

A CURRICULUM GUIDE TO

SOMEWHERE
THERE IS
STILL A SUN



A Memoir of the Holocaust

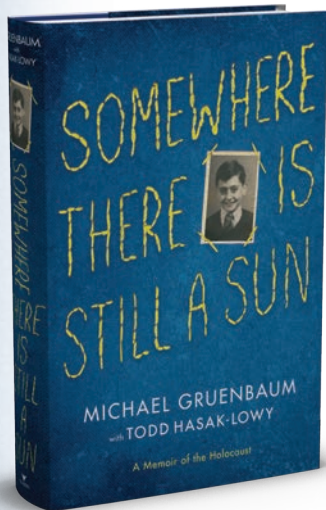
MICHAEL GRUENBAUM
with TODD HASAK-LOWY



ALADDIN

★ “[A] riveting memoir...an inspiring testament to human resilience.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

Summary



HC: 9781442484863
eBook: 9781442484887

In 1939 when the Nazis invaded Prague, Czechoslovakia, Michael (Misha) Gruenbaum’s life changed dramatically. Until that time, he had been living a comfortable life, surrounded by his loving mother, father, and sister. He had the usual experiences of a young boy—going to school, playing sports, and taking walks with his father.

Everything changed when Nazi soldiers—an entire army of them, holding rifles with bayonets and accompanied by tanks and motorcycles—marched down Misha’s family street. As Misha witnessed their arrival from the window of his apartment, he began seeing things he could not fully understand. Why would a couple jump from a balcony? Why were the Nazis making new rules and regulations for Jews, preventing them from going to restaurants, being out after 8:00 p.m., and living anywhere except the old part of the city? These changes were, of course, just the beginning of the Nazi plans to exterminate the Jews.

Somewhere There Is Still a Sun follows Michael Gruenbaum’s experiences during the Holocaust, when his father was taken away, never to return, and he and his mother and sister were taken to Terezin, a transition camp for prisoners on the way to Auschwitz. Incredibly, largely due to the courage and strength of his mother and the guidance and caring of a fellow prisoner, Misha survived.

This true story is narrated from Misha’s perspective and gives readers a sense of the events as they unfolded. Written seventy years after these events, we learn about what Michael Gruenbaum has called “the hardest years of my life.” Not only will readers learn about the Holocaust, they will also learn about the experiences of a single family and their will to survive. This is the story of terrible evil and remarkable acts of caring. It also raises significant questions about social responsibility, the human potential for good and evil, and the ability of even seemingly powerless people to resist injustices.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Main Idea and Key Details

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) suggest that students should be able to do the following:

- (RI.5–9.1) Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences
- (RH.6–9.1) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources

- (RI.5–9.2) Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize a text
- (RH.6–9.2) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide a summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge of opinions
- (RI.5–8.3) Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical text based on specific information in the text
- (RH.6–9.3). Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text

The discussion questions below incorporate these skills by focusing attention on key ideas and supporting evidence.

Introduction

In the introduction, Michael Gruenbaum does several things to help readers understand the world in which he lived when the Nazi army invaded and then took control of his hometown of Prague during the years 1939–1945. Tell how each of the following helps you understand this memoir.

1. The letter written by Michael's mother
 - When was the letter written?
 - To whom?
 - Why?
 - What happened to Michael's family?
 - How does the letter end? Discuss the meaning of the final sentence of the letter.
2. The questions that the book will answer
 - What questions does Michael tell you he will answer?
 - What other questions do you have?
3. The value of property or material possessions
 - What happened to the family's possessions?
 - What did the family learn about the value of these possessions?
4. How this book was finally published
 - How was this book finally written?
 - Why did it take so long?

Part I: Prague, Czechoslovakia

This part of the book deals with Misha's initial confusion about what is happening in Prague during the years 1939 – 1942, up to the time the family was imprisoned in Terezin.

5. Misha's understanding of what is happening in Prague grows over time. At first he doesn't seem to understand what he is seeing and experiencing, yet over time, his understanding grows. Use evidence from the book to explain Misha's growing understanding of the following:
 - The couple who jumped

- The rules imposed on Jews
- Why no one is willing to help the Jews
- Why there are going to be transports

What did he think initially? What did he learn?

6. Misha's parents try to distract and shield him from what is happening. When he asks his mother about the Nazi soldiers, the couple that jumped, and moving to the old part of the city, how does she respond? What does his father tell him about the golem? Why? Were Misha's parents right to respond this way?
7. Throughout the book there are several examples of Misha's confusion about the events happening around him. Here are some quotes:
 - "What kind of army trains you not to notice people falling out of the sky?"
 - "And that couple, did they know something that the rest of us don't?"
 - "Why is no one willing to help us, or any Jews around here, even though if things were the other way around, we'd help them?"
 - "What are these transports about? Why don't they want us in Prague?"
 - "And if we do go there [Terezin], we'll come back here once this is all over, right? When the war is over, I mean." How do these quotes help you understand Misha's thinking? What other evidence is there of his confusion? Find additional quotes.
8. Misha tells us, "All we see is that every day is worse than the one before." What evidence does he give us to support this observation?
9. Tell what happened when Misha assumed the identity of a Christian and went to the movies.
10. As Misha and his family leave the Exhibition Hall in Holesovice and board a train to Terezin, why do you think he tells us that he feels relief to be leaving Prague? What were conditions like in the Exhibition Hall?

Part II: Terezin

This part of the book details Misha's experiences as a prisoner in Terezin, from 1942–1945.

11. When Misha arrives in Terezin, he is taken to the Children's Home where he is introduced to Franta and the boys of Room 7, who call themselves the Nesharim. What does it mean to be part of the Nesharim?
12. In his role as madrich, how does Franta guide the boys? How does he tell them to behave? What does he tell them to do? Why?
13. What do the following quotes show about Misha's understanding of life in Terezin?
 - "Lots of things are fun here."
 - "Where do you think they're going?...I mean, do you think that maybe, maybe it won't be so bad? Because it would be pretty hard for a place to be worse than here, right?"
14. What is the story of Brundibar? Why is it surprising that the children are allowed to put on this opera?
15. Examine the pages of the memory book Misha's friends prepared for him and the translations provided in italics. What do you notice about the words and illustrations? What was the purpose of creating this book? What did Misha's friends want him to know? What questions do you have about the memory book?

16. How does Misha's mother manage to keep the family off the transport? What do her actions show about her character?
17. In the introduction to the book, Michael tells us that he originally tried to write his story by having a bear tell it. He says, "If you want to know why I chose a bear for that story, you'll have to read the book; I promise you'll find the answer there." Now that you have read this part of the book, discuss the answer you found.
18. When a train arrives carrying prisoners, what does Misha notice about their appearance? How do the Danish bakers, Misha, and Kikina respond to these new arrivals?
19. What does Misha realize about the meaning of "up the chimney"? Explain how he connects the appearance of the people who arrived on the train to the pattern of Nazi treatment of the Jews.
20. How do Misha and Marietta respond to the arrival of the Soviet soldiers? What does he mean when he feels "an incredible hunger"?

Epilogue: Prague, Czechoslovakia

In the Epilogue, Michael Gruenbaum describes what happened to him, his mother, and his sister after they were liberated from Terezin.

21. What happened to the family after they left Terezin? Where did they live? What happened to their valuables? How did his mother respond to this?
22. In the letter Franta sends Misha, he writes, "You are far from objective in your evaluation of our time in Terezin." What evidence does he give for this?
23. Franta also writes, "Turn the page, it's okay." What does he mean by this? Is this good advice?
24. When Misha reads Franta's letter, he is standing on the bridge where he used to walk with his father. He writes, "When I finally look up, I'm surprised to find myself standing in the middle of a bridge in the middle of Prague. For a moment I have no idea where to go or what to do." This is a turning point in Misha's life. What does he decide to do? Is it a good decision?

Craft and Structure

The CCSS asks us to pay attention to how a text presents information and uses structure to advance an explanation. The first two activities (#25 and #26) highlight an author's use of an introduction to raise questions that will later be answered in the book and an afterword to raise questions about how a memoir presents the truth about what happened in the past. These activities correspond to standard (RI.4–9.5): Analyze how a particular chapter fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

Activity three (#27), which deals with vocabulary, corresponds to standards (RI.5.4–9.5) and (RH.6–9.4). Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text. Activity four (#28) corresponds to standards (RL.5–9.2): Determine how characters in a story respond to challenges.

25. **Questions Raised by the Introduction.** In the Introduction, after sharing his mother’s letter, Michael Gruenbaum raises questions that he says the book will answer. These questions are listed below in column 1. As you read the book, write down the answers to these questions in column 2, and details about the answer in column 3. After completing the Question-Answer-Details chart, discuss how focusing on these questions helped you understand the book.

QUESTION	ANSWER	DETAILS
<p>What kind of place was my mother talking about?</p>		
<p>What kind of place forces a boy to work ten hours a day instead of going to school?</p>		
<p>What were “transports,” and why was a miracle needed to keep us off them?</p>		
<p>What was that miracle?</p>		

26. **Questions Raised by the Afterword.** In the Afterword, writer Todd Hasak-Lowy raises questions about the truth of this memoir. After reading the Afterword, for each question the author raises about truth, write down his answer and the evidence he gives to support this answer, and then give your thoughts about his answer. Use the chart below to gather your information.

QUESTION	ANSWER	DETAILS
<p>How true is the book you just read?</p>		
<p>Do all these things that the writer came up with make the story less true?</p> <p>Consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making educated guesses • Creating scenes, dialogue, and details • Imagining Michael as the narrator 		
<p>Why did the authors and publisher decide NOT to have Michael tell the story in his own voice today?</p>		

27. **Creating and Discussing a Language Collection.** Use the chart below to collect words and phrases to use when discussing and writing about the book. This will enrich your speaking and writing.

Language Collection Sheet

Fill in the chart below with words and phrases that fit each category.

Words and phrases that describe Misha's mother	Words and phrases that describe sights, sounds, or smells in Prague	Words and phrases that describe sights, sounds, or smells in Terezin
Words and phrases that describe Franta	Words and phrases that describe Misha's feelings	Words and phrases that describe Misha's actions

Use these words and phrases to discuss the following questions:

- How would you describe Misha's mother?
- What was it like in Prague before the Nazis arrived? What was it like after their arrival?
- What was it like for Misha to live in Terezin?
- How would you describe Franta?

28. **Inferring Character Traits.** Authors often show a person’s character traits and values through their words. It is then up to the reader to use this evidence to make inferences, drawing conclusions about that person. Use the chart below to think about Franta. First, list four quotes—Franta’s actual words—that help you understand his values. Second, draw your conclusions based on these quotes. How would you describe him?

Making Inferences about Franta

Write four quotes from Franta that help you understand his character.

Quote #1: _____

Quote #2: _____

Quote #3: _____

Quote #4: _____

Based on these quotes, how would you describe Franta? _____

Integration of Information

The CCSS emphasize integrating visual information such as videos and print material (RH.6–8.7). Viewing a video from the Holocaust Museum is a good place to start.

29. Watching and Discussing a Video from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Watch the video “Surviving Theresienstadt: The Michael Gruenbaum Collection” at USHMM.org/Information/Exhibitions/Curators-Corner/Michael-Gruenbaum-Collection

After watching the video, discuss the new information you learned about the following:

- Why the collection is important
- Why the scrapbook is remarkable
- Why the memory book is remarkable
- Why the postcard Misha’s mother received was so important to her

30. Integrating Information: Additional Accounts of Surviving the Holocaust.

Compare and contrast young people’s experiences during the Holocaust by introducing the following accounts:

- *The Boy on the Wooden Box: How the Impossible Became Possible... on Schindler’s List* by Leon Leyson
- *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps* by Andrea Warren
- *Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story* by Lila Perl and Marion Blumenthal Lazan
- *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust* by Livia Bitton-Jackson
- *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler’s Shadow* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti

31. Read a 2007 interview with Michael Gruenbaum in the *Yale Alumni Magazine* at Archive.YaleAlumniMagazine.com/Issues/2007_11/Where.html to learn more current information.

Writing

The CCSS emphasize writing arguments focused on disciplinary content (WHST.6–8.1) and writing informative/explanatory texts, including narrative of historical events (W.5.2) (WHST.6–8.2). The activities below reflect these standards.

32. Writing an Argument.

Does this memoir present the truth about Michael Gruenbaum’s experience during the Holocaust? Was Todd Hasak-Lowy’s way of writing this book—filling in the gaps in Michael’s memory, making educated guesses, creating dialogue—an effective way of helping you understand what happened? In the Afterword of the book, Hasak-Lowy states that he wanted to help readers experience Michael’s story as it was happening to him. Hasak-Lowy wrote, “I wanted to give the reader the experience of going through these events with Michael as Michael goes through them himself.” Was he successful in providing a true picture? Tell whether you think that memoir, a form of writing that allows a writer to use his imagination to recreate a time and place, is an effective way of presenting historical truth?

