

Milkweed

by Jerry Spinelli

Stopthief, later called Misha, lives on the streets of Warsaw, stealing in order to survive. He believes in bread, mothers, and angels and wants someday to be a Jackboot like those he sees in the parades, until he finds out what they really are and how they are treating the Jews.

THEMES

history, Holocaust, problem-solving, friendship, responsibility, courage

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:

artillery, runt, nickered, bombardment, boulevard, hoisted, spangled, veered, stubble, curfew, milled, grappled, skimming, lumbering, burly, gilded, goatee, mingled, wrangled, ghetto, gruff, nimble, ruffraff, trek, roused, withering, carcasses, bedlam, stampeding, muzzle, wavered, sniveling, bedraggled, scrawny, unfurled, ramrod, chiseled, stun, goaded, instinct, winch, stench, taunting, massive, skittered, menorah, deportation, multitudes, spiel, artifact

B. Before beginning the story, discuss the following questions with the class:

1. What have you heard about the treatment of the Jews during World War II? Why do you think the Nazis treated them this way?
2. What is a ghetto? Why do such things as ghettos exist?
3. Who are some heroes you have known or heard about? What makes a person a hero? Are heroes always famous?
4. Why do some people bully weaker people when they get the chance?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with Chapters 1 - 15: What is the first memory the boy has? What does the red-haired man tell him? What does the boy call himself? Why do the boys in the stable say people hate Jews? What happens as they ride the streetcar? How does the boy feel when he sees the Jackboots parading? What does he see the man with a beard doing? What story does Uri make up about the boy's former life? How does life change after the night the shop windows are broken? What does Misha see in the cemetery? What does he do that makes Uri mad? How does the merry-go-round make Misha feel? How does he feel when the horses on it are cut down for firewood?
2. Advance to Chapters 16 - 30: Why are the Nazis building a wall around the ghetto? What happens when the Jackboots come to the stable? What does Misha consider to be an "unlucky orphan"? How does Misha get out at night? What does he bring back? What are

"Flops"? How do the people react to the parade for Himmler? Why doesn't Misha believe he has seen Himmler? Why do all the boys fear Buffo? What happens when Buffo catches Misha? Why does Doctor Korczah say "Find the cow"? What is Janina doing that puts her in danger? Where does Misha see Uri?

3. Complete the story with Chapters 31 - 45: Describe Mrs. Milgrom's funeral. What do they find when they get home? What is life like now? Why does Uri come to see Misha? How does Janina react when she sees the trains? Where does she think they are going? What have the Jews been told? How do Misha and Janina get back into the ghetto? What do they find? What do the Jackboots do to Janina? Where does Misha tell the boy he is going? How does he spend his days after he runs away from the farm? What does he realize Uri has done for him?

B. For Discussion:

1. How do angels serve as a symbol in the story? How do they relate to milkweed?
2. What different kinds of parades does Misha see? How does he feel about the Jackboots' parades? What other parades does he notice? How are they different?
3. Discuss the title. Why do you think the author called the book *Milkweed*?
4. How do mirrors and other reflections serve as symbols in the story? Where does Misha see his own reflection?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

A. Language Arts:

1. Have students notice the similes in the story, like saying the sirens are "screaming like babies," the bombed out areas looking "like broken teeth," or calling the tanks, "colossal gray, long-snouted beetles." How do these similes add to the picture being created? Students might try making up similes of their own.

2. Have students write a made-up history for themselves with specific details the way Uri does for Misha.
3. Have students learn what the word “ghetto” means and where it comes from. Was the Warsaw ghetto the first one? Where else are there ghettos?
4. Have students read the poem “Mending Wall” by Robert Frost and discuss what he means when he says, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Then have students discuss how this might apply to the building of the wall in Warsaw. What other walls can they think of?

B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that is appropriate to some of the scenes. Have students find music that might resemble a busy, noisy city, such as by George Gershwin or Philip Glass. For later scenes they might use Richard Rodgers’ *Victory at Sea*, Nazi or German singing or the singing of children for the orphans.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. Have them cover the board with gray, include the Nazi swastika, pictures of Nazis in their uniforms, bombed out cities, broken glass, mirrors, pictures from the Holocaust and merry-go-round horses. Have them find milkweed pods and pictures of angels to place at the top of the board.
3. Show students the film *Schindler’s List* to compare with *Milkweed*. What makes this film especially moving?

C. Social Studies:

1. Have students learn about the Warsaw ghetto. Why did the Nazis treat the Jews in Poland so terribly? What happened when they were sent to the concentration camps? Why wasn’t the rest of the world able to stop this?
2. Have students learn about Hitler, Himmler, and other high-ranking Nazis. What happened to them after the war?
3. Have students learn more about the roots of prejudice, especially the long-standing prejudice against the Jews in Europe or racial prejudice against African Americans. How can we work to overcome our own prejudices?
4. Have students learn more about the night when all the shop windows were shattered. In what ways does this symbolize the beginning of the Holocaust?

5. Have students learn about Jewish holidays, especially Hanukkah. What does this holiday celebrate? Why is it so important to Jews?

D. Science and Math:

1. Have students learn about tanks. Why are they able to go places where other vehicles can’t? How do they move? What makes them vulnerable?
2. Uri explains that electricity runs the merry-go-round horses. Have students find out how electricity works. Where does it come from? How does it get into our homes and offices? What causes it to fail, especially during storms?
3. Uri tells Misha that a boy they see on the street might have died from typhus. Have students find out more about this terrible disease. Why, during this time in these conditions, would Uri say typhus was “very popular”?
4. Have students learn about lice. Why is this a serious problem? How do monkeys and other animals deal with them? How do we get rid of lice?
5. Have students learn about milkweed. What are the pods? What is contained in the silk?

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