

teacher's guide

Visual
Language
Books



to **The Secret Buttons**

A Novel by Ellen M. Shapiro for students in grades 5 and up

I. Why read and teach from this book?

The Secret Buttons tells the story of Anni and Rosie Blum, ages 12 and 7, who flee Nazi-occupied Vienna in 1939. With forged passports, disguised as Aryan holiday travelers, they are the only Jewish children on a passenger train—terrified they'll be discovered. As Britain prepares for war, they arrive in rural England to live with distant relatives as domestic servants. There, they face many challenges, come of age, and use their talents and creativity to solve a very grown-up problem—while hoping to reunite with their parents.

This guide provides teachers with background, discussion frameworks, and activities to help students engage with the book's themes and connect them to important issues today.

If your school has a Holocaust unit or curriculum, the book and this guide is designed to be an additional resource for further reading and understanding. If your school doesn't have a Holocaust unit, the book can be an appropriate starting point.

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IN THE NARRATIVE, a 12-year-old refugee, Anni Blum, tells her coming-of-age story amidst war and displacement in her own words. The story does not dwell on death, but on life, and it isn't scary for young readers. Although she and her little sister Rosie meet an Auschwitz survivor, the narrative ends a year and a half before actual murder operations begin in the camps.

The Holocaust matters today.

It happened within living memory. Some survivors are still alive to share their stories. Students may have grandparents or great-grandparents who lived through this era, or who were killed.

The author's mother, Elizabeth Shapiro, was the inspiration for Anni. Her grandparents were survivors from Vienna, her grandfather having been interned at Dachau. Her students were the catalyst. She finished writing and publishing the book after her fifth through seventh graders at a twice-weekly religious school — kids who weren't receptive to most lesson ideas — told her that the Holocaust was the only thing they really wanted to learn about. She couldn't find materials she felt appropriate, so wove some of her mother's recollections into a story that captures the period's fear, hope, and resilience, while making the story accessible and exciting for young readers.

While the characters and events were fictionalized to create a compelling story, the emotional truth comes from real experience.

The Secret Buttons shows where hatred leads. The Holocaust began with words, stereotypes, exclusion, and laws that stripped people of their rights — patterns we see in today's headlines.

Your students will learn much more than history.

The book is easy to read. The vocabulary is at a middle-grade level. Through it, students will learn about much more than the Holocaust and the Nazis' carefully plotted, step-by-step program of intimidation and dehumanization.

They'll also learn something about mail delivery through couriers in neutral countries, cooking with wartime rations, knitting and sewing with scarce materials, blackout curtains, sheep-shearing, English hedgerows, telephone calls through long-distance operators, savings accounts with passbooks. They'll read about personages including Winston Churchill, Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, Fiorello LaGuardia, and even a bit about the New York subway system and how the 47th Street Diamond District began and operated.

It's not just history—it's now.

Antisemitism is rising worldwide. Not only hatred of Jews, but hatred of other religious and immigrant groups. Understanding the deadliest expressions helps young people recognize and resist these forces today.

The Secret Buttons is different.

Many fiction books for young readers with a Holocaust theme portray Jewish children solely as victims — hiding in attics, suffering in camps, perishing. Those stories are important, but they only tell one part of the truth.

The Secret Buttons offers something different and important: *Jewish children as heroes*.

Anni and Rosie are not passive. They:

- Travel alone across Nazi territory with forged passports, maintaining their disguise under terrifying pressure.
- Adapt to a new country, language, and culture with resilience.
- Use their talents — knitting, crocheting, writing, drawing, quick-thinking — to solve an adult problem: helping refugees escape to America with resources hidden in handmade sweater buttons.

This portrayal matters because:

- It reflects historical reality. Jews resisted, rescued, and survived via courage and ingenuity — not just luck.
- It gives students models of agency. Readers see characters who act rather than simply endure.
- It honors survivors' full humanity. Jewish people during the Holocaust are not defined solely by their victimhood.
- The young characters face specific situations drawn from history:
 - The restrictions that prevented refugees from taking money or valuables out of WWII Britain because all resources were needed for the war effort
 - The suspicion faced by German-speaking immigrants in wartime England
 - The spiritual awakening of secular Jews who encountered traditional texts, observances, and values.

II. The main themes:

1. The Relevance of the Holocaust Today

The patterns that enabled the Holocaust – propaganda, scapegoating, dehumanization – still exist. Students can learn to recognize these warning signs.

2. Immigration: Past and Present

Anni and Rosie's experience mirrors what millions face today: leaving everything behind and adapting to a new culture – and enduring hostility, contempt (and even arrest and deportation) in their new environment.

3. Using Talents to Make Things Happen

The girls' knitting skills become tools of rescue. Every student has a talent that can make a difference – the question is whether they'll use them.

4. Learning from Our Elders

The book itself grew from family stories. Encourage students to interview their own grandparents, great-grandparents, and other relatives. These conversations preserve history that might otherwise be lost.

5. The Value of Immigrants

In addition to working for the family, especially gardening, cooking, mending, making blackout curtains for the house, and sewing, Anni and Rosie contribute to their new community in important ways:

- Helping dig the backyard bomb shelter and planting the Victory Garden atop it;
- Forming a knitting group and teaching the Church Ladies;
- Interrogating the German pilot who bailed out over the village;
- Helping walk dogs and shear sheep;
- Making a wedding dress from parachute silk.

This reflects a broader truth: immigrants enrich the societies that welcome them.

6. The Value of Craft

Knitting gives the girls comfort during tense times and, as a plot device, becomes necessary and lifesaving. Crafts aren't frivolous. They build skills and resilience.

7. Confidence in a New Culture

Learning a new language and fitting into a different culture is hard. The girls' journey illuminates both the struggle and the growth that comes from it.

8. Discovering Deeper Jewish Identity

Coming from a secular background, Anni and Rosie are thrust into a more Jewishly observant household in England. Uncle Benjamin gently helps them discover personal spirituality for the first time. Their journey reflects many individual's experiences of reconnecting with heritage.

III. A unique, engaging classroom presentation.

"Step Inside the World of Secret Buttons" is a 26-page presentation in PDF format. It may be printed and used as a study guide or projected as a slide show.

It was designed to get behind the scenes add additional historical information and insights to the world depicted in the novel — no matter how you teach the Holocaust, World War II, antisemitism, and immigration.

The pages, most of which include a suggested student assignment, are:

Step Inside: Cover and short introduction.

Turn the Pages: Introducing author Ellen M. Shapiro as writer and designer; a video of the book with the pages turning to the chapter-opening illustrations.

What's It About? Plot summary. How to think about the story as you read; what you learned and what would you do if you were in a character's shoes.

The Characters: Introducing each main character, with a picture excerpted from the book's illustrations, plus a list of minor characters.

Writing: The author's thoughts about writing fiction, art direction, and working with the illustrator, Caterina Baldi. What is challenging and rewarding about writing a "Holocaust book"?

The Illustrations: Each chapter opens with a beautifully detailed double-page spread illustrating a key moment in the chapter. There's a video showing exactly how Caterina paints a scene.

Timeline: Timeline of world events from March 1938, the *Anschluss*, when Germany annexed Austria, to August 1945, when WWII ends. Note that Anni and Rosie's story ends in September 1941, 18 months before "murder operations begin in concentration camps."

Anni & Rosie's Journey: Map of central Europe with train tracks and stops on the journey from Vienna, Austria, to the port at Hoek van Holland, where ferries leave for England, across the North Sea to the fictional village of Tuppinsshire.

Learning a New Language: Adapting to a new culture and learning a new language is never easy; what kids can do to help new immigrants.

Jewish Values: How the Jewish holidays and the values of repairing the world (*Tikkun Olam*), lovingkindness (*Chesed*), following the Commandments (*Mitzvot*), welcoming the stranger (*Hachnasat Orchim*), charity (*Tzedakah*), justice (*Mishpat*), and truth (*Emet*) expressed in the book.

Antisemitism and Immigration: This page poses six key questions, beginning with “What were Jews blamed for in 1930s Germany?” for students to ponder and discuss.

Why Not Leave: Making Nazi-controlled territory “*judenrein*” began with making life so difficult for Jews that they’d want to leave the country, leaving their money and valuables behind. Why did so many stay? These pages pose serious questions about identity and belonging, courage and agency for classroom, book club, and family discussions. Set A is for young readers, Set B, for adults.

This set of pages delve into details in the book’s setting and European and American culture at the time:

Knitting: It’s the thread that holds the story together—from the Viennese knitting table, to making sweaters for refugees in England, to rebuilding the knitting table in multicultural Brooklyn, NY. This page introduces readers to the reasons people knit and to Ellen’s mother and her “Tyrolean sweater.”

The Buttons: Is the story true? Can you really crochet around a diamond and make it into a button that won’t fall off?

Posters: An essential communications media of the era. This page presents iconic German, English, and American WWII posters and their messages.

Food and Cooking: From Viennese schnitzel and pastries to meals in England made with wartime rations to a banana split in the USA.

Music: Vienna was the classical music capital of the world. Why was symphonic music—and popular tunes from movies we still love—important in this story? What happened to Jewish musicians in Germany and other Nazi-occupied countries?

Learning Together: Suggestions for reading and discussing with parents and grandparents and making a family scrapbook.

Learn More: A list of other books with Holocaust themes and books about young people from other cultures during upheaval and war.

Your Stories and Art: An invitation for students to interview elders (their own family or people in the community) and send in their stories for posting on <http://secretbuttons.com>. Plus an invitation to illustrate an important family or immigrant story for posting.

IV. Guiding Questions for Students

In addition to the questions in the PDF Teaching Guide/Slide Show, here are more questions to share — before or during reading — to deepen engagement:

About the Characters

- How do Anni and Rosie handle fear differently from each other? What does each sister's response tell us about her?
- What sacrifices do the girls' parents make? How do you think they felt about sending their children away?
- Did you relate to the grannies? Could anyone have done more to save them?
- Did you relate to the characters in England? How does the way they think and behave differ from the way Americans are supposed to think and behave?
- What about other characters? Can you pick a character or two you think are important/interesting/realistic (or not) and talk about them?

About Choices

- What risks do the main characters take? When is risk-taking brave, and when is it reckless and dangerous?
- Who is most helpful to the girls along their journey? Who do they help?
- What motivates people to help strangers — especially when helping is dangerous?

About Identity

- How do Anni and Rosie's identities change throughout the book? In what ways do their personalities and ways of thinking stay consistent?
- What does it mean to "belong" somewhere? Can you belong to more than one place, national identity, race, or religion?
- Where and how do we see refugees and immigrants facing similar challenges today?
- Have you ever felt excluded because of who you are? How did you respond? How would you respond now?

V. Connecting to Today's Issues

Antisemitism

Hatred of Jews did not begin or end with the Holocaust. Students should know that:

- Antisemitic incidents are increasing in schools, online, and in communities worldwide.
- The same stereotypes the Nazis exploited (Jews as greedy, disloyal, powerful) circulate today.
- Recognizing antisemitism is the first step to stopping it.

Discussion prompt:

In the book, a man on the train reads a Nazi newspaper with cartoons of “big-nosed, greedy Jews.” Where do harmful stereotypes about groups appear today? (Social media, jokes, news coverage?) How should we respond?

Immigration

The debates about immigration students see on TV and hear and talk about today echo those of the period during which the book takes place:

- Who deserves refuge?
- How do we balance security concerns with compassion?
- What do immigrants contribute to a national culture? What do they need?

Discussion prompt:

Anni and Rosie are accused of being Nazi spies because they speak German, the language of England's enemy. Where are people mistrusted because of their language, religion, or national origin? How can communities become more welcoming?

War

Wars are going on in various parts of the world now, though in American (other than on 9-11) we don't feel the immediate effects:

- Are wars inevitable?
- Should America help arm the nations whose cultures are closest to our own?
- Should we help rebuild countries devastated by war?

Discussion prompt:

Families in rural England had to build and hide in backyard bomb shelters. In the London, they took shelter in the “tube,” the subway stations. Are there shelters today that keep people safe during bombings?

VI. Role-Playing Scenarios

Divide the students into groups. Each group considers one scene from the book and discusses: What might you feel, think, say, and do in this situation? Groups then present to the class.

Scenario 1: The Ice-Skating Rink

In an early Vienna flashback, Anni arrives at the park ready to go ice skating and show off the embroidered Tyrolean sweater she just finished. At the gate, there's a guard and a new sign that reads: "Forbidden to Jews." Inside, members of the Aryan Youth League are skating happily on the pond.

Questions to consider:

- How would you feel seeing a "Forbidden to Jews" sign?
- Would you leave quietly, say something, protest, or do something else?
- What would be the consequences of the different choices?

Scenario 2: The Train Ride

On the train to England, Anni and Rosie sit next to a man reading the Nazi newspaper, chuckling at cartoons of "big-nosed, greedy Jews." Their mother warned them they must behave themselves – their lives depend on it.

Questions to consider:

- How do you stay calm when someone is mocking your identity?
- What's the difference between choosing silence for safety and choosing silence out of fear?
- Have you ever had to hide who you are?
- What can we do today when confronted with antisemitic or other hate words, activities, literature, signs, or slogans?

Scenario 3: Accused as Spies

Because Anni and Rosie speak German, the boys in Tuppashire, their new village in England, accuse them of being Nazi spies and pretend to shoot them.

Questions to consider:

- Should people reveal who they really are when confronted with hate or in another dangerous situation?
- How should kids respond to bullying based on misunderstanding?
- What is the difference between friendly teasing and real prejudice and animosity?
- What could help those English "lads" see Anni and Rosie differently?

Scenario 4: The Seder

The girls' family in Vienna was secular – they celebrated Passover with traditional foods and a discussion about freedom but had never done a formal reading from a Haggadah. In England, the girls are asked to read at the family seder. Anni and Rosie insist that they don't believe the Passover story and refuse to read. Uncle Benjamin gives them the opportunity to write and read their own essay.

Questions to consider:

- What do you think of their essay? Consider their writing process, the content, and the way they delivered it.
- How did the others around the table react to it? If you were there, how would you have reacted to it?
- How did this experience change the girls?
- Should people participate in traditions they don't personally believe in?
- Have you ever been asked to take part in something unfamiliar? How did you handle it?

Scenario 5: Stay or Go?

Anni is now 14 and enjoying life in the English countryside. After meeting an attractive young man who helps run his family's sheep farm, and she considers giving up her dream of being a fashion designer to stay in Tuppishire and live a rural life. Rosie has become best buddies with Cousin Ronald. But their parents, whom they missed terribly, are already in America, waiting for them.

Questions to consider:

- What do you think of Spencer and the sheep farm? Does the English countryside seem like an appealing place to live?
- What do you think of Tuppishire in general? What are the main differences and similarities between the way the British characters portrayed in the book think and behave (consider Aunt Vivian) and attitudes in our mainstream American culture?
- Can you imagine yourself as an older teenager or young adult considering a lifestyle or moving to a place your parents might object to? Would you dare to make that choice?
- When the girls leave England, they think they're leaving war behind. Were they?
- Luckily, they'd already learned English. All they had to do in New York was learn some different expressions. What if you had to leave for a new country where you didn't know the language?
- Do you think World War II was a justifiable war? What wars are going on now? Are they justifiable?

VII. Interviewing Elders

Encourage students to have conversations with grandparents, great-grandparents, or elders in their community about their memories of wartime or their own immigration stories. These conversations preserve history and strengthen family bonds.

Sample questions for family interviews:

- Where did our family come from? When and why did they leave?
- What traditions or values did they bring with them?
- Can you share a story passed down about that time?
- What was hardest about starting over? What helped?

VIII. Creative Classroom Activities

Based on what they learned in their interviews, students choose one of the activities below and share with the class or at a school assembly:

Writing: Write a short essay about your family background, including information about parents, grandparents, or more distant ancestors. Include country of origin, native language, employment, religion, known difficulties, and how they adapted to this country. Details about food, dress, customs, religion will add color and interest to the essay.

Drawing: *The Secret Buttons* is illustrated with paintings that set the characters in scene with nature, building exteriors and interiors, cars, bicycles, clothing, toys, animals, etc. Draw a scene from your family background and place yourself or one of your relatives or ancestors in it.

Performing Arts: Bring to class music, a dance, or a story or poem from your family's national heritage that you can share or perform.

IX. Additional Teaching Resources

From the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

Main Teaching Portal: ushmm.org/teach

Teaching Materials by Topic: ushmm.org/teach/teaching-materials

Holocaust Lesson Plans: ushmm.org/teach/holocaust-lesson-plans

Fundamentals of Teaching the Holocaust: ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals

Kindertransport Encyclopedia Entry: encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kindertransport-1938-40

Kindertransport – Specific Resources

North Carolina Council on the Holocaust – Kindertransport Lesson: ncholoocaustcouncilworkshops.org/kindertransport-lesson

UK Holocaust Memorial Day – Secondary Kindertransport Lesson Plan: hmd.org.uk/resource/secondary-kindertransport-lesson-plan

Additional Lesson Plans

JFCS Holocaust Center Lesson Plans & Guides: holocaustcenter.jfcs.org/education-resource/lesson-plans-guides

Teaching with Testimony – Immigration & Emigration Lesson (Middle School): teachingwithtestimony.com

X. A Final Note for Teachers

The Secret Buttons is ultimately a story of hope – of young people who face impossible circumstances with courage, creativity, and heart. In teaching this book, you're not just teaching history. You're helping students understand that ordinary people, including children, can make extraordinary choices.

The questions the book raises about identity, belonging, courage, and compassion are ones your students will carry with them long after they finish reading.

Thank you for bringing this story into your classroom.

Please contact me with suggestions, comments, or questions:

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Please visit:

<https://visuallanguage.net/> for more information about the book, including a Q&A with me, videos of Caterina Baldi making the paintings that illustrate the book, and links to reviews and radio appearances.

<https://SecretButtons.com> for a flip-through video of the pages and links students can follow to upload their writing and art and information about purchasing additional copies.

Special offer:

Purchase 12 or more *Secret Buttons* paperbacks at \$10.50 and get a free hardcover edition for your school library.