



The Boy in the Woods



Teacher Resource Package Prepared By:

Susan Starkman, B.A., M. ED.

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Synopsis

Country of Origin: Canada

Release Year: 2023

Director: Rebecca Snow

Runtime: 96 minutes

Language: English

Themes: Coming of Age, Heroism, WWII, Brotherhood

Based on Maxwell Smart's best-selling memoir, *The Boy in the Woods* follows the true story of a resourceful young boy's harrowing experience of surviving the war by hiding in the forest. After his family is rounded up by the Germans, Max's mother helps him escape into the woods where he must learn to fend for himself. Events unfold in a manner reminiscent of a Grimm's fairy tale as Max encounters another young boy in hiding and the two heroically save a baby girl. More than just an individual survival story, the film is testament to Max's innate sense of compassion to set aside his fear to help others.

Context: Buczacz

While many people associate the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust with concentration camps, *Boy in the Woods* veers from traditional Holocaust narratives in that it takes place in and around the surroundings of Buczacz. This town exemplifies the war experience of many small towns after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Throughout the war, the city passed from the Poles to the Soviets, from the Soviets to the Germans and eventually back to the Soviets, exacerbating interethnic tensions between the town's inhabitants. The estimated number of victims from Buczacz is approximately 12,000, but only 4,000 of those occurred in death camps. The remaining 8,000 inhabitants were killed in mass shootings carried out not by Nazi soldiers, but by local townspeople who knew their victims personally. (source: <https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/lesson-plans/buczacz.html>).

Teachers who would like to learn more about Buczacz and how it is representative of other towns in the area where the local population played a role in actively participating in the murder of the local Jewish population can watch this lecture by Omer Bartov who published a monograph entitled *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a town called Buczacz*: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/cagr/2017/05/08/anatomy-of-a-genocide-the-life-and-death-of-a-town-called-buczacz/>. In studying the history of Buczacz during the war, Bartov came to the following conclusions:

One was that genocide on the local level was “intimate”; “the killers and their prey knew each other before the killing began.” And that killing was “extremely public.” Furthermore, the categories that had been created to help understand the Holocaust—“victims, perpetrators, bystanders”—didn’t hold. “No one was standing by. Everyone was engaged in one way or another,” said Bartov. “Most people were somewhere in the middle” You could help someone one day and profit off someone’s death the next. Most people’s behaviour, said Bartov, could be categorized as falling into the “ambiguity of goodness.” Pure evil, like Gestapo members who express no remorse, is easy to understand. Goodness, by contrast, is complicated, and “most people behaved in ways that don’t fall easily into one category or another,” he said. (Source: <https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2019/05/03/the-holocaust-in-this-small-polish-town-had-no-bystanders-says-omer-bartov/events/the-takeaway/>).

The concept of the “ambiguity of goodness” is one which teachers could discuss with students in the context of the film. Who were the local townspeople who helped Max and why? Was Jasko any less of a hero for taking money to shelter Max, especially since he put his wife and baby at risk?

Related Activity

Throughout the film, Max encounters people who are intent to capture him and those who come to his rescue. Students should list three people from the film who fall into each of these two categories and write a paragraph outlining the motivations for their actions. Do any of them act out of pure altruism or pure malevolence or is their behaviour based on several factors?

Extension Activity

A Boy in the Woods begins in 1943, with the war mass extermination of the Jews was already underway. The film illustrates how local townspeople were involved in

persecuting Jewish residents, but the road from neighbourly co-existence to genocide is one which happens gradually. To better understand how an otherwise civil society could descend into barbarism, it is useful to look at Gregory H. Stanton's ten stages of genocide: https://genocideducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten_stages_of_genocide.pdf

The ten stages that led to the Holocaust can also be applied to other genocides such as the Armenian, Rwandan and Cambodian. Students could research other genocides that have taken place in the last century and chart the ten stages that led to their horrific outcome. Listed below are some lesson plans that are available to explore this issue further. They are geared to high school students, but teachers could adapt them to middle school:

Sprouts Schools

<https://sproutsschools.com/the-10-stages-of-genocide/>

The Genocide Education Project

https://genocideducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten_stages_of_genocide.pdf

Woven Teaching

<https://www.woventeaching.org/lessons/stages-of-genocide>

Michigan Social Studies Hub

<https://www.misocialstudies.org/Inquiries/TPS21-WHG001.pdf>

Theme: Coming of Age

A Boy in the Woods conforms to the conventions of the coming-of-age genre. Although Max is still technically a minor when the film ends, his experiences have matured him beyond his years. Below is a list of events that contribute to Max's transformation from child to adult. For each event, students should outline the specific lesson(s) Max learns from the experience:

- Being told by his mother that he must run away and leave her and his sister behind
- Seeing the victims of a mass shooting and being told by his aunt that he cannot stay with her family
- Learning to live on a farm with strangers
- Being left in the forest to fend for himself
- Looking after Yanek
- Stealing clothes from dead bodies and finding an orphaned baby
- Dealing with death of Yanek

Extension Questions

1. Max initially feels abandoned by both his mother who tells him to run and by his aunt who tells Max that he cannot hide with them. At what point does Max realize that they have acted in his interest and that he is strong enough to survive?
2. How does Max pass the time before he meets Yanek? What does he do to distract himself from imminent danger and hunger?

Theme: Brotherhood

When Max discovers Yanek alone in the forest, his protective instincts kick in and he immediately adopts the role of Yanek's protector. Although Yanek is younger and lacks Max's survival skills, he is nevertheless as crucial to Max's survival as Max is to his. Teachers could use the focus questions below to chart the course of their relationship:

1. Why do you think Max takes Yanek under his wing even though his age and lack of survival skills will be a detriment to his own survival?
2. In what way does Max provide Yanek with practical skills? In what way does he offer him emotional support?
3. At one point, Max is so desperate that he eats poison mushrooms, only to spit them out before they can kill him. How much does his concern for Yanek prevent him from succumbing to suicide? How does Yanek provide Max with emotional support?
4. How does Yanek grow through his relationship with Max?
5. How does Max grow from his relationship with Yanek?

Themes: Luck and Altruism

While Max's innate intelligence, bravery and resourcefulness account for much of his ability to survive, there are times when it is either sheer luck or a helping hand from a kindly stranger that save him from getting killed. For example, when a group of hunters give chase to Max when they hear a noise in the woods, it is only because they are distracted by a rooster in their path that they give up the chase. In another instance, the only reason why Max was able to find his aunt was because a kind stranger who realized he was on his own told him to go to the cemetery to look for her.

Related Activity

Students should draw a list of all the times Max (or Max together with Yanek) were in the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time. They should also compile a list of the people who helped Max and Yanek and those who threatened them. Based on these factors, what do you think was the most important element in ensuring Max's survival?

General Discussion Questions

1. What hints does the audience get that Max is a nurturing person even before he meets Yanek?
2. The theme of two boys surviving in the forest has a fairy tale element to it. How does the filmmaker use imagery to further convey the sense of a fairy tale? Find specific examples.
3. How does Max's attitude towards God and religion change at various points in the film?
4. What is the significance of the Golem story that Max tells Yanek?
5. What evidence do we have in the film to suggest that Max will live his dream and become an artist?
6. What is Max's reaction when Jasko tells him that the price for turning in a Jew can be paid in "sugar or vodka"?
7. Who do you think is the bravest person in the film? Why?
8. Why does Max insist that they save the baby even when it puts him and Yanek in danger?

Classroom Activity: Film Review

Write a film review of *A Boy in the Woods*. Use the chart below to think about the qualities of a film that you need to consider when writing a review.

Criteria	Rating 5=Great, 1=Poor					Comments
	5	4	3	2	1	
Story Elements						
Dialogue/Screenplay						
Historical Accuracy						
Emotional impact						
Overall interest level						
Message of the film						
Character Elements						
Character believability						
Character development						
Development of Max and Yanek						
Depiction of local townspeople						
Technical Elements						
Cinematography						
Music						
Lighting						

References (All websites are from April,2024)

Yad Vashem

<https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/lesson-plans/buczacz.html>

USC Dornsife

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/cagr/2017/05/08/anatomy-of-a-genocide-the-life-and-death-of-a-town-called-buczacz/>

Zocalo Public Square

<https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2019/05/03/the-holocaust-in-this-small-polish-town-had-no-bystanders-says-omer-bartov/events/the-takeaway/>

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