



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 6-8**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Cage

Ruth Minsky Sender

**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

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Ruth Minsky Sender

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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**ISBN 978-1-50203-655-1**

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## Skills and Strategies

### Critical Thinking

Analysis, evaluation, research,  
brainstorming, problem-  
solving

### Writing

Journal, letter, newspaper  
article, description, book  
review

### Listening/Speaking

Impromptu, debate,  
testimonial, drama,  
monologue, storytelling,  
personal experience

### Comprehension

Inference, prediction,  
compare/contrast

### Literary Elements

Character analysis,  
cause/effect, story map,  
metaphor, simile

### Vocabulary

Target words, glossary

### Across the Curriculum

History, geography, social  
studies, health, art

**Genre:** autobiography; originally written in Yiddish  
**Settings:** Lodz, Poland (later, the Lodz Ghetto); Auschwitz concentration camp; Mittelsteine labor camp; Grafenort labor camp  
**Time:** 1939–1945; World War II  
**Point of View:** first person  
**Conflict:** person vs. person, person vs. society  
**Themes:** survival, the effects of hope, persecution and conformity, courage  
**Tone:** poignant, tragic  
**Date of First Publication:** 1986

## Summary

*The Cage* is the biography of Riva Minska, a young Jewish girl from Lodz, Poland. After the German invasion of Poland, the Nazis take Riva's mother and send the children to the Lodz Ghetto. Riva cares for her brothers in the ghetto until she is separated from them during their transport to the Auschwitz concentration camp. She never sees them again. Riva survives Auschwitz and two more labor camps by writing poetry and remembering her mother's words: "As long as there is life, there is hope."

## About the Author

Ruth Minsky Sender—an accomplished author, teacher, and lecturer—began her life in a loving, secure Polish home. Born Riva Minska, she was one of seven children belonging to Avrom and Nacha Minska. By the time the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, her father had died, leaving her mother a widow. Ruth chronicles her life during and after World War II in four books: *The Cage*, *To Life*, *The Holocaust Lady*, and *Remember Your Name*. After the war, Ruth reunited with her brother and sisters who had fled to Russia during the German invasion. Ruth married Monieko (Morris) Sender, another Holocaust survivor. Ruth and Morris had two children at the Displaced Persons camp in Germany while waiting to get their visas for America. In 1950, Ruth and her family finally moved to America. Ruth attended college and had two more children. She now shares her life as a Holocaust survivor through writing and testimony.

## Characters

**Riva (Rifkele) Minska:** a young Jewish girl; cares for her brothers after their mother is taken by the Nazis; separated from her brothers at Auschwitz; memories of family and thoughts of hope help her survive the Nazis' reign of terror

**Nacha Minska (Mama):** a widow and mother of seven children

**Mrs. Gruber:** the Minskas' friendly Polish landlady; betrays them after German invasion

**Harry:** Mrs. Gruber's grandson; Riva's friend before he joined the Hitler Youth

**Laibele:** Riva's brother; dies from tuberculosis in the Lodz Ghetto

**Moishele:** Riva's brother; separated from Riva at Auschwitz

**Motele:** Riva's brother; separated from Riva at Auschwitz

**Shmulek:** a Lodz citizen working at the labor camps; returns to find his family gone

**Henry:** Riva's friend; hides Shmulek from the Germans

**Yulek Schwartz:** a young man sent to help Riva maintain her library

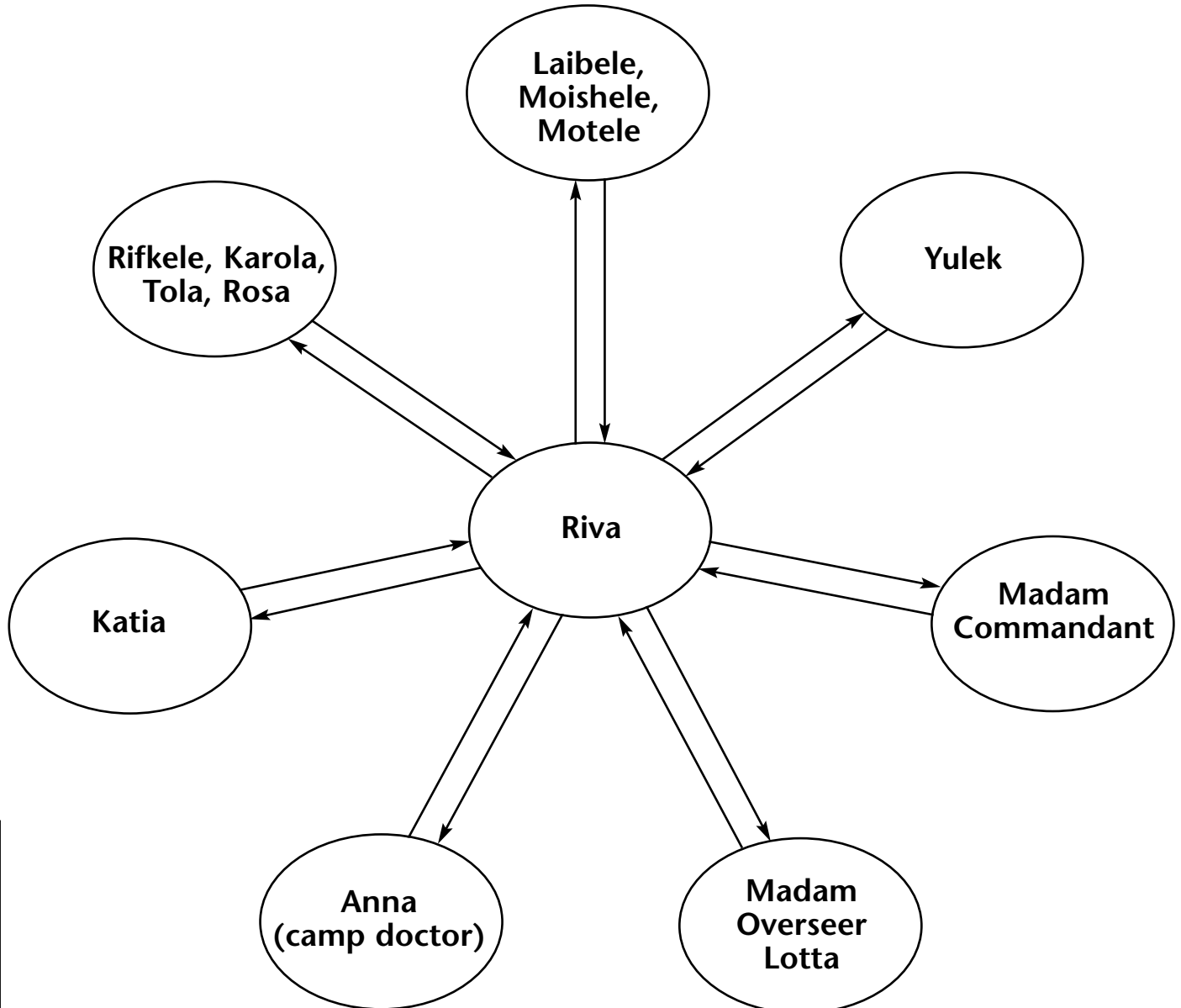
**Faygele:** Yulek's younger sister

**Rifkele, Karola, Tola, and Rosa:** Riva's friends at Auschwitz

**Madam Commandant:** a Nazi guard at the Mittelsteine labor camp

## Sociogram

**Directions:** A sociogram shows the relationship between characters in a story. Complete the sociogram below by writing a word to describe the relationships between the characters. Remember, relationships go both ways, so each line requires a descriptive word.



patients in the doctors' offices do not speak up for Riva. Answers will vary. Suggestion: When Hitler began persecuting the Jews, few people tried to stop him. As the Nazis became more powerful, non-Jews who voiced disapproval were persecuted also. Fear allowed the Nazis to exterminate millions of Jews. Had more people expressed disapproval earlier, perhaps the Holocaust could have been prevented.)

5. What is revealed about human nature in this section? (Answers will vary. Suggestions: People can display many different sides of themselves, depending on the situation. There is no limit to what a human being can do, whether it be kind or cruel. For example: pride [prisoners], kindness [Rosa, Anna, Madam Overseer Lotta], compassion [Madam Overseer Lotta], cruelty [Madam Commandant], indifference [German doctors, citizens], courage [Anna, Riva])

### Supplementary Activities

1. History: Research Anne Frank. Write a brief essay comparing her diary to Riva's poetry.
2. Character Analysis: Draw a caricature of Madam Overseer Lotta.
3. Poetry: Create an acrostic for "wooden shoes."

### Chapters 41–48, pp. 223–264

Riva learns to write with her left hand. The prisoners entertain the Nazi guards at Christmas. Riva reads her poetry, and Madam Commandant gives her a notebook to write her poems in. Riva works at a first-aid station with Katia, a Russian doctor, until the Nazis move the prisoners to Camp Grafenort to dig trenches for the German soldiers. There is talk of Allied forces coming to liberate the camps. One day, the Nazi guards march Riva and the other prisoners toward the woods with the intent of killing them. However, the guards run away to save their own lives and leave the Jews standing on the road alone. Riva and the rest return to the camp and wait until they are rescued. Riva returns to Lodz to find her mother and brothers or any trace of their past lives, but without success. She never sees her mother and younger brothers again. Riva eventually finds her older siblings who went to Russia to escape the Germans.

#### Vocabulary

internship (223)  
 basin (228)  
 regime (230)  
 oppressor (230)  
 disdain (236)  
 sterilize (238)  
 luxurious (243)  
 defiance (243)  
 oaf (244)  
 frantically (249)  
 nobles (251)  
 agitated (256)  
 crazed (257)

#### Discussion Questions

1. What are the messages of Riva's poems (pp. 226, 231–232)? (In the first poem, she praises Doctor Anna for her "words of love" and "words of hope." Riva says that the doctor gives them faith with her touch, a smile, and tales of the future. She gives the prisoners strength from her kindness. The second poem is a message, not only to her mother, but also to the mothers of the other prisoners. The message is how she loves and misses her mother and how she must stay alive until she can see her again and be freed. Both poems show great yearning and the longing of the prisoners for freedom and the life they once knew.)
2. Explain why Anna cannot return to her husband. (Anna, a Jew, married a young German medical student whom the Germans sent "to heal the killers" of the Jews. The Germans imprisoned Anna and killed her family at Auschwitz. No matter who "wins" the war, Anna and her husband will be political enemies. pp. 226–227)

3. Explain why Katia cannot return to Russia. (*Katia's husband, although a Russian, has German ancestors, so the German army enlisted him to fight against Russia. To be with him, Katia followed her husband. She ended up at a German labor camp as an assistant to the Germans. She would always be viewed as a traitor in the eyes of her Russian family and friends. pp. 239, 244–245*)
4. How does the author effectively emphasize the indifference of the outside world? (*She contrasts the two worlds by describing the outside world through Riva's eyes as she passes through it. For example, she describes the homes as "something from a beautiful picture postcard" [p. 255]. Riva wonders if they hear the wooden shoes, how they sleep at night, and if they ever wonder where "those skeletons" are being taken. She also shows their indifference when they refuse to answer the doors of the prisoners when they knock for help after they are freed. pp. 255, 258*)
5. Why do the Jewish women return to the camp, their "cage," after the Nazis flee? Why don't they leave the place where so many were tortured? (*Answers will vary. Suggestions: They have nothing—no food, no homes, no family, no money, no transportation, no help. They are weak, sick, fearful, and confused. p. 258*)

### Supplementary Activities

1. Social Studies: Write an essay on what life was like for the Jews who were freed from the concentration camps. Research the assistance available to them and if the persecution ended with Hitler's death.
2. History: Collect information (articles, pictures, etc.) about the Holocaust Museum to display in the classroom.
3. Writing: Write an essay about your fears. Include the reasons for your fears and ways you might conquer those fears.
4. Critical Thinking: Make a list of things for which you are thankful.