



The Magician of Auschwitz

written by
Kathy Kacer
illustrated by
Gillian Newland

The Magician of Auschwitz

Written by Kathy Kacer
Illustrated by Gillian Newland
Guide written by Larry Swartz
Teacher's Guide

ISBN: 978-192758-346-3

Second Story Press
www.secondstorypress.ca

Grades 3 and up; Ages 7 and up

The Magician of Auschwitz

Author: Kathy Kacer

Illustrator: Gillian Newland

Summary

The setting is in the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Young Werner Reich has been separated from his family and faces terrible circumstances each day. The young boy shares his bunk with a quiet man named Herr Levin whose gentle manner seems out of place in the dire setting. The older man was once famous for performing remarkable tricks as Nivelli the Magician in the great theatres of Berlin, Germany. At the Family Camp of Auschwitz, the prison guards learn of Nivelli's talents and enter the barracks ordering Herr Levin to do his magic. The story of *The Magician of Auschwitz* centres on two prisoners who find friendship, hope, kindness, and magic during frightening times. It is also the story of two Holocaust survivors and how performing magic helped each of them to thrive and live a happier life. An afterword to the book provides readers with photographs and information about how the story of these two heroes evolved and survived appalling conditions.

Some Background Information

To prepare for the writing of this book, author Kathy Kacer met with Werner Reich in his home in Long Island, New York, in the United States. Werner willingly and openly told his story of Nivelli the Magician and recounted experiences of life in the prison camp. Both men managed to recover and build a life for themselves in the United States. Werner became an industrial engineer. Herr Herbert Levin, as Nivelli, continued to perform magic until his death in 1977. Werner learned of the magician's death in a magazine. Werner recognized the tattooed number on Herr Levin's arm given in the statement.

About the Author

Kathy Kacer is an award-winning author who has written more than 20 books that focus on stories of the Holocaust. Her work includes picture books and 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 a personal responsibility to collect stories and pass 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

Students will have the opportunity to do the following:

- Learn information about the harsh day-to-day realities of life in a Nazi concentration camp
- Understand what happened in Auschwitz by reading a true story of Jewish concentration camp prisoners and their survival
- Learn about the wonder of performing magic tricks
- Develop compassion for those sent to prison camps and understand how kindness, friendship, and talent helped give hope—and survival—to Holocaust prisoners
- Examine and respond to powerful illustrations that depict horrific living conditions in concentration camps
- Ask questions and build inquiry into the history of the Holocaust
- Share their responses to the text through reading, writing, discussion, and the arts

Vocabulary

agility: the ability to move quickly and easily

Auschwitz: a Nazi concentration camp situated in German-occupied Poland during World War II

barracks: a building or group of buildings used to house a specific group of people such as labourers or prisoners

bunk: beds formed atop one another that form a unit; in prison camps bunk mattresses are thin and very uncomfortable

concentration camp: a place where a large number of people are deliberately imprisoned in a relatively small area with poor facilities. Nazi concentration camps (1933–1944) subjected prisoners to forced labour and mass executions. Mauthausen and Auschwitz were among the most infamous of the Nazi concentration camps

gnawing hunger: gnawing means to bite or chew on; gnawing hunger refers to hunger that is uncomfortable, worrying, painful

hard labour: heavy manual work, often used as a punishment

jostle: to push, elbow, or bump against someone roughly, typically in a crowd

liberation: the act of freeing someone from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression; American and British forces liberated prisoners from concentration camps in 1945

spellbound: to be completely captivated by and in awe of someone or something fascinating

Preparing to Read *The Magician of Auschwitz*

Sharing Information About the Holocaust

As a class, discuss the following:

- What facts do you know about the Holocaust? About Auschwitz?
- Why did Adolf Hitler introduce laws to limit the freedom of Jewish people? Why did he want to rid the world of Europe's Jews?
- What information do you know about concentration camps?
- What stories have you read or movies have you seen about the Holocaust?

Extension: Divide students into small groups and have them develop their own questions about the Holocaust, then do research to answer them. Groups can share what they've learned with the rest of the class. To learn more, visit <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/en>.

Examining the Cover of the Book

Draw students' attention to the front and back covers of *The Magician of Auschwitz*.

- What information do we learn about the barracks of a concentration camp?
- How do these two illustrations make you feel? Explain.
- What questions come to mind about the story?

Picture Walk Through the Book

Take a picture walk through *The Magician of Auschwitz*, drawing attention to details in illustrations that give information about life for prisoners in Auschwitz.

Pause on an illustration of choice and have students work independently to write one or two sentences that they think might accompany the image. Some students may choose to write a line of dialogue to accompany the image.

Invite students to share their writing with others, first in small groups, then as a whole class.

Telling Stories About Mentoring

In this story, Herr Levin (Nivelli the Magician) befriends the young boy Werner Reich. He is kind to Werner and decides to share some of his secrets and teach him some magic tricks.

Ask the students: Who in your life has been an important mentor to you? What did this person teach you?

Magic Tricks

- a) Students can share stories about magic tricks that they have seen performed.
- b) Some students may share their personal experiences of performing tricks. Volunteers can perform tricks for an audience of classmates. To learn how to perform magic tricks, see <https://youtu.be/BEmfgg2oQRc>.

Questions for Discussion

The following suggested questions can be presented to the students during an interactive read-aloud of the picture book to encourage responses:

- Why do you think Kathy Kacer introduced the book with a story about Nivelli's past? How does the information in the opening, italicized passage prepare you for what this story will be about?
- What details from the story tell you that the conditions in the barracks were horrible for prisoners?
- Both Werner and Herr Levin have prison camp tattoos on their arms. Explain to the students that the tattoo was the prisoner's camp entry number, sometimes with a special symbol added (e.g., some Jews had a triangle). In 1944, Jewish men received the letter "A" or "B" to indicate a particular series of numbers. Why does Kathy Kacer introduce this piece of information in the text? For further information about prison camp tattoos, see <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/tattoos-and-numbers-the-system-of-identifying-prisoners-at-auschwitz>
- What information do we learn about Werner's family?
- Herr Levin tells Werner, "It's good to have hope." How can hope help a prisoner survive in "this deadly prison [...] for those who were tough and could put up a good fight"?
- Why did the prison guards want Herr Levin to perform magic? Why was it important that Nivelli show his magic tricks?
- Pause on an illustration and ask: How does the illustration on this page help to illuminate the text? What do we learn from the illustration?
- How do we know that Nivelli was a talented magician?
- A statement on the front page of the picture book says, "Magic can be found in the darkest of places." How did magic help Werner and Nivelli to survive as prisoners?

- The story ends with a description of what happened to Werner when “many years passed.” Why did the author choose to include this information about Werner’s life after being liberated from Auschwitz?
- What was the special relationship that Werner had with the Magician of Auschwitz? How were these two people important to each other to survive in the camp?
- What new information do we learn about Werner Reich in “How It Happened,” the afterword to this book?
- How did this story make you feel? What did you wonder about?

Responding to *The Magician of Auschwitz*

The activities described below can be adapted for different grade levels. Many students in Grades 5–8 can respond through discussion, writing, and arts activities to help them think about the story of Werner and Nivelli and to reflect on the history and impact of the Holocaust.

WRITING A LIST: Determining Important Ideas

In telling the story of *The Magician of Auschwitz*, author Kathy Kacer describes some horrible conditions a prisoner in a concentration camp encountered. Students may or may not have been familiar with these treatments and might have strong reactions to the hardships and hate prisoners endured. The following outline helps students to think about the brutal treatment prisoners encountered under Nazi power.

- Step One: Have students work independently to list three things they learned from this story.
- Step Two: Have students meet in groups of two or three to compare lists. Have students add on to their personal lists by borrowing a piece of information from a classmate's list.
- Step Three: As a class, discuss the terrible conditions that took place in Holocaust concentration camps. Ask: Did any of these conditions surprise you? Horrify you? How do you think prisoners survived with terrible conditions? For further information, see <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/camp-hospitals/sicknesses-and-epidemics/>

Answers may include the following:

- No blankets, no mattresses, no straw on bunk beds
- People crammed into each bunk
- Shaved heads of all prisoners
- Tattooed numbers
- Guards ordering prisoners do push-ups for many hours
- Endless hours of standing in line outside, waiting to be counted
- Repeatedly moving rocks from one pile to another
- Rationed meals: watery soup with two small potato pieces
- Gnawing hunger

WRITING A REPORT: Inquiry and Research: A Ten-Sentence Report

- a. For this activity, have students prepare a ten-sentence report about an issue connected to the Holocaust. Students can work independently or with a partner to complete the outline. Students can choose a topic of inquiry, or topics can be assigned to students.
 - Part One: Three things I know about...
 - Part Two: Two questions I have about...
 - Part Three: Five things I learned from research about...
- b. Once completed, students can meet in groups of four to share their reports and discuss new information they learned about the Holocaust from this inquiry.

Some topics may include the following:

- The Holocaust
- Concentration camps
- Auschwitz
- The swastika
- Prisoner tattoos
- The Gestapo Police (Secret State Police)
- Kristallnacht (Night of the Broken Glass, November 9–10, 1938)
- Liberation of concentration camps, 1945
- Adolf Hitler

A Ten-Sentence Report about the Holocaust (sample reproducible exercise)

You are to prepare a ten-sentence report about a topic connected to the Holocaust. Work alone or with a partner to complete the ten items below on a topic of interest.

1. Three things I know about _____

- i.
- ii.
- iii.

2. Two questions I have about _____

- i.
- ii.

3. Five facts I learned from research about _____

- i.
- ii.
- iii.
- iv.
- v.

ORAL LANGUAGE / DRAMA: Interviewing in Role / Writing an Article

To prepare for the writing of this book, Kathy Kacer had the opportunity to interview Holocaust survivor Werner Reich. We learn that Werner found out about the death of Nivelli the Magician from an article written in a magician's magazine.

Tell the students to imagine that they were the reporter who wrote the article about the magician and his life at Auschwitz. To prepare for the article they will have a chance to interview Herr Levin as a Holocaust survivor.

To begin, listen to Werner Reich's TED Talk:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GjinnLB86A>

- Part One: Students meet in groups of three to brainstorm questions that they would ask the magician about his experience in Auschwitz.
- Part Two: Students can improvise an interview between the magician and reporters. What questions will the reporter ask? What stories will Levin reveal?

Extension: Writing a Magazine Article

Students work independently to write a magazine article that pays tribute to Nivelli the Magician. What biographical information will they inform readers about? What stories about life at Auschwitz will they talk about? What stories of being a survivor might they describe? Students may wish to include an "in-role" written interview in their article.

VISUAL ARTS:

Responding to Illustrations; Creating an Illustration

When designing a cover for a picture book, a publisher often chooses an image from the illustrations that appear throughout the book. The image on the front cover of this publication is similar to the first full-page artwork by Gillian Newland that appears in the story.

1. Discuss the two illustrations that appear on the cover of the book. Ask: After having read *The Magician of Auschwitz*, do you think the publisher made a good decision with these two images? Do you think the two illustrations should have been reversed (i.e., Nivelli on the front cover)?
2. Review the illustrations throughout *The Magician of Auschwitz* by taking a picture walk through the book. Invite students to share their opinions of an alternate illustration that might have appeared on the front or back cover of the picture book. Encourage students to give reasons for their choices.

Extension:

Tell the students to imagine that the publisher would like to add some new illustrations for this book. Students can work independently to create an illustration that might appear in a new edition of the book. Encourage students to focus on a line that might inspire the illustration. Some students may take the opportunity to create a new cover page for the book.

ORAL LANGUAGE:

Pick a Card: Performing Magic Tricks

- Option #1: Some students may be familiar with a magic trick or two. They can volunteer to share their magic with others in the class, perhaps using a deck of cards or other props.
- Option #2: Students can use the Internet to investigate how to perform a magic trick. After planning and rehearsing the trick, they can try it out with their friends.
- Option #3: Students can work alone or with others to investigate some YouTube videos that demonstrate some magic tricks.

Extension:

Students can use the Internet to learn about famous magicians and their tricks (e.g., David Copperfield, David Blaine, Houdini). Students can report their findings by describing a trick or two performed by this magician.

READING:

Independent Reading + Response

There is a wide variety of historical fiction books set in the Holocaust or about the future lives of those who survived the Holocaust. Kathy Kacer's books are rich narratives based on true stories. Students can independently read a novel to understand the history, the lived experiences, and stories of those who survived the Holocaust. Students can share, orally or through writing, incidents from the novels they've read.

A Message from Kathy Kacer

To help bring understanding of what happened in the Holocaust, Kathy Kacer suggests that it is important, if possible, to bring a Holocaust survivor into your classroom to talk with your students. She reminds us that it is important to hear the stories from the mouths of those who experienced the full impact of hate. Ask the survivor how they feel when they see a swastika painted on the wall of a building. Their emotional response will stay with you and your students forever. Kacer urges that it is important to do this sooner rather than later! Holocaust survivors are passing away at an alarming rate, and it will not be long before their voices are gone. Contact your local synagogue, Holocaust education centre, or Jewish community centre to find a survivor who fits with the age and stage of your student group. If you can't find a survivor who will speak to your students, consider bringing in an author—like Kacer, the child of Holocaust survivors—who has written books about this time in history for a young readership. Authors can help initiate students into this history in a gentle and encouraging way.

Note: If it is not possible to have a Holocaust survivor visit your classroom in person, you can try to arrange a virtual visit, watch videos of survivors telling their stories, or read their testimonies. See this resource to learn about survivors' stories: <https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-reflections-testimonies>.

Further Reading

Picture Books (Ages 7+)

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

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

Kacer, Kathy; illus. Gillian Newland, *The Magician of Auschwitz*

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

Kacer, Kathy; illus. Juliana Kolesova, *The Brave Princess and Me*

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

Renaud, Anne; illus. Richard Rudnicki, *Fania's Heart*

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

Upjohn, Rebecca; illus. Renné Benoit, *The Secret of the Village Fool*

Nonfiction, \$18.95, ISBN: 978-1-926920-75-7

Middle Grade (Ages 9–12)

Anne Frank House; illus. Huck Scarry, *All About Anne*

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

Arato, Rona, *The Ship to Nowhere: On Board the Exodus*

Nonfiction, \$14.95, ISBN: 978-1-77260-018-6

Clark, Kathy, *The Choice*

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

Clark, Kathy, *Guardian Angel House*

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

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

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

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

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

Kacer, Kathy, *Clara's War*

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

Kacer, Kathy, *The Diary of Laura's Twin*

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

Kacer, Kathy, *Hidden on the High Wire*

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

Kacer, Kathy, *Hiding Edith: A True Story*

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

Kacer, Kathy, *The Night Spies*

Fiction, \$8.95, ISBN: 978-1-896764-70-2

Kacer, Kathy, *The Secret of Gabi's Dresser*

Fiction, \$10.95, ISBN: 978-1-896764-15-3

Kacer, Kathy, *Shanghai Escape*

Nonfiction, \$14.95, ISBN: 978-1-927583-10-4

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

Nonfiction, \$14.95, ISBN: 978-1-897187-96-8

Kacer, Kathy, *The Underground Reporters*

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

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

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

Levine, Karen, *Hana's Suitcase*

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

Levine, Karen, *Hana's Suitcase Anniversary Album*

(10th anniversary special edition)

Nonfiction, \$24.95, ISBN: 978-1-926920-36-8

Levine, Karen and Emil Sher, *Hana's Suitcase on Stage*

Nonfiction / Drama, \$18.95, ISBN: 978-1-897187-05-0

Spring, Debbie, *The Righteous Smuggler*

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

Wees, Janet, *When We Were Shadows*

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

YA/Adult (Ages 13+)

Burakowski, Ella, *Hidden Gold: A True Story of the Holocaust*

YA Nonfiction, \$14.95, ISBN: 978-1-927583-74-6

Gold, Jennifer, *Names in a Jar*

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

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

Adult Nonfiction, \$19.95, ISBN: 978-1-897187-75-3

Kacer, Kathy with Jordana Lebowitz, *To Look a Nazi in the Eye: A teen's account of a war criminal trial*

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

Kacer, Kathy, *Under the Iron Bridge*

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

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

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

Schulman, Faye, *A Partisan's Memoir: Woman of the Holocaust*

Adult Nonfiction, \$19.95, ISBN: 978-0-929005-76-8

Setterington, Ken, *Branded by the Pink Triangle*

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

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

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

For Teachers

Nesbitt, Shawntelle, *Holocaust Remembrance Series Teacher Resource: Elementary Social Justice Teacher Resource*

Educational Resource, \$149.00, ISBN: 978-1-897187-94-4

544 page Five-Part Comprehensive Guide