



Grades 4 – 8; Ages 9 – 13

The Secret of Gabi's Dresser

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Teacher's Guide

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Author: Kathy Kacer

Summary

This historical fiction novel for Grades 4–8 tells the story of Gabi Kohn and her family living in Czechoslovakia in the 1940s. As one of several Jewish families living in their small village, Gabi and her parents are an essential part of the community. But everything begins to change as the German army moves into other countries nearby. First, Gabi notices a change in people's attitudes towards herself and her Jewish friends. Then more and more restrictions are passed that control what Jewish people are able to do. Gabi and her family begin to fear for their safety. Will they stay or will they leave? What is the secret of Gabi's dresser?

About the Author

Kathy Kacer is an award-winning author who has written more than twenty books that focus on stories of the Holocaust. Her work includes picture books, historical fiction, and nonfiction writing. As a child of Holocaust survivors, Kathy Kacer is a passionate advocate for sharing Holocaust stories and has claimed that she feels personally responsible for collecting stories and passing them on to the next generation. In the book *Teaching Tough Topics* by Larry Swartz, Kathy Kacer writes: "I think that the lessons we can learn—lessons about hatred and power, but also lessons about compassion, strength, and selflessness are lessons for the ages. Remember this: Every time you remember the history, and every time you talk about it, you are honouring someone who lived and possibly perished during that time. You are giving meaning to their lives. And that is a remarkable thing." (2020, p. 69)

Learning Opportunities

Character Education

1. Character Traits: How do the characters in the story show courage and perseverance?
2. Personal Relationships: Do the relationships between the characters in the novel change? How do the characters handle conflict?

Literacy

1. Genre: What is historical fiction? What are the key elements of the genre?
2. Setting: What are some elements that authors use to help readers visualise unfamiliar settings? Is a specific setting always an essential part of a story?
3. Reading Strategies: What prior knowledge (schema) do you have about Czechoslovakia and the Holocaust? How can that knowledge help you understand the story and / or the characters?

Social Studies

1. Geography: Where is Czechoslovakia? What is the climate and terrain like there? What countries are now found where Czechoslovakia used to be?
2. Cultures and Celebrations: What are some of the sabbath traditions for the family in this story? Does your family have any similar traditions or foods?
3. Holocaust Education: What countries were invaded or controlled by Germany during World War II? What happened to Jewish people in those areas during the war? Why did so many people go along with the mistreatment of their Jewish neighbours?

Before Reading

The following discussion prompts offer a brief introduction to the setting and context of the book and can help gauge your students' understanding and familiarity with the Holocaust.

Ask students what they know about the Holocaust. What names, events, or places come to mind when they hear that term? (Responses could include Germany, Hitler, Anne Frank, gas chambers, Schindler's List, etc.). Show some images (in print or digitally) from the Holocaust to evoke questions and discussion.

Pictures with descriptions can be found at this website: <http://www.phdn.org/histgen/schmitz/indexeng.html>

Help establish the setting by discussing Czechoslovakia—where it is in the world, what the geography and climate is like, what countries are nearby, etc. This can also help orient the students when other countries, such as Poland, are mentioned.

A discussion of the Holocaust, especially touching on the fact that some horrible things happened, might be prudent before reading the story. Knowing if events in the story might remind students of similar events in their own lives or events they've heard of in their family history, would be helpful for you to be aware of.

Discussion/Comprehension Questions

The following list offers suggestions for classroom discussions to have with students while reading through the chapters.

Chapter 1

- a. Do you get to spend time with your grandparents or other older family members? What kind of things do you do with them?
- b. Why do you think Gabi (Babichka) had to hide in the dresser when she was a child?

Chapter 2

- a. Have you ever been bullied or have you witnessed someone else get bullied? How did it make you feel?
- b. What do the words “victim”, “bystander”, and “upstander” mean to you? What can you do when it is not safe to stand up to bullies and oppressors?

Chapter 3

- a. Does your family have any special traditions like Gabi’s family has for Sabbath dinner?
- b. How is Gabi feeling about the cruel comments from her classmates and about the news her parents are talking about? How do you think you would feel in the same situation?

Chapter 4

- a. What is Gabi’s relationship with her father like?
- b. When you are feeling scared or worried, who do you like to talk to? What does that person say or do to help you feel better?

Chapter 5

- a. Have you ever had a friendship end unexpectedly? How did you feel about it?
- b. What do you think happened to the teacher, Mr. Reich?

Chapter 6

- a. How did you feel after reading/hearing the first sentence of this chapter?
- b. How did Papa's death affect Gabi's everyday life?

Chapter 7

- a. Why did Gabi's mother ask her to look before opening the door?
- b. When Gabi's mother suggests sending her away to be safe, why do you think Gabi refuses to go? How do you think you might react if you were in Gabi's place?

Chapter 8

- a. Imagine you were Gabi or her mother. Would you have opened the door and offered food to the strangers on the doorstep?
- b. Why do you think the Jewish school was closed? How would you react if you got to school one morning and found out it was closed?
- c. Why do you think Nina came to talk to the soldier when he was threatening Gabi and Marishka?

Chapter 9

- a. When she's feeling scared and lonely, Gabi likes to repeat her father's lullaby. Do you have a special ritual you like to do when you're feeling scared that makes you feel better?

Chapter 10

- a. Why do you think Jews were forbidden from owning radios?
- b. Gabi and her mother still want to stay on their farm despite everything going on. Imagine your family was in a similar situation. Do you think you would stay or go? Why?

Chapter 11

- a. Imagine that you're Gabi. How do you think you would feel about hiding in the dresser? Do you think that you would react the same way she does?

Chapter 12

- a. Why do you think the family was more worried about Gabi's safety than her mother's?

Chapter 13

- a. Can you imagine what the house looks like after the soldiers are gone? What details from the chapter help you picture that scene?

Chapter 14

- a. Why does Gabi's mother finally decide it's time to leave?

Chapter 15

- a. Can you imagine someone else living in your house, using your belongings? How do you think you would react?

Literacy Extension Activities

The following list offers suggestions for activities that can be used to expand student learning and application of concepts in the book. These activities can be done at any point while reading the book.

1. If you had to leave your home and could only take a few things with you, what would you take? Write a list of ten things you would take.
 - Have students start with those ten things and then reduce to five and then two items. Students could draw or create a collage of photos or write short descriptions of their items and share with the class.
2. What do you imagine the characters look like? Draw a portrait of one or more characters based on their description in the book.
3. How is the story of *The Secret of Gabi's Dresser* similar to another story you have read? Think about stories where the characters face hard times, feel frightened, or must leave their homes.
 - If students or teachers are interested in more stories about this subject, see the Further Reading section at the end of this guide or visit: <https://secondstorypress.ca/holocaust-remembrance-series>
4. Do you know any stories about your family's history? Write down what you can remember.

Research Questions

Make a list of questions together with the students that can stay accessible and visible in the classroom on chart paper, a whiteboard, a Google document, a jam board, Padlet, or another learning platform. Or have students, independently or in groups, choose a question to research and share their new learning in the form of a poster, slideshow, booklet, etc. Below are some sample research questions:

1. Many people in countries across Europe helped Jewish families hide and escape persecution. These individuals were called rescuers. Who were some of the rescuers?
2. What were some of the factors that led to the persecution of Jewish people across Europe?

Additional Resources

For more information about the Holocaust, check out some of these resources.

- A compilation of links and resources for both students and teachers can be found at: <https://remember.org/educate>
- The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre has a variety of resources at: <https://www.vhec.org/what-we-do/>
- The Montreal Holocaust Museum has videos and programs to support teaching about the Holocaust at: <https://museeholocauste.ca/en/primary-education/>

Further Reading

Picture Books (Ages 7+)

The Brave Princess and Me by Kathy Kacer illus. Juliana Kolesova

Juvenile Fiction \$18.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-102-2

The Promise by Pnina Bat Zvi and Margie Wolfe illus. Isabelle Cardinal

Nonfiction \$18.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-058-2

Fania's Heart by Anne Renaud illus. by Richard Rudnicki

Nonfiction \$18.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-057-5

The Secret of the Village Fool by Rebecca Upjohn illus. Renné Benoit

Fiction \$18.95 ISBN: 978-1-926920-75-7

The Magician of Auschwitz by Kathy Kacer illus. Gillian Newland

Nonfiction \$18.95 ISBN: 978-1-927583-46-3

Middle Grade (Ages 9-12)

Hana's Suitcase by Karen Levine

Nonfiction \$18.95 ISBN: 978-1-896764-55-9

What Does Hate Look Like? by Sameea Jimenez and Corinne Promislow with Larry Swartz

Nonfiction \$21.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-290-6

All About Anne by Anne Frank House

Nonfiction \$24.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-060-5

She's A Mensch! Ten Amazing Jewish Women by Anne Dublin

Nonfiction \$22.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-320-0

Hidden on the High Wire by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$13.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-251-7

Under the Iron Bridge by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$15.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-205-0

The Brushmaker's Daughter by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$10.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-138-1

Shanghai Escape by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-92758-310-4

The Choice by Kathy Clark

Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-927583-65-4

Clara's War by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$8.95 ISBN: 978-1-896764-42-9

The Secret of Gabi's Dresser by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$7.95 ISBN: 978-1-896764-15-3

The Underground Reporters by Kathy Kacer

Nonfiction \$17.95 ISBN: 978-1-896764-85-6

The Diary of Laura's Twin by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-897187-39-5

Hiding Edith: A True Story by Kathy Kacer

Nonfiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-897187-06-7

The Ship to Nowhere by Rona Arato

Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-772600-18-6

To Hope and Back: The Journey of the St. Louis by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-897187-96-8

Guardian Angel House by Kathy Clark

Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-897187-58-6

We Are Their Voice: Young People Respond to the Holocaust by Kathy Kacer

Nonfiction \$16.95 ISBN: 978-1-926920-77-1

The Righteous Smuggler by Debbie Spring

Fiction \$9.95 ISBN: 978-1-896764-97-9

When We Were Shadows by Janet Wees

Nonfiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-061-2

The Night Spies by Kathy Kacer

Fiction \$8.95 ISBN: 978-1-89676-470-2

Hana's Suitcase on Stage by Karen Levine and Emil Sher

Book + Play \$18.95 ISBN: 978-1-89718-705-0

Hana's Suitcase Anniversary Album by Karen Levine

Nonfiction \$24.95 ISBN: 978-1-92692-036-8

(10th anniversary special edition)

Ages 13+

Heroines, Rescuers, Rabbis, Spies: Unsung Women of the Holocaust by Sarah Silberstein Swartz

YA Nonfiction \$19.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-262-3

Branded by the Pink Triangle by Ken Setterington

YA Nonfiction \$15.95 ISBN: 978-1-926920-96-2

To Look a Nazi in the Eye by Kathy Kacer with Jordana Lebowitz

YA Nonfiction \$13.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-040-7

Names in a Jar by Jennifer Gold

YA Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-207-4

Witness: Passing the Torch of Holocaust Memory to New Generations compiled by Eli Rubenstein, with March of the Living

Nonfiction \$32.95 ISBN: 978-1-77260-149-7

Hidden Gold: A True Story of the Holocaust by Ella Burakowski

Fiction \$14.95 ISBN: 978-1-927583-74-6

A Partisan's Memoir by Faye Schulman

Nonfiction \$19.95 ISBN: 978-0-92900-576-8

Restitution: A family's fight for their heritage lost in the Holocaust by Kathy Kacer

Nonfiction \$19.95 ISBN: 978-1-89718-775-3

For Teachers

The Holocaust Remembrance Series for Young Readers Teacher Resource

\$149.00 ISBN: 978-1-89718-794-4

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