

# *Brundibar* Study Guide

Built by the CYPRESS  
Committee

The Committee to Promote Respect in Schools

Evansville, Indiana

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# Why *Brundibar*?

Dear Teachers,

This teaching guide centers around the opera *Brundibar*, a children's opera that was performed fifty-five times from its premiere on September 23, 1943, to its last performance in October, 1944. The story itself is a simple one. It is a story of two children who must find help for their sick mother in impossible circumstances. The town bully, Brundibar, prevents them from reaching their goal until a bird, a cat, and a dog advise them to join with their friends and work together to defeat the bully. The children join together, and good wins the day. This is not high drama.

However, the spirit of the opera lies in its history and goes well beyond the simple tale of good and evil. This opera represents the power of music over the most miserable of conditions. Its music and story, in another setting, may have been quickly forgotten. But the story of how this opera came to be performed and how it affected the young performers is a story that still resonates with audiences of all ages.

It is important that audiences understand the history of this opera before they see it. The CYPRESS Committee has gathered the following information, list of resources, lesson plans and ideas for those teachers bringing their students to our production of *Brundibar*. We hope that this information will be helpful to teachers preparing their students for the experience.

We look forward to seeing you and your students at the performances.

Sincerely,

*The CYPRESS Committee*

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# United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust

These guidelines have been developed by the education staff at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

## Why Teach the Holocaust?

Because the objective of teaching any subject is to engage the intellectual curiosity of the student in order to inspire critical thought and personal growth, it is helpful to structure your lesson plan on the Holocaust by keeping questions of rationale, or purpose, in mind. Teachers rarely have enough time to teach these complicated topics, though they may be required to do so by state standards. Nonetheless, lessons must be developed, and difficult content choices must be made. A well-thought out rationale helps with these difficult curricular decisions. In addition, people within and outside of the school community may question the use of valuable classroom time to study the Holocaust. Again, a well-formed rationale will help address these questions and concerns.

## Guidelines

### 1. Define the term “Holocaust”

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims—six million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

2. Do not teach or imply that the Holocaust was inevitable. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act.
3. Avoid simple answers to complex questions. Be wary of oversimplification. Allow the students to think about the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust and often made decision-making difficult and uncertain.
4. Strive for precision of language. Strive to help your students clarify the information presented and encourage them, for example, the differences between prejudice and discrimination, collaborators and bystanders, armed and spiritual resistance, direct and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility. Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions.
5. Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust. Most students express empathy for victims of mass murder. However, it is not uncommon for students to assume that the victims may have done something to justify the actions against them and thus, to place inappropriate blame on the victims themselves. One helpful technique for engaging students in a discussion of the Holocaust is to think of the participants involved as belonging to one of four categories: victims, perpetrators, rescuers, and bystanders. Examine the actions, motives, and decisions of each group. Portray all individuals, including victims and perpetrators, as human beings who are capable of moral judgement and independent decision making. As with any topic, students should make careful distinctions about sources of information...Strongly encourage your students to investigate carefully the origin and authorship of all material, particularly anything found on the internet.

6. Avoid comparison of pain. This is a study of the Holocaust. Do not imply that the victims of this horror suffered any more or less than those who have suffered other genocides.
7. Do not romanticize history. People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. Given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped to rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic tales in a unit on the Holocaust can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history... Accuracy of fact along with a balanced perspective on the history must be a priority.
8. Contextualize the history. The events of the Holocaust must be put in historical context. These events did not happen in isolation.
9. Translate statistics into people. In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges easy comprehension. Show that individual people—families of grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and emphasize that within the larger historical narrative is a diversity of personal experience. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature provide students with a way of making meaning out of collective numbers and add individual voices to a collective experience. (See Symborska poem, Appendix 1)
10. Make responsible methodological choices. One of the primary concerns of educators teaching the history of the Holocaust is how to present horrific, historical images in a sensitive and appropriate manner. In studying complex human behavior, many teachers rely

upon simulation exercises to help students “experience” unfamiliar situations. Even when great care is taken to prepare a class for such an activity, simulating experiences from the Holocaust remains pedagogically unsound. The activity may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression that they now know what it was like to suffer or even to participate during the Holocaust. It is best to draw upon numerous primary sources, provide survivor testimony, and refrain from simulation games that lead to a trivialization of the subject matter.

Furthermore, word scrambles, crossword puzzles, counting objects, model building, and other gimmicky exercises tend not to encourage critical analysis but lead instead to low-level types of thinking and, in the case of Holocaust curricula, trivialization of the history.

(The full text of these Guidelines can be found at [www.USHMM.org](http://www.USHMM.org) in the education section.)

Three of the most important songs from the libretto are the lullaby, Brundibar's song, and the victory march. Even though the words are sometimes choppy because of the translation, the words of these songs can be used in class discussions and in lesson planning.

## Lullaby

Mom rocks a cradle, humming a lullaby,  
and wonders what will be,  
when days have drifted by.  
Every bird must one day fly,  
spread his wings, leave his nest,  
he will fly, God knows where,  
to pursue his quest.

Trees grow up, weeks go by,  
clouds move on in the sky,  
day by day, far away...

Dear Mommy, you should see  
how we grew strong and fair,  
To think about the past maybe you do not care,  
how you used to bathe us in the tub, naked, bare,  
and with love gave us names: Kitten, Teddy  
Bear...

Trees grow up, weeks go by,  
clouds move on, in the sky,  
day by day, far away...

Mom rocks a cradle, which time left empty,  
cold,  
and wonders what will be, when she is frail and  
old.

### Brundibar's Song

Doggone children, what a bother!  
If I only were their father,  
I would teach them proper manners:  
Courtesy, respect, and honor.  
And you kids don't make a riot!  
Where I rule you must be quiet.  
Here's my empire, I'm the czar,  
Organ-grinder Brundibar.  
When I play and turn this handle,  
Sing with me, don't make a scandal!  
Don't you like my music making?  
Out of here! Or you'll be aching!  
Of this show I am the star!  
I, organ-grinder Brundibar

## Finale: The Victory March

We've won a victory, over the tyrant mean,  
Sound trumpets, beat your drum, and show us your  
esteem!

We've won a victory, since we were not fearful,  
since we were not tearful,  
Because we marched along, singing our happy  
song,  
Bright, joyful, and cheerful.

He who loves his mom and dad, mother and native  
land,  
Who wants the tyrant's end,  
Join us hand in hand,  
And be our welcome friend.

An excerpt from

## *Brundibar* at Theresienstadt

### A People's Struggle to Maintain a Level of Musical Culture in the Face of Imminent Peril

JOE PEARCE

BRUNDIBAR—when I first heard of it, all I could think of was *wunderbar*, hardly an apt association in light of the facts. But to get those facts requires more than a little backtracking, and *Opera Quarterly* readers should be assured that what follows will, along its circuitous route, be linked ultimately to an operatic "happening" that clearly belongs in these pages.

Theresienstadt held a very special place in the Nazi mind as a "showplace\* of sorts. It was not a death camp in the usual sense. People died there for different reasons: old age; lack of decent medical care; deterioration of health due to improper nutrition; or some other "natural" cause. As a rule, in Theresienstadt they neither lined up people to be shot nor gassed or tortured them. In fact, this "model" camp was intended to house the "elite" of the Czech-Jewish cultural establishment, such as First World War heroes. (Many German, Dutch, and Danish Jews would eventually end up in Theresienstadt.)

Designed to accommodate a population of roughly six thousand, at one time it held ten times that number. For most it was simply a stopping place, sometimes for two or more years on the way to Auschwitz or other death camps. Of the 140,000 people sent there, 87,000 were later transported out, usually to their deaths, 33,000 died in the camp itself, and some 20,000 survived to be liberated. Obviously, it was an awful place to be, but if you had to be in a concentration camp, Theresienstadt was the one to aim for. Nazis at times invited the Committee of the International Red Cross to observe how humanely the inhabitants were treated in Theresienstadt. Their host for at least one visit was Nazi personage Adolf Eichmann.

Given time, leadership, and even a glimmer of hope, human beings have been known to adapt themselves to even the most terrible conditions, and this includes concentration camps. Many camps had boards of governors, appointed leaders, some sort of social life, and surreptitious education. Theresienstadt was exceptional, perhaps unique, for the quality of cultural life, which, after many initial difficulties, became quite viable. This cultural life embraced various branches of the performing arts, including music, and specifically opera.

The camp's leading composers provided a good deal of new musical compositions, and provisions were made for training the children housed there. All of this was conducted in an atmosphere of repression while the singers, instrumentalists, and composers kept being shipped out and replaced by others. In the context of the Holocaust, this may be a minor area of investigation, but it cannot be dismissed, even by non-musicians or the most callous historians. It demonstrates the most inspiring moral courage in a people's struggle to maintain musical culture in the face of imminent peril.

*Brundibar* was presented more often than any other opera in Theresienstadt—fifty-five

times in all. It is an opera for which performance criteria must be somewhat altered, and it is not an easy piece to discuss. *Brundibar* is a children's opera, named for its nasty protagonist. It [was] written not only for children to enjoy, but also for children to *perform*.

*Brundibar* was written by the Czech composer Hans Krasa (1899-1944), who was in Theresienstadt for two and a half years and died at Auschwitz. Krasa was not an unknown composer. Even during his adolescence he had had works performed at Salzburg and St. Moritz. *Brundibar* was written with librettist Adolf Hoffmeister for a Czech Ministry of Education and Culture competition in 1938, but the contest never took place and the opera went unperformed until the winter of 1942-43, when it received its premiere under possibly the most adverse circumstances ever encountered for a new opera. By this time Jewish musical activity had been banned in Prague, the original orchestral score lost, and the composer himself transported to Theresienstadt.

The first performance took place rather clandestinely in Prague at a Jewish orphanage for boys in the presence of some 150 invited guests. The "orchestra" comprised a pianist, violinist, and drummer; all worked from the surviving piano reduction of the lost score. A few more performances followed, but eventually most of the staff and inmates of the orphanage were also transported to Theresienstadt.

The piano score now back in his hands, Krasa reorchestrated the work for thirteen instrumentalists, and it is in this form that the opera survives. Fifty-five performances ensued, including the one for the visiting International Red Cross committee. After the death of Krasa and the liberation of the camp, the opera fell out of sight, but not forever.

The plot of *Brundibar* is brief and easily told. Two children have no money to buy the milk their sick mother needs to recover. Imitating an organ-grinder, Brundibar, they sing on a street corner to raise money, but Brundibar and a policeman chase them off. While spending the night on a street bench, they discover various animals offering to help. The neighborhood children form a chorus with them, and the resulting lullaby brings contributions from passersby. The jealous Brundibar steals their money, but the children catch him. Their victory song concludes the opera.

The opera... is utterly charming in its small-scale way. ... The opera is in two acts and runs about thirty minutes, is completely tonal and easy on youthful and older ears alike. The music may be deliberately unsophisticated, but it is never condescending. About a third of the opera is spoken over ongoing accompaniment. Although there are no truly memorable melodies, certain moments are most impressive musically, especially in light of the meager forces employed: the street filling up with people in the early morning; the act 2 Overture-Serenade; the children's lullaby and victory choruses.

The opening of Brundibar's first solo... is much in line with the villain's character. It is easy to imagine musically inclined children wanting to perform such a work, perhaps more so than just watch it. I would think the most appreciative nonadult audience would fall between the ages of six and eleven. Unfortunately, such an appreciation would have manifested itself more readily and enthusiastically fifty or sixty years ago than it would today [unless the audience has been well-prepared and made aware of the opera's significance].

Also, the opera had a message at Theresienstadt fifty years ago that would be

less relevant to any current audience, if understood at all by a youthful one.

Portions of the libretto were quite obviously aimed at these people's oppressors and implied some hope for the future:

Become members of our band,  
Right and justice we'll defend.  
Dictator will be defeated,  
United we'll win our stand.  
We shall give a good example  
To all people in this land.

Or:

He who loves his dad,  
Mother and native land,  
Who wishes tyrant's end,  
Join us hand in hand  
And be our welcome friend.

Or a special Theresienstadt version of the above:

He who loves justice and will  
Abide by it, and who is not afraid,  
Is our friend and can play with us.

In conclusion, when we look at some of the twentieth century's prime examples of man's inhumanity to man, we are given precious little to hope for in the way of any anticipated improvement in human nature. But hope we do, for even the worst of these examples—and the Holocaust was surely that—can provide something of worth. So with *Brundibar*. Good as it is, ten of its kind would not begin to compensate for the life of even one Theresienstadt victim. This opera and the other surviving musical works are all that remain. We can savor it as representative of the hope that survives even the most hopeless situations, rather than dismiss it and again curse the long-irreversible circumstances that nurtured it. Unlike its creators and [most of its] first performers, *Brundibar* has survived... to tell its story. A minor miracle, perhaps, but miraculous nonetheless.

Pearce, Joe. "Brundibar at Theresienstadt." *Opera Quarterly*, Summer 1994.

## ***Brundibar*** History and Information for Teachers

by  
Lisa Muller

***Brundibar*** is a simple children's tale of good prevailing over evil. But it is so much more than that. The story itself can be seen as an allegory or as a parable. However, the context in which the story was written and performed is what gives it its greatest meaning. In addition, the story itself, as well as the history of that story, has many lessons that apply to our students today.

The story of ***Brundibar*** begins with the founding of the first concentration camp in Germany in 1933. Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Less than one month later, a proclamation was passed that severely curtailed individual rights and civil liberties, including the right to privacy, the right to a free speech, and the right to assemble. The German people lost all those hard-won civil rights in the blink of an eye. The government had frightened the people into accepting these losses by appealing to their fears. Nazi philosophy thrived by dividing people-- by separating groups and promoting their suspicions of one another. The Nazi's promised security, safety, and prosperity to those who gave up their rights. People comforted themselves by saying that they had done nothing wrong, so the loss of rights wouldn't hurt them. They lulled themselves into a false sense of security by telling themselves that only those who somehow deserved punishment would be punished.

The first concentration camp, Dachau, was ostensibly opened to protect the people from the dangerous enemies of the state—Communists, Catholics, Protestants, and anyone else who might be called an enemy of the

state. Anyone who objected to the new rules was in danger of being sent to Dachau. The Nazis couldn't bear the idea of criticism or questioning.

One of the first tenets in the "re-education" program at Dachau was, "Tolerance is weakness." These words should make our blood run cold. This is an idea that seems more and more prevalent in our world today. The idea of "the other" makes discrimination and prejudice acceptable. These ideas are NOT acceptable. When a group begins to think that they are better than others, or that their way of living or their way of praying is the only right way of doing things, we have the atmosphere where fear, hate, and prejudice thrive. Teachers and religious leaders should be on the front lines of those who resist this way of thinking. Tolerance is not weakness; it is the strength of a diverse, vibrant society.

Dachau, which was near Munich, was founded mainly for political prisoners. From that one camp grew an elaborate system of camps that eventually imprisoned millions. It has been estimated that eleven million men, women and children died in this camp system between 1933 and 1945. By the time the war ended in 1945, more than one thousand camps had been in existence for at least part of this time. Those are startling numbers, and it is almost impossible for us to imagine the size and the tragedy of the camp system.

It has been said that one death is a tragedy, one hundred deaths is a disaster, and a thousand deaths is a statistic. With a number like eleven million, it is possible to forget the tragedy of each one of those deaths. But we must never forget, and we must never let others forget, that each one of those eleven million was someone's mother, father, brother, sister, grandparent, or beloved child.

The camp system consisted of several types of camps. Probably the names we know are those of the **death camps**—those horrible names: Auschwitz- Birkenau, Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Chelmno. These camps were set up as killing factories. Other camps were set up as **labor camps**, many of them built next to factories whose owners paid the Nazis a very nominal sum for a steady supply of slave labor. In her memoir, one survivor tells of being purchased by a factory owner for the equivalent of approximately one dollar (Klein 104). **Transit camps** were the gathering stations, where prisoners were sorted. Decisions of life or death were made with the flick of a wrist as the prisoners were introduced to life in the camps. If the prisoner could be of some use, they were sent to labor camps. If not, they were sent to death camps. **Ghettos** were walled off areas in cities and towns where the Jewish population was forced to live in squalid and horrible conditions.

Terezin (referred to as Thereisenstadt by the Nazi's) was unique in this system. It was referred to as the "model camp." It was the attempt by the Nazi's to cover up their horrible crimes against humanity. It was a combination of a ghetto and a camp, and the constantly changing rules were different here than in any other camp. Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef had built the town of Terezin as a fortress town in 1780. High ramparts surrounded and protected the town from possible invaders. Later the town became a garrison, and in the years prior to World War II, Terezin had become a regular town, which was home to about 5,000.

Czechoslovakia was invaded and conquered by the Nazis in March, 1939. Almost immediately, life became very difficult for the so-called "enemies" of the Nazis, especially Jews. Anyone who questioned the Nazis in any way, or anyone who had resisted the invasion either had to flee their

homeland or face imprisonment. The need soon arose to provide a place of imprisonment for all these “enemies of the state.”

Terezin was “discovered” by the Nazis and converted to a combination ghetto and camp. In November, 1941, it was renamed Theresienstadt by the Nazi's, the 5000 Czechs who lived there were moved out, and prisoners began arriving. In the Nazi design, the high ramparts of the original fortress were used to keep people in rather than out. The first transport was a group of 1000 young men who were sent to “ready the camp.”

Many more Czechs began to arrive in the winter of 1941- 1942. Beginning in 1942, many German and Austrian Jews were sent to Terezin. Terezin became the way that the Nazis used to deny what was really happening to the people who were being taken away. Their imprisonment was called “protective custody,” and the camp was even advertised as a spa. Those sent there were the “prominent” people, those who would be missed. Therefore, Terezin was filled with professors, performers, musicians, artists and scientists. It became one of the only places in Europe where culture was fostered during the dark years of Nazi domination.

Terezin was also unique because it had so many children. Children did not last long in the other camps. If they couldn't work, they were immediately sent to the death camps, and when they arrived there, they were immediately murdered. Since this was the camp that the Nazis used to show the world that the camp system wasn't so bad, children lasted longer.

However, conditions there were horrible, and of the 15,000 children who moved through Terezin, fewer than 150 survived. At its height, the population of Terezin reached 60,000. This was in a town built for 5,000 to 6,000 citizens. Sanitation facilities were indescribable. Disease and starvation ravaged the population. People lived on top of one another.

"As total living area shrank to less than 18 square feet per person, the Jewish administration...worked frantically to exploit every inch of available space. New arrivals were jammed into attics or cellars, even though such quarters were often without windows, plumbing, heat, and in the case of cellars, floors. Rooms that once had housed three or four people now had to shelter up to sixty ... The town's plumbing facilities were primitive to begin with, for flush toilets and running water had only been installed a few years earlier... Each toilet now had to serve over fifty and sometimes as many as one hundred people. Most had no lights and this, plus their constant use, made them impossible to keep clean. Water taps were few in number... [and] their use had to be restricted to three one-hour periods a day. A resident could reckon on getting a shower at the central bathhouse only once every two months...

Many other factors contributed to making Theresienstadt's shelter situation a source of torment. A constant shortage of coal caused most residents to shiver all winter-- some actually froze to death-- while the lack of ventilation caused those in the attics to nearly suffocate during the summer. Also, families remained separated for the most part, and this only increased with the establishment of children's houses. Now, father, mother, sons, and daughters would typically find themselves all living in different places, with a grandparent in still another location" (Berkley 46-47).

It is not easy to characterize Terezin, because the rules and the conditions were constantly changing. At first, all gatherings were prohibited, as were classes for the children or adults. Later, schools were approved, but all creative activities, such as music, art, and creative writing were banned. Even later, music was allowed, but art and writing were still prohibited. At

times, musical performances were ordered by the Nazis, usually to “show” how wonderful life was in Terezin.

*Brundibar* had been written in 1938 by young Czech composer Hans Krasa. It had been written for a competition, but the competition was cancelled by the tragic events of 1938 and 1939. An important part of Czechoslovakia was given to Germany in 1938, and the Nazis invaded and captured the rest of the country in 1939. Life immediately became difficult for all the Czechs, but especially Jewish Czechs. Krasa was in one of the first transports sent to Terezin in the winter of 1941- 1942.

In the story of *Brundibar*, two children discover one morning that their mother is ill. They attempt to earn money to buy milk for her, only to be thwarted by the bully Brundibar. The bullying Brundibar tyrannizes the town square, and the dejected children almost give up. A cat, a dog, and a sparrow befriend the children and issue a call to action. All the children of the town unite to defeat the bully, earn the money for the milk, and return home in triumph.

With so many composers and musicians in Terezin, a revival of *Brundibar* was staged. The cast, all of whom lived in filthy and incredibly crowded living conditions, all of whom were constantly cold, hungry, and ridden with fleas and lice, all of whom had lost their homes and all of their possessions, and many of whom had lost their parents and most of their extended family and friends, worked to perfect their parts. All of those who were over the age of twelve or thirteen also worked twelve to fourteen hours each day before their rehearsals. Still, those in the opera had been very anxious to be a part of it.

The premiere was on September 23, 1943, with about 150 in the audience. The audience crowded in to an attic room, sitting on rough planks

or on the dirty floors. As Joza Karas says in the notes to the CD version, "The audience quickly grasped a more profound meaning than its authors had ever considered. In the minds of the audience, the simple plot of *Brundibar* came to represent all that the Nazi regime stood for, and when the children sang their final song of victory over the mean Brundibar, there was no doubt as to the evil he personified. To make the point even more obvious, the poet Emil Saudek altered the last few lines of the original text." The last few lines of the original opera were as follows: "He who loves his mother and father and his native land is our friend and can play with us." In the revamped version of Terezin, the last lines became "He who loves justice and will defend it and who is not afraid is our friend and can play with us." The meaning of the play had changed for both the performers and for the audience.

As Ela Weissberger says in *The Cat with the Yellow Star*, "When we were singing, we forgot all our troubles. ... It was possible to have hope...We were happy, and so was the audience. We all wanted to completely exhaust that moment of freedom. When we were onstage, it was the only time we were allowed to remove our yellow stars" (Rubin *Cat* 23,24).

The opera was performed a total of fifty-five times. In June, 1944, it was performed as part of the great and repulsive hoax that the Nazis successfully perpetrated upon the world. The International Red Cross visited Terezin to assess the system of concentration camps. As the transports left for Auschwitz from one end of the camp, the Red Cross officials at the other end of the camp enjoyed one of the last productions of *Brundibar*, convincing themselves that things were not so bad in the concentration

camps. A production of *Brundibar* was featured in the Nazi propaganda film known sarcastically as "The Fuhrer Gives the Jews a City."

The last production of *Brundibar* occurred in October, 1944. More than 20,000 people were transported from Terezin to the death camps in September and October, 1944, including Hans Krasa and most of the children who had been in the cast. Fewer than twenty of the many children who had participated in the fifty-five performances survived the war.

The story of Terezin and of *Brundibar* seems to be a grim one. However, many positive and hopeful concepts arise from the history of this simple children's story.

First, the story itself is one of hope. The cat, the dog, and the sparrow issue the dejected children a call to action. The children, by being brave and being helped by their friends, prevail over the bully Brundibar.

Second, the singing and the performances themselves were acts of resistance. The children and the adults that worked so hard to put on the shows had refused to give in to the despair and the dehumanization of the camps. The teachers and others who worked with the children always referred to everyone by name. They treated each other with the respect that was lacking in all their other activities in camp life.

Third, the performers were transformed and lifted out of their every day misery by the power of the arts. Prisoners who were involved in this and other performances in Terezin have remarked about the power of the experience. Singing became not only a temporary escape from reality, but a means to endure their unthinkable reality. According to Ela Weissbergher, one of the surviving members of the cast, "The show meant more to its young performers than food, for it helped them overcome feelings of

helplessness while giving them a sense of membership in the human race" (Berkley 142).

Another survivor of Terezin, one who sang in performances of Verdi's *Requiem* rather than in *Brundibar*, says "The hours and hours which I spent, incredibly happily, during performances...were the most profound experiences of my life and cannot be compared with anything that happened later (Friesova 147)."

While thinking about Holocaust history and the lessons that we can learn from it, it is useful to think about the roles of perpetrator, victim, rescuer, and bystander. We must ask ourselves to think about these roles in our own lives. In our homes, in our schools and workplaces, in our society, do we take the role of perpetrator, victim, bystander, or rescuer?

Are we perpetrators? Are we ever guilty of bullying, discrimination, or cruelty? Do we make fun of an individual or a group? Do we tell a joke or use words that hurt others?

Are we guilty of being bystanders? Are we the ones who listen to the cruel jokes or words without speaking up? Are we the "guiltless" who shrug our shoulders and say that there is nothing we can do? Are we the ones who say that we have done nothing wrong, when we have done nothing right?

Are we the rescuers? Do we speak up for the rights of others? Do we speak up when unkind words are used? Do we go out of our comfort zones to include others who are often excluded? Do we resist the tendency to just accept the status quo?

The lessons of the Holocaust in general, and of Terezin and *Brundibar* in particular, are important ones. The Holocaust teaches us what prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and fear can bring. Terezin teaches us the horrors of how our fellow human beings were treated. It can also teach us

about the incredible strength and resilience of the human spirit. The performances of *Brundibar* can teach us about resistance, cooperation, and the power of art, music, and education. Those who were a part of *Brundibar* preserved their souls and their spirits, even as most of them lost their lives.

Literature, whether it is a children's story, an opera, a play, or a classic novel, should serve as both a window and a mirror. *Brundibar* gives us a window into the lives of the children who were incarcerated in Terzin during the Holocaust. It also acts as a mirror, as we reflect on our own lives and on our role in society. It serves as a call to action, just as the words of the cat, the sparrow, and the dog in the opera called the children to action.

In their book for young readers, published in 2002, Maurice Sendak and Tony Kushner have added additional lines from the bully Brundibar:

"They believe they've won the fight,  
They believe I'm gone-- not quite!  
Nothing ever works out neatly--  
Bullies don't give up completely.  
One departs, the next appears,  
And we shall meet again, my dears!  
Though I go, I won't go far--  
I'll be back.

Love,  
Brundibar

The state of our world in the twenty-first century has shown us that the bully has not been vanquished. We must continue to pay attention to the bullies. We must treat our fellow human beings with respect, understanding,

and compassion. Tolerance is NOT weakness. It is the strength that binds us together for a better world. The history of the Holocaust provides many lessons in our world today. It reveals both the best and the worst in humanity, and it makes it clear that we have choices about what kind of people we want to be.

Every discussion of the Holocaust and of *Brundibar*, whether one focuses on the simple, straightforward story of the children prevailing over the bully or goes deep into the historical context, should end with a call to action. What role will we take in our world? What will we do when we encounter prejudice, discrimination, or bullying? What will we do to be rescuers rather than perpetrators or bystanders?

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- Rubin, Susan Goldman. *The Cat with the Yellow Star: Coming of Age in Terezin*. Holiday House, 2006.
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## ***Brundibar***- Meeting with the Cast

December 14, 2004

By  
Lisa Muller

I know that all of you have been working very hard on the upcoming production of ***Brundibar***. You know the story by now, and you have been balancing your busy schedules with a busy rehearsal schedule. I am here today, not to tell you the story of the opera. You know that by now. What I would like to tell you about today is the story of how this opera came about, and what life was like for the kids who were in the original performances. The context in which this story was written and performed gives it its greatest meaning.

The story of ***Brundibar*** started in Prague, a beautiful city in Czechoslovakia, in 1938. At the time, Czechoslovakia was a vibrant democracy, where the arts flourished and education was available to most citizens. The music for ***Brundibar*** was written by Hans Krasa, and the words were written by Adolph Hofmeister for a contest in that year. In March of 1939, Czechoslovakia was stolen by Nazi Germany, and of course, the contest was cancelled, and the opera was set aside.

Life became difficult for all Czechs, especially Jewish Czechs, almost immediately. By the fall of 1939, "Jews had already been banned from working in the professions and from frequenting public events and parks. Now they were being fired from even menial jobs, and were prohibited from walking on the main streets during the week-end, from owning radios, and

from shopping at other than designated hours" (Berkley 18). Children were at first humiliated in school and then banned from attending altogether. Soon all Czech high schools and universities were closed. All Czechs were constantly spied upon, questioned, and humiliated by the Nazis.

Hans Krasa and many of his fellow artists and musicians were sent to Terezin, the newly established concentration camp/ ghetto for Jews and political prisoners. A fortress town that had been the home of fewer than 6,000 Czechs became the extremely crowded home for as many as 60,000. During the two and a half years that the camp at Terezin existed, approximately 140,000 men, women, and children passed through. Of these, 88,000 were transported to the death camps at Auschwitz. Most of those people died there. In Terezin itself, thirty-three thousand died of disease, starvation, and exposure. Of the 15,000 children who passed through Terezin, fewer than 150 survived.

When we think of these numbers, and of the total of eleven million who died in the massive Nazi camp system during the years from 1933 to 1945, we must always remember that each one who died was someone's mother, father, grandparent, or beloved child. It has been said that one death is a tragedy, a hundred deaths a disaster, and a thousand deaths become a statistic. We must never allow the enormity of the tragedy make us numb to the tragedy of each one of these deaths.

Terezin became the way that the Nazis used to deny what was really happening to the people who were being taken away. Their imprisonment was called "protective custody," and the camp was even advertised as a spa. Those sent there were the "prominent" people, those who would be missed. Therefore, Terezin was filled with professors, performers, musicians, artists and scientists. It became one of the only places in Europe where culture was

fostered during the dark years of Nazi domination. *Brundibar* became part of this culture.

The premiere was on September 23, 1943, with about 150 in the audience. The audience crowded in to an attic room, sitting on rough planks or on the dirty floors. As Joza Karas says in the notes to the CD version, "The audience quickly grasped a more profound meaning than its authors had ever considered. In the minds of the audience, the simple plot of *Brundibar* came to represent all that the Nazi regime stood for, and when the children sang their final song of victory over the mean Brundibar, there was no doubt as to the evil he personified. To make the point even more obvious, the poet Emil Saudek altered the last few lines of the original text." The last few lines of the original opera were as follows: "He who loves his mother and father and his native land is our friend and can play with us." In the revamped version of Terezin, the last lines became "He who loves justice and will defend it and who is not afraid is our friend and can play with us." The meaning of the play had changed for both the performers and for the audience.

The opera was performed a total of fifty-five times. In June, 1944, it was performed as part of the great and repulsive hoax that the Nazis successfully perpetrated upon the world. The International Red Cross visited Terezin to assess the system of concentration camps. As the transports left for Auschwitz from one end of the camp, the Red Cross officials at the other end of the camp enjoyed a production of *Brundibar*, convincing themselves that things were not so bad in the concentration camps. A production of *Brundibar* was featured in the Nazi propaganda film "The Fuhrer Gives the Jews a City."

The last production of *Brundibar* occurred in October, 1944. More than 20,000 people were transported from Terezin to the death camps in September and October, 1944, including Hans Krasa and most of the children who had been in the cast. Four of the many children who had participated in the fifty-five performances survived the war.

As you play your role and sing your part in *Brundibar*, you are actually taking on two roles. You are the cat, the sparrow, or a child in the chorus, but you are also a child in Terezin. You have lost everything that you loved in your old life. It is likely that you have lost many members of your family, and if you have family left, you are probably living in a different building than they are. You are living in filthy and incredibly crowded living conditions; you are constantly cold, hungry, and ridden with fleas and lice, and if you are over the age of twelve, you are also working twelve to fourteen hours a day at a backbreaking job, with no safeguards or concerns for your health and safety.

Still, the children loved being part of the opera. Music allowed the children not only to escape reality, but also to endure reality. According to Ela Weissberger, one of the few surviving members of the cast, "the show meant more to its young performers than food, for it helped them overcome feelings of helplessness while giving them a sense of membership in the human race"(Berkley 142).

As you think about this opera and what it means, think about the roles of perpetrator, victim, rescuer, and bystander. Think about these roles in the opera, and think about these roles in your own lives. In our homes, in our schools, in our society, do we take the role of perpetrator, victim, bystander, or rescuer?

Are we perpetrators? Are we ever guilty of bullying, discrimination, or cruelty? Do we make fun of an individual or a group? Do we tell a joke or use words that hurt others?

Are we guilty of being bystanders? Are we the ones who listen to the cruel jokes or words without speaking up? Are we the "guiltless" who shrug our shoulders and say that there is nothing we can do?

Are we the rescuers? Do we speak up for the rights of others? Do we speak up when unkind words are used? Do we go out of our comfort zones to include others who are often excluded? Do we resist the tendency to just accept the status quo? Although it is sometimes very difficult to be a rescuer, it is always the right thing to do.

The lessons of the Holocaust in general, and of Terezin and *Brundibar* in particular, are important ones. The Holocaust teaches us what prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and fear can bring. Terezin teaches us the horrors of how our fellow human beings were treated. It can also teach us about the incredible strength and resilience of the human spirit. The performances of *Brundibar* can teach us about resistance, cooperation, and the power of art, music, and education. Those who were a part of *Brundibar* preserved their souls and their spirits, even as they lost their lives.

Literature, whether it is a children's story, an opera, a play, or a classic novel should serve as both a window and a mirror. *Brundibar* gives us a window into the lives of the children who were incarcerated in Terezin during the Holocaust. It also acts as a mirror, as we reflect on our own lives and on our role in society. It serves as a call to action, just as the words of the cat, the sparrow, and the dog in the opera called the children to action.

Why is *Brundibar* still valid in the Twenty-First Century? In their book, for young readers, *Brundibar*, published in 2002, Maurice Sendak and Tony Kushner have added an additional line from the bully:

"They believe they've won the fight,  
They believe I'm gone-- not quite!  
Nothing ever works out neatly--  
Bullies don't give up completely.  
One departs, the next appears,  
And we shall meet again, my dears!  
Though I go, I won't go far--  
I'll be back.

Love,  
Brundibar

The state of our world in the twenty-first century has shown us that the bully has not been vanquished. We must continue to pay attention to the bullies. We must treat our fellow human beings with understanding, respect, and compassion. Tolerance is the strength that binds us together for a better world. The history of the Holocaust reveals both the best and the worst in humanity, and it makes it clear that we have choices about what kind of people we want to be.

You are keeping the words and the history of this opera alive. You are singing for all those children whose voices were silenced. Each of you, by taking part in this production, is taking action as a rescuer. You are helping people become aware that their choices and actions DO make a difference. You are making a difference, and you are contributing to a kinder, more tolerant, compassionate, and respectful world. I hope that you will continue to do this throughout your lives. I thank you for being a part of this production, and I hope that this is an experience that you will never forget.

Sample Lessons  
Language Studies

*Brundibar* in the Classroom  
©Lisa Muller, 2005, 2011

**Rationale:** As with anything taught in the classroom, the teacher should spend time thinking about exactly what is to be taught, how it is to be taught, and why it should be included in the curriculum. Invest time carefully in teaching Holocaust history, Holocaust literature, and the lessons that this terrible tragedy in human history can teach our students today. Each teacher should develop his or her own rationale carefully and thoughtfully.

**Objectives:** (These will vary from one grade level to the next, but here are some possibilities:

To learn the story of *Brundibar*, both in its original form and in the new Tony Kushner, Maurice Sendak version.

To learn the history of the opera and put it into context.

To look at the history of the Holocaust in terms of perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and rescuers, and to think about how those terms apply in the story of *Brundibar*.

To look at our own lives to see how the terms still apply in our world and in our personal lives today.

To study the idea of resistance, going beyond the idea that all resistance involves armed conflict.

To learn the following literary, musical, and general terms:

Allegory	Anthem	Resistance
Parable	Overture	Discrimination
Euphemism	Opera	Stereotyping
Symbol	Libretto	Prejudice
Denotation	Syntax	Antisemitism
Connotation	Diction	Inference

## Classroom Activities:

### Photo Analysis

Have the students look at photos from the Holocaust. You can find information on photos at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum web site (USHMM.org). Go to "Collections/ Photo Archives." There you will find a collection of photos and guidelines for using them. It is not only productive but necessary to pre-select the photos, especially for younger students. Many of the photos that depict the horror of the Holocaust are not suitable for young students.

After they observe the photos carefully, have the students list five or more **facts** about the photo. Then have them list five **inferences** that they can make by looking at the photo carefully. Then have them list five things that they can **imagine** about the photo. These facts, inferences, and imaginings can then be used for a variety of creative writing assignments or for the beginning of research.

### Word Study

After reading Eve Bunting's *Terrible Things* and Tony Kushner's *Brundibar*, use the following questions:

1. What is the literal meaning of each story? What are the figurative meanings?
2. What connotations do the characters and the words have?
3. Why were the words of the final victory march in *Brundibar* changed from the original version when the opera was performed at Terezin? What effect did those changes have on the audience?
4. Identify the **perpetrators**, the **victims**, the **rescuers**, and the **bystanders** in each story. Justify your choices.
5. Are these stories allegories, parables, or both? Explain your answer, using specific examples from the stories.
6. How does the Kushner version of *Brundibar* differ from the original opera? How do you account for the changes?
7. Compare and contrast *Terrible Things* and *Brundibar*.

Study the idea of **resistance** as something other than armed conflict. Could teaching, learning, art, poetry, or the simple act of keeping oneself clean (survivor Primo Levi discusses this in his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*) be an act of resistance? Discuss the role of these things in a person's life.

### **Word Choice: Diction**

When *Brundibar* was performed in Terezin, the words of the Victory march were changed from the original version. (See Pearce, “Brundibar at Terezin” on P. 11 of this guide). These changes illustrate the importance of revision, connotation, and denotation, and they provide an example of the importance of every word in a piece of literature. After they learn the history and the significance of this opera, have the students explain or account for these changes. This could be an essay, a journal entry, or a class discussion.

### **Additional writing prompts on this topic:**

Kushner and Sendak added a message from Brundibar at the end of their book. Why do you think they chose to do that? Is it a good addition? (For additional information about using Brundibar in a middle or high school classroom, see Appendix 2.)

When the opera was performed in Terezin, the lullaby was always received with great emotion and applause. How is this lullaby especially important in the context of Terezin and the Holocaust? What special meaning do these words have in this specific time and place?

Study Brundibar’s song. What special meanings do the words of this song take on in the context of Terezin and the Holocaust

## Lessons and Links from the Web

[www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/antisemitism/voices/teaching/propaganda/image\\_analysis/](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/antisemitism/voices/teaching/propaganda/image_analysis/)

A lesson from the USHMM on the power and the deconstruction of Nazi propaganda.

[www.college.usc.edu/vhi/education/pyramid](http://www.college.usc.edu/vhi/education/pyramid)

A lesson from the Visual History Institute at University of Southern California that centers around the Anti-Defamation League's Pyramid of Hate. This lesson includes video clips from the archives, worksheets and detailed directions for the teacher.

[www.keene.edu/cchs/t\\_resources/pyramid\\_of\\_hate.pdf](http://www.keene.edu/cchs/t_resources/pyramid_of_hate.pdf)

Another downloadable lesson that gives educators ideas for using the Pyramid of Hate. This is from the well-respected Cohen Center for Holocaust Studies at Keene State University in New Hampshire.

[www.adl.org/education/courttv/pyramid\\_of\\_hate.pdf](http://www.adl.org/education/courttv/pyramid_of_hate.pdf)

Another version of the Pyramid of Hate lessons.

[www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/23/60minutes/main2508458.shtml/](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/23/60minutes/main2508458.shtml/)

[www.pbs.org/now/arts/brundibar.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/brundibar.html)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5028218>

## Bibliography for *Brundibar*

\*Books Suitable for Younger Readers

**\*Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow*. Scholastic, 2005.**

Bartoletti's carefully researched history of the Hitler Youth is an excellent introduction to the subject. The book is well-organized and makes excellent use of archival photographs. This book will capture the interest of even the most reluctant high school and middle school readers. An excellent source for beginning researchers.

**Berkley, George E. *Hitler's Gift: The Story of Theresienstadt*. Branden Books, Boston. 1993.**

Very readable history of Terezin (Theresienstadt). This is a basic history that puts the opera *Brundibar* into its historical context.

**\*Bunting, Eve. *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*. The Jewish Publication Society, 1980.**

Bunting's allegory shows young readers the dangers of being silent in the face of danger.

**Brenner, Hannelore. *The Girls of Room 28*. Schocken, 2009.**

This memoir of ten survivors of Terezin gives insight into the Holocaust, into Terezin, and especially into the lives of the girls who lived through the experiences. *Brundibar* is a big part of this book. The reader hears first-hand how it felt to be a part of this amazing experience of spiritual resistance to evil. It is suitable for high school and adult readers, and would be especially suitable for teachers who are preparing their students to see *Brundibar*.

**De Silva, Cara. *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*. Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996.**

The best and most important part of this book is its introduction. The author explains how the book and the original collection of recipes came about. The women of Terezin had their own unique method of resisting the Nazi terror.

**Friesova, Jana Renee. *Fortress of My Youth: Memoir of a Terezin Survivor*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.**

Ms. Friesova's memoir tells of the horrors of the camp, and is more suited to high school readers. She participated in other musical productions in Terezin, and she speaks about how important those experiences were to the prisoners of Terezin.

**\*Polacco, Patricia. *The Butterfly*. Penguin, 2000.**

This picture book is based on the true experiences of the author's aunt who was part of the French Underground. Even though there is no direct connection to Terezin, the story captures the fear and danger of the times, but also portrays the courage and the ways that the individual can make a difference in a terrible situation. Suitable for upper elementary students.

**Polak, Monique. *What World Is Left*. Orca Books, 2008.**

This is a YA novel (Grade 9 and up) based on the experiences of the author's mother as a teen-ager in Terezin. The writing is average, but the book gives insight into how it was to be a teen-ager in Terezin. *Brundibar* and the Red Cross visit of 1944 are mentioned, and the artists of Terezin are an important part of the story.

**Roubickova, Eva. *We're Alive and Life Goes On: A Theresienstadt Diary*. Henry Holt and Company, 1998.**

This is the day-to-day diary of Eva Roubickova, who was sent to Terezin at age 20. Her frequent diary entries give the reader a picture of one person's life in Terezin.

**\*Rubin, Susan Goldman. *The Cat with the Yellow Star: Coming of Age in Terezin*. Holiday House, 2006.**

This is the story of Ela Weissberger, who played the cat in all fifty-five productions of *Brundibar* in Terezin. On Page 36 of the 2006 edition, it is stated that 4,096 of the almost 15,000 children who passed through Terezin survived. Most other sources put the number of surviving children as between 125 and 200.

**\*Rubin, Susan Goldman. *Fireflies in the Dark: The story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin*. Scholastic, 2000.**

This is the story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, artist and art teacher who tended to the spirits of her young students even though she could not save their lives. This book reminds us of the power of art to help people cope with even the horror of the Holocaust. Dicker-Brandeis is a hero that shows that resistance does not always involve guns.

**Schiff, Vera. *Theresienstadt: The Town the Nazis Gave to the Jews*. Self-published, 1996, 2002.**

Ms. Schiff's memoir of her teen years in Terezin adds another dimension to the picture of life in this ghetto. Because it details day-to-day life in Terezin, it is suitable for high school readers, but not middle or elementary students.

**\*Sendak, Maurice, and Tony Kushner. *Brundibar*. Hyperion, 2003.**

This is a children's book that is much more suitable for middle and high school readers than it is for children. (See Appendix 2)

**Spies, Gerty. *My Years in Theresienstadt: How One Woman Survived the Holocaust*. Prometheus Books, 1997.**

Gerty Speis survived through her writing. For high school and older readers, it is another picture of life in Terezin, and another example of how the prisoners used arts and creativity to transcend the horror around them.

**Troller, Norbert. *Theresienstadt: Hitler's Gift to the Jews*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1991.**

Troller is one of the few “artists of Terezin” who survived the war. He resisted Nazi rule by recording the truth about Terezin in his drawings and smuggling them out of the camp. Suitable for high school readers.

**\*Volavkova, Hana, Editor. *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp 1942- 1944*. Schocken Books, 1993.**

This is a collection of the actual poetry and art created by the children of Terezin during their incarceration in Terezin. The story of how this artwork and poetry came about and how it was saved after the war is as touching and important as the work itself.

## **Films**

***Prisoner of Paradise*. DVD. (2005).**

This is the story of Kurt Gerron, famous German actor and director before the war, who was imprisoned by the Nazi because he was Jewish. This film is about the last creative effort of Gerron's life, the Nazi propaganda film about Terezin. Gerron was forced to direct the film known sarcastically as *The Fuhrer Gives a Village to the Jews*. The film was supposed to show the world that the Jewish people were being treated well. A production of *Brundibar* was part of Gerron's film.

## Web Sites

### **USC (University of Southern California) Shoah Foundation Institute, Los Angeles, California.**

<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/education>

This site has numerous wonderful lesson plans, especially for high school students. Two that are especially effective in the classroom are the “Pyramid of Hate” exercise (all handouts can be downloaded from the site) and the “Living Histories” testimonies.

### **The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Washington, D.C.**

[www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)

This is the premiere site for educators. On this site, teachers will find the guidelines for teaching this sensitive material, guidelines for creating rationales, and a large collection of classroom-ready lesson plans. To find the most valuable material, look under “Museum/ Collections and Archives/ Photo Archives” to search the collection of photographs. To find the educational material, look under “Education/ For Teachers/ Lessons/ Activities and Teacher Guides.”

**Facing History and Ourselves. Brookline, Massachusetts.**

[www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications](http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications)

You must register as a user with Facing History and Ourselves, but it is free and is a wonderful resource for teachers. Once you reach the website, use the search box to find “Finding a Voice: Musicians in Terezin.” This is an extensive forty-three page teachers’ guide filled with background information and lists of resources. It is an amazing and extensive resource.

**Keene State University. Cohen Center for Holocaust Studies. Keene, New Hampshire.**

[www.keene.edu/cchs](http://www.keene.edu/cchs)

This small university in New Hampshire has an amazing center for Holocaust education. The website is full of information, teaching resources and guides, and access to other resources.

**Yad Vashem. Jerusalem, Israel.**

[www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)

This is the official site for Holocaust remembrance and education in Israel. The materials and lesson plans for educators are extensive and well-written. Many include first person testimonies within the lesson plans.

## **Hunger Camp at Jaslo**

by Wislawa Szymborska

Write it. Write. In ordinary ink  
on ordinary paper: they were given no food,  
they all died of hunger. “All. How many?  
It’s a big meadow. How much grass  
for each one? “Write: I don’t know.  
History counts its skeletons in round numbers.  
One thousand and one remains a thousand,  
as though the one had never existed:  
an imaginary embryo, an empty cradle,  
an ABC never read,  
air that laughs, cries, grows,  
emptiness running down steps toward the garden,  
nobody’s place in the line.

We stand in the meadow where it became flesh,  
and the meadow is silent as a false witness.  
Sunny. Green. Nearby, a forest  
with wood for chewing and water under the bark—  
every day a full ration of the view  
until you go blind. Overhead, a bird—  
the shadow of its life-giving wings  
brushed their lips. Their jaws opened.  
Teeth clacked against teeth.  
At night, the sickle moon shone in the sky  
and reaped wheat for their bread.  
Hands came floating from blackened icons,  
empty cups in their fingers.  
On a spit of barbed wire,  
a man was turning.  
They sang with their mouths full of earth.  
“A lovely song of how war strikes straight  
at the heart.” Write: how silent.  
“Yes.”

**Using *Brundibar* in the Middle and High School Classroom** (article by L. Muller, 2010)

*Brundibar*

Retold by Tony Kushner, Pictures by Maurice Sendak. (2003)

New York: Hyperion Books for Children

ISBN: 2001099819

*Brundibar* is a simple tale of good overcoming evil, at least temporarily. Although the Holocaust is not directly addressed, the characters wear the yellow star, and the bully named Brundibar has more than a passing resemblance to Hitler. The lavish but at times frightening illustrations by Maurice Sendak tell the informed reader that the story takes place in Prague during the Nazi occupation of that city. The story is based on the libretto of a children's opera that was written in occupied Prague in 1938. It was performed fifty-five times in 1943 and 1944 by the children who were imprisoned in the Terezin Concentration Camp.

The story is straightforward. Two children must find milk for their sick mother, but they have no money and no one to help them. They go to the town square, where they see lavish displays of ice cream, bakery goods, butter, and cheese. They ask for a bit of milk and are turned away. They try to earn a few coins by singing on the street, but their two small voices cannot be heard, and they are chased away by the bully. They are befriended by a collection of animals that encourage them to join with the other children to make their voices heard and defeat the bully. The children join their voices together in a beautiful and moving lullaby, and the crowd is so pleased that it rewards them with plenty of coins for the milk. Brundibar is so angry that he steals the money and runs away. He is chased by the animals, the crowd of children, and even the grownups that had previously been bystanders.

Brundibar is vanquished and the entire ensemble sings the victory song. The good, brave children enlisted several hundred allies, and through their collective action, defeated tyranny. However, the story ends with a warning from Brundibar. Readers are warned that tyranny is always a possibility, and that he will return. Kushner and Sendak seem to be saying, "Stay awake! Be aware!"

This is a wonderful book for high school students, but children would find it confusing and scary. The real story of *Brundibar* is the history of the story. This book could be used for all its wonderful use of language, for the poetry of the lullaby (which must be put into context to make sense), for its delicate and obvious irony. The children singing about milk, ice cream, and bakery goods had seen none of those things for years. Sendak imparts subtle messages in his meticulous and multi-dimensional drawings. Teaching the book in the context of its history would make an excellent unit in middle school or high school. It could be used with Hannelore Brenner's *The Girls of Room 28* (Random House 2009) or with one of the other books that tell the history of the Terezin ghetto/camp and the original opera.