

# A Teacher's Guide to THE LIBRARIAN OF AUSCHWITZ

FOR  
USE WITH  
COMMON CORE  
STATE  
STANDARDS



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Based on the experience of real-life Auschwitz prisoner Dita Kraus, this is the incredible story of a girl who risked her life to keep the magic of books alive during the Holocaust.

Fourteen-year-old Dita is one of the many imprisoned by the Nazis at Auschwitz. Taken, along with her mother and father, from the Terezín ghetto in Prague, Dita is adjusting to the constant terror that is life in the camp. When Jewish leader Fredy Hirsch asks Dita to take charge of the eight precious volumes the prisoners have managed to sneak past the guards, she agrees. And so Dita becomes the librarian of Auschwitz. Out of one of the darkest chapters of human history comes this extraordinary story of courage and hope.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ANTONIO ITURBE** is a novelist and journalist. He interviewed Dita Kraus, the real-life librarian of Auschwitz, for this story.



## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

**LILIT THWAITES** is a literary translator and an Honorary Fellow in Spanish at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. She specializes in the society, cultures, and literature of contemporary Spain, and in particular, the work of women writers.

This guide is aligned with Common Core Standards for seventh grade but can be applied to multiple grade levels. To attain specific Common Core grade level standard for their classrooms and students, teachers are encouraged to adapt the activities listed in this guide to their classes' needs. You know your kids best!

# PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

◀ Hold a discussion in which students share their knowledge about the Holocaust and specifically Nazi concentration camps. The discussion should include the sources of their information, such as classes, books, television/movies, relatives, their synagogue, and so on. After the discussion, have students do brief research to see how accurate their beliefs are and report back to the class on what they found.

◀ What would it be like to have virtually no access to education, books, and other reading materials or information, such as newspapers and the internet? Have students discuss the impact on their lives if that happened to them from the time they were nine until they turned sixteen. How would it affect those years? What would it mean about their future?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss chapter one and why the author chose to open the book with these scenes. What does the chapter convey about Auschwitz, Block 31, Fredy Hirsch, Dita's personality, and Dita's past? How do the different scenes in this chapter foreshadow important themes and later developments in the book?

2. "You have to have a childhood to be a child!" Dita thinks at one point. (p. 41) What was Dita's life like before the Nazis? What aspects of a typical childhood did she and other Jewish children lose due to the war and the concentration camps? Why was it so important to Fredy "to convey a certain sense of normalcy" to the children of Block 31? (p. 112)

3. Analyze the power of books in Dita's life before the war and in the concentration camps. Discuss specific books as well as the role of books for her in general. What were the "living books" in the camp, and how did they affect her and others in Block 31?

4. Describe Fredy Hirsch—who, like Dita, was a real person—and why he is so important to the people around him, including Dita. What is his past? What is the secret that Dita learns about him? How does she react at first to the secret and why does she change her viewpoint? Talk about his death and why the way he dies matters so much to Dita.

5. "Brave people are the ones who can overcome their own fear," Fredy tells Dita. (p. 25) He also tells her that the strongest athlete isn't the fastest one but rather "the one who gets up again every time he falls." (p. 46) Talk about his words and about the courage shown in the story by Dita, Fredy, and others.

6. Describe Professor Morgenstern and his strange actions. What does Dita think of him when she first knows him? What causes her opinion to change, and what is her new opinion? What character in one of the library books does he resemble, and how? Talk about their final encounter and what it means to Dita.

7. Describe some of the people who are important to Dita besides Fredy and the professor. How did they help her survive physically and emotionally? Give specific examples. How did her relationship with each of them change over the course of the story?

8. Why did the Nazis in charge of Auschwitz want the family camp to exist, and why did they end it? Why did they let Fredy create a special place for the children in Block 31? What usually happened to children at Auschwitz? Describe Block 31, including its official activities and its secret ones.

9. Who is Dr. Mengele? What do the prisoners think about him? What does he do in his lab? Why does Dita think he's watching her? How is he used in the novel to symbolize the Nazi regime? Discuss what could cause someone to be so evil and how conditions could exist that encourage such evil.

10. The prisoners discover over the years “that horror is bottomless.” (p. 367) How does the author convey the horrors of the concentration camps? How does the book’s pacing reflect Dita’s own experience of the horrors? Point to details and incidents that help readers understand what it was like to be a prisoner in such brutal conditions.
11. Consider some of the literary elements of the novel. Why do you think the author uses a third-person, present-tense narrative voice? Find examples of foreshadowing in the story, such as hints about Fredy’s secret, and discuss their effect on the reader. Discuss, too, the use of flashbacks about Dita and other characters, and the purpose they serve.
12. Professor Morgenstern says to Dita, “Our hatred is a victory for them.” (p. 184) Describe the circumstances in which he says it. What does he mean by it? Do you agree? Why or why not? How do Dita and those she loves keep from giving into hatred? Discuss examples of love and kindness in the story.

## COMMON CORE ACTIVITIES

← Tell students they must choose eight books for children who will be imprisoned for years. The books could be for young children, readers their own age, or a mix of ages. The choices should include informational books as well as fiction. Have students make a poster of their choices with an introductory paragraph and short paragraphs explaining each choice. Display the posters and some of the books in the classroom.

**CCSS.RL.7.1** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.W.7.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

← Dita lives in three concentration camps: Terezín or Theresienstadt; Auschwitz–Birkenau; and Bergen-Belsen. Have students use print and internet resources to research one of these concentration camps further or one of the many others the Nazis established. Students should share their findings in an oral report. Follow up with a discussion about the different types of camps, such as forced labor, prisoner of war, transit, and extermination camps or death camps.

**CCSS.W.7.7** Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

**CCSS.SL.7.1** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

← Museums have carefully preserved memories of Holocaust survivors. Have students watch this short video of Dita Kraus ([www.yadvashem.org/remembrance/archive/2014/torchlighters/kraus](http://www.yadvashem.org/remembrance/archive/2014/torchlighters/kraus)) and discuss it in small groups. Then each student should listen to at least one podcast at the United States Holocaust Museum’s website ([www.ushmm.org/information/visit-the-museum/programs-activities/first-person-program/first-person-podcast](http://www.ushmm.org/information/visit-the-museum/programs-activities/first-person-program/first-person-podcast)) and report back to the small group about it. Students should discuss the survivors’ narratives and the impact of seeing and hearing survivors speak of their experiences.

**CCSS.SL.7.1** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

**CCSS.SL.7.2** Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study.

← Throughout history, people have wielded power by controlling access to education, books, and other forms of reading. For example, it was illegal to teach American slaves to read. Have students find recent and historical examples of book burning, book banning, restrictions on education, and so on. Have them write about their research, tie it to Dita’s experiences, and share it with the class.

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CCSS.W.7.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

◀ “Novels add what’s missing to life” (p. 108) is one quote from *The Librarian of Auschwitz* that praises books. Have students compile other quotes from the novel about books and reading, and post them on a “Power of Books” bulletin board. Then have students collect quotes from other sources to add to the board. They should then write an essay using one of the quotes as a writing prompt.

CCSS.RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.W.7.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

Kathleen Odean was a school librarian for seventeen years and now gives workshops for educators on new young adult books. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Newbery and Caldecott committees.