

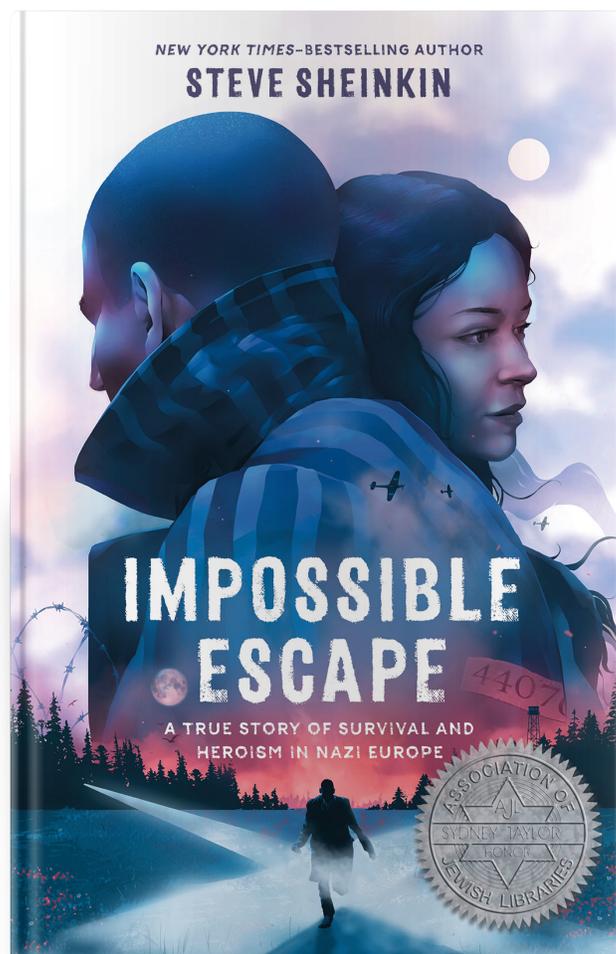
A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR
IMPOSSIBLE ESCAPE
A True Story of Survival and Heroism in Nazi Europe
by Steve Sheinkin

ABOUT THE BOOK

It is 1944. A teenager named Rudolf (Rudi) Vrba has made up his mind. After barely surviving nearly two years in the Auschwitz concentration camp in German-occupied Poland, he knows he must escape. Even if death is more likely.

Rudi has learned the terrible secret hidden behind the heavily guarded fences of concentration camps across occupied Europe—each day that passes means more lives are lost.

This is the true story of one of the great heroes of World War II, and how his death-defying escape helped save more than a hundred thousand lives.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Sheinkin is the acclaimed author of fast-paced, cinematic nonfiction histories, including *Fallout*, *Undeclared*, *Born to Fly*, *The Port Chicago 50*, and *Bomb*. His accolades include a Newbery Honor, three Boston Globe–Horn Book Awards, a Sibert Medal and Honor, and three National Book Award finalist honors. He lives in Saratoga Springs, New York, with his wife and two children.



PREPARING YOURSELF AS AN EDUCATOR

Impossible Escape introduces readers to a compelling and unexpected account of survival during the Holocaust. Every Holocaust survivor's story is unique. To understand how unlikely Rudi's survival was, the experiences of other prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the importance of what would become known as *The Auschwitz Report*, it is important to place this story within the larger scope of the Holocaust and to understand how Rudi's experience in Slovakia was different from that of Jewish people in other parts of occupied Europe. Becoming familiar with the geography of central Europe and the timeline and trajectory of the Holocaust in Slovakia will help students to fully understand and appreciate the bravery, creativity, determination, resilience, and compassion that contributed to Rudi's survival.

The details of Rudi's experience, and the historical events surrounding them, are difficult, and students may have strong emotional responses. As educators, it is critical to ensure that we bring students "safely in and safely out" of their learning. Through his story of survival and resistance, Rudi presents an example of light in the darkness of the Holocaust. His story can help to inspire students at a difficult time. Be sure to allow time and opportunity for students to debrief and reflect independently, in small groups, and/or as a class. For additional suggestions on bringing students "safely in and safely out" of Holocaust learning, see [Echoes and Reflections](#) linked below.

THE HOLOCAUST IN SLOVAKIA

Czechoslovakia, a country formed from parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire following World War I, had a complicated history during World War II and the Holocaust. In the months leading up to the outbreak of World War II, portions of the country were taken over by Germany, Hungary, and Poland, and Slovakia became an independent state with a fascist, one-party government heavily dependent on Nazi Germany. Slovakia became an ally of the Axis powers, participated in the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, and declared war on the United States and Great Britain that December.

In March 1942, Slovakia agreed to allow Germany to deport Slovak Jews, the first country to agree to deport its citizens under the framework of the "Final Solution." Over the next several months, approximately 70 percent of Slovak Jews (fifty-seven thousand people) were interned in concentration camps and forced-labor camps. Most of them were taken to the border and turned over to German authorities, and nearly all were murdered at the Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Sobibor killing centers. By the end of World War II, approximately sixty thousand Slovak Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

RUDOLF VRBA TIMELINE

SEPTEMBER 11, 1924:

Walter Rosenberg (later Rudolf “Rudi” Vrba) born, Topolcany, Czechoslovakia

SPRING 1942:

Rudi takes a taxi to the Hungarian border, the first leg in an attempt to escape to England

- He is caught and sent to Novaky labor camp; he tries to escape but is unsuccessful

JUNE 14, 1942:

Rudi is deported to Majdanek forced-labor camp

- Two weeks later, he is selected for a work detail “on a farm” and is transferred to Auschwitz I

DECEMBER 1942–

JANUARY 1943:

Rudi is transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau

- He becomes a registrar for the men’s camp; memorizes protocols for processing newly arrived prisoners and their belongings

APRIL 7, 1944:

Rudi and Fred (Alfred Wetzler) put their escape plan into motion

THE AUSCHWITZ REPORT

Following their escape from Auschwitz in late April 1944, Rudolph and Alfred Wetzler cowrote a report that described the geography of the camp, its administration and functioning, the conditions and daily lives of the prisoners, and details on the identities of the prisoners, including numbers, place of origin, categories prisoners were placed into by Nazi officials, and who was selected for work or for immediate death. This account provided eyewitness details not previously known outside the camp.

Written in Slovak, the report was translated into German and distributed among diplomats in western Europe. Translated excerpts of the report began to appear in American and British newspapers in June 1944 and led to international pressure, including from U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to halt deportations to Auschwitz. Deportations from Hungary were stopped in July but resumed in October. Auschwitz was finally liberated by the Soviet Army on January 27, 1945.

VOCABULARY

CONCENTRATION CAMP: A place where large numbers of people, especially political prisoners or members of persecuted minorities, are deliberately imprisoned in a relatively small area with inadequate facilities, sometimes to provide forced labor or to await mass execution. Nazi concentration camps served a variety of functions and were called by different names: labor camps (*Arbeitslager*), transit camps (*Durchgangslager*), prisoner-of-war camps (*Kriegsgefangenenlager*), concentration camps (*Konzentrationslager*, KZ), and death camps or killing centers, often referred to in Nazi parlance as extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*). The Nazis established about 42,500 camps and ghettos between 1933 and 1945 throughout occupied Europe and the Soviet Union.

“FINAL SOLUTION”: The Nazi phrase for the murder of every Jewish person in Europe. Other solutions to “the Jewish problem” had been debated but World War II provided the cover for Germany to carry out the systematic annihilation of European Jews.

GAS CHAMBERS: Sealed-off rooms where poisonous gas (either the insecticide Zyklon B or carbon monoxide) is used to murder all those inside. First used against German citizens with mental and physical disabilities in a Nazi program known as T4, gas chambers were the preferred method of killing Jews from 1942 onward. Gas chambers were used on a large scale at all Nazi killing centers as well as at Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau, which functioned as both a killing center and a concentration camp.

KAPOS: Jewish concentration camp prisoners who were given authority over and responsibility for other prisoners by the Nazis. In their role, they were forced to participate in the persecution of their fellow prisoners, but some found opportunities to aid others as well.

JEWS: Followers of the Jewish faith. Jews originated as a separate ethnic and religious group around the second millennium BCE, living in the land of Israel. The Jewish diaspora sent many Jews to Europe over centuries. Ashkenazi Jews are a Jewish diaspora population that merged in the Holy Roman Empire around the end of the first millennium. Many Ashkenazi Jews in central and eastern Europe largely maintained their Orthodox way of life in shtetls, which were small, mainly Jewish villages. Yiddish, a mix of Hebrew and Germanic languages, was the language widely spoken by Jews of central and eastern Europe. Many Jewish families did not think of themselves as that different from their Christian neighbors, assimilating into their country’s culture and society.

KILLING CENTER: The Nazis established killing centers for efficient mass murder. Unlike concentration camps, which served primarily as detention and labor centers, killing centers (also referred to as “extermination camps” or “death camps”) were almost exclusively “death factories,” with little to no purpose aside from the mass murder of human beings. German SS and police murdered nearly 2,700,000 Jews in the killing centers, primarily by asphyxiation with poison gas or by shooting.

NAZI: A member of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party. The Nazi Party was formed in 1920. They promised a strong central government, increased *Lebensraum* (“living space”) for Germanic peoples, formation of a national community based on race, and racial cleansing via the active suppression of Jews, who would be stripped of their citizenship and civil rights. The Nazis proposed national and cultural renewal based upon a mythic vision of Germany’s past. The party, especially its paramilitary organization Sturmabteilung (also known as the SA, Storm Detachment, or Brownshirts), used physical violence to advance their political position, disrupting the meetings of rival organizations and attacking their members (as well as Jewish people) on the streets. Nazification of Germany occurred after Adolf Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933.

SONDERKOMMANDO: Groups of Jewish prisoners assigned various roles in the concentration camp system related to the gas chambers and crematoria, particularly the disposal of corpses.

RESOURCES FOR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

GUIDANCE FOR BRINGING STUDENTS “SAFELY IN AND SAFELY OUT” OF HOLOCAUST LEARNING

<https://echoesandreflections.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Guidance-for-Bringing-Students-Safely-in-and-Safely-out-of-Holocaust-Learning.pdf>

THE HOLOCAUST IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/czechoslovakia>

THE MUNICH AGREEMENT

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1933-1938/munich-agreement>

THE HOLOCAUST IN SLOVAKIA

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-holocaust-in-slovakia>

THE “FINAL SOLUTION

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/wannsee-conference-and-the-final-solution>

MAJDANEK LABOR CAMP

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lublin-majdanek-key-dates>

AUSCHWITZ

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz>

WAR REFUGEE BOARD

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/war-refugee-board>

FDR LIBRARY: THE VRBA-WETZLER REPORT AND THE AUSCHWITZ PROTOCOLS

<https://www.fdrlibrary.org/vrba-wetzler-report>

SURVIVOR TESTIMONIES

Jana Gottschall, on life in interwar Czechoslovakia: <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/1089?from=search&seg=3>, (see particularly 2:00–4:06)

Eva Gross, a Jewish survivor from Czechoslovakia, discussing Rudolf Vrba (18:30–19:30): <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/10030?from=search&seg=108>

Mike Vogel, a Slovakian Jew from the same hometown as Rudolf Vrba, describing arrival at Auschwitz: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/oral-history/miso-michael-vogel-describes-arrival-at-auschwitz>

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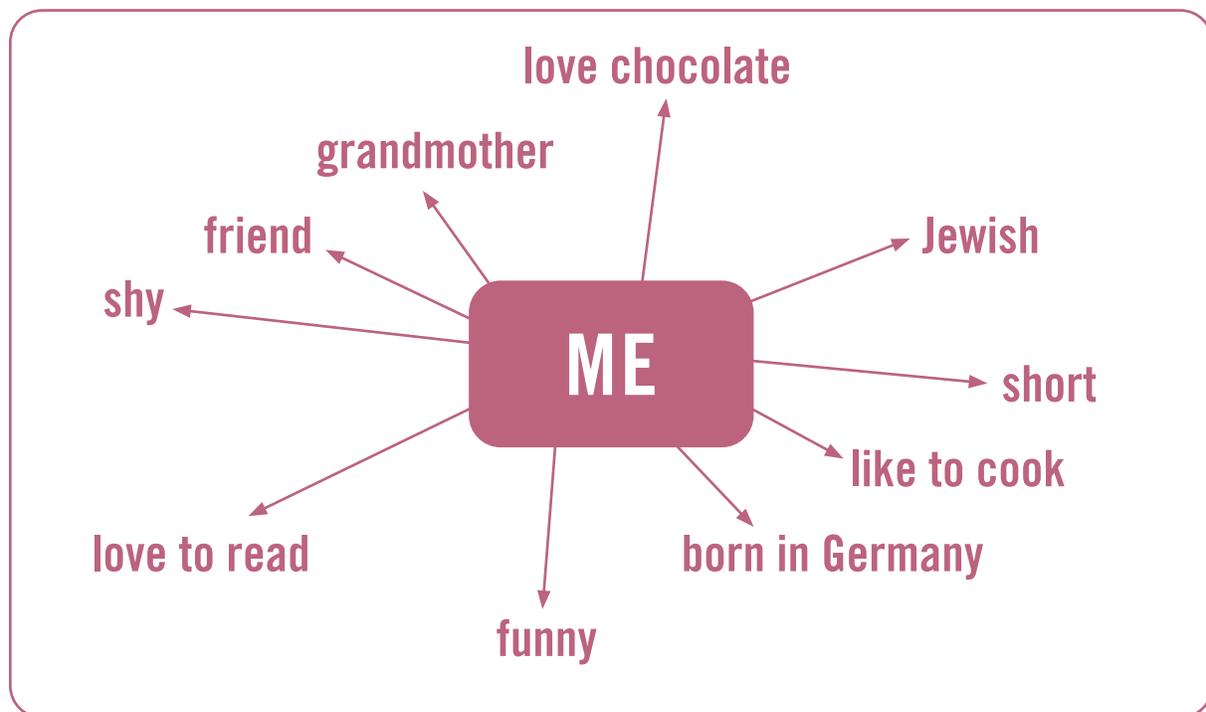
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ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Identity

Who am I? Who was Rudi? Who was Fred? Who was Gerta?

Think about your identity. Create an identity chart for yourself. Use words or phrases that describe the way you see yourself. Most of us define ourselves using categories that are important to our culture: age, gender, physical characteristics. Also think about religion, class, neighborhood, school, and nation.



Create an identity chart for Rudi. What phrases might Rudi use to describe himself? What words would others use to define him? What did he do that helps you to describe his identity? Create an identity chart for Fred and answer the same questions, and then create one for Gerta.

Pre-Reading Discussion Questions

1. What is prejudice? What do you think leads some people to treat others differently based on their identity?
 2. Think about a time when you were treated unfairly, or you saw someone else being treated unfairly. How did you respond? What did you do (or could you have done) to address the situation?
 3. The anthropologist Jane Goodall said, “What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.” What do you think she meant by this? Do you agree that one person’s actions can make a difference? Why or why not?
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Discussion Questions

1. During World War II and the Holocaust, Rudi tried to escape from the Nazis multiple times. What motivated him to try? What risks did he take? How might his past attempts have influenced his decision to try to escape from Auschwitz? Why was that attempt successful when his others were not?
2. In chapter 34, as Rudi and Fred make their way across German-occupied Poland to the Slovak border, they seek help from an elderly Polish woman. What risks did they take by knocking on her door? What risks did the woman take by helping them? Why do you think she chose to help two strangers?
3. Later in chapter 34, Gerta is recruited to join a small underground resistance network. “It would have been much safer for Gerta to say no, to lay low until the end of the war. Instead, she jumped at the chance.” What risks was Gerta taking by joining the resistance? Why do you think she made this choice?
4. In Germany and in the countries they occupied, the Nazis stripped Jewish people of their citizenship as well as their rights; to the Nazis, they were all simply “Jews.” Rudi, however, refers to his fellow prisoners by their prewar nationality: Slovaks, Poles, Germans, etc. Why do you think these identities were important to him? What does this tell us about how Rudi saw his fellow prisoners versus how the Nazis saw them? Why is this important?
5. It is often said that no one survived the Holocaust without luck, and no one survived the Holocaust without help. Give examples of luck helping Rudi survive. Who helped Rudi, and how? Who did Rudi help to survive, and how?
6. Throughout the book, Rudi, Fred, Gerta, and others resist the Nazis. What form does their resistance take? (Escaping or attempting to escape from the camps; joining the underground; providing false identity documents; telling the world of Nazi atrocities; etc.) Which form of resistance do you think was the most effective? How and why?
7. Do you think Rudi’s actions made a difference? Why or why not?

Extension Activities

1. Chapter 1 begins, “Rudi *would* find a way to fight Adolph Hitler.” Discuss the ways in which Rudi fought Hitler. Then, individually or in small groups, research another person who has fought back against injustice without using violence. What injustice were they fighting against? How did they fight back? What impact did they have? Possible individuals to research include:
 - Malala Yousafzai, fighting for education for women and girls
 - Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, fighting for a cleaner environment
 - Ryan Hreljac, fighting for access to clean water
 - Or select an individual of your choosing to research.
 - Dion Dawson, fighting for access to healthy foods
2. The Epilogue ends, “You read the story. You know what to do.” Now that you’ve read Rudi’s story, how will you continue his legacy? What injustice will you fight against? Working in pairs or small groups, discuss challenges people face in your school, neighborhood, or community. How might you help to fix one of those problems or right one of those wrongs? Working together, develop an action plan to address the challenge you’ve selected.

IN DEVELOPING YOUR ACTION PLAN, CONSIDER:

- The topic/issue/injustice your group chooses to address
- Who in your school community your action plan will reach or educate (students, teachers, staff, parents and families, etc.)
- What outcome your group hopes to achieve
- What steps you will take to accomplish this
- What resources you will need (support from teachers, participation of other students, supplies, etc.)
- How much time your group will devote to the project, including planning, advertising/spreading the word, and taking action
- How your group will determine if your project is successful
- Then follow through and carry out your action plan, and report your results back to the class.

This teaching guide was written by Amanda Friedeman of the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center. To learn more about the museum’s resources for students and educators, visit <https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/students-educators/>.