

SCHOLASTIC  
FOCUS

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

Grades 5–8

HARDCOVER

978-1-338-88051-9

\$18.99

EBOOK

978-1-338-88054-0

\$18.99

## THE GIRL WHO FOUGHT BACK

Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

She and her  
friends dared to  
defy the Nazis.

TRUE  
STORIES  
IN  
FOCUS

JOSHUA M. GREENE

SCHOLASTIC

# A LETTER TO EDUCATORS

Vladka Meed was determined to ensure that those who perished in the Holocaust would not be viewed as faceless victims but as people who lived lives worth remembering. The stories she told about the lives and deaths of people she knew were always precise and emotionally gripping.

This strong woman, all five feet of her, who had so often endangered her own life as a courier in the Warsaw ghetto, still wept when she recounted her inability to save her own family. Perhaps it was their loss—and the loss of so many others—that prompted her to reframe the story of the Holocaust from one of helplessness to one of the dignity of lives led under unendurable conditions. She was the first person I ever heard speak about “spiritual resistance”: the day-to-day actions of ordinary people who strove to maintain their dignity and humanity.

Her stories included a mother who gave her meager portion of bread to a rabbi so that her son could have a Bar Mitzvah. They included parents who surrendered their children, hoping someone would protect them until the end of the war. They included young people who held concerts and dramatic readings in the ghetto to preserve their Yiddish culture. To hear her tell these stories was to be transported back to that place and time.

It would have been enough to share these stories with her own children and grandchildren, but Vladka was determined that others should hear and know. Her book, *On Both Sides of the Wall*, was published in 1948, perhaps one of the first memoirs of the ghetto to reach a mass audience. She spoke all over the country, never softening the tales or her reactions to telling them.

## **A LETTER TO EDUCATORS (cont.)**

But one voice could only reach so many ears. Her project of educating teachers about the Holocaust and the spiritual resistance of the Jews was her greatest achievement. Nearly 1,100 teachers, from every state in the nation, attended the Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Teachers Program, which emphasized the life of the Jews before the war and the culture that was lost. These teachers, in turn, have influenced thousands of students, challenging the accepted view of what makes someone a hero, a particularly difficult task in our violent culture. They called Vladka their personal hero, larger than life, someone who had touched them and changed their teaching and their lives forever. They gave her a standing ovation each time she spoke, knowing they were in the presence of someone very special. She always said she was not a teacher, but to those of us who knew her, she was, in the most basic way, the greatest teacher any of us had ever encountered.

As a participant in this program, I came away with a newfound respect for survivors. As the director of this program hand-picked by Vladka to be her successor, I shouldered the responsibility of conveying her message to retell and to emphasize the heroism of daily life.

**Elaine Culbertson, Director  
Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Teachers' Program**

# ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS

Interspersed within Vladka's story are informational topics relating the historical events of the Holocaust. These include World War II (pg. 3), Nazi Racism (pg. 14), the Warsaw Ghetto (pg. 20), Deportations (pg. 30), The Camps (pg. 41), Treblinka (pg. 52), Jewish Children (pg. 77), and the Polish Uprising (pg. 119).

Select one or two topics that interest you and use the recommended websites to gather research. Organize your research into an informative piece such as a podcast, power point, or social media post to present to your classmates.

You may also choose to enter the Chapman University Annual Holocaust Art & Writing Contest, submitting a poem, artwork or short film based upon the recorded testimony of Vladka Meed. See guidelines at <https://www.chapman.edu/research/institutes-and-centers/holocaust-education/holocaust-art-and-writing-contest/index.aspx>

## **World War II pg. 3**

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/world-war-ii-in-europe>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/series/world-war-ii>

## **Nazi Racism pg. 14-15**

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-racism-an-overview>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/racism-in-depth>

# ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS (cont.)

**The Warsaw Ghetto pg. 20-21**

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw?series=6>

**Deportations pg. 30-31**

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

**The Camps pg. 41-42**

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps>

**Treblinka pg. 52-53**

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

**Jewish Children during the Holocaust**

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/children-during-the-holocaust>

<https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/museum-exhibitions/remember-the-children-daniels-story>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/life-in-shadows-hidden-children-and-the-holocaust>

**Polish Uprising pg. 119**

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-warsaw-polish-uprising>

<https://newspapers.ushmm.org/events/warsaw-ghetto-jews-revolt>

# THEMES, VOCABULARY AND DISCUSSION

Teachers should preview all materials and consider what is age-appropriate for their students. By way of introduction, teachers may wish to incorporate one of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Teaching Materials on the Holocaust: Foundational Holocaust lesson plans. See <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/teaching-materials/holocaust>

## *Chapter 1: In Disguise*

**Themes and vocabulary:** Nazi Party, antisemitism.

**Discussion questions:** Why would Vladka's non-Jewish friends reject her so quickly after the Nazis occupied Poland? How was the invented description of a Jew's physical appearance integral to Nazi dehumanization of Jewish people?

## *Chapters 2-4: The Ghetto, Taken Away, and A Family Lost*

**Themes and vocabulary:** Aryan, curfew, deportations.

**Discussion questions:** How does the world you live in differ from the world Vladka knew in Nazi-occupied Warsaw? What things continue to remain the same? What do you do when you see discrimination, antisemitism, or racism in the world around you?

## *Chapters 5-7: In the Factory, A Casual Killing, and Escape from Treblinka*

**Themes and vocabulary:** Holocaust, concentration camps, hunger.

**Discussion questions:** Some people, called "deniers" or "revisionists," argue that the Holocaust did not happen or else was not as bad as people say. Why do you think they do that?

## *Chapters 8-10: A Call to Arms, Escape from the Ghetto, and In Disguise Again*

**Themes and vocabulary:** resistance, underground.

**Discussion questions:** What qualities and talents did Vladka possess that allowed her to operate as a resistance fighter? In what ways were her gender and physical appearance assets, particularly when working undercover?

# THEMES, VOCABULARY AND DISCUSSION (cont.)

## *Chapters 11-13: A Million Dollars in a Shoebox, Sad Eyes, and Rise Up!*

**Themes and vocabulary:** fear, chance versus initiative.

**Discussion questions:** Why would Vladka say she felt more at home inside the ghetto than outside in the city of Warsaw, where there was more food?

## *Chapters 14-16: Dynamite, The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and The End*

**Themes and vocabulary:** the power of one person to make a difference, the definition of selfless action.

**Discussion questions:** Why did Vladka react as she did to being outside the ghetto when the uprising occurred? What identity do you think she had for herself after the world and the people she had grown up with were destroyed?

## *Chapters 17-19: Arrested, Someone Who Cares, and Rise Up, Poland!*

**Themes and vocabulary:** brutality, defining ethical in extreme conditions.

**Discussion questions:** Why were the Nazis so determined to murder every Jew? Why do you think they targeted children?

## *Chapters 20-22: Wasteland, America, and Teaching Teachers*

**Themes and vocabulary:** displacement, immigration.

**Discussion questions:** Why was keeping memory of the Holocaust alive so important to Vladka?

# THE GIRL WHO FOUGHT BACK

JOSHUA M. GREENE



**Joshua M. Greene** is the author of more than twenty books for young and middle-grade readers. His work has received multiple *Publishers Weekly* Starred Reviews, Parents Choice Awards, ALA Notable Awards, *Parenting Magazine's* Best of the Year, the International Reading Association Award, and the President's Award from the Coalition for Quality Children's Media. He is a Laurel Vlock Fellow at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Learn more at: [joshuamgreene.info](http://joshuamgreene.info)

This teacher's guide was prepared by former students of Vladka Meed, including Elaine Culbertson, Rosemary Conroy, Abbie R. Laskey, Margaret Lincoln, Meryl Menashe, and Donna Rosenblum, with help from Joshua M. Greene. For more information about the Scholastic Focus titles and for free materials including author videos, reading guides, and more, please visit <https://www.scholastic.com/site/scholastic-focus.html>

## Quotes from Vladka Meed

"The biggest danger is indifference to what happens to people around you."

"Know that in the most difficult moments, when death is ever-present, we try to maintain human dignity."

"I would like also to say to people not to take for granted – not freedom, not justice. You have to stand up for it. You have to defend this. To be your brother's keeper. To remember that the other needs, too, your help. Not to be passive when things are going on around you. Not to be indifferent. To be a participant in life, and to defend the rights of humanity."