

Title: Escape from Warsaw (also known as The Silver Sword)

Author: Ian Serraillier

Grade Level: 5th Grade

SUMMARY

When Warsaw, Poland is attacked by Nazi forces, the Balicki family becomes separated. Joseph Balicki meets a young boy, Jan, and offers him a silver sword in exchange for a promise: Jan must tell his children to meet him in Switzerland. Reuniting the family proves to be no easy task. Ruth, Edek, Bronia, and Jan eventually meet up and spend months making the long journey to Switzerland together. Along the way, they must work together to survive and avoid being caught by soldiers on the lookout for Polish refugees. As you and your family read this thrilling story, you will be immersed in World War II history. Together, you will learn about the war's effect on families in Europe, through the eyes of Polish refugees.



QUESTIONS TO TALK ABOUT WHILE READING

VOCABULARY

It's important to make sure that your child has an understanding of key words in the book. Talking about words while reading is a great way for your child to learn new words.

In this book, you might talk about these words:

- tensely (pg. 9)
- punctured (pg. 30)
- ordeal (pg. 40)
- mangled (pg. 59)
- usurp (pg. 69)
- undernourished (pg. 83)
- curtly (pg. 126)
- anxiety (pg. 150)
- devotion (pg. 174)

You might use a question like:

In the book, what does the word “undernourished” mean? What does Mark mean when he says, “you can never tell with these kids, they’re so undernourished.”? What kids is he referring to and how does he know they are undernourished?

KEY IDEAS and THEMES

In addition to words, it's important to talk about key ideas and themes and how they develop over the course of the book. Here are some examples to get you started:



1. How do conditions in Warsaw change throughout the beginning of the book? After reading chapter 8, talk about the Pole's reactions to the Nazis. What led these people to fight the Germans?
2. At the beginning of the book, the author states, "This is the story of a Polish family, and of what happened to them during the Second World War, and immediately afterwards" (page 1). What happened to each member of the Balicki family when Warsaw fell under Nazi control? Help your child think through this question by creating a chart together to track each character's experience. Talk with your child about the steps each character took to solve his/her problem and reunite the family.

Here's a template to get you started!

Father	Mother	Ruth	Edek	Bronia	Jan

3. What does Mark mean when he writes about Ruth in his letter on page 87: "She's got as firm a hold over the family as Jan had over the chimp"? As you talk about this statement, ask your child to describe both Jan and Ruth. Reviewing Jan's interaction with the chimp in the previous chapter, talk about what the author means. How does Jan have a "firm hold" over the chimp? How does this connect to Ruth's role in her family?
4. Why is the silver sword so important to Jan and the other children? Review chapters 4 and 5, where Joseph finds the sword and eventually gives it to Jan. Flip through the remaining chapters of the book, asking your child to find places where the silver sword is a part of the family's conversation. What does the silver sword represent to the Balicki family? How does it bring together parts of the story?
5. Throughout *The Silver Sword*, the children receive help from many people as they work to meet their father in Switzerland. As a family, talk about the people they meet along the way that makes their survival possible. What motivated these people to help the family? As you talk about this, have your child find each helper's words and actions in the book. For example, Joe says, "Everywhere's a mess. I want to help clean it up. I want to show folks that you can't see all of life from a hole in a blitzed cellar. There's more to it than ruins and rubble. Sometimes things work out right, and sometimes they don't" (pg. 155). After reading his words, ask, "What was his motivation in helping the family?"
6. Read the "Afterword" at the end of the book. What was the author's purpose for writing this story? What does the author want people to understand about World War II and its effect on families in Europe?

EXTRA ACTIVITIES

1. After the Balicki family's town was attacked in Warsaw, the author describes the Pole's reaction to the Nazis. Learn more about the role Warsaw played in World War II. As a



family, search online for articles and stories about WWII's effect on Warsaw. To get started, check out the website called "Warsaw Ghetto Uprising" on History.com.

- a. After reading more about Warsaw's involvement in WWII, review the chapters of the book that depict these events. (Chapter 8 specifically). How do the events in the book mirror what you read in this and other articles?
2. Go back to your library or Internet and look up other places mentioned during the kids' epic journey to Switzerland. What more can you find out about the places they visit? How does this help you understand more about the story?