

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Silver Sword/Escape from Warsaw

by  
Ian Serrailier

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## Book Information

Ian Serrailier, The Silver Sword/Escape from Warsaw  
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Ruth, Edek and Bronia are left to survive on the streets of bombed Warsaw when they are separated from their parents. The Silver Sword is their talisman of hope and inspires them in their journey across Europe where they unite with their parents.

**Topics:** Countries/Regions, Poland; People, Nazis; Wars, World War II

## Main Characters

- Bistro** the escaped chimpanzee that Jan befriended in Berlin
- Bronia** the youngest of the three Balicki children, a talented artist who adores her older sister
- Burgomaster** the German whose job is to send all refugees back to their native countries
- Edek** the middle child, a very resourceful and intelligent boy
- Herr Wolff** the kindly Bavarian farmer who takes in the children
- Ivan** the Russian soldier who helps the children in Warsaw
- Jan** the orphan boy who Ruth takes in and cares for as a brother, a very bitter but loyal child
- Joe Wolski** the Polish-American soldier who helps the children reach the Red Cross camp
- Joseph** the children's father, who was captured early on in the war and was determined to reunite his family
- Ruth** the oldest of the children, a natural teacher and a courageous and selfless young woman

## Vocabulary

- blitz** an intensive bombing attack on a city, especially during World War II
- dodges** methods of smuggling things

- lorry** a truck used to transport goods
- queue** a waiting line
- warren** a rabbits' den made up of an intricate maze of tunnels

## Synopsis

Ruth, Edek, and Bronia Balicki are three Polish children who are left alone in Warsaw, Poland after the Nazis arrest their parents. Their father, Joseph, is taken while he is teaching school, and their mother is taken from their home in the middle of the night. Although Joseph escapes more than a year later from his prison camp, he is unable to find his children when he returns home. He finally decides to flee to Switzerland, where the family had agreed to meet in case they were separated. While still in Warsaw, Joseph befriends a young boy named Jan who agrees to keep an eye out for the children and to tell them where to find their father. He gives Jan a tiny silver sword to help identify the children.

Left on their own, the three children had learned to fend for themselves in the war-riddled city, living in ruined buildings and smuggling food. They also helped other children survive. One day, however, Edek is caught smuggling food and is taken to a German work camp. Although he was the family's main provider of food, Ruth manages to support herself and Bronia, as well as teach the other orphaned children in a makeshift school in the bombed-out cellar in which they live. One of the children she takes in and cares for turns out to be Jan. Eventually she finds out that he had met her father, and Ruth becomes determined to bring her siblings and Jan to Switzerland to find him and reunite their family.

The children's journey is filled with various adventures and dangers. They first attempt to find Edek at the hospital where he is being treated for tuberculosis, only to discover that he had run away just that morning. However, the siblings are soon reunited when they find Edek at a soup kitchen. The four children then catch a ride on a train to Berlin where Jan befriends a runaway monkey named Bistro, as well as a British officer stationed there.

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The children press on towards Switzerland, walking and hitching rides with the other refugees traveling south. While they are in the American-occupied zone, Jan is arrested for helping thieves rob the goods from trains that pass through. After he serves a few days in jail, the children continue on to Bavaria, where they seek refuge in a kindly farmer's barn. They remain on the farm for a short time, but when the Burgomaster threatens to send them back to Poland, they escape by canoeing down the river to safety. Edek continues to get weaker due to his illness, but with the help of a young Polish-American soldier, the children finally reach the refugee camp on Switzerland's border. There they receive word that their father is alive and that he is coming to get them, but when the children go out to meet him at the side of the lake, they nearly drown in the awful storm that suddenly strikes. In the end, however, they are reunited not only with their father, but with their mother as well. Although all the children have difficulty readjusting to normal life again, the emotional and mental wounds of the war heal, and they all become happy adults.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Why might Jan trust animals more than people?

*Jan probably feels he can trust animals because an animal would never hurt him or deceive him on purpose. Other people had probably abused him, the Nazis had destroyed his city, children likely teased him, and adults may have shooed him away because they did not want to deal with an orphan. As a result, the only friends and companions Jan had were the animals that he trusted.*

### Literary Analysis

How do the characters of Herr and Frau Wolff break the stereotypes held about the Germans during World War II?

*The common stereotypes of the Germans were that they all blindly followed Hitler and hated the Jewish people. The Wolffs were different from this stereotype because they were willing to help the children as well as other refugees who came to their farm for help. They also were willing to stand up to the Burgomaster to help the children, rather than simply obey the law without question.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Compare and contrast Edek and Jan. How are they similar and how are they different?

*Edek is a few years older than Jan and is much more mature. Before Edek is sent to the work camp, he smuggles food into Warsaw, but his motivations for doing so are to help the people in town. Jan, on the other hand, steals from anyone he can, picking pockets, snatching food, and even taking the silverware from the house of the German woman where the British soldier is staying. Jan and Edek are also different because of their background. Jan is an orphan who has no known family, whereas Edek has Ruth and Bronia and can remember his parents and the love they showed him. Jan and Edek are similar because they both respect Ruth and depend on her to take care of them. She has a great deal of influence on both of them, but she has to use that influence with Jan more often than with Edek.*

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## Constructing Meaning

Even though the Nazis do terrible things to Edek and his family, he does not believe all Germans are evil. What events in the book show the reader that Edek does not stereotype all Germans as Nazis?

*The Nazis take away Edek's parents and destroy the city in which he lives. The Nazis also arrest him and send him to a work camp. As a result of this, he contracts tuberculosis and has a more difficult time getting to Switzerland. However, Edek is mature enough to realize that the Nazi party is responsible for the majority of the problems he faces and that not all Germans are Nazis or even support the Nazis. His understanding is reinforced by the Wolffs' kindness to him and his family.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Surviving World War II and its aftermath is difficult for the Balicki children as they try to make their way to Switzerland. For the children who were trapped in the concentration camps, however, the battle for survival was fought every minute as they faced hardships ranging from malnourishment and disease to death in the gas chambers. Yet like the Balicki children, they sometimes managed to find bright spots in the midst of their troubles. Check out the book *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (edited by Hana Volavkova, New York: Schocken Books, 1993) from the library and read the poems and essays in it as a class. Written by the children living in the concentration camps, the pictures, poems, letters, and stories in it depict the hardships the children suffered. Choose one or two selections in the book and discuss them as a class, identifying the feelings expressed in each one.

**Describing Actions or Events** After Joseph leaves Warsaw for Switzerland, the reader does not hear anything about him again until he is reunited with his children. Have the children write a short story about two adventures Joseph has during his travels to Switzerland. Some possibilities are explaining what happens to him on the goods train, describing who helps him find

his relatives in Switzerland, or relating how he is reunited with his wife.

**Recognizing Detail** The things Jan keeps in his box have little, if any, monetary value, yet they are all very important to him. Ask the students to think of one thing that is very important to them that other people may not consider valuable. Then have each student bring in the object or a picture of it and explain to the class why it is so important to him or her.

**Identifying Persuasive Language** Many of the people who help the four children aid them only after the children convince them to do so. The children use many tactics such as bargaining and begging to acquire what they need. To put some of these techniques into practice, have the students play a round of "Honey, If You Love Me." The class sits in a circle with one person in the middle whose goal is to get someone to smile. That person may approach anyone in the circle and say, "Honey, if you love me, won't you please, please smile?" He or she may not touch the person being addressed, but any tasteful actions or acting techniques may be used to cause the person to smile. If he or she smiles, that student trades places with the person in the center and must make someone else smile. If the person addressed does not smile, the student in the center moves on to someone else. The object is to be the last person in the circle to smile.