

GAZING AT  
THE STARS

MEMORIES OF A CHILD SURVIVOR

EVA SLONIM

TEACHING NOTES BY LAURA GORDON

## **About Laura Gordon**

Laura Gordon is an experienced secondary English teacher. She currently teaches years 7–12 at St Joseph's College, Geelong, where she has taught for the past 10 years. She shares her passion for books and reading by creating engaging curriculum and learning activities for the classroom.

***Gazing at the Stars: Memories of a Child Survivor***  
**By Eva Slonim**

**Introduction:**

*"These events, the persecution of my people, have become part of the collection of facts that people now call "history". I lived these facts every day. They are part of my memory." (p24)*

*"Eva and I spoke at length about why she wanted to write this book. One theme we continuously came back to was testimony. Eva is driven by a sense of responsibility to tell future generations about what happened to her and her family. She wants to teach her grandchildren about Jewish life before the Holocaust, to ennoble the idea of Jewish continuity, and to teach and warn the world at large about humanity's potential for evil." (Oscar Schwartz, Foreword, pviii)*

No matter how many books one may read about the Holocaust, the human capacity for evil continues to haunt and surprise readers. Each story, or rather testimony, has an account so disturbing that it stays with you for many days after you close the pages of that novel. The atrocities that occurred during this time are abhorrent, confronting and need to continue to be told, so that we never forget. Eva Slonim is doing just that. Her sense of responsibility to ensure this history is learnt and understood is more significant to her than any individual catharsis she may achieve in reliving the "evil she encountered as a child". She refutes Oscar Schwartz's suggestion that there is any personal catharsis from sharing her memoir stating "there is no meaning in these memories. Reliving these memories is only difficult. I'm doing it for the next generation" (pix).

The narrative is told in the voice of thirteen-year-old Eva, when the horror invaded her life and stole her innocence. At times it is detached and mechanical, and often the scene she relives does not need any embellishment or reflection. The events just need to be told, and in the voice of a resilient, ingenious survivor, Eva Slonim does just that. Her writing is poignant and rich, without being sentimental. The warmth comes from her enduring capacity to hope. Despite everything she encounters, the pure evil and hatred she faces as a child, for something that is so integral to her sense of self, she still resists. Her Papa's advice to "look at the stars, speak to them, tell them your fears, your worries" and his reassurance that "(he) will also look at the stars, and try (his) best to answer" sustains her (p70). It is the only glimmer of hope in a blackened landscape of immorality.

Students may need some introduction to the Holocaust depending on their prior knowledge of this time in history. The politics is not particularly important, but places and people may need a little explanation. This is a historical account and speaks of Auschwitz-Birkenau in detail. The essence of this story is the personal toll, the detail of the individual suffering and the effects of those, whose desire to commit atrocities on fellow human beings, went unchallenged by so many, for so long. Eva Slonim wants this story shared, not just so it can become part of Jewish memory, but everyone's memory.

### LEARNING ACTIVITY: Memory vs History

Read the foreword as a class. Consider why this has been included. How does it affect our reading of the text? What is the most important message that comes from this introduction? Students explain in their own words what *zikaron* means.

“There has been such a huge emphasis on systematically archiving what happened during the Holocaust. This is of course necessary, but sometimes it can make history look like cold, hard facts, and the sounds of individual suffering can be swallowed up.” (Foreword pviii)

Have students discuss this quote from Oscar Schwartz. Consider a memory of their own that forms part of their family history. It may be a significant moment of happiness, or something that caused despair. Invite students to write a personal recount of this experience ensuring that the “individual sounds” are brought to life in this memory. Ask them to consider whether they are an adult recollecting the event, or a younger person telling it through their eyes as Eva does. They could anonymously share these pieces with each other.

### Background / Set the scene

Naturally, many students will gravitate toward the photographs at the centre of the text. View these together, particularly the ones of her sister Judith, and the two taken at Auschwitz.

### LEARNING ACTIVITY:

- How do these photos make this horrendous time in history more real?
- Ask them to share one photo they can find of Auschwitz and explain why it is significant. Parental assistance might be required for this if this is a homework task as some of the footage and visuals that can be sourced will be harrowing for young readers.
- As a class you could read *The 7.30 Report* transcript featuring Eva Slonim. This follows her return to the death camp and shares some of her recollections as an adult. There are a number of other media articles on this event.  
<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1293240.htm>
- Some basic facts need to be shared with students, including the places the death camps were located, how many people were killed in these camps, and how many of these were Jewish. Given that part of this memoir details her arduous journey back to her family, what happened upon liberation might also be worth discussion with students. Is this what they expected?

### Chapter summary and questions

As students read the text for the first time, encourage them to keep a Reading Journal. They need to make a brief note of the key events associated with each chapter and write one ‘fat question’. This is a question that has a large answer, not a skinny yes/no answer, but one that requires reflection and explanation. The following chapter notes are a teacher’s version of this learning activity.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

**BLOG:** Set up a private class blog where students can post personal responses to the text, respond to each other, or to specific tasks set. A weekly response works well with a requirement to post first and then comment on two other students' responses. This encourages discussion, reflection and interaction between students and allows time between class learning to deepen their understanding of key events and themes. The questions that follow could form the questions for the blog.

#### ***Childhood (p1)***

- Introduction to the Weiss family. Eva's siblings are introduced, even though some are born much later than the time surrounding these early chapters. Sadly, some do not survive.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Select a quote that indicates how Eva relates to her family.**

#### ***Weiss & Kerpel (p5)***

- Papa was a successful business man and enabled them to live a life of wealth and Jewish tradition. Mutti's family lived in a small village, but she went away to study. She was educated, cultured and fashionable.
- Eva remembers this life fondly with delicious food, extended family, love and the celebration of Jewish traditions.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Consider five adjectives that describe the childhood Eva had. Why does she go into such detail about what her life was like then?**
- ❖ **Write a Haiku poem that adequately captures Eva's childhood.**

#### ***A Premonition (p15)***

- Through Kurti's lessons, Eva develops an understanding of how life might be better for Jews in Palestine. She applies to the Bnei Akiva immigration department to move to Palestine. Her parents forbid it. Despite being a happy child she had a sense that life might be better if they were to move away.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Why do her parents forbid her leaving? Why do they "bitterly regret their decision?"**

#### ***Invasion (p19)***

- In March 1939 the German guards break into their apartment with a bloody faced Pres Opapa whom they had beaten. A few days later Papa is arrested. Mutti sells the shop they own and uses the money to bribe the SS for Papa's release.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **"It was during this week that I ceased to be a child; I lost my innocence forever." What happens to Eva in this chapter that changes her irrevocably?**
- ❖ **How does the actions of their nanny indicate what is to come?**

### ***Why Didn't We Leave? (p24)***

- Renata is born. Kurti is being beaten on the way to school. The prime minister of Slovakia grabs Eva as she tries to cover her star, kicks her in the stomach and shouts to passers-by "let everyone see your star."
- Eva wonders why they do not leave. Papa sends his sisters and employees by boat to Palestine but realises the journey is too treacherous for his elderly parents. Instead he stays and makes contacts to ensure the safe passage of his children.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Does Eva find the answer to the questions that heads this chapter?**
- ❖ **How does Eva feel about his decision?**

### ***Loss (p29)***

- Grandfather Kerpel passes away and Grandmother Kerpel requests privacy so she goes to live in the Jewish Ghetto. Eva is sent to live with her. She is given independence and starts a small baking business with her grandmother.
- Uncle David and Auntie Frida and their children are arrested and eventually sent to Auschwitz where they were never heard from again.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What does "a modest final request" mean? What was so significant about the fact her mother fulfilled this?**
- ❖ **What is an arizator? Explain the injustice about having an "illiterate peasant" take-over Papa's business.**
- ❖ **How do you feel about Auntie Frida rejecting the spot Papa had arranged for her and her family in Hungary? What does this indicate about what they thought was happening?**

### ***Duty (p34)***

- Papa makes plans to have everyone hidden as they are surrounded by families disappearing and being deported in the middle of the night. Eva is sent to care for her grandparents and works so diligently she wonders if she is more of a maid than their beloved granddaughter.
- It becomes even more difficult for them to follow their Jewish traditions, especially eating kosher food as traditional slaughter of animals has been banned in Bratislava.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What does it mean to denounce someone?**
- ❖ **What things did Papa believe were "the soul of the family"?**
- ❖ **How did the gold ring dramatically change the way Eva felt about her situation?**
- ❖ **What is Rosh Hashanah?**

### ***Can You Hear Us? (p39)***

- Eva and her family are reunited but their movements are carefully monitored by an evil man.
- Pres Opapa and Pres Omama are becoming a liability for the family if they need to escape. Papa puts them into two separate hospitals.
- Eva must care for both her grandfather in the mental institution and her grandmother and the other eight elderly patients.

- The guards regularly come for them. Twice they escape. Their extended family is not so lucky.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Explain the poignancy of this title: Which theme does this explore? Write the prayer the Rabbis insist they say.**
- ❖ **What is revealed about Eva's parents in the sentence "what they were drinking was no more than hot water?"**
- ❖ **Describe an average day for Eva. Use five adjectives to describe her life at this point.**
- ❖ **What is the horror of this final question?**

***The Ghetto (p45)***

- In April 1943 they are sent to Klariská Ulica, "a type of Jewish ghetto". Their grandparents came as well and slept in the beds while the rest slept on the floor.
- Eva became very ill and had to have her tonsils and adenoids removed. "It was against the law for Jews to have procedures in hospitals" so Eva had to secretly enter the hospital. The needle was blunt, she watched the whole operation through the mirror on the surgeon's head. Toward the end SS soldiers stormed the operating theatre and arrested this Jewish man who had agreed to help Eva.
- They had to hide many people during their time in that tiny apartment, some tried to steal from them, others needed medical attention.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What do you find the most shocking about the operation Eva had to undergo?**
- ❖ **Why did Eva resent his generosity? Why did her Papa continue to help people in the face of the horror and desperation they were experiencing?**
- ❖ **What does it mean to be a Jewish collaborator?**

***Who Will Live and Who Will Die? (p54)***

- During Yom Kippur, the SS torture those staying at the old people's home by stabbing a pig and forcing some of them to drink pig's blood. The horror of this action is revealed as Eva's wonders "is this a fate worse than death".
- Pres Opapa passes away. He is buried in the Jewish cemetery.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Explain the horror of having to drink pig's blood as a Jewish person on Yom Kippur. What does this say about the SS?**

***An Only Child (p58)***

- Eva's parents make the heartbreaking decision to smuggle their children over the border to stay with family in Hungary. Eva remains with her parents as their only daughter.
- All of the children were smuggled over the border using different methods with the help of Mrs Tafon. It was the last time they would see Judith.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Explain the title of this chapter and how Eva felt about this.**
- ❖ **List the methods they used to smuggle each child into Hungary.**
- ❖ **How true is the final sentence of this chapter?**

### ***'I Will Be Spared' (p63)***

- Two men arrive seeking help to hide their cousin and girlfriend. They warn Eva's parents of Hitler's presence in Hungary. Papa hurries to have all of the children returned, but the families they are staying with refuse out of fear. They are instructed to escape. Mrs Tafon rescues Ruth and Renata from a camp that has one train line to Auschwitz.
- She finds Judith in a camp. The father of that family, Mutti's cousin, refuses to let Judith go. He believes that being a highly decorated war hero will save him and his family. It does not. They are all sent to Auschwitz.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **How do we start to see Eva's clever survival instincts kick in?**
- ❖ **What happens to Ruth and Renata? How must this have felt for her parents? What are the long-lasting consequences of this?**
- ❖ **How does the final sentence of this chapter make you feel. Can you draw this image?**

### ***Our Last Goodbye (p68)***

- Papa and Mutti must once again farewell all of their children as they divide into pairs and seek shelter in Slovakia. Eva is sent with her sister Marta. She must live alone with her younger sister and pretend she is sixteen. She is only twelve years old.
- Papa's final message to his daughters is to fight fear by looking up at the stars and remembering that he will be looking at those same stars too. And to never admit to being Jewish.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What does it mean to have an Aryan name? Why is this essential to their survival?**
- ❖ **Why are stars the most powerful symbol in the text? How does it sustain the girls?**
- ❖ **How do you feel toward Papa and Mutti as you read this chapter?**

### ***Alone (p71)***

- Eva and Marta must hide alone in the apartment with little food and no contact with the outside world. Marta could no longer remember how to speak German or Slovakian due to her being hidden in Hungary.
- Maria Wohlschlager was to pretend the girls were her sisters. She brought Ruth and Renata to stay with a family one hour from where they were hiding
- Eva would send her parents letters. There was no response. They discovered after the war that Maria had kept all of the money and supplies her parents had sent, and "made (them) feel that (they) would never again see (their) parents."

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What is the most surprising aspect of Maria's behaviour?**
- ❖ **Write one of these letters Eva would have sent to her parents. What must life have been like for her?**
- ❖ **Do you think luck, faith, will or ingenuity enable all four Weiss children to survive this time?**

### **Interrogation (p77)**

- The neighbours are suspicious of two girls living alone and the SS are called. The girls are questioned extensively.
- The SS officer offers Eva, posing as Anca, a job as a nanny with his family. He tells her Bratislava is to be liquidated the following day. Eva calls her father and he warns people to hide. Those who do not escape are sent to Auschwitz the following day. Eva's parents managed to escape.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What is so significant about the fact that the girls do all of their chores on a Friday?**
- ❖ **How does one conversation change her life irrevocably again?**

### **Gombárik (p82) \*Close Reading**

- The head of the Hlinka Guard and 25 soldiers arrive at Eva and Marta's apartment. They had helped hide a Jewish couple who left the day before.
- Gombárik, with an Alsatian dog, a pair of silver knuckle-dusters and many soldiers, furiously interrogate Eva and terrorise her sister. She abides by her father's demands and does not sway from her story. She never admits she is Jewish despite being beaten, threatened and thrown down the stairs.
- Grete calls Maria's apartment at Eva's request and says the phrase, "All the goods have been taken." Papa and Mutti flee Maria Wohlschlager's house.
- Noemi calls her parents only to have a German voice answer. Gombárik had sent the Gestapo there within half an hour after Grete's phone call.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What is so shocking about the treatment Gombarik inflicts on Eva?**
- ❖ **Describe your own response to Eva's comment; "Our neighbours were smiling, laughing and cheering. At that moment, I swore I would never forgive them."**
- ❖ **What is so significant about the quote; "lives were saved and lives were lost within minutes."**
- ❖ **How must it have felt for Noemi and Kurti to have believed their parents had been caught for the rest of the war?**

### **Torture (p90)**

- Marta and Eva are taken to the detention centre in Nitra. It is a large cellar holding a hundred Jewish prisoners. "Along the walls were bare wooden shelves three tiers high and about a foot wide. That was where we were to sleep." (p90)
- Only those who were deemed fit enough to work were given rations. Eva was set to work, Marta was not so their single ration had to be shared.
- Eva was tortured daily by Gombárik. One day they were taken into the courtyard where a young man Simon was shot. Then Gombárik shot a mother who tried to escape with her three year old daughter. Then he shot her daughter.
- Many years later Eva was instrumental in having Gombárik receive justice for his behaviour during the war. Her testimony was significant in his trial. The judge was the father of Simon.

### LEARNING ACTIVITY:

- ❖ Write a passage that Eva might have said at the trial of Gombárik.
- ❖ Build a description of this cruel man using the quotes that describe his behaviour.
- ❖ Describe the tone of this chapter. Why does Eva adopt this voice to retell this memory in particular?

### *Caught (p96)*

- After two weeks at Nitra, the girls are summoned to Gombárik. He found Maria Wohlschlager who told the SS the truth about the girls. They are sent to Auschwitz despite Grete's father attempts to save them.

### LEARNING ACTIVITY:

- ❖ What does Eva's retort, 'Not unless I turn up in one of your cans of meat' suggest about her character?
- ❖ How do you feel toward Gombárik at this point? What is ironic about his statement; "we will never see each other again"?

### *Orphaned, All of Us (p99) \*Close Reading*

- They are sent away on a train. Eva gives her last possession, a gold pen she stole from the confiscated goods, to a soldier and begs for him not to shoot if they jump from the train. He says he will try and miss, but cannot guarantee what the other soldiers will do.
- Eva pretends she can knit to avoid being deported. Her deception results in another fierce beating. They are herded into a large room and are left to stand all night.
- They are herded onto a packed train where they travel days without stopping. No food, water, or opportunity to use the toilet is provided to them. A baby cries for three days from hunger and eventually dies in her mother's arms.
- Eva questions her faith and makes a promise that if she survives she will give birth to many more Jewish children.
- They arrive at Auschwitz and witness the huge chimneys and "lots of smoke".

### LEARNING ACTIVITY:

- ❖ What does the scene with the knitting reveal about Eva and her captors?
- ❖ Students may have heard stories about Jews being transported on trains. What is significant about this particular account? Why is it so important that the 'sounds of suffering' are heard?
- ❖ Try and capture the horror of this chapter in five images. Use symbols to represent the events.
- ❖ Eva discusses her faith in detail on page 103. Summarise in your own words her relationship with God and her promise for the future.

### *Our First Day (p105)*

- When they exit the trains they are divided for selection. For a brief moment Eva considers leaving Marta to go to the 'right' on her own. She is horrified at herself and promises she will never leave Marta on her own.
- They are marched through Birkenau and watch in horror as they see prisoners who no longer look human.
- Marta is pushed off the bridge and into the sewerage below. She would have drowned if not for a brave man who jumps in and rescues her. When they reach the

barracks, everyone gives their ration – a cup of weak coffee – to Marta to wash the sewage off herself.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **There are two moments when Marta is saved in this chapter. Describe these two. We know why Eva saves her, but what is so surprising about the second incident?**
- ❖ **What does Eva pray for in this chapter? Describe her state of mind at this point, remember she is only thirteen years old.**
- ❖ **What is a *kapo*?**

**The Familienlager (p109)**

- Eva was chosen by the Blockälteste to do chores for him. She leaves her shoes with Marta who is tricked into giving them away for bread. No bread is given.
- His anger at the loss of his daughter causes him to burn Eva's arm with boiling water. He holds her head down the toilet until she vomits.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Why does Eva continue to endure all of the horror she faces?**
- ❖ **Read the definition in the glossary of a Blockälteste. Why does he react like this? What is particularly cruel about this arrangement?**
- ❖ **What is the significance of the final sentence of this chapter?**

**A27201 (p112)**

- One morning they are woken up much earlier than normal and taken to have their number tattooed on their arms.
- Eva walks past a concrete pit that she later learns was where Judith was buried. She was loaded into a tip truck and tipped into the pit with hundreds of other children. There was a fire at the bottom.
- The prisoners were stripped naked, had all their body hair shaved, put under a cold shower, had their heads shaved and then given old, dirty, ripped clothes.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Describe how you feel when you read about how Judith was killed.**
- ❖ **There are two very poignant quotes in this chapter. Find them and explain their significance.**
- ❖ **How has Eva's identity changed? Give two examples of this.**

**Toddlers' Barracks (p115)**

- Eva and Marta are put into the toddlers' barracks and made to look after seventy young children. There was nothing to feed them.
- At night their mothers would bang on the door screaming for their babies and the children would scream back.
- After four days and some children already dying of starvation and dehydration, a can of milk was thrown in. A *kapo* ran in and stole the milk claiming; "You will die anyway, I deserve this milk. I've been here for years."

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Once again Eva and Marta have to face a harrowing fate, to care for babies and children with nothing to care for them with. What is particularly cruel about their time in these barracks?**

- ❖ **When you read this chapter, what you do think about Eva's reasons for writing this memoir. Consider the reasons she gives, how are they relevant to this particular time in her horrific experience?**

### **Mengele (p117) \*Close Reading WITH SUPERVISION**

- They are taken to new barracks where Dr Josef Mengele operates. He mistakenly thinks Eva and Marta are twins.
- He makes the children play a game where they choose the next child to be taken away. Eva later finds these children, dismembered.
- The boy Shmuel dies and asks Eva to remember this date. She has no idea what date it is, so gives him the number on her arm for his *kaddish*.
- A prisoner escapes and the rest of the people in their barracks are made to stand in the snow for three days and nights until she is found. She is hanged in front of them.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Have you heard of Dr Mengele? What does this account reveal about the horror of Auschwitz?**
- ❖ **What does Eva mean when she says; "to be a twin at Auschwitz meant to stay alive, but at a cost"?**
- ❖ **How does thirteen-year-old Eva help Shmuel? Why is this so significant?**

### **Hospital (p122) \*Close Reading WITH SUPERVISION**

- Marta is taken away, but returned shortly after. She is given injections in her stomach causing extreme pain.
- Eva is then taken to the hospital and witnesses the abhorrent, cruel treatment of other human beings. She is also given injections.
- Twins are bled to death, a pregnant woman gives birth to a baby alone then flees. Mengele discovers the woman has escaped and gives the baby a fatal injection and throws it across the room. A boy returns from surgery, his scars split open and his organs spill out.
- The Red Cross came to visit. The barracks were cleaned and everyone given new bedclothes and uniforms. One woman calls out to them that this is a lie, to look at the gas chambers. The Red Cross ignore her, she is publicly hanged the next day.
- The children desperately hope for the war to end and to be returned to their families. They sing a song of hope and freedom.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **It is extremely difficult to make sense of the things Eva witnesses in this chapter. Write down your personal response to reading these events. What is the most disturbing aspect of this account?**
- ❖ **What is surprising about the visit from the Red Cross? How is bravery treated in this chapter?**
- ❖ **How do the children survive? What does this reveal about the human spirit?**

### **The Sound of Defeat (p127)**

- They can hear the sound of bombs dropping. The SS panic and send them to march for selection. Those who are sick are made to stay behind. Those who are well enough march. Eva desperately tries to march but is too unwell and returns to the hospital. The SS set fire to the hospital.

- The SS return and they are forced to march. The Russians arrive, they fight the SS until they surrender. The captors are lined up and the Russians invite them to do what they want to their tormentors, no one moves.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **How is it that Marta and Eva survive even these last few moments? It is luck, hope or determination?**
- ❖ **Why don't the Jewish prisoners seek revenge on their captors? How does this further distinguish them from those who imprisoned and tortured them?**
- ❖ **Why do the Russian liberators look upon them with horror rather than sympathy?**

***No One Was Waiting for Us (p131)***

- The children were expecting their parents to be waiting with toys and lollies. They were extremely disappointed and confused about what liberation really meant.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Use five adjective to describe how the girls felt at this point.**

***'We Are On Our Own' (p133)***

- The girls hear they are going to be sent to Russia so they escape from the hospital and begin the long journey home. They find a carriage to sleep in. The soldiers feed them, give them a bottle of vodka to exchange and take them as far as they can.
- They stay in a stable, travel with soldiers a little further, then keep walking.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Even with such despair, Eva has great empathy for others. Find a quote that demonstrates this.**
- ❖ **Explain the girls' decision to decline the ice cream.**

***Days of Walking (p138)***

- Mr Kohn warns them not to go to the Russian headquarters as all orphans were being sent to Russia. The girls keep hitchhiking for many days until they reach the border of Poland and Slovakia.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Why is it now that Eva experiences the depths of despair? How does she feel about life at this moment?**

***Anywhere but Here (p141)***

- In Poprad there is an 'absorption centre' but no one is interested in helping the girls. They are given 100 crowns each and both girls buy ten eggs. The first eggs are delicious, but they make themselves sick eating too many.
- They meet the men and women who Eva's parents hid for safety. They refuse to offer them food or money and send them away. Judith runs after them and offers to take one of the girls in. Eva tells them to take Marta.
- Eva is sent to Mrs Frankl and is treated like a servant. The girls run away.

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Imagine the despair and sense of abandonment Eva must feel at this point. Write a short diary entry describing how she feels toward people and their treatment of her after liberation.**

### ***Convalescence (p147)***

- The girls are sent to the Tatra Mountains for recuperation. They are fed and cared for but they are haunted by memories of loving family holidays. Physically they are recovering well, but mentally the girls desperately miss their parents.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What does Eva mean when she says; “the girl in my memories was not me”?**
- ❖ **This recovery could be described as bittersweet. Why?**

### ***They Are Alive (p149)***

- Mr Kohn visits the girls to tell them that Bratislava has been liberated and their parents are alive. He cannot take them from the hospital, so tells them to leave after dark.
- They run for the train. Mr Kohn makes it on the train, the girls do not. They have to find their own way home.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Should Mr Kohn have made sure the girls were on the train with him?**
- ❖ **What does liberation look like. Draw one image that sums up Eva’s description so far. What has surprised you the most?**

### ***Arriving Home (p153)***

- Eva and Marta finally make it home and are reunited with their parents, Kurti, Noemi, Ruth and Renata. They meet their baby sister Rosanna for the first time.
- The house is filled with orphans and the Russian army. Her family are still helping others who need it.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Describe Mutti’s reaction to seeing her daughters again after so long. How has Eva’s mindset changed?**

### ***Everyone Returning (p157)***

- All of the children who had returned had horrible stories of survival. Judith never returned, neither did any of Papa’s family. Mutti had another baby Hannah after the war ended.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Why did none of them share their memories of their time away from each other?**
- ❖ **How does new life sustain and heal Eva?**

### ***Kurti (p160)***

- Eva and Marta become very ill with TB again and are sent away to recover.
- Kurti went swimming with some friends in the Danube. When soldiers approach they hide. Kurti is drowning, but no one wanted to risk being found to help him. He never returns home. Eva and Marta are not told, nor returned to mourn their brother.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Why is this so devastating after everything that has happened?**
- ❖ **Was not telling Eva and Marta the right thing to do?**
- ❖ **Explain the quote at the end of this chapter. Why does Eva choose this one?**

### **Boarding School (p167)**

- The family decide they must leave Bratislava. The memories are too painful and there is still a strong sense of anti-Semitism. The girls are sent to boarding school in Switzerland for two years.
- Eva graduates with first-class honours. Her father decides the family will move to Australia.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **What else do we learn about Eva's personality during this chapter? Does this change the way you think Eva managed to survive?**
- ❖ **Why is night time so difficult for her?**

### **The Furthest Place from Here (p169)**

- Papa must flee Bratislava without the family. Mutti sells their house and arranges for passports and visas to escape across the border and on to Australia. Eva is left behind, but Papa arranges for her to safely meet up with the family.
- They never speak the unspeakable. No one ever mentions those who did not survive, nor the cruelty, degradation and horror they all survived. The silence prevents the healing and Eva realises the goodbye at the train station was a goodbye to "an entire way of life".

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Why do they never speak about what happened to them? What is the consequence of this?**
- ❖ **What does the goodbye at the train station signify?**
- ❖ **Explain this quote; "our tongues were bound in shameful silence, heavy with some sort of guilt or remorse."**

### **Epilogue (p173)**

- It takes six weeks travel by boat to reach Australia. It takes Papa a while to settle in, but eventually he buys a business and joins a shul to make him feel as though he belongs.
- Eva married Ben Slonim in 1953 and had five children. There are many grandchildren.
- To have the Weiss family *sefer Torah* in their possession and hear many of their children and grandchildren read from this gives them a sense of continuity and persistence.

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Why is it so significant for Eva that the family *sefer Torah* is read from?**
- ❖ **How important are the photographs and documents that she finds?**

<b>Characters</b>
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**There are a large number of characters that Eva comes into contact with throughout her journey. The following quotes are a selected few for some of the key characters. Some suggested learning activities follow the description.**

#### **❖ HERO/ BYSTANDER/ CONTRIBUTOR**

**Have students create this table with these three columns prior to reading. Eva recounts many people who cross her path. Some go out of their way to help, others do nothing, and many contribute to her suffering. List each character in the appropriate column with**

**some brief detail about their actions. At the end of reading, make some observations about how many people actually help her.**

### **Eva Weiss**

*"My life was filled with family, Jewishness, happiness, abundance. I sometimes wonder why as an eight-year-old, I had a desire to be elsewhere, to be in Palestine. Perhaps I had some faint premonitory darkness of the long nightmare that was awaiting us." (p18)*

*"My name is Anca Wohlschlager." (p84)*

*"I felt Gombárik's revolver press against my temple. Papa was with me at this moment, and I heard his voice of reason: 'If you tell him you are Jewish, you are dead anyway.' I listened. I didn't say a word." (p87)*

*"I saw that lifeless baby in her mother's arms, and even though I accused God for letting it happen, I brokered a deal. If I survive, I prayed, I will give birth to many more Jewish children." (p103)*

*"I felt that hatred, violence and killing was going to follow me through my entire life. There was no escape. I was doomed to run from it forever." (p140)*

*"I wanted them to look at me as their little, happy Eva, not as a survivor of Auschwitz. I didn't want them to know what I had seen." (p172)*

**As a girl, Eva Weiss endures some of the most horrific, heart breaking experiences human kind has known. She is persecuted for her faith, tortured for her deception and forced to witness the epitome of cruelty at the hands of Dr Josef Mengele. Her childhood is filled with love and laughter. She finds comfort in the knowledge her family are proud of their faith and will do anything to be together. The second child in her wealthy family, she lives a privileged life, until Hitler comes to power and their world is never the same again. At only thirteen Eva is given the responsibility of maintaining a false identity and ensuring the survival of herself and her ten-year-old sister. She faces torture at the hands of Gombárik, is sent to Auschwitz where illness, deprivation, torture and cruelty become her everyday existence. Her wit, resilience, hope and physical endurance see her survive what millions of others do not. Her survival is due to more than just luck.**

**Her father's final goodbye at the train station and words of wisdom to never reveal that she is Jewish sustains her through beatings and torture. His reminder to look at the stars whenever she feels hopeless, for he too will be looking at the stars, is the inkling of hope she needs to endure. Her tiny body is wracked with disease, her spirit is broken through the horror of what she witnesses, but her capacity to persist enables her, and her sister, to survive. They miraculously make it to liberation. But their dreams of being reunited with their beloved parents reveal that in fact she is only a child. Their terror is not over. Eva and Marta must continue to find something deep within themselves to make it home. No one will do it for them. Through all of this her faith is tested. She never stops believing in her God, but often questions how and why this cruelty can continue, and at what point her family will be freed. After years of bringing up her own children, loving her grandchildren, and reclaiming her Jewish traditions that she is able to unlock the silence of her memories.**

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **At the launch of this memoir, Eva has been asked to speak to her audience. Write the speech she might deliver as she reflects on her experience of writing this memoir and what it means to be able to share her story.**

- ❖ **Graph Eva's life experiences that she recalls during this book. The vertical axis needs to represent the quality of the experience from the heights of hope and salvation to the depths of cruelty and despair. Have students select 15 key events from the text and graph them according to how she would have felt during those times.**
- ❖ **Write the testimony that Eva might have presented at the trial of Gombárik.**

### **Eugene Weiss (Papa)**

*"It was not common for a family to all live together, as we did, but Papa's devotion to his family bound us a remarkably tight unit." (p4)*

*"Remember: the same stars will shine over you as over Mutti and me, and those same stars also shine over Palestine. One day we will be a free people in our own country. But until then, just look at the stars, speak to them, tell them your fears, your worries. I will also look at the stars, and I'll try my best to answer." (p69-70)*

**Papa is the guiding light in Eva's life. His advice enables her to resist her tormentors, to remain strong in her resolve to protect her sister and deny her Jewish faith in order to survive. The stars become their link, Eva's beacon of hope when all seems lost. Papa's compassion is only overtaken by his courage. His ingenuity to save his family, despite the danger and the personal toll, ensures the survival of all but one of his beloved children. He refuses to flee to safety if he cannot guarantee the safety of his parents. He cannot and so they stay. The death of Kurti is senseless and so unfair when they have survived so much. It is the final reason to leave Bratislava. He chooses Australia as it is the furthest place from where they are. Through hard work and good business sense, Papa always has the means to fund the escape of his children and his family. The fact that so many people are willing to work for him, despite the danger they are in, is testament to his generous remuneration, but also his strength of character. Papa ensures that they not only physically survive, but that enough of their history and Jewish tradition survive that their life in Australia is punctuated with their tradition from their family home.**

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **As the eldest remaining child, it is likely that Eva may have spoken a Eulogy of sorts at her father's memorial. Write her recollection of her father.**

### **Margaret Weiss (Mutti)**

*"Mutti was a quiet woman of strong conviction and courage." (p7)*

*"Mutti had excellent taste. She simply had that sense – to look at something and know immediately if it was quality. She had an instinct for fashion." (p10)*

*"She was an avid reader, she wrote well-crafted stories and she maintained the household." (p10)*

**Mutti shares the compassion of her husband. She loves her children fiercely and follows Papa's recommendations for their survival, no matter how heart breaking it is to say goodbye. Mutti is also a product of her parents and her upbringing. She is educated, courageous, clever and compassionate. Mutti never hesitates to help those who ask for it. Even after liberation, as she waits for her children to return to her and while caring for another new baby, her house is filled with orphans and there's bread and jam on the table for the children to eat as they please. She is determined and keeps her wits about her when her husband must flee for his own safety. The sale of the shop in town procures**

**her husband's release, as does the sale of their house to organise visas and passports. Despite being terrified and having little business experience, she is diligent and ensures a good deal. The safety of her family is paramount.**

### **Kurti Weiss**

*"Kurti watched me with bewilderment and sympathy. By now he was fifteen and very mature, grown up. He did things with the self-assured calmness of a natural leader."* (p160)

*"Kurti could speak fluent Hebrew and was learned in Jewish texts. He was also an avid Zionist."* (p160)

*"They hid and Kurti was left alone to drown."* (p165)

**As the eldest son, Kurti had significant responsibility. Through his own will and determination he too survived the horrors he endured. He returned home and was appointed head of the youth movement. He was a leader and a teacher. His patience and kindness towards his sister was indicative of the great man he would have become. Disobeying his father, he leaves to swim in the Danube with other young people from the movement. As the others ran for cover from the Russian soldiers, Kurti was trapped in an undercurrent. They chose to hide and save themselves, rather than save Kurti. He drowned. The injustice of losing his eldest child and only son after all he had survived was too much for Papa to bear. If it had been anyone other than Kurti in that water, it is a fair assumption that Kurti would have put his own welfare second to help someone in need. This has been his nature so far; this is what he had learnt from his father. The tragedy of Kurti dying and the futility of his loss truly tested what little faith the family were clinging to.**

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Eva has one of her most prized possessions, a book of Hebrew poetry that Kurti gives her, confiscated as she flees to Australia. Find a poem that Kurti might have chosen especially for Eva and write the inscription he had written on the inside cover of this book.**

### **Marta Weiss**

*"I felt angry and betrayed, but I knew that this was a good opportunity. 'Of course', I said. 'Take Marta with you. And look after her.'" (p145)*

**Marta features almost as much as Eva, the narrator, and yet she is almost a silent character. She exists to sustain Eva in her darkest moments, but she is also in need of protection. Perhaps it is her presence and Eva's overwhelming sense of responsibility for her ten-year-old sister that maintains her courage and will to live. They find strength in one another. Despite their early days of hiding being filled with silence, they fill each other with a drive to survive which they may not have been had alone. Perhaps it was her father's stroke of genius, to send his children away in pairs: enough to stay alive, but not too many to be in any more danger than absolutely necessary. Marta endures the beating and torture at the hands of Gombárik, the experimentation in Mengele's barracks and the starvation, cruelty and deprivation at Auschwitz. Marta and Eva travel home together, withstanding yet more cruelty and hatred, and finally reach the haven of their parents' home. Eva is careful not to speak for Marta, she never assumes how Marta feels, only**

**what she experiences. Their stories are intertwined, but their struggles still quite individual.**

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Choose one of the events that Marta experiences along with Eva in the novel. Write this from her perspective. Consider how she might have described her own pain, the way her sister treated her and how she held on to hope for a better future.**

**Noemi, Esther, Judith, Renata, Ruth, Rosanna and Hannah Weiss**

*"I remain very close to my sisters to this day. We draw on each other for support. There is an understanding between us that cannot be articulated with words. Yet each of us has her own memory of this time in our lives, shaped by the passage of time and her personal experience of trauma." (p159)*

**Those who are born before the war begins are all sent away. They each survive in their own way, and are forced to escape to return home to their parents. Everyone except Judith survives. Her death, discovered after the war had ended, must have been horrific for a small child. And for her sisters who survived, the knowledge of their sister's suffering is a burden they will carry forever. Noemi was Eva's soul mate. They missed each other dreadfully during the time they were separated and despite the experience Marta and Eva endure together, it is still Noemi she remains the closest to. On her return from Auschwitz, the birth of Rosanna and Hannah bring Eva solace and joy in a way she hadn't experienced before. Their presence was a symbol of her family's capacity to endure and move on. They were new life and with that came hope that perhaps their family may find the comfort in each other they once did.**

**LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Choose one of the older girls and write a letter they may have written to their parents while they were separated. It might describe some of the conditions and how they were coping with the terror they were living in.**

**Solomon Weiss (Pres Opapa) & Ruzena Loewenrosen (Pres Omama)**

*"He was tall and immaculate, sporting a small beard, a hat and a black suit." (p3)*

*"At Papa's textile shop, his father sat in an elevated chair manning the cash register, commanding authority." (p3)*

*"In some ways Pres Omama receded into her husband's shadow. She mostly dressed in floor-length black gowns, beautiful lace-up short boots, black gloves and large black hat. She would wear that outfit everywhere, even to the market." (p3)*

*"Papa would visit his parents twice daily ... He adored his parents." (p3)*

**The beloved parents of Eva's father, Pres Opapa and Pres Omama are both the sustaining lifeblood of this family and the reason they remain in Bratislava. The bond Papa has with his parents is reflective of his integrity and the overwhelming love of family. Eva always holds them dear, but become a burden as she has to care for them. Likening herself to a servant, Eva complains that her daily grind of caring for her grandparents is more than she should have to bear. The gold ring, with her initials engraved, are more than she needs.**

### **Leopold Kerpel & Johanna Reichfeld (Grandmother and Grandfather Kerpel)**

*"Their house was simple but well kept ... I felt right at home there."* (p8)

*"She wasn't very tall, but she was remarkably lively and so commanded respect."* (p8)

**In 1938 Mutti's parents arrive on their doorstep. They had been evicted and needed to live with them. Eva spends a lot of time caring for them. Mutti's father is diagnosed with lung cancer. After he passes away, Grandmother Kerpel requests some privacy and so Eva is sent to live with her. They are great companions, but Eva also has independence that she thoroughly enjoys. Papa fearing for her safety has her smuggled safely into Budapest. It is the last time Eva sees her beloved Grandmother.**

### **Maria Wohlschlager**

*"She stole everything, even the spare underpants they sent us."* (p75)

*"She also made us feel alone. She made us feel that we would never again see our loving parents."* (p76)

**Their nanny, their carer, the woman Eva shared a room with, becomes their saviour and in doing so, their greatest threat. When the German soldiers first arrive, Maria is described as doing some sort of victory salute. Despite this, Eva and Marta are sent to live with her, to pretend they are her sisters. With fake names and documents they must hide in the apartment next to Maria's. She is the only link between these young girls and their parents. And she betrays their trust terribly. The letters Eva writes are never delivered, the money and supplies stolen. Eventually, she gives them up to the SS and thankfully for Eva's warning, her parents flee before anyone else can be taken away. Eva tries to excuse her actions in light of the horror that was to follow. But the fact that this woman cared for these children and was still willing to deliver them to gates of hell seems barbaric. She, as many others who also supported the cause, believed she was doing the right thing. She saw these children as the enemy and happily contributed to their torment.**

### **Gombárik**

*"Every morning at four am, I was taken from my wooden shelf and led by soldiers to Gombárik's chambers for interrogation."* (p91)

**Gombárik is yet another of Hitler's puppets, drunk on power and blinded by hatred. His furious and unrelenting pursuit of Eva, a thirteen-year-old girl, is cruelty at its extreme. The use of fear, threats, physical violence, beating and constant harassment reveals Gombárik to be a cruel man, who eventually has justice served to him. The irony in his final words to her plays out many years later as Eva bravely testifies against his atrocities to a judge with no sympathy for a man who killed his son in cold blood. Gombárik is given the death penalty, and Eva's testimony is largely responsible for this fate.**

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **Write the summation the judge would have given at his trial. Gombárik was sentenced to death, explain why the judge came to this decision based on the evidence he had heard.**

### **Dr Josef Mengele**

*"Mengele's presence hung over us. He would stroll past our bunks and look at us. His gaze was almost paternal, perversely caring, but it was cold. It said: You are my toys, and I will decide what happens to you, and when. And I will play with you until you are of no more use to me."* (p118)

**Dr Josef Mengele is the personification of pure evil. His willingness to inflict such cruelty and suffering on human beings, in particular children, has made him an infamous perpetrator of the Nazi regime. The misfortune that Eva and Marta came in contact with him cannot be underestimated. He may well have kept them alive, but at a significant and everlasting cost. He treated those he selected with complete disregard for their humanity. As Eva describes, it was as though those under his charge were his toys to dispose of as he wished. His fury is well documented, and the description of the murder of the newborn infant is particularly chilling. The sisters suffered injections and physical torture. But perhaps what they witnessed was to scar them more permanently than anything he did to their bodies. The farmer's wife game is a despicable example of the torment he inflicted on them. Forcing children to choose other children to become the next experiment is abhorrent. How Eva survives this, let alone recalls this for others to read is remarkable.**

### **Symbolism and Literary device**

#### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

#### **EXPERTS:**

**Students work in small groups to investigate each symbol. They need to create three images of the symbol, find five quotes that show the meaning of this symbol and write an essay question using this symbol as the key idea. Groups rearrange to have one representative from each symbol and share their findings so each individual has a record of each symbol and the meanings they represent.**

### **Apple (p29)**

Mutti's father is diagnosed with lung cancer and his dying wish is for a red apple. Mutti puts herself, and Eva, at huge risk by buying one for him in town. It is not the apple that poses the danger, but they cannot afford to catch the tram if they spend their money on this simple request. They walk the streets to the hospital, a very dangerous practice for Jews. Mutti is able to grant her dying father's last humble request. Mutti's willingness to risk herself to please him is testament to the sense of family she holds dear. The danger of such a basic exercise illustrates just how brutal life had become for Jews at this time.

### **Goose (p37)**

The passage where Eva must collect and carry a goose to be slaughtered seems surreal to contemporary readers. It is difficult to understand the cultural significance of kosher meat, or the responsibility that Eva now had to uphold as the eldest daughter of the family. In this moment, when she is rendered helpless and no one comes to her aid, her isolation and abandonment as a Jew is pertinent. She has failed her mother's request, and as a result her family will go without once again.

### **Stars (p70 & 134)**

The night sky becomes the only beacon of hope in a bleak landscape for Eva. Her Papa's final words as they bid each other farewell at the train station sustains her through the torment that is to come. His remark that the stars she sees are the same ones her beloved parents will see keeps her close to them, when their love and protection is so far away. This symbolic connection remains strong throughout all of her struggles. It is only when she faces terror during the day and she cannot see the stars in the night sky that her strength wavers. As she is finally freed from Auschwitz and her dream of liberation and being reunited with her parents is broken, the stars' meaning deteriorates and they become just stars. Her faith, resilience and will to live fades, she has faced too much horror, borne too much responsibility. The glow of the stars is no longer enough. Thankfully, she is almost home.

### **The birch trees (p113)**

The concrete pit the girls bypass on a march through Auschwitz is framed by this beautiful image of the birch trees swaying in the breeze. It is not until after the war has ended that Eva and Marta discover that was actually the resting place of their little sister Judith. Without knowing this at the time, the trees speak to Eva, they mark her memory in a way that allows her to reflect on this place with such beauty amidst such horror.

### **The vodka (p115)**

Liberation is a profound disappointment to the children of Auschwitz. They had naively imagined being reunited with their parents bearing lollies and gifts. They were never to know that tragedy would await many of them on their release. Eva and Marta are lucky enough to be reunited eventually, but the journey is lonely, arduous and filled with uncertainty. The Russian soldiers who come to their rescue many times have so little to give and little help to offer. Their vodka is something that will buy the girls assistance. Often it delivers little more than sympathy.

### **Torah scroll (*sefer Torah*) (p173)**

The Epilogue completes the rest of Eva's life. She goes on to live a full, loving, blessed life with children and family surrounding her. Her most precious memories connect her promise to give birth to many more Jewish children, and the strength of her faith. Reading from the family Torah scroll, a rare possession that survived the war, gives her the greatest pleasure of all. It is testament to their strength, courage and tenacity.

### **LEARNING ACTIVITY:**

- ❖ **These symbols allude to key themes and develop some of the key traits of the characters in this text. They are included in the 9 Card Sentences activity that follows the themes as a way of making sense of the text.**

<b>Themes: (Quotes)</b>
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### **Faith**

*"It is clear to me now, as it was clear to me then: the real substance of our family life lay deep within our Jewishness."* (p12)

*"Our kitchen was strictly kosher."* (p12)

*"Jewish holidays were a favourite times for deportation, gassing and torture. Were they mocking our faith? Did that, too, have to be attacked?" (p43)*

*"Our Father, our King. Hear our voice!" (p43)*

*"We were alone, abandoned, orphaned, all of us. During that long and terrible journey, my faith began to sway to and fro, and it has done so for the rest of my life." (p103)*

**Eva and her family are identified, persecuted, tortured and banished because of their faith. Under Hitler's Nazi regime, Jews are forced to publicly identify by wearing the Star of David on their clothing. Their possessions are seized, their businesses taken from them and property redistributed. While unjust, these are the least of their worries. The genocide that is to follow is beyond comprehension. Despite all of this, Eva and her family remain steadfast in their beliefs, in their faith. At times they question how their God could allow such suffering to occur. And unfortunately, they only have to consider their history as a people, to recognise exactly why this persecution is occurring. Eva challenges her God to try and make sense of the horror. She believes that at any moment he will strike down those men who take great pleasure in forcing proud Jews to drink the blood of a pig on a holy day. And when they have survived everything, to have Kurti, a learned teacher and leader in the faith, taken from them, life fails to make any sense at all. Adult Eva identifies as Jewish; some of her sisters do not, but it is essential to her sense of self, that she has recreated the Jewish tradition and family the Nazi's stole from her so many years before.**

### **Injustice and Cruelty**

*"We received a letter saying: 'Your request to move to Klariská has been approved.' We had made no such request." (p45)*

*"Our neighbours were smiling, laughing and cheering. At that moment, I swore that I would never forgive them." (p87)*

*"On arriving at Auschwitz, she was put in a tipping truck with hundreds of other little children, and thrown alive into this concrete pit, at the bottom of which was a fire." (p113)*

*"Most of us in that barracks were children. How we suffered there. Alone, without our parents, in the middle of a waking hell." (p118)*

*"I tiptoed into the room. It was filled with the dismembered body parts of the children who had left our barracks. Bodies lying like broken dolls ... I saw this with the eyes of a thirteen-year-old." (p118)*

*"We saw things together that no human should ever see. And we watched in silence, never sharing a word." (p123)*

**From the beatings at the hands of Gombarik to the medical experimentation in the barracks of Dr Josef Mengele, Eva endures the worst of the Holocaust. She is sent away from her parents, to suffer the evil doings of these cruel men. Not only must she survive, but also be resourceful enough to protect her younger sister Marta. She must lie, withstand physical torment as well as starvation and disease. Her spirit is broken, again and again. What she witnesses in the streets near her home, in her hiding place with Maria Wolschlager is horrific, and yet it pales in comparison to the pure evil that exists in Auschwitz. The removal of her tonsils, with only a blunt needle of anaesthetic because Jews are no longer allowed to be operated on, is horrendous and only the beginning of the unrelenting cruelty inflicted on these people. People she trusts betray her. People she**

**helps refuse her. People in power abuse her. People who could do something turn their backs. She is forced to say goodbye to her brother and sisters she loves, and her parents who can save her, and forge her own way through the degradation that has become her homeland.**

### **Survival**

*"In spite of the horror around us, we were desperate to live." (p120)*

*"We children would also talk incessantly about food and our families. We would dream up stories: everyone's parents were kings and queens, and everyone was rich and happy. We fantasised like this all the time. It helped us face the next torturous and fearful day." (p126)*

*"I was not going to capitulate now that freedom was in sight." (p128)*

*"They each had a story of survival that was filled with courage, despair, darkness, hope, perseverance and luck." (p157)*

**It is remarkable that Eva is even able to recall these events, let alone have survived them with such stoicism and endurance. Is it because of her fierce will to survive, her ingenuity, luck or resourcefulness? Is it her faith that enables her to strengthen her mind and withstand all the cruelty she faces? She is a girl of thirteen, sent away from her family and responsible for the protection of her younger sister. Eva never gives up. It is not always hope or faith that sustains her; at times it is just a refusal to submit, to allow these monsters to dictate her final moments. At only one point does she put her own wellbeing before her sister's, and she feels guilty for it the moment it crosses her mind. It is impossible for readers to truly grasp what it must have been like to be starving, freezing, riddled with disease and petrified of what the future may hold. Upon liberation, when the future should be filled with hope, Eva and Marta must still fight off the despair of being alone and still so far from home. They are finally reunited with their family, eventually healed in the mountains, only to lose their only brother in an accident. And still Eva survives. This time it is not just the physical pain, but another test of her inner strength and faith. The Epilogue is told by a proud Eva, a woman who has fulfilled an ancient promise to rebuild the life that was taken away. Her tradition has survived, her family has survived, her faith has survived.**

### **9 CARD SENTENCES:**

**Cut the following table into 9 cards. Students rearrange the cards into this original pattern. They write 8 sentences using the three words in each line. One sentence for each of the horizontal lines (=3), one sentence for each of the vertical lines (=3), and one for each of the diagonal lines (=2). They must use the three words, in any order in a sentence that shows clearly the connection between the three concepts. The nine words can vary as you please.**

**E.g. 'Despite the extensive *cruelty* Eva faces, her enduring *faith* ensures her *survival*.'**

<b>EVA WEISS</b>	<b>MARTA WEISS</b>	<b>PAPA</b>
<b>TORAH SCROLL</b>	<b>JOSEF MENGELE</b>	<b>STARS</b>
<b>FAITH</b>	<b>CRUELTY</b>	<b>SURVIVAL</b>

<b>Assessment</b>
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**ANALYTICAL RESPONSES:**

1. **"Our tongues were bound in a shameful silence, heavy with some sort of guilt or remorse."**  
**Surviving the Holocaust was as much a miracle as it was a burden. Discuss.**
2. **"Most of us in the barracks were children. How we suffered there. Alone, without our parents, in the middle of a waking hell."**  
**Perhaps what is most surprising about Eva's story was the fact she was only a child. What sustains her during the darkest moments of her memoir *Gazing at the stars*?**
3. **"Our neighbours were smiling, laughing and cheering. At that moment, I swore I would never forgive them."**  
**Those who inflicted the cruelty should be punished, but those who stood by and allowed the horror to unfold are just as much to blame. Discuss.**
4. **Eva's faith is constantly challenged as a Jewish girl growing up during the Holocaust. It is the cause of her suffering as equally as it is the reason for her survival. To what extent do you agree?**
5. **"Even in my darkest moments, the stars had kept me sane. They reminded me of my family, of warmth and protection."**  
**The stars are symbolic of Eva's faith, hope and sense of family that enable her to survive. Discuss.**

**CREATIVE RESPONSES:**

**Any of the writing tasks listed could be extended to fulfil a creative writing task. Further ideas:**

- ❖ **Choose one scene. Write the script for this scene as if it were to be part of a movie.**
- ❖ **Turn Eva's story into a song. Think of appropriate imagery and consider the title carefully.**
- ❖ **Write this story as a picture book, not necessarily for young readers, but as a way of using images and simple language to tell the story.**
- ❖ **Write 20 interview questions that would like to ask Eva Slonim.**



EVA SLONIM (née Weiss) was born in Bratislava, Slovakia, in 1931. A survivor of the Holocaust, Eva relocated with her family to Melbourne in 1948. She married Ben Slonim in 1953, and together they had five children, and many grandchildren and great- grandchildren, fulfilling Eva's wish to rebuild what was lost in Europe. A gifted storyteller, and deeply passionate about the importance of education and community, Eva has for many years given public talks on her experiences during the war.

In March 1939, seven-year-old Eva Weiss's innocence was shattered by Germany's invasion of her homeland, Slovakia. Over the next five years, as the Nazi persecution of Europe's Jews gathered momentum, Eva's parents were forced to send their children into hiding, but she and her sister Marta could not avoid capture.

In this remarkable memoir, Eva recounts her experiences at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. There, she witnessed countless horrors and was herself subjected to torture, extreme deprivation, and medical experimentation at the hands of the notorious Dr Josef Mengele. When the Soviet army liberated the survivors of Auschwitz early in 1945, Eva and Marta faced a new challenge: crossing war-torn Europe to be reunited with their family.

Narrated with the heartbreaking innocence of a young girl and the wisdom of a woman of eighty-three, *Gazing at the Stars* is a record of survival in the face of unimaginable evil. It is the culmination of Eva Slonim's lifelong commitment to educating the world about the Holocaust, and to keeping alive the memory of the many who perished.

Recommended for middle and upper secondary

Subjects: Memoir, Non-fiction, History, World War II, Holocaust studies

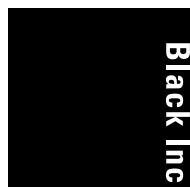
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