

# Survivors Club

## The True Story of a Very Young Prisoner of Auschwitz

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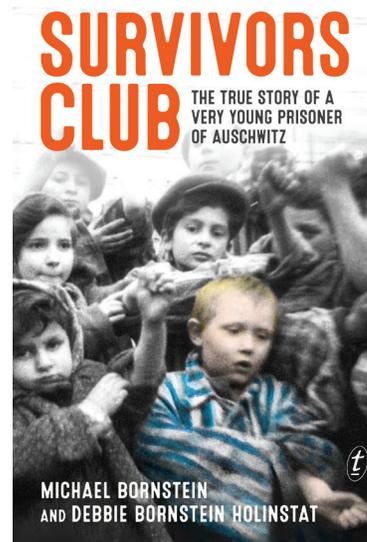
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Non-fiction

RECOMMENDED AGE 13+

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### CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

### SYNOPSIS

Fragmented memories and a chance discovery of film footage from his childhood set the wheels in motion for Michael Bornstein and his daughter to write *Survivors Club, The True Story of a Very Young Prisoner of Auschwitz*.

Born in war-torn Poland, Bornstein grew up in a close-knit family, despite knowing only hunger, prejudice and insecurity for the first five years of his life. His story is drawn from fragmented memories pieced together with the stories told by others about those years. His only memories of his father and brother are through the eyes of other family members who survived. They were, despite their loss, the lucky ones—the Survivors Club. Bornstein's story stands out from other Holocaust memoirs as it not only depicts the brutal reality of life in the ghetto and Auschwitz, it also documents his life after the Soviets freed them. The book highlights the ongoing struggle that many survivors had after the war, the emotional reunions and the struggle to rebuild their lives without those who did not survive.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

After the war, Michael Bornstein emigrated to New York City, where he worked in pharmaceutical research for over forty years. Now retired, Michael visits schools, talking about his experiences in the Holocaust.

Debbie Bornstein Holinstat is Michael Bornstein's third of four children. A producer for NBC and MSNBC News, she lives in New Jersey.

### BEFORE READING

1. Research World War II and the Nazi occupation of Europe. On a map, shade the areas that were occupied by Germany. Find Poland and locate Bornstein's hometown, Zarki. Locate Auschwitz.
2. How much do you remember of your first five years? Write about your earliest memory. What memories are easiest to remember? Talk to a family member who may have shared that experience and compare their version of events. Do you think your memories are all your own or have they been created by the stories of others?
3. Watch a film about the children who survived the concentration camps in World War II or visit a local museum to get an understanding of the impact that the Holocaust had on the survivors, especially the children.

### SUGGESTED FILMS

1. *Echoes of Truth*
2. *Fateless* (Directed by Lajos Koltai)
3. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Directed by Mark Herman)



### SUGGESTED MUSEUMS

1. The Jewish Holocaust Museum, Elsternwick, Vic., Australia. ([jhc.org.au](http://jhc.org.au))
2. Sydney Jewish Museum, Darlinghurst, NSW, Australia ([sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au](http://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au))
3. The Holocaust Institute of WA, Yokine, WA, Australia ([holocaustinstituteofwa.org.au](http://holocaustinstituteofwa.org.au))

### WHILE READING

1. In order to understand the narrator, it is important to read the Preface. What role does the Preface play? What reasons does Bornstein give for the decision to write his memoir?
2. 'How foolish Papa felt for looking right past all the misery and blindly believing, for three straight years, that the end of the war was near.' (p. 93) Do you believe that Israel Bornstein was foolish?
3. Over time, the memory of the survivors and their sense of identity begins to fade. Find examples from the book that reflect this. (For example, p. 166 'We showed them our tattoos to identify ourselves, but they pushed our arms aside and asked for our names.')
4. Why does Michael's memory seem to be clearer when he returns to Zarki? (p. 195)
5. Despite his experiences during the war, Michael's innocence is not completely lost. Find evidence of this from the book, such as when his grandmother takes him to the infirmary just before the arrival of the Soviet soldiers (p. 163-164) or playing a trick on his mother when he was supposed to be hiding in the straw (p. 157).

### AFTER READING

#### CHARACTER

1. 'Inside the crispy ironed uniform shirts of the men who marched like robots, I suppose there were still beating hearts.' (p. 112) Michael describes the surprising contrast in Officer Schmitt's behaviour. Are there other characters who are a contradiction?
2. How does the adult voice of the narrator, Michael, reflect his feelings as a child? Consider his memories of the very early years against the memories of his years in New York.
3. Why do you think the authors included the short biographical notes for each character at the end of the book?

#### STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. How do the photograph on the first page of the Preface and the opening line set the tone for the book?
2. How does the narrator maintain the fine line between his own memories and those that have been filled in by others?

3. Michael is shocked by the way that the Soviet soldiers speak kindly to them when they are 'freed' from Auschwitz. Consider the way that the language used by different people in the novel adds to our understanding of their attitude and beliefs. Make a list of positive and negative language.

### THEMES

#### Family

1. What choices do Israel and Sophie make to protect their family? Do you believe that some choices would have been more difficult than other choices? If so, why?
2. At the end of the book, Bornstein details the lives of his family members in their new country. Why do you think he includes this detail?
3. At the end of the Preface, Debbie Bornstein Holinstat, co-author and the narrator's daughter, refers to items saved by her grandfather. 'Among the items was one small but special religious relic. It didn't look like much—but it represented a lot.' How is the symbolism of this item used to connect the generations?

#### Prejudice

1. Make a list of the experiences that the family have that demonstrate both outright prejudice as well as more subtle forms of prejudice.
2. Why do you think some Poles continued to discriminate against the Jewish families after the war?
3. After the war, while waiting for a visa to America, Sophie and Michael still experience prejudice, but they also learn they can be guilty of judging others too soon. Find examples of both.

#### Survival

1. Despite their survival, each member of Michael's family is altered by their experience. Make a list of the survivors and consider the way that the war altered their life. (For example, p. 245)
2. '...you can kill people but you can't destroy their faith.' (p. 266)
3. What is the role of 'faith' in their survival? There is more to survival than being alive. How does the author depict survival in the book?

### RESPONDING

1. Despite their suffering, Michael and his family are able to 'look forward' and rebuild their lives. Explore this idea drawing on evidence from the book.
2. 'We were an elite club of survivors, with luck that had conquered all odds.' (p. 246)
3. Was their survival a result of luck?



4. While the book depicts images of death and destruction, this is a story of survival and hope. Do you agree?
5. Michael recounts the experiences of other family members in the book. Choose one of those people and retell part of their story in the first person. For example, what was the war like for Hilda or those who hid in the attic at the farm?
6. What is the message that Michael Bornstein wants to convey to his readers? Consider references in the Preface and on p. 295.