

A Bag of Marbles



Teacher Resource Package Prepared By:

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

A Bag of Marbles (Un Sac de Billes)

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Synopsis

Country of Origin: France

Release Year: 2017

Director: Christian Duguay

Runtime: 110 minutes

Language: French

Themes: Coming of Age, Heroism, Family ties, France during the Occupation

Similar to Louis Malle's *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, Christian Duguay's *A Bag of Marbles* explores the Nazi treatment of Jews from a child's perspective. Based on the autobiographical novel by Joseph Joffo, the film tells the story of Joseph and Maurice, two brothers whose parents send them away from Vichy France to join their brothers in the free zone in Nice. After a brief family reunion, the younger boys are again separated from their family and face possible capture and deportation. Beautifully shot on location with outstanding performances by the child actors, the film appeals widely to children and adults alike.

Curriculum Links:

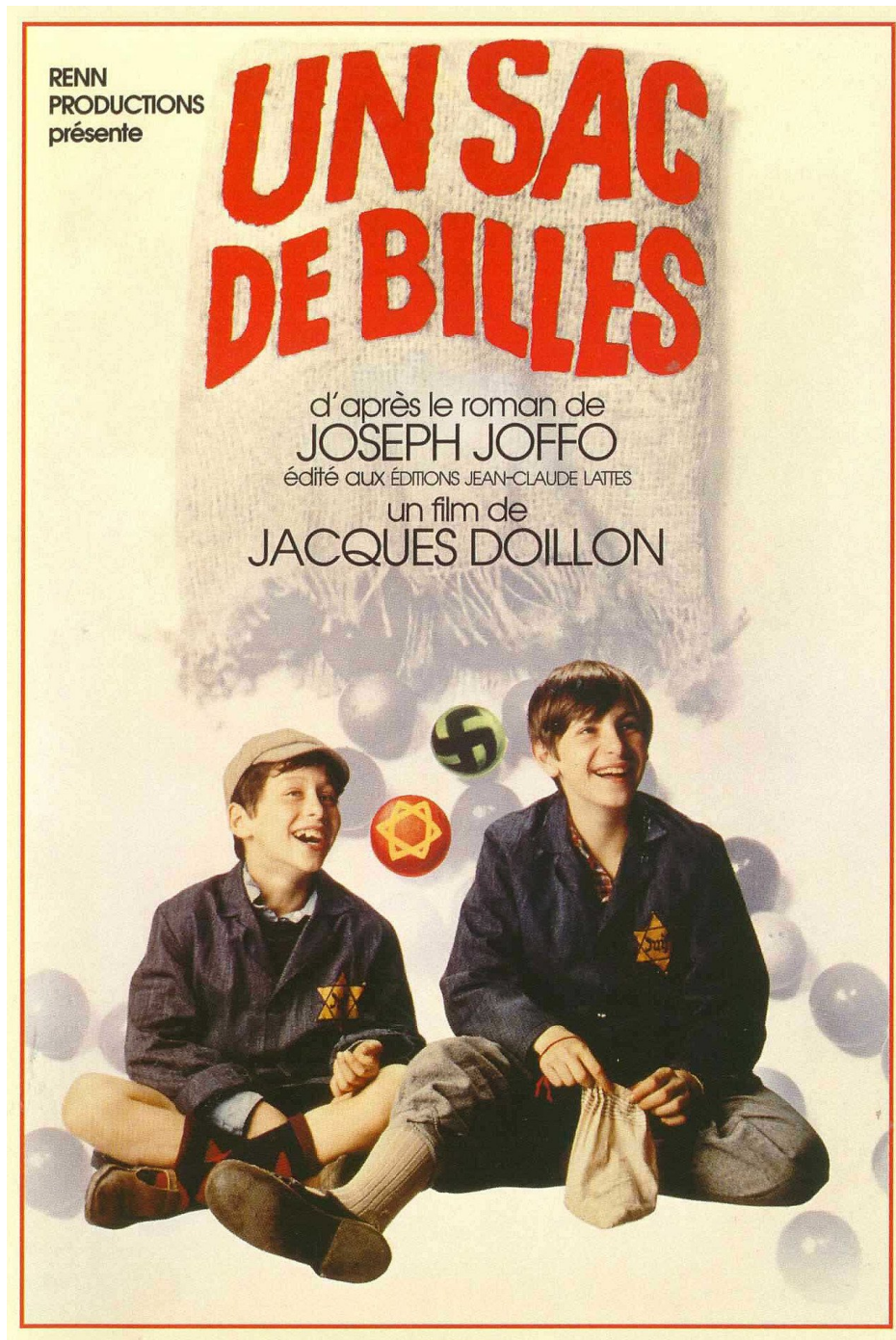
A Bag of Marbles can be used as part of the Social Studies curriculum from Grades 5-8 and as part of the Media Literacy component of the English curriculum from Grades 5-8.

Below is one of the advertising posters for *Secrets of War*. Students should consider the way that advertising shapes our expectations of film by answering the following questions:



1. When do you think the film is set? What visual cues suggest when the film is set?
2. What do you think the film is going to be about? Why do you think so?
3. Who do you think the hero of the film is going to be? Why?

This is the second time that Joseph Jollo's book has been adapted to the screen. The first time was in 1975. Below is an advertising poster for that version. Students should consider the differences between the two posters and the messages that they imply by answering the following questions:



1. What do you think the film is going to be about based on the poster?
2. When is the film set? How do we know?
3. Which poster makes you more interested in seeing the film? Why?

Historical Context: France During WWII

Younger students will likely be unfamiliar with the historical period in which the film is set. Before viewing the film, teachers should prepare their students by providing them with a brief outline of the German occupation of France during the war and the establishment of the Vichy government that existed between 1940 and 1944 and that oversaw the deportation of thousands of French Jews to concentration camps. There are many websites that deal with the period, but below is a brief timeline that teachers can use to provide some necessary historical context to the film.

May 10, 1940: Germany launches an offensive against France and quickly overwhelmed the French military.

June 22, 1940: Germany and France sign an Armistice agreement that divided France into Occupied and Unoccupied Zones. Germany held northern and western France and the French government oversaw the remaining two fifths of the country under the leadership of Philippe Pétain. The capital of this zone was in Vichy.

Under the Armistice agreement, the French armed forces were reduced to an “Armistice Army” of 100,000 soldiers and the 1.2 million French prisoners of war remained in captivity. The French had to pay the Germans for the occupation and the government had to prevent the French population from going into exile. The ideals of the French revolution (liberty, equality, fraternity) were replaced with work, family and country.

October 1940 and June 1941: In two separate motions, the Vichy administration enacted the “Statut des Juifs” (“Jewish Statute”) excluding Jews from public life, dismissing them from the civil service and military and barring them from positions in industry, commerce, medicine, law and teaching.

March 1941: The Vichy government created a central agency, the Commissariat General aux Questions Juives (General Commissariat for Jewish Affairs) to coordinate anti-Jewish legislation and policy.

July 1941: A program of “Aryanization” was implemented in which Jewish-owned property was appropriated for the French state, leaving most French Jews destitute.

May 1942: German authorities issue a decree that French Jews must wear the yellow star on their clothing.

July 16th and 17th, 1942: German officials secure an agreement from the Vichy government to round up Jews in both the Occupied and Unoccupied Zones of France. 13,000 Jews were

arrested and interned in the Velodrome d'Hiver sports arena. By the autumn of 1942, approximately 42,000 Jews had been deported to concentration camps.

November 1942: German troops occupied Vichy's formerly "free zone" and occupied it with Italian forces who refused to hand Jews over. This protection lasted until 1943, when Italy surrenders to Germany. This is depicted in the film when Jo's father is playing cards with Marcello, an Italian soldier, and someone whispers to Marcello that Mussolini has been arrested. Marcello's response is "vacation's over"; he knows what is in store for the Jews now that the Italians are no longer in charge.

January 1943-August 1944: Germany reinstitutes deportations of Jews of Jews from France. In total, approximately 77,000 Jews living in French territory were killed. Native born French Jews fared better because the French authorities refused to strip them of their citizenship. It was thus mostly foreign-born or stateless Jews living in France that were killed.

August 25th, 1944: German forces surrender in Paris and the Vichy regime comes to an end.

Related Websites

Jewish Virtual Library

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-french-vichy-regime>

The World at War

<http://schudak.de/timelines/france-thefrenchstate&theoccupation1940-1944.html>

United States Holocaust Museum

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005429>

Classroom Activity

Students should draw a timeline of events in the film from when it begins in 1942 to when it ends in 1944. What are the significant dates? How do they reflect the changes in the French government and its attitude towards Jews during the War?

Guiding Questions (provide evidence from the film to support your response):

1. How did Jo's life change when the Germans arrived in Paris?
2. What were the dangers and challenges facing the Jews who tried to escape to the Free Zone?
3. Were Jews guaranteed safety once reaching the Free Zone?
4. When do Jo and Maurice have to flee from Nice? What happens at the end of 1943 to make Nice no longer safe for the Joffo family?
5. Plot all the places that Maurice and his brother lived between 1942-1945 on a map. How far did they have to travel to get into the Free Zone from the Occupied Zone?

Extension Question

While most of the action in the film takes place between 1942 and 1944, the filmmaker begins the film at the end of Jo's journey in 1944 and then proceeds to tell the story in flashback. Why do you think he did this?

Context: Collaborators vs. Resisters

After the Germans invaded France, the country was divided into Occupied and Unoccupied Territory. Though ostensibly still under control of a French leader, Philippe Pétain, many French people collaborated with Germans and actively participated in rounding up Jews and sending them to their deaths in transports to concentration camps. Anti-Semitism was rife in France and the attitude towards Jews is depicted in the film at the beginning when Joe is bullied at school for wearing the yellow star and his former friends turn against him when they discover he is Jewish. The most obvious French collaborator in the film is Ambroise Moncelier and his son who hire Jo to work in the family bookstore under the false belief that he is an Algerian Christian. He is very open about his hatred towards Jews his son vows to help in the German effort to "exterminate those rats".

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there were French people who joined the Resistance movement and risked their lives to fight the Germans. The hotel that Maurice works in at Rumilly Haute-Savoie is a hub of Resistance activity and Jo briefly gets caught up in their mission when he is given a coded message to deliver to a certain "Monsieur Jean." The extent of the risks that they took is evident in the scene where Jo and Francoise hide as they watch her brother and his other collaborator friends kill a group of young men who had been identified as members of the Resistance.

In 1997, the French Roman Catholic Church publically apologised for its silence during the Vichy regime which oversaw the deportation of thousands of Jews (<http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9710/01/france.catholics/>). Although the Church as an institution did not actively stand up to the Nazi occupiers, there were individuals within the church who actively helped Jewish individuals and families to escape to safety. The priest who protects Jo and Maurice from the Nazis checking identity papers in the train to Dax is one such example, as is the priest in Nice who collaborates to get the brothers false baptism papers.

New Harvests school, the Pétainist boarding school where Jo and Maurice are sent also harboured resisters in their midst. Though the school is outwardly a pro-Vichy, paramilitary youth camp, the headmaster, Mr. Subinagui, knowingly harbours the brothers as well as other Jewish children who quickly learned who could be trusted among the student population. For an example of a false membership card issued to a Jewish student at one such school, students

can go to <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1087375> and read the story of Walter Karliner, whose experience was similar to that of Jo and Maurice.

Related Activity

Listed below are the names of the characters in the film who were either actively part of the Resistance or who risked their lives as individuals to help Jo and Maurice. Explain the motivation behind each of these individuals' decisions to put their own lives on the line to help two Jewish boys:

- Priest on the train to Dax
- Mr. Subinagui
- Dr. Rosen
- Priest in Nice who provides false baptism papers
- Mr. Jean

Extension Question:

How would you classify Raymond, the young man who charges Jo and Maurice money to guide them into the free zone? He does risk his life when he does this, but do you consider him to be a resister in the same way that the other characters are? Why/why not?

THEME: COMING OF AGE

A Bag of Marbles fits into the coming of age genre of films. Although he is still technically a child at the end of the war, Jo's experiences have forced him to mature well beyond his years. By the time he returns to Paris in 1944, he is no longer the same "crybaby" that his brother teased him about being just a couple of years before. Below is a list of events that contribute to Jo's transformation from child to adult. For each event, students should outline the specific lesson(s) Jo learns from the experience:

- Train journey to Dax
- Escape from Hagetmau to the Free Zone through the Forest
- Journey from Free Zone to Nice
- Running a black market business in Nice
- Boarding at New Harvests School
- Getting caught by Nazis with Maurice and Ferdinand and rounded up with other Jews at the Excelsior Hotel
- Working and living with Ambrose Mancelier and his family in Rumilly Haute-Savoie
- Returning to Paris after Liberation

Extension Question:

Maurice calls Jo a crybaby at the beginning of the film and there are many points in the film where we see Jo burst into tears. At what point does Jo say that he “had no more tears. Rage had taken their place.”?

Theme: Brotherhood

The bond between Jo and Maurice is a central theme in the film and the love between the two sustains them through the darkest times. It is unlikely that either brother would have survived without the emotional and practical support from the other. While Maurice is clearly the older, dominant brother at the beginning of the film, Jo gradually becomes his equal in assessing danger and making decisions regarding their safety and survival. Teachers could use the focus questions below to chart the progression of their relationship:

Focus Questions:

1. At the beginning of the film, Maurice protects Jo from school bullies who beat him up for wearing the yellow star. When is the first time that Jo tries to provide physical protection for Maurice?
2. What is the first time that Jo disagrees with Maurice and overrides his decision? Why does he do this?
3. While Maurice is older and physically stronger, Jo proves to be the more cunning of the two brothers. Provide at least two examples of Jo’s “street smarts” and his ability use his brains to navigate dangerous situations.

Theme: Luck

Quick thinking and strategic planning undoubtedly played a role in Jo and Maurice’s ability to survive, but the film shows that not everything is in our control; sometimes, being in the right place at the right time, or alternatively, being at the wrong place at the wrong time can decide a person’s fate. For example, had Jo and Maurice not been in the same train compartment as the sympathetic priest, they would have suffered the same ending as the other Jews on the train.

Classroom Activity:

Students should compile a list of all the times random chance played a role in either saving the boys or threatening their survival.

Classroom Activity: Film Review

Write a film review of *A Bag of Marbles*. 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
Story Elements	5	4	3	2	1	
Dialogue/Screenplay						
Historical Accuracy						
Emotional impact						
Overall interest level						
Message of the film						
Character Elements						
Character believability						
Character development						
Development of relationship between Jo and Maurice						
Depiction of Collaborators and Resisters						
Technical Elements						
Cinematography						
Music						
Lighting						

General Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the title. What does the bag of marbles symbolize?
2. Although the film deals with some traumatic events, the overall tone of the film is optimistic. How does the filmmaker balance the darker elements of history with personal moments of happiness? Provide examples from the film where Jo and Maurice find reason to be joyful despite their circumstances.
3. Trust is a major issue in the film. How do Jo and Maurice learn who is trustworthy and whom to avoid?
4. After he is saved by Dr. Rosen who lies about Jo's circumcision being surgical rather than religious, Jo wonders "why did he save us out of the hundreds he doomed every day?" What do you think the reason is?
5. Why does Jo decide to save Ambroise Mancelier?
6. Although Jo tells his story when he is an adult, he tells it from his childhood point of view. Why does he do this? How might the story look different from an adult's perspective?

References

(All websites cited are from April, 2017)

Jewish Virtual Library

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-french-vichy-regime>

The World at War

<http://schudak.de/timelines/france-the-french-state&the-occupation-1940-1944.html>

United States Holocaust Museum

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005429>

CNN

<http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9710/01/france.catholics/>

United States Holocaust Museum

<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1087375>

