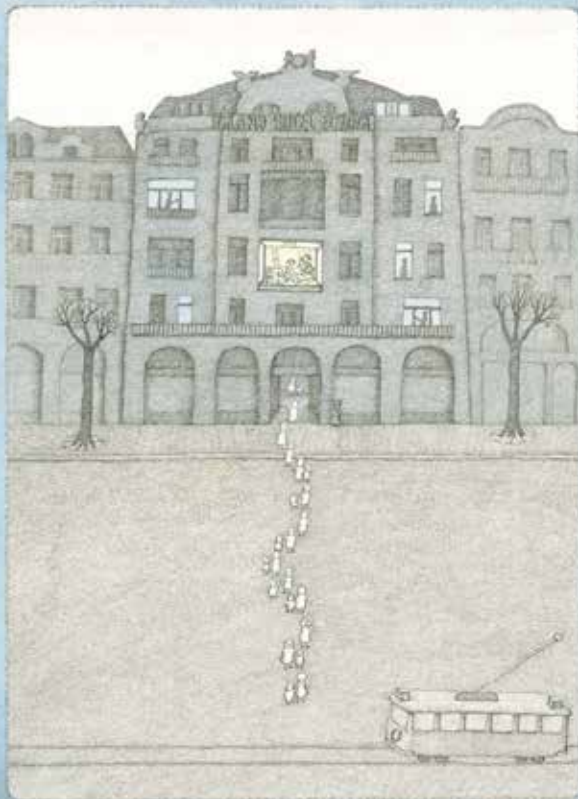
The story's focus is on two people, Nicky and Vera. The Holocaust is the backdrop of the story. It provides the setting, and is not the foreground.

The storytelling is honest, straightforward, and gentle, with no horrific details. The art, like the storytelling, conveys the material in an age-appropriate way.

- *Nicky & Vera* is not about the Holocaust, but is rather about courage, kindness, inclusivity, and resilience. Nicky is a man who sees a terrible injustice in progress, and who sets aside his own life in order to save the children.
- There are moments of quiet, gentle humor. This humor often shows up in the illustrations, and sometimes in the text. For example, describing ten-year-old Vera's mission to rescue stray cats—and random cats are shown everywhere throughout the book—Sís writes, “Vera was the Queen of the Cats” (page 8).
- Although *Nicky & Vera* is not really about the Holocaust, it does provide an introduction to the idea of the Holocaust, upon which parents and educators can later build. Children learn that the Holocaust was a terrible thing that happened in Europe in the early 1940s, and that many people died, but little else.
- *Nicky & Vera* demonstrates the importance of inclusion and respect for diverse others, providing a model for addressing racism and discrimination in all its forms.
- The book leaves children with the positive message—so important at this challenging moment in history—that each person can contribute to making the world a better place, and that bystanders can become heroes if they take action.

WHEN SHARING *Nicky & Vera* with children as young as six or seven, it's important that there is a close and loving adult present for the reading, whether the child is reading for themselves or an adult is reading the book aloud to the child. The adult should be careful not to read with too much emotion, or betray their own reaction to the historic set of events that was the Holocaust. If you're reading this book to a child, try to put yourself in an innocent child's headspace, and to think of it as a simple children's story. Stay calm, and keep the emphasis on Nicky's quiet heroism and Vera's courage and resilience.

If a child asks tough questions about what was going on behind the scenes, be ready with reassurances such as "The Holocaust was truly dreadful, but it happened a long time ago in a place where the people in charge were very mean, and encouraged everyone to bully Jewish people." You can then add, "What this book shows, and what the Holocaust showed, is that it's very important that we pay attention all around us, and stay ready to stand up for anyone we see being treated badly. If you're worried that someone is being bullied, whether it's you or someone else, talk to me or another adult you trust. We will do everything we can to make sure the injustice is stopped."



Nicky set up an office in a hotel in Prague.

He made lists of children.
He took their photographs.
He found train connections.

Spies kept watch.

TERMS YOU MIGHT WANT TO DEFINE OR DISCUSS

Some children need to understand everything, and others prefer just to hear the story. Depending on a child's level of interest and curiosity, you can mention these ideas before reading the book, during the reading as you encounter them, afterward, or not at all. In some situations, you might just read the book and respond to any questions as they arise. **HERE ARE** some brief definitions or descriptions appropriate for an inquisitive six-year-old. You can scale these up or down depending on an individual child's age and interest.

HOLOCAUST: A bad thing that happened in Europe a long time ago, when one group of people (the Nazis) bullied another group of people (Jews and some others). Many people died.

NAZI: The short name for a member of the National Socialist Party in Germany.

ADOLF HITLER: The leader of the Nazi party from 1921 to 1945.

NUREMBERG: A city in Germany where Hitler held Nazi rallies, and where laws were made that took citizenship away from Jews.

ANNEXATION OF AUSTRIA: After threats from Hitler, Austria became part of Germany.

THE MUNICH AGREEMENT: A settlement made in September 1938, by England, France, Italy, and Germany that allowed Germany to take part of Czechoslovakia.

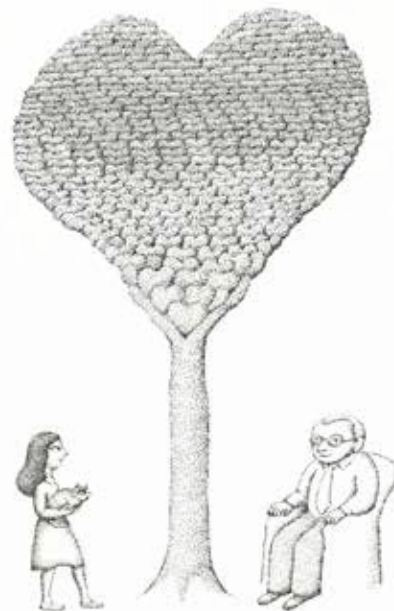
KRISTALLNIGHT (or THE NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS): November 9, 1938, a night when rioters across Germany smashed windows in Jewish stores, homes, and synagogues.

FENCING: Fencing is a sport that involves fighting with swords, with contestants wearing protective clothing and following careful rules. [You can point to the picture of Nicky riding the pigeon on page 3, or the fencers at the top and bottom of pages 4 and 5.]



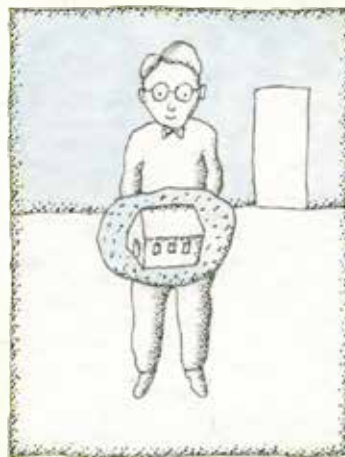
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CHILDREN

1. Would you like to go to a school like Nicky's, where students are encouraged to follow their interests, whatever they are?
2. If you went to that kind of school, what interests would you follow? (Nicky discovered that he liked mathematics, stamp collecting, photography, fencing, and raising pigeons.)
3. What does the author mean when he writes, "Vera was the Queen of Cats"? (page 8)
4. Why was there suddenly extra food and clothing in Vera's family's barn and cellar? What does Vera's mother mean when she replies, "Just in case" (page 12) to Vera's question about it?
5. Why did Vera's parents decide to send her to England?
6. What do you think Peter Sís means when he describes Nicky as a "quiet hero"? What makes him "quiet"?
7. What did Nicky mean when he said, "I was not a hero"? (page 52)
8. Have you ever done something heroic?
9. Do you know anyone who is a quiet hero? What makes them a quiet hero?
10. Is there anything happening in your neighborhood or at your school where heroes could make a difference?



ACTIVITIES

1. **“Lift a Line.”** Ask the children to find a line in the story that makes them curious, or that makes them think, or that surprises them. Ask them to draw a picture or write something about that line.
2. **Look for heroes and allies.** Ask the children to think about heroes in the world around them. Together, make an open list of unjust or otherwise problematic situations that people are working hard to combat. You might post this somewhere, and add to it as more heroes and allies are identified.
3. **Devise an action plan.** Start with a discussion about ways that even children can be like Nicky—for example, by being alert to bullying or other mistreatment they encounter in school or other environments. Ask the children about injustices they see around them. Some children might apply this to environmental issues or animal rights; others might focus on bullying or racism. Then talk about what they can do to help address injustices. Work with a parent or trusted adult to devise an action plan.
4. **Write and illustrate your own story.** Help the children think about a story they can write and illustrate themselves. It can be a true story about a hero they already know about, an imaginary hero, or their own revised version of *Nicky & Vera*.
5. **Write a play and act it out.** Ask the children to write a script for a play about Nicky and Vera (an adult can help with the writing, depending on the kids’ ages), and then act out the play, perhaps for an audience. The play can be recorded and used for further discussion later.



PETER SÍS, THE AUTHOR AND ARTIST

PETER SÍS is an award-winning artist and writer who was born in Czechoslovakia and later moved to the United States.

As a child growing up in Prague, Peter loved to draw. He loved it so much that his teachers complained, writing comments on his report cards like, “Peter once again annoys with drawing. Please have a word with him!” His talent took him to the School of Graphic and Industrial Design in Prague. Feeling oppressed by Russian control of his country and activities, as so many people of his generation were, he continued making artwork: “I keep drawing. Drawing brings hope.”

Peter also loved music. He worked as a DJ, as well as designing and drawing album covers. He was invited to Los Angeles to create an animated short for the 1984 Olympics, and decided to stay in the United States rather than return to Czechoslovakia.

Peter Sís has written that good luck found him in America. In his first year in the United States, he was asked to design the poster for Miloš Forman’s film *Amadeus*, one of his illustrations was published by the *New York Times*, and his first children’s book, *Bean Boy* (text by George Shannon), was published. A few years later, his book *Rainbow Rhino* won a prize for best illustrated children’s book.

Peter Sís continued to produce remarkable artistic work of many kinds, creating award-winning animated short films, writing and illustrating a number of best-selling children’s books, and creating widely produced magical puppet shows. He was a 2003 MacArthur fellow, and wrote *The Wall*, an autobiographical picture book that received acclaim all around the world. In 2012, he received the Hans Christian Andersen Award for lifetime achievement in children’s literature.

When Peter’s son, Matej, was fifteen, they traveled together to see the place where Peter had grown up. One of their topics of conversation was heroes—what makes a person a hero, and what kinds of actions are heroic. While in Prague, they went to the National Museum, and happened upon a celebration of Nicholas Winton’s 100th birthday. As Peter learned more about Nicky Winton, he realized that he was a true hero, a man who saw something terrible happening, and quietly went about doing everything he could to prevent it.



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OTHER RESOURCES

Reviews of *Nicky & Vera*:

“He Saved 669 Children from Nazis—A New Book Tells His Story to Children,” by Elizabeth Blair for National Public Radio: <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/27/960439081/he-saved-669-children-from-nazis-a-new-book-tells-his-story-to-kids>

“Review of a Children’s Book on the Holocaust by Peter Sís,” by Dona Matthews in *Psychology Today*: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/going-beyond-intelligence/202101/review-children-s-book-the-holocaust-peter-sis>

“A Captivating New Picture Book Celebrates the ‘British Schindler,’” by Jennifer Kraus in *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/27/books/review/peter-sis-nicky-and-vera.html>

“The Holocaust’s Quiet Heroes, Survivors Honored in New Book for Children, Teens,” by Fred de Sam Lazaro and Sarah Clune Hartman for PBS NewsHour: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-holocausts-quiet-heroes-survivors-honored-in-new-book-for-children-teens>

More ideas for talking to children about the Holocaust are available here:

“How Should You Talk to Your Child About the Holocaust?” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/going-beyond-intelligence/201811/how-should-you-talk-your-child-about-the-holocaust>

Teaching Resources, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <https://www.ushmm.org/teach>

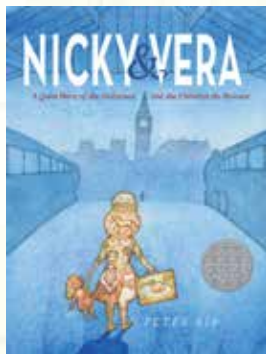
SELECTED WORKS BY PETER SÍS:

The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain

The Pilot and the Little Prince: The Life of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Madlenka

Tibet Through the Red Box



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This guide was prepared by Dona Matthews, a developmental psychologist and author of several books and articles on children’s development. Her most recent book is *Imperfect Parenting: How to Build a Relationship with Your Child to Weather Any Storm*. www.donamatthews.com

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