

# The Children of Chance



**Teacher Resource Package Prepared By:**

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## ***The Children of Chance (Les Enfants de la Chance)***

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#### **Synopsis**

Country of Origin: France

Release Year: 2016

Director: Malik Chibane

Runtime: 95 minutes

Language: French, Yiddish

Themes: Coming of Age, WWII, Coping with Sickness

A broken leg is a blessing in disguise for Maurice Gutman, a young Jewish boy who is taken away by ambulance just as the Jews of Paris are being rounded up by the French police. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, Maurice is sheltered from the occupying forces and forms a close bond with the other boys in his ward. As the war intensifies, the chief physician and senior nurse resort to drastic measures to keep Maurice and the other Jewish patients safe. This tender coming-of-age drama, based on a true story, is a testament to the resilience and bravery of youth.

#### **Curriculum Links**

*The Children of Chance* can be used as part of the curriculum for Grade 10 Civics, Grade 11 World History since 1900, Grade 11 Politics in Action: Making Change, Grade 12 World History since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Grade 12 Adventures in World History, Grade 12 Canada and International Politics and the media studies component of Grades 9-12 English curriculum.

#### **Related Resource Package (in French)**

The Children of Chance

[http://frenchfilmfestival.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2017\\_enfantsdelachance\\_presskit\\_fr.pdf](http://frenchfilmfestival.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2017_enfantsdelachance_presskit_fr.pdf)

## *The Children of Chance: Director's Statement*

Source: French Film Festival

<http://frenchfilmfestival.us/2017-les-enfants-de-la-chance>

Films that alternate between major and minor stories form a separate, fully fledged cinematographic genre that I particularly enjoy, both as a spectator and as a director.

We will never stop trying to understand the period of the Occupation in spite of the numerous accounts, works and major documents that we already know and I remain convinced that we can still revisit this part of our history by exploring another viewpoint. Future generations will never meet miracle survivors like Maurice Grosman, so cinema can bring these heroes to us with the appropriate narration and the vast power of identification that is characteristic of this art.

I am extremely sensitive to historical events that sweep away – or indelibly influence – the existence of a family. My parents often told me about their three wars: the Second World War with the American convoy driving through their Kabyle village, when my uncle, who was an officer, left Tunis to travel to Berlin with thirty armoured cars. The other two wars are connected with the decolonisation of Indochina and Algeria. The implausible and the improbable always crop up in real life and my family's photo album bears witness to this, as does that of Maurice Grosman.

In Maurice Grosman's real life, I was surprised by the series of lucky breaks that allowed him to escape a tragic fate. A fracture avoided him being rounded up, another fracture revealed he was suffering from tuberculosis of the bones, a fake plaster protected him from another round-up, adulterated penicillin treated his tuberculosis. People call it chance, a lucky star, a guardian angel . . . these words are used because we are sometimes struck dumb by these happy coincidences due to a twist of fate or unexpected luck. These events form the great story of little Maurice's life.

Truth is often stranger than fiction and in my capacity as storyteller, I am pleased that the knowledge of this true fact, which inspired a film, is the fruit of an encounter. *Les Enfants de la Chance* is the outcome of several meetings with Maurice Grosman.

I was disturbed by the geographical proximity of the places where the action in my film takes place, between the 18th district in Paris and Garches Hospital – I know the area well. Madame Grosman was a Polish-Jew-Parisian at the time. She was born in the Rue de l'Atlas in Belleville. The maternity ward where she gave birth has become a clinic where I take my children. Madame Grosman went to the local school, where my daughter voted for the first time in May 2012. Maurice's aunt lived in the 10th district, where I now live.

Every day, I go down the streets and avenues that little Maurice walked to go back to the woman who replaced his mother. Another element that fascinates me is the difference between the image that the Grosman boys had of that period in their father's life – obviously sad, dark and depressing – and the story Maurice Grosman told me: a sad time, obviously, due mainly to the absence of his family but interspersed with bright and happy times.

How can children cope in such situations?

It must be by escaping from the routine and sometimes oppressive reality in which the enemy is neither the 3rd Reich Army, nor disease, but boredom. To resist this boredom, playing games and a fantasy world are essential if one is to remain able to be filled with wonder at being alive and to lend the most humdrum events a rare intensity. Highlighting this side of Maurice Grosman's story appealed to me: it showed me the universal side of these children's story: in the children's hospital for two years during the war, they resisted in their own way by drawing energy from their imagination. They composed another reality for themselves; they dreamed of their favourite cakes while they eat carrots fantasizing about their favourite pastries, they disrupted a grammar lesson by imitating a horse, they instilled a burlesque spirit à la Charlie Chaplin into the caretaker . . . They display resilience without knowing it.

Like all adults of my generation, I still have the mark of the BCG on my left shoulder. This vaccine eradicated tuberculosis, the same disease suffered by Maurice Grosman and other children in the long-term ward at the hospital. I wanted to tell you about this disease as if it was a story for which very often, the only remedy was amputation. Several scenes deal closely with the disease: the scene in which Doctor Daviel explains his illness to Maurice, the scene in which the German medicine – Prontosil – is delivered or the one in which the Doctor announces to certain children that they are cured when he examines their X-rays . . .

This dramatization allows us to better apprehend the Doctor's expectations for American penicillin. Finally, the last facet of Maurice Grosman's testimony that particularly resonates with me: he is the son of immigrants: he speaks two languages, one at home and the other outside, his mother tongue is not French but Yiddish, he switched between the two languages that convey two ways of thinking, two worlds in which he is a natural intermediary. I have experienced this type of situation.

Maurice was constantly using trickery. He interpreted, showing great understanding and finally had to adapt so that the Authorities and the school would understand his parents and that he, himself could be understood by his own parents. The little boy from the 18th district was not a Pole like them but a young French lad, who went to school every day. Maurice's resilience is perhaps rooted in his ability to adapt to a variety of – sometimes dangerous – situations.

Maurice Grosman told me that his mother tongue gradually lost ground whereas his French improved considerably. And then one day he forgot it altogether and his mother was no longer there to drag out the words and expressions that were buried deep in his memory. Without his aunt, the only survivor in the family, Maurice would not still be a custodian of this ancient language from Central Europe. Today, Maurice, an old man, dreams in French but thinks of his parents in Yiddish and his thoughts are precious.

Identity and integration are still part of our current political context since the French Revolution and the establishment of the *jus soli* principle. As a citizen, I remain convinced that the commemoration of the Shoah represents a shield that protects the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren born of immigration.

## **Translation of Statement by Maurice Grosman (the real Maurice whose story inspired the film)**

Source: The Children of Chance Press Kit

<http://medias.unifrance.org/medias/37/144/167973/presse/les-enfants-de-la-chance-presskit-french.pdf>

What really made me decide to participate in the film was that through the prism of these stories of sick children in the hospital, his script denounced the ignominy of this period of the Occupation and the Vichy regime . With its iniquitous laws that encouraged the police and the French population to denounce the Jews, even beyond what the Germans had asked. I think that today we are not talking enough about this time. Probably because those who were direct witnesses are very old or deceased. As a result, I feel that many young people have forgotten this past and, if only for the sustainability of the democracies, I find it dangerous. One has only to note the rise of nationalist thoughts in almost all European countries! So yes, to try to fight against this, we must continue to make films that remind us of what, not so long ago, racism and xenophobia were able to lead.

The Jews who survived the Shoah all have a story to tell. All, without exception. And each of their history is singular. Mine is only adding to theirs. The peculiarity of the one I experienced was that in a sense, it was marked by luck. This did not relieve me from sorrow or despair. On July 16, 1942, during the so-called Rifle of the Vel d'Hiv, 10000 Jews were arrested in Paris. Among them, my mother, my three sisters and my little brother. Not my father, who had already been shipped to Drancy in August 1941.

My first stroke of luck is an anti-Semitic child. A few days before the raid, at the sight of the yellow star that had been sewn on my jacket, and while I was playing in the street, he gave me a violent kick that caused me a trauma of hip. It must be said that at that time, the galoshes were made of wood and when you were hit with it, it hurt! Still, this injury caused me to be taken to the hospital. I was still there on the day of the raid ...

My second stroke of luck stems directly from the first. When the doctors examined my hip, they realized that in addition to my trauma, I was suffering from bone tuberculosis, which no one in my family had ever noticed. This disease, many of which died for lack of effective medicines, brought me to a long-term care facility in a hospital in the suburbs of Paris

My third stroke of luck, I owe it to the doctor in charge of this service. I did not see him because he was very busy, but he told me that, contrary to the obligation that was given him then, he had not declared me as a Jewish child. This testified, on his part, of a sacred dose of courage

When I arrived at the hospital I was twelve years old. I remained there three and a half years, plastered, unable to walk, punctured regularly the pus that formed in the bones of my hip. It was

both disabling and painful. But what I suffered most is a terrible sense of abandonment. I felt alone in the world and I must say that I was. I finally understood that if my parents did not write to me, it was because they were surely dead. And I wondered what, once cured, I was going to become. I was so unhappy that when friends or relatives of my hospital companions came to see them and pointed my finger at me asking why I never had a visit, and therefore never a single cake or piece of chocolate, Hiding under the sheets. And I cried. Yes, I have "experienced" the feeling of abandonment. And I can tell you that it does more pain than physical pain.

At liberation, when I was fifteen, I was sent to an orphanage. I felt very lonely as well. The only friend I had, and whose name was Samuel, was dead. At the hospital, as he was suffering from the same illness as me, he had been given a brand-new drug that had come from America, Penicillin, but unfortunately, the one he had been injected with was adulterated. And he was dead.

In this orphanage, I obviously never had a visit either. They wanted to send me to the country to work the land, but because of my leg it was impossible. And one day, miracle! I hear that they call me and ask me to go to the parlor. I go there with a beating heart, and what I see, through the opening of the door, my aunt (my father's sister) and her husband. During the Occupation, she had managed to take refuge in Switzerland. And on her return to France, she had managed to find me. It was, I think, the happiest day of my life. I ran to her sobbing and begged her to get me out of the orphanage. What she did. My life as a man began. I learned again to live and also to speak Yiddish, which I had unwittingly forgotten during all these years of solitude.

When producer Manuel Munz contacted me to make a film of my story, I was surprised. Did she deserve to be brought to the screen? Some stories had been much more tragic than mine. I, in my misfortune, had been lucky. Unlike other Jewish children, thanks to my illness, I had not been deported and I had been able to spend all those years of Occupation, fed and warm in bed. But Manuel Munz had explained to me that precisely it was the luck factor of mine that made it its singularity. I finally accepted.

We worked a lot with director Malik Chibane. During the period when the film was being prepared, I praised every day its great sense of listening, and also its subtle way of recalling memories that I had buried, voluntarily no doubt, in order to find again A form of recklessness. Thanks to that, this story that was mine, Malik succeeded, I believe, in restoring it with an infinite sensitivity and a great imagination.

Today, this feature film entitled LES CHILDREN OF CHANCE is released on the screens. On seeing it, other memories came back to me and I could not help but cry.

I hope that this film will explain to the children of this new century what happened to the Jews during the war, and that no one, at least at first, could suspect: death for the deportees. Now, we, the Jews, have a refuge: the State of Israel. And that changes everything. We will never again suffer the Shoah.

## Historical Context: France During WWII

Many 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 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, 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.

**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 25<sup>th</sup>, 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>

French History Online

<https://frenchhistoryonline.com/vichy-france-and-the-second-world-war/vichy-france-the-nazis-and-the-holocaust-an-introduction/>

BBC

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/jewish\\_deportation\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/jewish_deportation_01.shtml)

United States Holocaust Museum

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

## **Related Activity**

Students should draw up a chronology of events highlighting the main dates of WWII referred to in the film.

## **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. The famous roundup of Jews between July 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> is depicted at the beginning of the film. Anti-Semitism was rife in France and there were many French citizens who were happy to collaborate with the Nazi occupiers to rid France of its Jewish population. The most obvious French collaborator in the film is Dr. Daviel's brother, Raymond who relishes the opportunity to deliver Jewish children from the hospital to the Nazis.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there were French people who joined the Resistance movement and risked their lives to fight the Germans. In addition to those who took up arms against the Nazis, many ordinary citizens put their own survival in jeopardy in order to help the Jewish population. In France, they are known as "Les Justes parmi les Nations", or Righteous Among Nations. Dr. Daviel and Nurse Veronique fit into this category; without their courage



and willingness to risk their own lives in order to protect the Jewish children in their care, Maurice would never have survived.

### **Related Activities**

- Write a paragraph outlining the reasons why you think that Dr. Daviel and Nurse Veronique decided to put their own safety at risk to save the Jewish boys in their care.
- Research some of the other Justes parmi les Nations and the actions they took to save their fellow Jewish citizens. There are several websites dedicated to these people. For example, <http://memoiredelashoah.weebly.com/les-justes-parmi-les-nations.html> (French website), <http://www.yadvashem.org/righteous>, and <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/righteous-among-the-nations>.
- The boys' teacher, Charles, could also be seen as a resister. What does Charles stand for? Why does he believe Algiers to be the new capital France?

### **Extension Activity**

Luc and Marcel stage a mock battle, with Luc representing Charles De Gaulle and Marcel taking the part of Philippe Pétain. Students should research both men and compare their stances regarding the Germans.

### **Theme: Coming of Age**

Although Maurice is only 15 when the war ends, he has matured well beyond his years as a result of the War and the time he spent in the hospital. Likewise, the other boys in his ward all insist at various points that they “are no longer children” and don’t need to be shielded from news about the war by adults. Below is a list of events that contribute to Maurice’s transformation from child to adult. For each event, students should outline the specific lesson(s) he learns from the experience:

- Seeing his mother and siblings rounded up by the Nazis
- Maurice’s first night away from home at Poincaré Hospital
- Trying to escape from the hospital after his letter to his parents is returned. What lesson does Dr. Daviel teach Maurice when he asks him to sign a document that will grant him freedom?
- Maurice discovers that the Nazis have entered the Free Zone
- Death of Jean the Breton
- Discovering who the real Maurice Mangin and Georges Dunoyer were
- Death of Samuel
- Realising that Dr. Daviel had pretended that still had TB so that he would be kept safe during the war
- Reuniting with his aunt and discovering that his entire family had been killed.

**Theme: Luck**

It is largely due to the help of Dr. Daviel and Veronique that Maurice was able to survive as a Jew during the war. However, the film makes it clear 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 Maurice not broken his leg, his tuberculosis would not have been discovered and he would have been rounded up with his family instead of spending the war in a hospital.

**Classroom Activity:**

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

**Theme: Escapism**

While the events of the film take place during WWII, *The Children of Chance* is not a typical war film. Being confined to the hospital ensures the boys' physical safety, but it does not protect from boredom and loneliness. Director Malik Chibane emphasises the role that imagination and fantasy play in building the boys' resilience to their circumstances. For example, imagining that their daily ration of watery vegetable soup is, in fact, a homemade apple strudel, the boys are able to transform a measly war ration into a veritable feast.

**Classroom Activity**

Compile a list of the ways in which the boys in the ward combat the monotony of their confinement. At what points in the film does the director insert musical numbers? Why does he choose these moments?

**Theme: Language and Identity**

In order to protect himself from being readily identified as a Jew, Maurice makes the deliberate choice to speak only in French. By the time the war is over, he can no longer even understand what his aunt says to him when she speaks in Yiddish. However, Yiddish and his Jewish upbringing are an integral part of his identity. This is evident in the scenes where Maurice is heard speaking Yiddish in his sleep; while he can consciously control the identity he puts forward in public, his unconscious betrays his true self.

**Focus Question:**

Why does Maurice agree to speak to Samuel in Yiddish when they are together? At what point in the film does he decide that it is no longer a good idea for either of them to revert to their mother tongue when they are together?

## **Children of Chance: General Discussion Questions/Activities**

1. Listen to the lyrics of the opening song, Blumenthal et Campagne, an anti-Semitic French song from the 1940s. What Jewish stereotypes does the song promote?
2. In an ironic twist, the German-manufactured drug Prontosil cures two of the boys of their tuberculosis, but the American-made penicillin kills Samuel and Rene. Although the boys were unfortunately given a contaminated batch of the drug, penicillin did, in fact, prove to be a wonder drug during WWII, saving countless soldiers from amputations caused by gangrenous infections. Students could research the role that penicillin played in the War. A lesson plan about this can be found at <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-teachers/lesson-plans/pdfs/thanks-to-penicillin-lesson.pdf>
3. What is Dr. Daviel's initial reaction to Veronique's suggestion that they send two terminal boys to their deaths under Jewish names in order to give Maurice and Samuel their identities to spare their lives? Do you think this was the right ethical choice? Why/why not?
4. The film begins on July 16, 1942 during the infamous Vel d'Hive roundup, when French police arrested 13,152 Jews and confined them to the Velodrome d'Hiver, a bicycle stadium. Research that chapter of French history. There are several websites that are helpful including [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/france/vel\\_dhiv\\_roundup.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/france/vel_dhiv_roundup.asp) and [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/17/france-vel-d-hiv-70-anniversary\\_n\\_1678941.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/17/france-vel-d-hiv-70-anniversary_n_1678941.html)
5. Though it is widely known that the French collaborated with the Nazis during the Vichy regime, it was not until 1995 that President Jacques Chirac publicly acknowledged the role of the French in the Vel d'Hive roundup. To commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the roundup, the Paris police opened their archives, shedding new light what happened and President Francois Holland publicly apologised and vowed to protect Jews from anti-Semitism. Why do you think it took France so long to acknowledge their complicity? Students can Holland's speech at <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/08/18/france-hollande-crime-vel-d-hiv/> and learn more about the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations at <http://www.france24.com/en/20120714-france-police-history-archives-world-war-two-deportation-jews-vel-dhiv-holocaust/> and at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/world/europe/france-reflects-on-role-in-rounding-up-jews-for-death-camps.html>
6. Maurice's sister tells Maurice that their parents were to Drancy. What was Drancy? Students can learn more about it at <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005215> and at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/drancy-transit-camp>.

## References

(All websites cited are from April, 2017)

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United States Holocaust Museum

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

Memoires de la Shoah

<http://memoiredelashoah.weebly.com/les-justes-parmi-les-nations.html>

Yad Vashem

<http://www.yadvashem.org/righteous>

Jewish Virtual Library

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/righteous-among-the-nations>

National WWII Museum

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-teachers/lesson-plans/pdfs/thanks-to-penicillin-lesson.pdf>

Yad Vashem

[http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/france/vel\\_dhiv\\_roundup.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/france/vel_dhiv_roundup.asp)

Huffington Post

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/17/france-vel-d-hiv-70-anniversary\\_n\\_1678941.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/17/france-vel-d-hiv-70-anniversary_n_1678941.html)

New York Review of Books

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/08/18/france-hollande-crime-vel-d-hiv/>

France 24

<http://www.france24.com/en/20120714-france-police-history-archives-world-war-two-deportation-jews-vel-dhiv-holocaust/>

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/world/europe/france-reflects-on-role-in-rounding-up-jews-for-death-camps.html>

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