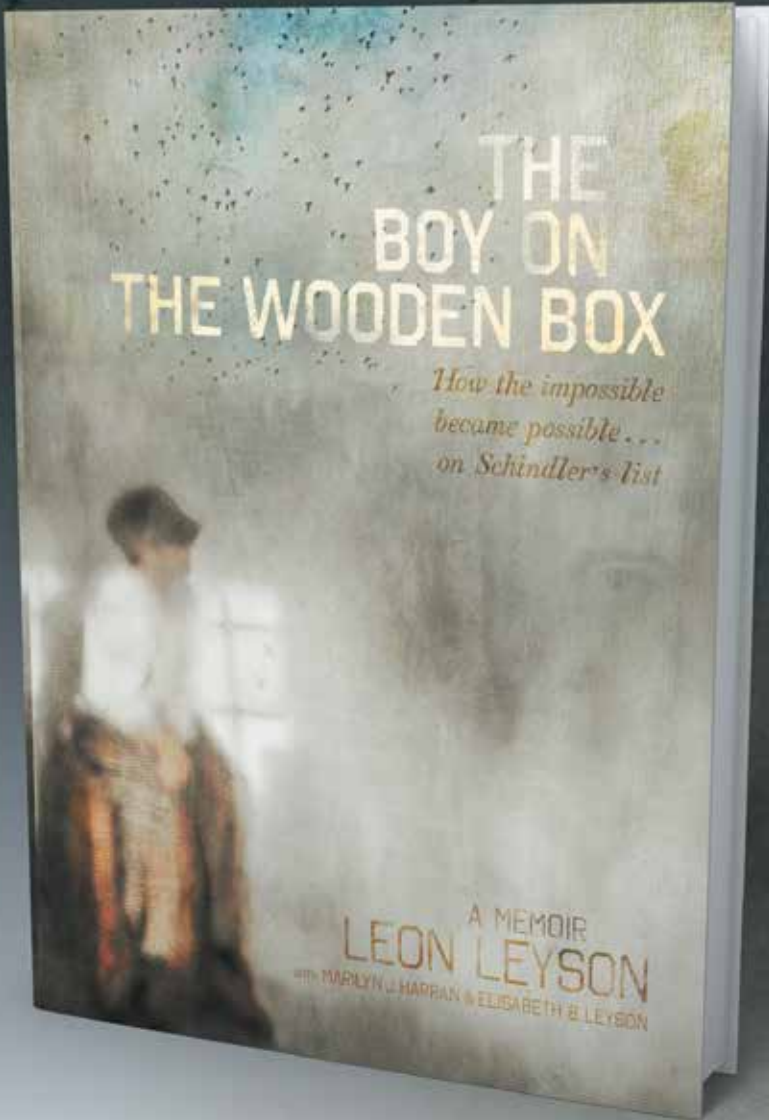


THE BOY ON THE WOODEN BOX

by Leon Leyson

with Marilyn J. Harran and Elisabeth B. Leyson



A Common Core Curriculum Guide for Teachers and Librarians

BACKGROUND / SUMMARY

Leon Leyson was born in 1929 in the small village of Narewka in northeastern Poland. It was a world he described as “a pretty idyllic place to grow up.” His life centered around his loving family, friends, and a caring community. In the spring of 1939, Leon, his parents, brothers, and sister moved to Kraków where, for a few months, Leon enjoyed the modern conveniences and the adventures this cosmopolitan city offered. When the German army invaded Poland in 1939, his idyllic life was obliterated.

Immediately, Jews’ rights were nullified. Jews could not own businesses, and Jewish children were forbidden from attending public schools. These are just two examples of the pervasive restrictions that followed. Soon, Jews in Kraków and other cities were forced to live in ghettos. Ultimately, the Nazis’ goal to annihilate the entire Jewish population was revealed.

With the arrival of the Nazis, nine-year-old Leon Leyson’s life was changed forever. His once carefree existence turned into a life of fear and suffering. Food became more and more scarce. Leon was always hungry, always searching for something to eat. He was brutalized and eventually was separated from his family. He firmly believed that he would not survive the war. Incredibly, his father had the good luck to be hired by Oskar Schindler, a Nazi Party member who had come to Kraków to make his fortune. As the Nazi treatment of the Jews grew increasingly harsh, Schindler chose to protect the Jews who worked for him, using his money and influence to save over 1,000 lives, including young Leon’s. He did this at great risk to himself.

The Boy on the Wooden Box, Leon Leyson’s story of survival during the Holocaust, is told with simplicity and passion. It is a story that raises significant questions about social responsibility, the human potential for good and evil on many levels, and the ability of even seemingly powerless people to resist injustices. Written in 2012, many decades after Leon Leyson’s experiences of the 1930s and 1940s, this memoir teaches readers about the Holocaust and connects them with the powerful story of a boy and his family. Leon Leyson’s survival is ultimately an uplifting story of the power of human resilience and love in the face of evil.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Main Idea and Key Details

The Common Core State Standards expect students to be able to identify the main idea of a text and to explain the key details that support their claim (**RI.4.2, RI.5.2**); to be able to place events in a historical text, telling what happened and why based on specific information in the text (**RI.4.3, 4**), and to cite specific textual evidence to support their analysis of primary and secondary sources (**RH 6-8.1**). The following activities incorporate these skills by focusing on key ideas and supporting evidence.

1. Leon Leyson says his early years in Narewka were *carefree* and *idyllic* and his first months in Kraków were *adventurous* and *full of wonders*. What evidence does he provide to describe his life before the Holocaust?
2. How did Leon Leyson's life change with the occupation of Kraków by German soldiers in 1939? Tell how each of the following events affected him:
 - His father's arrest and incarceration by the Gestapo.
 - His family being forced to move to the ghetto.
 - His transfer to and imprisonment in Plaszów.
 - The life in Plaszów under the command of Amon Goeth.

What other events changed Leon's life into what he describes as "a hell on earth" and "an alien world"?

3. Why does the author remind us that some people repeated the phrase "If this is the worst that happens"?
4. Throughout the book there are several examples of how Jews resisted the Nazis. Find evidence of their resistance. The following are a few examples:
 - Leon sat on a park bench even though it was prohibited.
 - Rabbis continued to conduct religious services in the ghetto.
 - Leon and his mother destroyed the family's furniture before leaving the ghetto.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

How do these examples and others you find inform your understanding of the Holocaust?

5. Leon Leyson writes, “My first impression of Plaszów as hell on earth never changed.” He also states, “My first reaction to Plaszów, that I would never leave alive, was reinforced each day.” What details does he give to help us understand this?
6. The author describes Amon Goeth, the commandant of Plaszów, this way: “He seemed to thrive on inflicting agony on the helpless.” How did Goeth exacerbate (make worse) Leon Leyson’s suffering?
7. Leon Leyson states that by resisting the Nazi racist ideology, by treating Jews humanely, and by placing himself in danger to protect his Jewish workers, Oskar Schindler “defines heroism.” Do you agree? Why should Oskar Schindler be considered a hero? Provide evidence from the book that supports your opinion.
8. Do you think the title *The Boy on the Wooden Box* expresses a crucial message of the book? Explain why or why not.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Craft and Structure

The Common Core State Standards ask us to pay attention to how a text presents information and uses structure to advance an explanation. The first activity focuses on the author's use of foreshadowing and retrospect when presenting information. This corresponds to standards **RH.6.5** – **RH.10.5**. The second activity highlights the author's use of a prologue to establish the setting of the book and an epilogue to bring closure to the story by updating it. This activity corresponds to standard **RI.4.5**.

Foreshadowing and Retrospect

1. In Chapter 1, the author makes extensive use of foreshadowing (hinting at what will happen in the future) and retrospect (looking back at past events with the knowledge of what actually happened). He uses phrases like “little did I know,” “it turned out that,” “in retrospect,” and “it would never have occurred to me” to contrast what he thought in the past with what he learns in the present. This use of foreshadowing and retrospect makes the narrative dramatic. It raises questions and arouses the reader's desire to know what actually happened.

Work with a partner to complete the charts that consist of quotes from Chapter 1 that make use of both foreshadowing and retrospect. First, read each quote in column 1, focusing on the underlined words. In column 2, write questions that each quote raises. What information do you want to know? Third, after reading the book, write answers to your questions. What is the relationship between the foreshadowing/retrospect in Chapter 1 and the actual events described later in the book?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Foreshadowing/Retrospect	Questions Raised by the Foreshadowing/Retrospect	How Actual Events & Foreshadowing/Retrospect Are Connected
<p>“My father was a tall, handsome man who always took great pride in his appearance. He liked the more formal attire of men in Kraków and gradually purchased several elegant suits... <u>Little did I know, those very suits would help to save our lives</u> during the terrible years ahead.”</p>		
<p>“Those of us who were Jewish spoke Yiddish at home, Polish in public, and Hebrew in religious school or at the synagogue. I also learned some German from my parents. <u>It turned out that knowing German would prove more useful to us than we ever could have imagined.</u>”</p>		

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Foreshadowing/Retrospect	Questions Raised by the Foreshadowing/Retrospect	How Actual Events & Foreshadowing/Retrospect Are Connected
<p><u>“In retrospect, my parents and many others made a terrible mistake in thinking the Germans who came to Narewka in the Second World War would be like the Germans who had come in the First World War. They thought they would be people like themselves, men doing their military duty, anxious to return to their wives and children, and appreciative of any hospitality and kindness.”</u></p>		
<p><i>“How many tears lie in these letters And how much lament.”</i></p> <p>“In the evenings, when I sang this song with the Lansman family, those words seemed like ancient history. <u>It never would have occurred to me that those words were forecasting my imminent and terrifying future.</u>”</p>		

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

2. Prologue/Epilogue

In the *Prologue*, the author provides background information about people he will later introduce in the memoir. Tell what he reveals about the following people:

- Leon Leyson (himself)
- His family
- Oskar Schindler

In the *Epilogue*, the author updates what happened to these people. What additional information is provided? How do the *Prologue* and *Epilogue* add to your understanding of the events described in this memoir?

Integrating Information

The Common Core State Standards emphasize that students should be able to write or to speak about two sources by comparing and/or contrasting important points in the two on similar topics (**RI.4.9 – RI.5.9**). Looking at writing by Anne Frank and Leon Leyson provides the opportunity to read two texts about young people living during the Holocaust. The Common Core State Standards also require the integration of visual information such as videos as well as additional print material (**RH.6-8.7**). After reading Leon Leyson's memoir, viewing a video of him discussing his experiences is a good place to start. Go to the website "sfi.usc.edu" and search Leon Leyson in the Visual History Archives to view videos of Leon speaking about his experiences.

1. Connections to *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*

Although Anne Frank and Leon Leyson had unique experiences during the Holocaust, they address a number of similar topics. The quotes on the succeeding pages are grouped according to topics. After reading their personal accounts, discuss what the quotes on the following topics reveal about the similarities and differences of their ideas and experiences. Then, using *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and *The Boy on the Wooden Box*, add to this list of topics and quotes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Topic	Anne Frank	Leon Leyson
<p>Heroism/ Admiration for Those Who Helped the Jews</p>	<p>“It’s amazing how much these generous and unselfish people do, risking their own lives to help and save others. . . The best example of this is our own helpers, who have managed to pull us safely to shore. . . That’s something we should never forget; while others display their heroism in battle or against the Germans, our helpers prove theirs every day by their good spirits and affection.” (Friday, January 29, 1944)</p>	<p>“As an influential Nazi, Schindler did have a choice. Countless times he could have abandoned us, taken his fortune, and fled . . . Instead, he put his own life in danger every time he protected us for no other reason than it was the right thing to do. I am not a philosopher, but I believe that Oskar Schindler defines heroism. He proves that one person can stand up to evil and make a difference.”</p>
<p>People on the “Outside”</p>	<p>“Whenever someone comes in from outside, with the wind in their clothes and the cold on their cheeks, I feel like burying my head under the blankets to keep from thinking, ‘When will we be allowed to breathe fresh air again?’ I can’t do that—on the contrary, I have to hold my head up high and put a bold face on things, but the thoughts keep coming anyway. Not just once, but over and over.” (Friday, December 24, 1943)</p>	<p>“Through the barbed-wire fences surrounding the camp, I could look out and sometimes see the children of the German officers marching back and forth, wearing their Hitler Youth uniforms and singing songs praising the Führer, Adolf Hitler. They were so exuberant, so full of life and enthusiasm, while just a few yards away from them I was exhausted and depressed, struggling to survive another day. Only the thickness of the barbed wire separated my life in hell from their life of freedom; we might as well have been on separate planets. I couldn’t begin to understand the injustice of it all.”</p>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Topic	Anne Frank	Leon Leyson
Liberation	<p>“A huge commotion in the Annex! Is this really the beginning of the long-awaited liberation? The liberation we’ve all talked so much about, which still seems too good, too much of a fairy tale to come true? Will this year, 1944, bring us victory? We don’t know yet. But where there’s hope, there’s life. It fills us with fresh courage and makes us strong again.” (Tuesday, June 6, 1944)</p>	<p>“‘You are free,’ he told us. Free! We were speechless. What was there to say? What words could possibly express the tumult of feelings that flooded over us? Freedom seemed like an impossible fantasy. Before he left, Schindler asked that we not take revenge on the people in the nearby town, since they had helped him to keep us alive. Then he gave us each a bolt of cloth and a bottle of vodka, goods he knew we could barter for food, shelter, and clothes.”</p>
Going Public	<p>“You’ve known for a long time that my greatest wish is to be a journalist, and later on, a famous writer. We’ll have to wait and see if these grand illusions (or delusions!) will ever come true, but up to now I’ve had no lack of topics. In any case, after the war I’d like to publish a book called <i>The Secret Annex</i>. It remains to be seen whether I’ll succeed, but my diary can serve as the basis.” (Thursday, May 11, 1944)</p>	<p>“My own life changed with the release of Spielberg’s movie <i>Schindler’s List</i>. Until the film I had remained mostly silent about my past. When there was such enormous interest in the movie, I began rethinking my reluctance to talk about my experiences . . . Maybe I hadn’t really been ready to speak about my experiences until so many years later, or maybe people hadn’t really been ready to listen, or both. The outpouring of interest from the community touched me deeply.”</p>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

2. Integrating Visual Information: Watching and Discussing a Video of Leon Leyson

Leon Leyson shared his life story when he gave his testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation in 1995. Visit [YouTu.be/LMyZ4LTpqWo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMYz4LTpqWo) to watch the video.

After watching the video, discuss the new information you learned about:

- Why Jews didn't hide from the Nazis.
- Why Jews could not escape to other countries.
- Why Leon Leyson believes that Oskar Schindler fits Joseph Campbell's definition of a hero as an ordinary human being who does "the best of things in the worst of times."

3. Integrating Information: Accounts of Surviving the Holocaust

Compare and contrast young people's experiences during the Holocaust by introducing the following accounts:

- *Night* by Elie Wiesel
- *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry
- *Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story* by Lila Perl and Marion Blumenthal Lazan
- *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust* by Livia Bitton-Jackson
- *I Will Plant You a Lilac Tree: A Memoir of a Schindler's List Survivor* by Laura Hillman

4. Integrating Information: Additional Online Resources

For educators interested in searching through Leon Leyson's testimony, using his testimony in multimedia projects, and accessing additional testimonies for use in the classroom, please visit [IWitness.usc.edu](https://www.witness.usc.edu) to sign up for a free account.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

lWitness is an educational platform, which enables students to engage on an individual level with testimony to discover connections to their own lives while building the media literacies needed in the 21st century.

For an opportunity to bring additional lessons from the Holocaust to your classroom, please visit the website for Chapman University's annual Holocaust Art and Writing Contest: Chapman.edu/Holocaust-Arts-Contest.

Writing

The Common Core State Standards emphasize writing argument (**W.6-8.1**) and writing narrative to develop real experiences using effective techniques (**W.6-8.2**). The activities below reflect these standards.

1. Writing an Argument

Identify your own criteria for what you consider essential to qualify as a hero. You may agree with Leon Leyson that Oskar Schindler is a hero or you may write about someone else who meets the criteria you have established for a hero.

Select a person you believe is a hero and write about that person. Follow the steps below:

- First, make a claim expressing why you think the person is a hero.
Be sure to include the criteria you have used to define the person as a hero.
- Second, acknowledge any reasonable opposing claims.
- Third, give evidence to support your claim.
- Finally, end with a conclusion that supports your claim.

2. Writing a Narrative that Incorporates Foreshadowing and Retrospect

Write a narrative explaining an important event in your life. As you narrate the story, use foreshadowing to hint at what is to come and retrospect to comment on how you now understand this event.



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