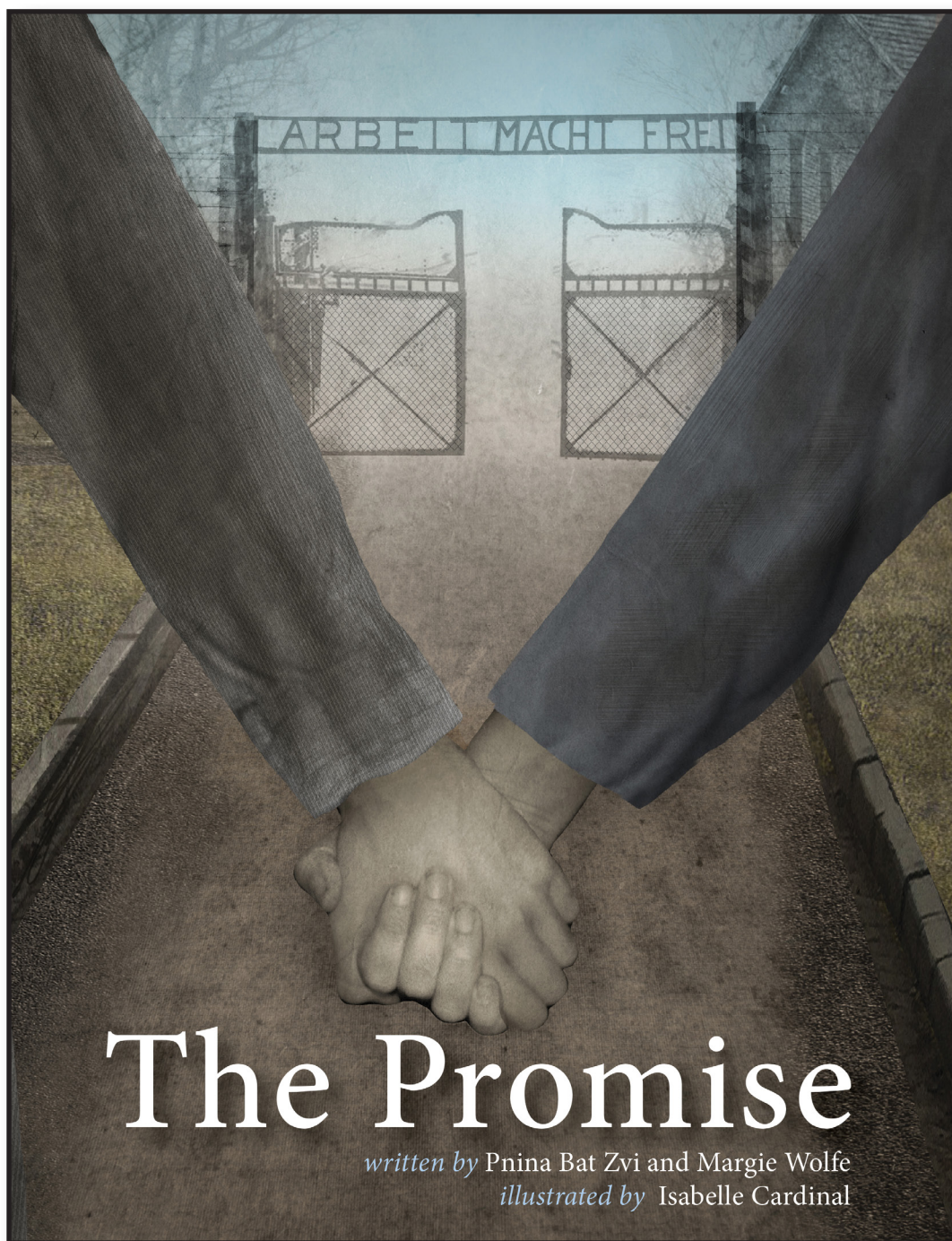


Grades 3-7; Ages 7-10



# The Promise

*written by* Pnina Bat Zvi and Margie Wolfe

*illustrated by* Isabelle Cardinal

Teacher's Guide: The Promise  
By Pnina Bat Zvi and Margie Wolfe  
Illustrated by Isabelle Cardinal

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## A. Story Summary

*The Promise* is the true story of two young sisters, Toby and Rachel, who were prisoners in Poland's infamous Auschwitz concentration camp during the Holocaust.

This narrative non-fiction book for young readers chronicles the daily horrors of existence in a concentration camp where survival often depended upon luck, courage, and quick thinking.

Rachel and her older sister, Toby, are teenaged girls who are imprisoned in Auschwitz after having been separated from their parents, whom they will never see again. For two years, the sisters live together in a primitive barrack with other young women. At the outset, we learn that these young women help and depend upon each other to try to survive. However, Toby and Rachel keep a secret from the other girls. Toby conceals a tin box containing three gold coins that her parents gave her on the promise to use them only when necessary and that she stay together with her sister. The parents knew that staying together would be their daughters' best chance of survival.

*The Promise* explores several themes. It emphasizes the importance of loyalty and sisterhood expressed in Toby and Rachel's relationship and the dangers they face to stay together. Since the Holocaust is the setting and historical context of the story, readers learn of the struggles people went through to survive day-to-day. The story, with its emphasis on personal courage, family loyalty, and risk-taking, provides important lessons on values clarification for its young readers. The book's somber illustrations reinforce its stark setting and the maturity of its two main characters.

*The Promise*, written by first cousins Pnina Bat Zvi and Margie Wolfe, is their mothers' survival story. It is appropriate for children between the ages of seven and twelve, and for English as a Second Language adults who are at the high beginner or low intermediate level.

## **B. Listening and Speaking Activities**

These can be used as non-evaluated activities before your class starts reading the book or as evaluated projects during or after reading the book.

## **ACTIVITY 1: SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

This is a pre-reading discussion to prepare young readers to study the book. This activity has several objectives. First, it gives them the opportunity to describe their own relationships with their siblings or family members. Second, they practise using vocabulary needed to describe the two protagonists in the story.

Have the students work in small groups. Assign one or two students to recorder the answers. The rest of the group members can take turns presenting to the whole class.

## ACTIVITY 1: GROUP DISCUSSION: INTRODUCTION TO *THE PROMISE*

### DIRECTIONS

- a. Organize yourselves into groups of four or five students.
- b. Discuss the questions below and answer them as a group.
- c. One or two group members should listen and record the group's answers on computer or chart paper.
- d. The other group members will be responsible for presenting the answers to the rest of the class.

### HERE ARE YOUR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you have any brothers or sisters? If you do, what are some words that you would use to describe your relationship?
2. Have you ever been in a situation when your brother or sister helped you a you a lot with something? If you have, describe that situation.
3. What is the meaning of the word survival ? Don't use a dictionary. Decide on a good definition by having a discussion with your group members.
4. What is the meaning of the words heroes or heroines ? Do you know about any heroes or heroines in your family? If you do, name that person and explain in a few words what they did. Create a list for the group that could look like this.

#### Our Group's Heroes And Heroines

Person's Name

Mai's aunt Tam

Eric's mother

What He Or She Did?

helped her family escape from war in her first country

rescued her family from a house fire

5. What are the personal qualities of a hero or heroine? After you have discussed the heroes and heroines in your group, make a list of the special personal qualities that made that person a hero or heroine. The personal qualities that you identify could be nouns or adjectives. Your list could look like this.

Special Qualities of a Hero or Heroine

- courage (or courageous)
- determination (or determined)
- intelligence (or intelligent)
- quick-thinking (or quick thinker)

## ACTIVITY 2: INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST

*The Promise* is aimed toward children between seven and twelve years old. Children of this age can read and study the book simply as a story of courage and survival. However, adults who are ESL learners at the high beginner or low intermediate level can also read and appreciate the book.

For older students, it would be beneficial for them to have a brief introduction to the Holocaust, which is the setting of the story. There are many Internet resources that can be used to help them understand the period. Depending on your students' ages and language abilities choose one or two short resources that can be used to complete this activity. Alternatively, you could have students research their own Internet resources on the Holocaust. Some resources they may find useful are: [www.theholocaustexplained.org](http://www.theholocaustexplained.org), [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org).

When doing this activity, provide students with two maps that would aid in their research. One map would be of the occupied and invaded countries during the Holocaust, and the other would be a map of concentration camps built and inhabited during that time. Both maps are easily available on the Internet. Give students their copies of each map.

## ACTIVITY 2: INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST: FILL IN THE BLANKS

### DIRECTIONS

Organize yourselves into groups of four or five students.

Using the Internet resources that you have found or that your teacher has given to you, fill in the blanks with correct information.

1. The Holocaust was a time in history that occurred between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

2. The man who started the Holocaust was named \_\_\_\_\_.

3. He was the leader of a political party called the \_\_\_\_\_.

4. That man was the Chancellor or leader of \_\_\_\_\_.

5. When he became leader, his government passed laws that hurt or discriminated against different groups of people including \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
and \_\_\_\_\_.

6. During the Holocaust, the Nazis invaded many countries in Europe. The first country they invaded was \_\_\_\_\_.  
Some other countries that they invaded were \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
and \_\_\_\_\_.



7. When the Nazis invaded and occupied countries in Europe, they made Jews and other groups of people leave their homes and then put them in places called

\_\_\_\_\_.

Sometimes people were sent to \_\_\_\_\_ camps and killed right away. Prisoners who could work were sent to \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ camps.

8. Life in these prison camps was very dangerous. Prisoners never had enough food to eat and many died from \_\_\_\_\_.

Also, the camps were very crowded and not clean, so people got sick from illnesses such as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

9. Prisoners needed to obey everything that their guards told them to do. If they didn't, the guards could punish them or even \_\_\_\_\_ them.

10. The Holocaust ended in 1945, when the armies of countries such as

\_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_,  
and

\_\_\_\_\_ defeated the Nazi army in battles, and the Nazis \_\_\_\_\_ to them.

### **ACTIVITY 3: LEARNING ABOUT OTHER PERSECUTED GROUPS IN THE HOLOCAUST**

This activity provides an opportunity for students to learn about people, other than Jews, who were persecuted or killed during the Holocaust. Students can be organized into groups and work co-operatively to research and present information about that group. This activity would be appropriate for academically gifted, ESL or adult students.

## ACTIVITY 3: CREATING A VISUAL PRESENTATION ON PERSECUTED GROUPS IN THE HOLOCAUST

### DIRECTIONS

1. Organize yourselves into groups of four or five students.
2. Here is a list of groups of people who were also treated badly or killed during the Holocaust.
  - a. Roma
  - b. People with developmental and physical disabilities
  - c. Teachers or university professors
  - d. Priests, nuns, and other religious people
  - e. Communists
3. Each group will choose or be given one of these groups to research. Your goal is to create a visual display about that group's situation during the Holocaust. Your display should be a combination of important facts about that group, and any graphics or pictures that would make your presentation more interesting. Your display can be done on hard copy or published online on your class website.
4. Use any search engine allowed by your school.
5. Find appropriate pictures or graphics which would make your presentation more interesting to read.
6. Answer these questions to complete your assignment.
  - a. Who were the people in this group?  
  
Describe any specific information about them.
  - b. Why did the Nazis want to hurt or kill these people? What reasons did they give for treating them so badly?
  - c. How did the Nazis punish or hurt these people?
  - d. Did other people try to save this group? What things did other people do to try to save them?

## C. Reading Activities

## ACTIVITY 4: COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

These questions evaluate your students' comprehension of the story. They focus on the elements of storytelling including plot, character, theme, setting, climax, conflict and symbolism. If appropriate for your students' grade level and ability, introduce the storytelling terms as pre-reading activities, which are available online. There are also questions requiring students to express their feelings about the story and identify with the experiences of the protagonists. There are also inference questions which require students to "read between the lines." Other questions are used to practise prediction skills. Use these questions to encourage ongoing discussion of the story, or assign them as written assignments or homework questions.

1. What is the relationship between Rachel and Toby?
2. Where are Rachel and Toby?
3. Look at the first two pictures in the book. Describe the place where the girls live. Would you want to live in this place? Why or why not?
4. Look at the artist's drawings of Rachel and Toby. How old do you think they are? Describe their appearance. What are some ways that they look different from the young girls you know who are their age?
5. What was Rachel's dream? Why do you think she would have this kind of dream?
6. Where are the gold coins? Why do you think Rachel was so worried about keeping them?
7. What happened to Rachel and Toby's parents?
8. Who were the Nazis? What did they do to Rachel and Toby's parents? Look at the picture of the Nazi soldier. What do his facial expression and body language tell you about his personality or what he is doing to the other people in the picture? Why is he using a gun?
9. How long have Rachel and Toby been separated from their parents?
10. Why do you think Rachel's father trusted her with the gold coins?
11. What advice did Toby get about the coins? Do you think it was good advice? Why or why not?

12. Why did the Nazi guard have a German shepherd dog with her?
13. Why did the Nazis make the girls call out their names?
14. What do you think happened to Lola, the girl who was gone? Why do you think this happened to her?
15. What happened to the wall of fieldstones that the girls built? Why do you think they had to do this?
16. What did Toby do when the guards were not looking? What does this action show about her personality?
17. What do the words *small victory* mean? What did Toby's action help her to win?
18. What did Rachel do when she saw the shoe paste tin on the ground? What does this action show about her personality?
19. What are three words that you could use to describe the relationship between the two sisters? Give some reasons for your choices.
20. What happened to Rachel on the cold and rainy day after she and the other girls were taking apart the wall? What do you think was wrong with her?
21. What words would you use to describe how the girls treated Rachel when she was sick? Give reasons for choosing these words.
22. Why was it so important for Rachel to feel better?
23. What happened when Rachel was too sick to get up for work?
24. What did Toby and Rachel's friends say when Toby wanted to find her sister? What do you think of their advice? Do you agree with their advice or with what Toby was planning to do?
25. Why do you think Toby thought, *I still have the coins*? Predict what she was planning to do with them.
26. Why did Pessa and Eva give Toby their headscarves?
27. What did Toby understand about how the relationship between her and her sister had changed? Why did it change?

28. The girls in the camp lived in “barracks”. How is a barrack different from a bedroom that most people have? Use the illustrations in the book to help you answer the question.
29. In your opinion, what kind of list was the Barrack 29 guard writing? How would the list be used?
30. Why did Rachel think that the world had forgotten about the prisoners in Auschwitz?
31. In your own words, summarize what Toby did to get to Barrack 29.
32. A prisoner in Auschwitz was guarding Barrack 29. Why do you think a prisoner would do the job of guarding other prisoners? If you were in the same situation, would you guard people that you knew? Why or why not?
33. How did Toby persuade the guard to let her see Rachel? What is the word we use to describe this action? Would you have done the same thing that Toby did?
34. What did the guard mean when she said, “Make my risk worthwhile”?
35. How did Toby finally get to rescue Rachel?
36. Explain how Toby showed courage when the guard called Rachel’s name the morning after the rescue?
37. How did the guard punish Toby for rescuing Rachel?
38. Explain what the guard then did for Rachel? In your opinion, why did the guard show both cruelty and kindness?
39. Have you ever known anyone who was had such opposite personal qualities? Why could the same person behave this way?
40. Explain how the two sisters survived.
41. Summarize Toby and Rachel’s relationship for the rest of their lives.
42. How did the cousins who wrote *The Promise* learn about the story of their mothers?

## **ACTIVITY 5: UNDERSTANDING VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT**

The ability to learn and understand new vocabulary in context is a key skill in reading comprehension. Depending upon your students' experience, you may wish to first introduce simpler generic vocabulary from context exercises, which are readily available on-line.

The assignment below is a multiple-choice exercise. Emphasize that the exercise should be done without a dictionary and that students practise guessing the meaning of the underlined word from the way that it is used in the sentence.

Depending on your students' abilities and ages, the exercise can be done in groups or independently as individual student work.



## ACTIVITY 5: UNDERSTANDING VOCABULARY FROM CONTEXT

### DIRECTIONS

- A. Read the sentences below and guess the meaning of the underlined word or phrase in each sentence.
- B. Using your copy of the *The Promise*, find the sentence so that you can understand the context or situation in the story when you see the sentence.
- C. Circle the answer that is the best synonym or definition of the underlined word or phrase.

1. But now, the gong announced the beginning of another day in Auschwitz prison camp.

**Announced** means

- a. brought
- b. ended
- c. began
- d. signalled

2. Her hand automatically reached into her pocket for the tin box.

**Automatically** means

- a. easily
- b. without thinking
- c. with difficulty
- d. quickly

3. Always afraid of what any moment might bring, Rachel inched closer to her older sister in the bunk they shared with four other girls.

**Inched** means

- a. moved a lot.
- b. moved a little
- c. moved quickly
- d. moved slowly

4. Once outside, the girls stepped forward as a prisoner called the roll and checked off their names.

**Called the roll** means

- a. made them march around for hours
  - b. made them clean their barracks
  - c. read the prisoners' names to make sure they were present
  - d. made the prisoners line up to get food
5. The German shepherd by her side snarled—always alert and ready to lunge at anyone.

**To lunge at** means

- a. to help
  - b. to hurt
  - c. to play with
  - d. to attack
6. When the guards weren't watching, she'd (Toby would) stop working and stare defiantly at them.

**Defiantly** means

- a. in a friendly way
  - b. in a kind way
  - c. in an angry way
  - d. in a smart way
7. Pessa thought she was reckless.

**Reckless** means

- a. careful
- b. intelligent
- c. careless
- d. dangerous

8. “Clumsy girl! Get back to work!” the guard yelled.

**Clumsy** means

- a. doing something carefully
- b. doing something carelessly and without thinking
- c. forgetting something
- d. thinking about something

9. “I was so proud of you today,” Toby murmured.

**Murmured** means

- a. spoke in a loud, clear voice
- b. spoke in a quiet voice
- c. spoke in quiet, unclear voice
- d. whispered

10. Hunger and hard labor had taken their toll.

**Taken their toll** is an English idiom that means

- a. made her happy
- b. made her weak
- c. made her unhappy
- d. made her strong

11. Toby worked feverishly all day with no thought of defying the guards.

**Defying** means

- a. obeying orders or instructions
- b. disobeying orders or instructions
- c. making friends with
- d. listening to

12. At home she had treated Rachel like an annoying little pest, always tagging along.

**Tagging along** means

- a. going to places with someone when you are not invited
- b. going places you've been to before
- c. going to places by yourself

13. She begged to stay with Rachel and do a double shift the next day, but the guard ignored her.

**Do a double shift** means

- a. to do her work and Rachel's work as well
- b. to do the same work that she always did
- c. to do less work than she always did
- d. to do no work at all

14. Toby worked feverishly all day with no thought of defying the guards.

**Feverishly** means

- a. as slowly as she could
- b. as quietly as she could
- c. as carefully as she could
- d. as quickly as she could

15. The others could hear the determination in her voice.

**Determination** means

- a. being unsure about what to do
- b. being unhappy about what to do
- c. being sure and strong about what to do
- d. being happy about what to do

16. They did need a miracle.

**Miracle** means

- a. when an event that you expect will happen, does happen
- b. when you work for something good to happen and it does happen
- c. when you get disappointed or unhappy about something that happens
- d. when you believe that a higher power has caused something unexpected and positive to happen

17. Toby darted behind a storage shed, but the German shepherd saw her and strained at its leash.

**Darted** means

- a. moved quickly
- b. moved slowly
- c. fell

18. The guard snatched them (the two coins) and rubbed away the shoe paste until the gold glimmered.

**Snatched** means

- a. took something away from someone in a rude way
- b. took something away from someone in a polite way
- c. held on to something
- d. dropped something to the ground

19. Toby cried out and ran to embrace Rachel.

**Embrace** means

- a. walk away with
- b. hug and hold
- c. run away with
- d. talk with

20. “You risked everything for me,” Rachel said.

**Risked** means

- a. took a dangerous chance
- b. kept them safe
- c. talked to everyone
- d. brought them something

21. “You are my pesky little sister.”

**Pesky** means

- a. co-operative
- b. unhappy
- c. annoying
- d. funny

5. Rachel smiled, “And you are the bossy miracle I needed.”

**Bossy** means

- a. someone who likes to tell others what to do
- b. someone who helps other people
- c. someone who is independent
- d. someone who makes her own decision

23. The guard looked at Rachel, astonished.

**Astonished** means

- a. interested
- b. bored
- c. scared
- d. surprised

24. Shouts of relief filled the air as the guard marched away.

**Relief** means

- a. surprise
- b. anger
- c. happiness after a difficult situation
- d. hurt

25. Toby and Rachel remained devoted sisters and best friends for the next fifty years.

**Devoted** means

- a. always angry with each other
- b. always helpful and loving to each other
- c. always sad together
- d. never talking with each other

## D. WRITING ACTIVITIES



## **ACTIVITY 6: CREATING A GRAPHIC ORGANIZER: CHARACTER PARAGRAPH**

The object of the exercise is to give students practice in creating graphic organizers, which they can then use to write character paragraphs. The graphic organizer used in this exercise is a chart, but you can substitute other organizers such as webs and scaffolding.

## ACTIVITY 6: CREATING A CHARACTER CHART

### DIRECTIONS

1. Organize yourselves into groups of four.
2. Using either chart paper and markers or a computer, you are going to create a character chart for one of the main characters in the story.
3. Answer this question.

**In your opinion, who is the most important character in the story?**

Choose that character. Then, choose three personal qualities that the character has. Finally, write details from the story that demonstrate those qualities.

### FILL OUT THIS CHART

Character's name: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Personal Quality</b>	<b>Details from story</b>

## **ACTIVITY 7: WRITING A CHARACTER PARAGRAPH**

Depending on your students' abilities and experience, you may wish to do an introduction to paragraph writing and organization. Many of these activities are available online.

## ACTIVITY 7: PARAGRAPH WRITING

### DIRECTIONS

Use the chart that you created in Activity 6 to write a paragraph (5-8 sentences) about the most important character in the story. Your paragraph should have these parts.

- a. an interesting title
- b. your first or topic sentence that introduces the topic
- c. 4-6 sentences that support the topic
- d. a concluding sentence that summarizes your topic

Make sure to check or proofread your paragraph to improve spelling, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary.

## ACTIVITY 8: JOURNAL WRITING

Journaling is an excellent way to check your students' understanding of the story and to express their feelings about what the two protagonists are experiencing. Students can do handwritten journals or, if the technology is available, can write online in the class website or blog.

### DIRECTIONS

1. You will need to write five journal entries while we are reading *The Promise*. Choose five questions from the list below.
2. Each journal entry should be 75-100 words. Please check your spelling, grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary after you finish writing your entry.
3. Make sure to date each of your entries and give each entry a title.

### JOURNAL ENTRY QUESTIONS

- a. What is your opinion of the illustrations (drawings) used in the book? Do you like the way that the illustrator (artist) created the drawings? Why or why not? How did the illustrations help you to understand the story better?
- b. What are four adjectives you could use to describe Rachel and Toby's life in the prison camp? Give the reason why you chose each word. Give examples from the book to support your word choice.
- c. In your opinion, was Toby a good big sister to Rachel? Give your opinion and three reasons to support it. Use details and examples from the story to support your opinion.
- d. The prison guard in the story was also one of the prisoners in the camp. Why do you think she became a guard over the other prisoners? Give some reasons. If you were in that prisoner's shoes, would you have become a prison guard or not? Give your opinion and reasons for it.
- e. Do you think that Toby used the gold coins her parents gave her in an intelligent way? Why or why not? Give your opinion and reasons to support it.
- f. What's your opinion of the guard who whipped Toby? Why do you think that she whipped Toby, but then let both sisters go? Give your opinion and reasons to support it.

- g. Look at the last page of the book. What do you think the word *Epilogue* means? In the Epilogue, it says, “Even when distance separated them, their hearts and spirits were always together.” What do you think is meant by these words? What are some ways that you think the two sisters could remain close, even though they lived far away from each other? Please keep in mind that they would not have used the Internet or any other not-yet-invented technology to keep in contact.

## **EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES**

### **ACTIVITY 7: GUEST SPEAKER**

If your city or community has a Holocaust Education Centre or Jewish Community Centre, invite a guest speaker to talk to your students about the Holocaust. The guest speaker might possibly be a Holocaust survivor who could relate their personal experiences of survival. Afterwards, have the students journal about their impressions of the speaker.

### **ACTIVITY 8: VISIT TO HOLOCAUST EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Organize a class visit to your local Holocaust education children's programs. Many synagogues or Jewish Community Centres have resources to help students learn more survival stories from the Holocaust.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Helen Wolfe has been an educator for almost 40 years. She has a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Education and has earned professional certification in Senior English, ESL, Law, Special Education, and a Guidance Specialist.

Helen is experienced in all grade levels from Kindergarten to Grade 12. She has taught in a wide variety of public and private school settings. Since 1988, her focus has been as an adult educator in secondary school credit programs. During that time, she has written, revised, and implemented many courses of study in English, Social Science, and English as a Second Language.

In 2011, she wrote *Terrific Women Teachers*, a non-fiction chapter book for young readers that is part of the Women's Hall of Fame Series from Second Story Press. Her belief is that every student, even those with language and other learning challenges, has the right to read and appreciate well-written children's literature. That philosophy of inclusion motivates her to write teacher's guides to help make quality literature accessible to all learners.

Helen lives in Toronto and continues to work in adult education and ESL.