

The Boy on the Wooden Box Study Guide

The Boy on the Wooden Box by Leon Leyson

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Summary

Leon Leyson began his life in a small village in Poland. Life was fairly carefree for Leyson, filled with summer days playing in the river and adventure games played out with friends. At the age of eight, Leyson and his family moved to Krakow where his father worked in a glass factory. The city was an adventure for Leyson in the beginning, but when the war began, life became complicated for him and his family.

Assuming the German soldiers would be much like they were during World War I, when the Germans invaded Poland, Leyson's father decided that it would be safe to leave his wife and children in Krakow, but he and his eldest son should return to their home village ahead of the Germans. Leyson's father returned a short time later, having had second thoughts about abandoning his family. His eldest son, Hershel, returned to the home village alone. A short time later, Leyson's father was arrested and held in a local prison for several weeks, leaving the family without money and a means to get food.

When Leyson's father was released from prison, he returned home broken and without a job. He was able to secure a job a short time later when he opened a locked safe for the new German owner of a local factory. Leyson's father was given a job at this factory. He was not paid, but he was given a work pass that allowed him and his family to remain in Krakow when the Germans purged the city of all but fifteen thousand workers. The man his father worked for was Oskar Schindler.

A short time later, the remaining Jews were transferred to a closed off ghetto at the edge of the city. The ghetto was so crowded that there were sanitation and disease problems. However, they managed to survive until the Nazis decided it was time to purge even the ghetto. The Nazis at first asked for volunteers to agree to move into the ghettos in the countryside. Soon, however, they were forced to board trains to these new ghettos. Jews who had managed to escape these new ghettos and return to the city told horror stories of concentration camps. Soon the people were afraid to get on these trains. Unfortunately, Leyson's elder brother, Tsalig, was put on one of these trains and refused an opportunity to escape because his girlfriend was on the train as well.

Eventually the ghetto was completely cleared out and the Jews were taken to the work camp, Plaszow. Leyson had a hard time in this camp and was afraid he would not survive. Therefore, when he learned that Schindler had written a list of new workers he wanted moved to his sub-camp at his factory but that his name was crossed out, he arrived at the line leaving for the sub-camp and demanded to be taken. He was allowed to go.

Leyson worked at Schindler's factory for eight months. However, the Germans began to lose the war and Germans were fleeing Poland. Schindler's factory was to be torn down and moved to Czechoslovakia. Leyson and his family were among the workers allowed to go. When the war came to a close, Schindler gave each of the Jews a bolt of clothing and a bottle of vodka so that they might trade them after their release. He then fled to the American lines.



Leyson and his parents immigrated to America while his sister and surviving brother immigrated to Israel. Leyson would go on to serve in the military and achieve a higher education. He would be a teacher for nearly forty years and marry, bringing two children into the world. Leyson rarely talked about his childhood and experiences in World War II. However, when the book, *Schindler's List*, came out, Leyson found himself sharing his story in small and large venues. He also learned more about Schindler than he had known before, making him more of a hero in his mind. Leyson would die in 2013 after a three year battle with cancer.



Prologue and Chapters 1-2

Summary

Prologue. In 1965, the author attended a reunion of a group of Jews who were rescued from the Holocaust by Oskar Schindler. The author, who was then thirty-five and a teacher in America, worried that Schindler would not remember him, but was pleased when he did. The writer decided to write this book so that the public would not forget what Schindler did for him and others like him.

Chapter 1. The author, born Leib Lejzon, was born in the small village of Narewka in Poland. The author, Leyson, was the youngest of five children. When he was young, the factory where his father worked was moved to Krakow, forcing his father to live in the city the majority of the time. In a few years, he would also bring his son, Hershel, to the city to work in the factory with him. The father's visits home were always a big deal, as he often brought gifts. Leyson was close to his three brothers and his sister, especially David who was only a year older than him.

There was a large Jewish population in Narewka. Leyson had fond memories of attending synagogue with his extended family. However, there was also a large Christian population in the village. While many of the Christian children were playmates of Leyson's, there were times when they accused him of being the murderer of Jesus and would throw rocks at him. There were other small prejudices that Leyson faced as a child. He and other Jewish children were forced to stand when the Christian children said their prayers in class. His cousin was rudely told once that Jews were not allowed to have Polish first names.

The village in which Leyson grew up lacked many modern conveniences. They had to get their water from a well and they grew a lot of their own food, including vegetables and eggs. Jews were not allowed to own land in Poland during that time period, so Leyson's grandfather had to lease his land from the Eastern Orthodox Church. It was also a patriarchal society, so everyone was not known by their names, but by who their father or grandfather was. Leyson was often referred to through his grandfather's reputation.

Chapter 2. In 1938, Leyson's father moved the family to Krakow. Leyson was impressed by the indoor plumbing, something he had not had in his previous residence. He settled into life in the big city fairly quickly, finding it to be an adventure each day.

In October of 1938, news became focused on the Nazis and their actions against Jews. In March, many Jews had been forced out of Germany, but were also not allowed to reenter Poland. They were stuck in a no man's land on the border. Then, on the night of November 9-10, many Jewish owned properties in Austria and Germany were burned or vandalized. It is remembered in history as Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass.



Despite this, hope remained that the Germans would stop this bigotry, but as the certainty of war increased, hope began to die.

By the summer of 1939, many families were preparing for war. Some Jewish families prepared by moving away, most moved closer to the Soviet border. On September 1, 1939, Leyson woke to the sound of an air raid siren. The Germans were invading Poland. In an attempt to avoid the advancing German army, Leyson's father and brother fled the city for Narewka, leaving behind Leyson, his siblings, and his mother with the assumption that the German soldiers would not harm them. Five days later, Leyson heard a rumor there were soldiers on the bridge over the Vistula River. He believed they were allies and was shocked to discover they were German soldiers.

Analysis

Leon Leyson, the author of this book, is a survivor of the Holocaust. When he was only ten years old, he was placed on a list written by Oskar Schindler. This list saved every person on it from going to the concentration camps where too many Jews were murdered during the war. He begins this book by telling the reader about at time, twenty years after the war, that he was able to go back and meet Oskar Schindler. He was impressed that Schindler remembered him, and he now wants the world to know and remember Schindler.

Leyson's life began like most children in an industrialized country. He lived in a small village, had several siblings and friends, and looked at the world through the innocence that only comes with childhood. He was only eight when his family moved from their small village to the big city of Krakow. Not long after their move, rumors and stories of cruelty against Jews in Germany, Austria, and Poland began to spread. Leyson was mostly protected from this news, but it was impossible to hide it from him, even at such a young age.

The reader is aware of the history of this time period. However, it is different to see it through the eyes of a young child. Leyson, looking back on this time from old age, tells his story with the simple naivety of a child. It is a lesson in history straight from someone who lived it, a rarity that most people do not have the opportunity to experience.

Vocabulary

foreboding, symbols, border, celebrating, perilous, advanced, extended, outbreak, bravery, defense, declared, war, consider, abandoning, construct, adjustment, acquaintances, expected, exploding, attacked, intently, available, invasion, electrician, sometimes, commented, entrusted, doubting, increasingly, extended



Chapters 3-5

Summary

Chapter 3. Leyson's father returned home just a few weeks after he left. The Germans had invaded far further than they had suspected. Hershel, Leyson's brother, continued on with the group while the father came home. The factory where they both worked was taken over by a German entrepreneur soon afterward. All the Jews, with the exception of Leyson's father, were fired. Leyson's father remained because he could speak German and could act as a liaison between the German management and the Polish workers.

One night the Gestapo broke into their apartment looking for a key some neighbors had told them they had. Leyson's father stood up to them. He was beaten in front of his wife and kids and then dragged out into the night. Leyson and his brother, David, tried desperately to find out where they had taken their father. As the days turned to weeks and their father did not come home, they family grew desperate. There was no money and no food.

In December 1939, the Nazis decreed that Jews could no longer attend public school. Leyson began looking for work to help the family like his older brother and sister. He worked putting labels on soda bottles and was paid one bottle each day. One day, he saw one of the Gestapo who dragged his father away. He asked where his father was and was told he had been taken to St. Michael's prison. The family was pleased to know he was still alive. They were even more pleased when he was released several weeks later. However, prison life had broken his father and he had lost his job. Not long after, the Nazis began requiring Jews to wear a white armband with the blue Star of David on it.

At ten, Leyson was not required to wear an armband identifying him as a Jew. He also did not look Jewish. For this reason, he often defied the rules that required Jews to act subservient around the Nazi soldiers. His father, too, found a way to be disobedient. He opened a safe for the new owner of another glass factory without asking questions and was given a job for the factory off the books. The Nazi factory owner who hired Leyson's father was Oskar Schindler.

Chapter 4. Oskar Schindler first leased, and then bought, the glass factory in November 1939 and renamed it Deutsche Emalwarenfabrik, or German Enamel Works, to appeal to German army contractors. They made enamelware pots and pans at a low production cost. In 1940, he only employed seven Jews. However, working for a German-owned company gave these Jews the protection of being forced into labor by the Nazis. This included Leyson's father. They were not paid, but they were given food and coal.

As Leyson continued to ignore the rules placed against the Jews, he began making friends with a group of soldiers guarding a petroleum tank across from his family's



apartment building. He would often entertain them with jokes and they would share their chocolate with them. Then, one night, the soldiers broke into his apartment after being told he was a Jew and slapped him for lying to them.

In May 1940, the Germans declared that all Jews - except those with jobs at German-owned companies - had to leave the city. Leyson's parents told their children this was a good thing, but everyone was relieved when they learned that, due to his father's job at Schindler's factory, they would not have to leave. His work permit covered his wife and children, as well.

At the end of 1940, a ghetto was built in Krakow to house the fifteen thousand Jews remaining in the city. Leyson and his family were forced to move into the ghetto, an area that had once housed five thousand people and would now be forced to hold three times that many. The Leysons were forced to live in a small apartment with another family, the Luftigs.

Chapter 5. The conditions in the ghetto were deplorable. There were too many people and an inadequate sewer system. Not only this, but the people were so close to one another that illness spread quickly. Despite this, people continued to live as normal a life as possible. They still worshiped, they still went to school, still found ways to be entertained. They also continued to fall in love, including Leyson's older brother, Tsalig.

Starvation was rampant in the ghetto. The Nazis only provided them with a small amount of bread, so most families had to buy or trade for food. The Leysons had nothing left except for a few of the father's suits. They often went to bed hungry, but they each did the best they could to find food. The father would bring home food from work, and Leyson would sometimes get food in payment for running errands for his neighbors. In an effort to help the family, Leyson's father asked Schindler to hire his son, David, at the factory. Schindler agreed.

In May 1942, the Nazis asked for volunteers to move to a new ghetto in the countryside. Fifteen hundred Jews agreed. Soon after, the Nazis stopped taking volunteers and began demanding that all non-essential Jews leave the ghetto. The Luftigs were part of the first of these to leave. In time, people who had been forced to leave and made their way back began telling stories about the horrors they saw on the trains. This made the people afraid, so there was chaos the next time the Nazis came to expel more Jews.

On June 8, the German soldiers came to the Leysons' apartment. Leyson's father had the identification necessary to save him. However, Tsalig, who was now seventeen, needed a work permit, but did not have one. He was arrested and put on a train to Belzec. Schindler had learned that his accountant, Itzhak Stern, was on the train and went to the station to save him. He also saw Tsalig and tried to save him, but Tsalig refused to leave without his girlfriend, Miriam.



Analysis

Life for the Leyson family grew harder as time passed. First the father returned, but he was quickly arrested. Then he was released, but he lost his job and his spirit. He managed to get a job at a factory after he opened a safe for the owner, but this job did not pay him anything. Therefore, the family, who had already been starving and had no money, continued to survive on just the little bits of food and coal the father could bring home from work.

When the family was moved into the ghetto with the rest of the Jews, they found themselves not only starving but living in conditions that were inhumane. Disease and starvation were a daily occurrence in the ghetto. It was a difficult life, but they managed to survive until the Nazis began forcefully evacuating the ghetto. The Leysons continued to be lucky because of the work pass the father had from Schindler. Not only that, but David, Leyson's older brother, also had a job there. However, Leyson's second eldest brother, Tsalig, did not have a work permit. When the German soldiers surprised them with a raid on their apartment, he was taken away. Ironically, he could have been saved by Schindler, but Tsalig refused to leave the girl he loved, showing a depth of character.

Vocabulary

accountant, prepared, countless, practiced, pounced, rescue, identification, deportations, furtively, escapees, terrifying, erupted, determined, remained, deportees, encouraging, emotion, swallowed, proceeded, ordered, belonging, exchange, information, contradictory, transport, ghetto, information, gentile, absolutely



Chapters 6-7

Summary

Chapter 6. Leyson was nearly killed one night when he stayed out too late after taking an old woman to the ghetto infirmary. Not long after, word of another roundup spread in the ghetto. Schindler kept his workers in the factory while Leyson hid with the neighbor children. They spent two days hiding in the rafters of a shed with Leyson's mother. When they finally came out, they found that most of the Jews were gone, including the neighbor children's mother. Not only that, but Leyson's father, brother, David, and sister, Pesza had been ordered to the Plaszow work camp.

Leyson and his mother were moved to another section of the ghetto. They were only allowed to take a few possessions. The new section of the ghetto was so crowded that they were forced to live in an attic, sleeping on the floor with others. In March 1943, the ghettos were purged. Leyson's mother left with the other cleaning workers, but Leyson was pulled out of line by one of the soldiers when he tried to leave with the brush factory workers. Leyson's friends were pulled aside too, and they had decided to hide. Leyson decided not to go with them. Instead, Leyson snuck out of the gate with another group of workers. He was sent to Plaszow.

Chapter 7. Leyson was not reunited with his family as he hoped, but assigned to a barracks and put to work doing menial labor. One night, Leyson learned where the Schindler Jews had been taken. He searched until finally, exhausted, he found his father and brother. His father promised to try to get Schindler to hire him. A short time later, Leyson found his mother. She was shocked to find him there. She gave him a piece of bread and sent him away.

One day, Leyson cut his leg and went to the camp infirmary. Shortly after he left, the commandant of the camp, Amon Goeth, shot all the patients in the infirmary, inspiring him to never go back. In the winter of 1943, Leyson was with a crew shoveling snow when the commandant ordered them all to be given twenty-five lashes with heavy whips. Leyson took his whipping with some bravery, but went to his father afterward for sympathy. He got none. The camp was a nightmare that Leyson slowly learned to survive.

The brush factory where Leyson had worked was moved to Plaszow and he received a job putting the two halves of the brush together with brads. One day Goeth came into the factory, shot the foreman and had his men divide the workers into two groups. Convinced he was in the doomed group, Leyson snuck to the other. However, Goeth lost interest and no one else died that day.

In late 1943, Schindler convinced Goeth and other SS officers to allow him to build a sub-camp near his factory to make his workers more productive. In early 1944, Leyson's father and David moved to the new camp. Sometime later, word spread that Schindler



had written a list of thirty Jews he wanted to add to his workforce. Leyson and his mother were on the list. However, shortly before he was to leave, Leyson learned that his name had been removed. Convinced he would not survive much longer at Plaszow, Leyson went to the line where the Schindler Jews were waiting to be relocated and insisted he was on the list. The soldier, for unknown reasons, checked the list and allowed him to join the line with his mother.

Analysis

After suffering far too long in the ghetto, the Jews were finally rounded up one last time, the remaining few moved into overcrowded buildings on the other side of the ghetto. Leyson was alone with his mother after his father, brother, and sister were moved to the work camp, Plaszow. A short time later, Leyson and his mother would also be moved there. It was a time full of uncertainty for Leyson, but he continued fighting to be with his mother and survive. He had strong character, the kind of character that was necessary to help him through an impossible situation. Therefore, when he arrived at Plaszow, the reader anticipates he will survive because of his strong character.

Conditions at Plaszow are worse than the ghetto. Leyson found himself alone, unable to be with either his father and brother or his mother. He worked hard and found himself in dangerous situations over and over again, but managed to make it through without responding with the immaturity of one his age. In fact, he proves himself to be very brave on several occasions, most notably when he defied someone's decision to remove him from Schindler's list so that he might leave Plaszow and be reunited with his family once again.

Vocabulary

eternity, ponder, agonizing, bureaucrat, permission, command, commandant, mysterious, disappear, sub-camp, strengthened, audacity, entertainment, perverse, assigned, electrical, dangerous, separated, despair, workforce, supervisor, terror, current, inferno, scheduled, transfer, network, property



Chapters 8-9

Summary

Chapter 8. Life in the sub-camp outside Schindler's factory was different. There was more food and the people were allowed to visit one another in the barracks. The Nazis were not allowed to go into the barracks without Schindler's permission. The work was different, as well. Schindler was not the task master the Nazis at Plaszow had been. He would often stop to talk with his workers and never criticized them for their low production. He even rewarded Leyson for his curiosity by moving him to the toolmaking area where he would be with his father. Not only that, but Schindler would often leave word that Leyson should get double rations, and from time to time he would leave a half pack of cigarettes with his father so that they could trade them for bread.

When word reached the factory in February 1943 that the German Sixth Army had surrendered, they began to hope that the war would soon be over. In the summer of 1944, news arrived that the Americans and Russians were approaching the Polish border and German businessmen were fleeing the city, they knew it was almost over. Schindler's factory was to be closed. Many of the Jews were to return to Plaszow while others would remain to help with the closing. Leyson was devastated to learn that he, his father, and his brother were on the list to go to Plaszow. On the day they were to leave, Leyson got Schindler's attention and informed him of the move. Schindler immediately had them removed from the list and then informed Leyson's mother of the change personally.

When the factory was closed, the workers returned to Plaszow where they would wait until they could be moved to the new factory location in Brunnlitz. David was part of a group of workers who were forced to dig up the mass graves of the Jews killed at the camp and burned. He was shocked speechless by all he saw. Pesza was reunited with the family during this time at Plaszow when her factory closed. Schindler, at the request of Leyson's father, agreed to hire Pesza so that she would travel to Brunnlitz with the rest of them. They left Plaszow for the last time on October 15, 1944.

Chapter 9. Instead of Brunnlitz, they were taken to Gross-Rosen concentration camp. There they were cleaned and processed. Several days later, they were put on another train and taken to Brunnlitz. However, upon their arrival they learned the women had been taken to Auschwitz. When Schindler learned of this, he bribed the officials and had the women brought to Brunnlitz.

The Leyson family spent the next eight months working in Schindler's ammunitions factory. As the Nazis continued to lose the war, food became scarce. Leyson made friends with the cooks in the kitchen and often was able to get some extra rations he shared with his father and brother.



As the war came to an end and the Nazi officers began to flee, Schindler bought thousands of bolts of dark clothes and bottles of vodka. He gave these to the Jews so that they might use them as barter. Then he told them they were free. Afterward, he fled to the American lines. On May 8, 1945, Russian soldiers reached their camp and set them free. At the end, it was determined Schindler had saved nearly twelve thousand Jews.

Analysis

Leyson joined his family at Schindler's sub-camp next to his factory and lived a different life for a time. He had more food, more freedom to be with his family, and a boss who did not threaten him with death each time he made a mistake. Schindler proved to be a kind and generous man by making sure Leyson and his family had what they needed to survive. Schindler's actions could have led to his own death if the Nazis learned of it. However, the war was ending and the factory was to be closed. The Jews were transferred back to the same camp Leyson nearly died in several times and was sure no one would ever survive.

Schindler saved Leyson and his family several more times before the war ended. He made sure that he, his brother, and father did not return to Plaszow too soon. He then saved Leyson's mother and sister from Auschwitz where his mother would surely have died. Then he gave the workers clothes and vodka they could use as barter as they were freed. Schindler was many things, but in the case of the Leyson family and many others, he proved to be a kind man who saved them from certain death.

Vocabulary

opportunist, maverick, contradictions, schemer, maverick, rescuer, captured, departure, abandoned, performed, sentry, imminent, danger, impossible, fantasy, revenge, shattered, squat, developed, liberation, fetched, advance, geographically, knowledgeable, craftsmen, bounty, surprisingly, genuinely, movements, mentally physically

Chapter 10, Epilogue, and Afterward

Summary

Chapter 10. The Leyson family traveled back to Krakow only to discover that many of the remaining citizens of the city were shocked to see that any of the Jews had survived. There was a great deal of tension between the gentiles and the Jews. It eventually culminated in a riot on August 11, 1945 when a gentile boy claimed some Jews had tried to kill him.

The Leyson family learned that their home village, Narewka, had been raided by an SS squad and all the Jews were killed, including their extended family and eldest son, Hershel. Leyson's brother David and sister Pesza moved to Czechoslovakia to begin a new life. Leyson and his parents also decided to leave Poland, ending up in a displaced persons camp in Wetzlar, Germany. During his time there, Leyson made friends and renewed his education. In 1949, Leyson and his parents immigrated to Los Angeles to live near his aunt and uncle. On the trip, Leyson struggled with his lack of understanding when it came to the English language. However, one kind woman taught him how to count change, giving him his first English lesson. At the age of nineteen, Leyson arrived in Los Angeles and began his new life.

Epilogue. The family learned English and began to make a life for themselves. Leyson's father got a job as a janitor. Leyson went to work for an electrical company and took classes at a trade school. When he graduated, Leyson was drafted. During his time in the service, Leyson witnessed discrimination and got to meet people from all over the United States. He also served time in Japan. After he was discharged, Leyson continued his education, eventually receiving a masters in education at Pepperdine University. He worked thirty-nine years at Huntington Park High School.

Leyson's brother and sister eventually settled in Israel. They each married and had families, as did Leyson. His father continued to learn English and eventually got a job as a machinist in a factory. He died in 1971, his mother died five years later. Schindler died in 1974 in humble circumstances, having failed to own a successful business again. He was buried in Jerusalem on Mount Zion.

Leyson is friends with Mila Page, the wife of the man who spent the rest of his life trying to get word of what Schindler had done out to the world. It was Page who told his story to writer, Tomas Keneally, inspiring the book *Schindler's List* that was later made into the Spielberg movie of the same name. After the release of the movie, Leyson spoke with reporter, Dennis McLellan. Leyson was overwhelmed by the response he got from students and coworkers. He began speaking publicly about his experiences.

In the aftermath of the film, Leyson also began to learn things about Schindler he had not known before. He learned that Schindler was arrested at one point for working within the black market. He also learned that Schindler had begun to build the sub-camp



before he bribed the Plaszow guards to get the Jews away from Goeth. He also learned that Schindler spent much of his remaining fortune at the end of the war to feed the Jews he had brought to Brunnlitz.

Afterward, Leon Leyson died on January 12, 2013 after a three year fight with T-cell lymphoma. His daughter remembers him as generous. His son admired him and hopes to one day be just like him.

Analysis

Leyson and his family finally left the camp and returned to Krakow. However, they were unwanted there and became something of a migrant family, moving from relocation camp to another camp. It was a difficult time and the family was separated as the two older children moved first to Czechoslovakia and then to Israel. Leyson, as the youngest, was forced to remain with his parents. The two older brothers, in addition to all the family they left behind in their home village, were killed in the war.

The Leysons ended up in America and put their lives back together. Leyson showed his character once more by not only surviving, but flourishing in his new home. He became well educated and taught for nearly forty years. He also had a wife and children. He had a good life, one he should have had if the war had not taken his childhood from him. He did not talk much about his past, but when the book, Schindler's List, was published, he finally began speaking about his life in a way he had never done before. He also began to learn things he had not known before.

Leyson would spend his entire adulthood thankful for the man who saved his life. Schindler did things that were very dangerous for him, things that helped more than a thousand people survive the brutality of race extermination. If not for Schindler, Leyson would likely have died. He was more than grateful for this man's acts. He thought of him as a hero.

Vocabulary

churning, nervous, married, background, circumstances, continent, vastly, recognize, postpone, fortune, claiming, connections, included, reunion, disappointed, introduce, mattered, peril, downstream, repeated, adventure, carefree, journey, monsters, experience, narrow, disguised, remnant, crafting, inventive



Important People

Leon Leyson

Leon Leyson is the author of this memoir. Leyson was born in a small village in Poland where his family had lived for many generations. When he was eight, Leyson and his family moved to Krakow because his father worked in a glass factory there and he had finally saved enough money to bring the entire family there.

The war began shortly after Leyson and his family moved to Krakow. At first, the war did not impact Leyson's everyday life. However, changes began taking place that caught his attention. When the Germans invaded Poland, rules were passed that forced the family to wear armbands and have work papers to allow them to stay in the city. Eventually, they were moved to the ghetto where survival was a day-by-day struggle. Then they were moved to a work camp where the conditions were worse than the ghetto and the commandant was crazy enough to kill the Jews without provocation.

Leyson was hired to work for Schindler because his father and brother worked for him. Leyson was moved to another camp, run by Schindler, with relaxed rules and extra food. However, the war was coming to an end and Leyson was again moved to the work camp before finally reuniting with Schindler at his new factor in Brunnlitz. At the end of the war, Leyson and his family were freed, but when they returned to Krakow, they were unwanted. They eventually relocated to Los Angeles, California where Leyson lived a quiet life as a high school teacher.

Leyson never told his story until the book, Schindler's List, came out. Leyson began telling his story and heard stories of other Schindler workers. Leyson had always thought of Schindler as a hero, but the stories he heard only reinforced this belief. Leyson died in 2013 of cancer.

Moshe Lejzon

Moshe Lejzon was Leyson's father. Moshe worked for a glass factory in the small village where he was born and raised. When the factory moved to Krakow, Moshe was one of a few workers who went with it. Several years passed before Moshe was able to send for his family and take them to Krakow with him. The war began shortly after the family came together in the city.

Moshe decided to leave the city with his eldest son when the German's invaded Poland. He changed his mind before reaching his home village and returned to Krakow. A short time later he was arrested for standing up to German soldiers who broke into their apartment searching for something he did not have. When he was released, Moshe was broken and jobless. Moshe managed to impress the new owner of a factory by opening his safe and was given a job at the new factory. His boss was Oskar Schindler.



Moshe worked for Schindler throughout the war, a fact that saved his family in several circumstances from being forced out of Krakow or put on trains headed to the concentration camps. However, it did not save them from going to the work camp. In the end, Schindler saved Moshe, his wife, and three of his children by offering Moshe employment.

Chanah Lejzon

Chanah Lejzon was Leyson's mother and Moshe's wife. Chanah was a housewife before the war. When the family was moved into the ghetto, she went to work as a cleaning lady. Chanah was sent to the work camp to continue her cleaning duties. After a year in the camp, Chanah was hired by Schindler to work in his factory. When the factory moved to Brunnlitz, Chanah and the other women were directed through Auschwitz on their way to Brunnlitz. Chanah had been chosen to be exterminated, but was saved at the last moment by Schindler. Chanah relocated to America after the war, but she never truly recovered from her experiences in the war or the loss of her two eldest sons.

Hershel Lejzon

Hershel Lejzon was the eldest child of Chanah and Moshe Lejzon. Hershel worked with his father at the glass factory in Krakow and spent a great deal of his time with a girlfriend when the family first moved to the city. When the Germans invaded Poland, Hershel left with his father for their home village. Moshe returned to Krakow, but Hershel continued on to the village where he is believed to have been killed by the SS unit that raided the village and killed all the Jews.

Tsalig Lejzon

Tsalig Lejzon is the second eldest child of Chanah and Moshe Lejzon. Tsalig was a favorite of Leyson, the brother who always took the time to spend time with him and teach him things. When the Jews were moved into the Krakow ghetto, Tsalig fell in love with a local girl. One day, during the forced evacuations to the concentration camps, Tsalig was arrested because he did not have the proper papers to prove he was employed. Schindler tried to save Tsalig from the train, but Tsalig chose to remain on board because Schindler could not save his girlfriend, Miriam, who was also on the train. Word reached the Lejzon family that no one survived that train journey.

David Lejzon

David Lejzon was only a year older than Leyson, so he and David were close. David worked as a plumber's helper during the early part of the war. When the family moved to the ghetto, David got a job working in Schindler's factory. David would hold this job throughout the remainder of the war, a fact that likely saved his life. When the war was



over, David immigrated first to Czechoslovakia and then to Israel. David married and had several children.

Pesza Lejzon

Pesza Lejzon was Leyson's only sister. Pesza worked at an electrical company throughout the war, which provided her with the paperwork necessary to keep her safe from the concentration camps. However, when the Germans began to flee Krakow, Pesza's company closed and she was left without the protection of a job. Schindler agreed to hire her as he prepared to move his factory to Brunnlitz. Pesza survived the war and immigrated with David to Czechoslovakia and then to Israel where she married and had several children.

Jacob Meyer

Jacob Meyer was Leyson's grandfather. Jacob was well respected in his village. Leyson was often known as Jacob's grandson in the village rather than by his father's name. Jacob could not own land so he had to lease his farm from the church.

Oskar Schindler

Oskar Schindler was a business man who saw the benefit of buying a factory owned by a Jewish business man as the Germans invaded Poland. Schindler bought a factory and turned it into an enamelware factory. He hired only seven Jews at the beginning of the war, but soon came to understand how his employment of these men and women was impacting their lives. Schindler began hiring more and more Jews. Schindler, under the laws of the war, did not have to pay these workers, but he provided them with two meals a day. He also treated them with respect even though doing such a thing could have led to his execution.

To the outside world, Schindler was an opportunist, a party guy, and a womanizer. However, he treated the Jews with the same respect a good man might offer to any fellow human being. Schindler called the Jews his children and he did all he could to protect them from the Holocaust. When he died, in humble conditions, Schindler was buried in Jerusalem on Mount Zion.

Amar Goeth

Amar Goeth was the commandant at Plaszow work camp outside Krakow. Goeth was a cruel, demanding commandant. Once, when Leyson went to the infirmary to have a cut dressed, Goeth walked in just minutes after Leyson left and shot all the patients for no apparent reason. Another time, Goeth had a group of Jews who were clearing snow whipped for unknown reasons. On yet another occasion, Goeth had the workers in the brush factory where Leyson worked divided into two groups, with the implied intention of

killing the useless workers. Much to everyone's relief, Goeth lost interest and left before killing anyone. It was under the control of this man that Leyson and his family found themselves several times during the war. If not for Schindler, they likely would not have survived the experience.



Objects/Places

Armbands

All the Jews in Krakow were required to purchase and wear a white armband with a blue Star of David on it in order to quickly identify them to Germans and gentiles. This rule applied only to those over twelve, so Leyson was exempt because he was only ten. He used this exemption to disobey many of the rules that applied to Jews, but was eventually caught and punished.

Deutsche Emalwarenfabrik

Deutsche Emalwarenfabrik, or German Enamel Works, is the name of Schindler's factory in Krakow, Poland.

Glass Factory

Moshe Lejzon worked for a glass factory in his home village, Narewka. When the factory moved to Krakow, he was one of a few employees allowed to move with it. In time, Moshe moved his family to Krakow and that is where they lived when the war began.

Brush Factory

While living in the Krakow ghetto, Leyson got a job working in the brush factory. This job continued when the factory was moved to Plaszow.

Plaszow Workcamp

Plaszow was a work camp just outside the city limits of Krakow. Most of the surviving citizens of the Krakow ghetto were moved to this work camp late in the war. Leyson thought he might die in this camp until Schindler hired him and moved him to a sub-camp near his factory.

Gross-Rosen Concentration Camp

After Schindler's factory closed, his workers were placed back in Plaszow until his factory in Brunnlitz was ready. On the trip to Brunnlitz, the men were taken to Gross-Rosen, where they were cleaned and processed.



Auschwitz Concentration Camp

Auschwitz was a concentration camp where the women from Schindler's female workers were taken. Schindler saved them just before several were to be executed.

Narewka, Poland

Narewka, Poland is the small village where Leyson was born. His parents and their parents also lived there. During the war, a SS squad raided the village and killed all the Jews, including Leyson's relatives and his eldest brother, Hershel.

Krakow, Poland

Krakow is a large city in Poland. The Leyson family moved there in 1938. The family continued to live in Krakow through most of the war where the father worked for Schindler's factory.

Krakow Ghetto

The Germans forced the remaining Jews in Krakow to move into a ghetto they had fenced off in a poor section of the city. The Jews were forced to live in overcrowded conditions where a lack of sanitation caused the rampant spread of disease.

Brunnritz, Czechoslovakia

As the war was coming to an end, Schindler moved his factory to Brunnritz and began manufacturing ammunition. Schindler brought along most of his Jewish workers. At the end of the war, Schindler gave his workers clothes and vodka before going to the American lines to protect himself from persecution by the Russian or German forces.

Los Angeles, California

Leyson and his parents moved to Los Angeles, California to be close to his aunt and uncle. Leyson received an education here and became a high school teacher.



Themes

Desperation

The author of this memoir begins his story with a perfectly normal scene out of any child's carefree summer. This belies the desperation that will soon become a reality of this child's life. As a Jew living in Poland during the Second World War, Leyson found himself the subject of an attempt to exterminate an entire race of people. The Germans invaded his country and forced the Jews to live in intolerable conditions before imprisoning them, first in ghettos and then in work camps, just so the Germans could take advantage of their lingering ability to work despite their weakening physical states.

Leyson describes in several sections of the memoir how difficult it was for him and his family to find food. They worked hard every day, yet they were not paid and were rarely given enough food to support an entire family. They would scrounge the streets, sell their belongings, and take handouts from neighbors just to survive. Yet, they were not desperate until things got worse, until two of their own were dead and they were taken to a camp where they were beaten, abused, and forced to work menial jobs that required more calories out than they were taking in.

Desperation became such an everyday part of Leyson's life that he no longer cared what might happen to him. He fought to be taken to Schindler's sub-camp, fought to keep his family from being taken away from Schindler sooner than necessary, fought to survive in every instance when he knew the only thing keeping him from death was his ability to stand up and fight. Desperation is a theme of the war, of the treatment the Jews were given, but not a theme of the life of this one man.

Cruelty

Cruelty entered Leyson's life early. While still living in the small village where his family had lived for generations, he was often persecuted by the local Christians whenever they celebrated the crucifixion of Christ. When he moved to Krakow, Leyton had to face little persecutions, such as the time his teacher called him a disrespectful name in class.

When the war began and Germany invaded Poland, the Jews on a whole were treated with cruelty by the Germans. Many fled the city, others were forced from the city. Those who did not leave the city were forced into a ghetto where the living conditions were unsanitary. Then they were tricked into going to concentration camps or moved into work camps.

The worst cruelty Leyson experienced himself in the course of the war was the constant insanity of the work camp commandant, Goeth. Goeth would kill Jews for no reason, would have them whipped for his own pleasure, would make them think he was going to kill them only to leave them alive to face the reality of what had just happened. Goeth's



cruelty was not the exception during the war, but the rule. Leyson and his family were lucky to survive it.

Heroism

At the end of the book, Leyson defines a hero via a quote from Joseph Campbell, as a person who does the best of things in the worst of times. To Leyson, Schindler was the personification of this quote. Schindler did something that could have placed his own life in danger in order to do the right thing. Without Schindler, Leyson, his parents, and two of his siblings likely would not have survived the war. Schindler not only gave them jobs, but he protected them, he provided for them, and he did everything he could under the scrutiny of the Germans to save them.

As the reader sees the war through Leyson's eyes, it is clear to them that Schindler is, indeed, a hero. He went above and beyond. He gave to Leyson the hope he needed to survive. However, Schindler is not the only hero in this memoir.

Leyson suffered the worst imaginable conditions and treatment during the war. He starved, nearly to death, a fact that had irreparable impact on his body. He did not go through puberty until he was well into his late teens, did not have hair for much of his teen years. He worked hard, but his life was threatened on multiple occasions for reasons that were often inexplicable. Despite all of this, Leyson stood up for himself and fought, not only for his own life, but for that of his remaining family members. Leyson risked injury and death on several occasions when he confronted German soldiers and insisted that he be given privileges.

After the war, Leyson got an education that many native Americans might elect not to pursue. He served his adopted country in the military and then taught American teacher as a high school teacher of forty years. He never talked about his past, never tried to gain special treatment because of what happened to him. Not until the movie came out did Leyson share his story.

Leyson admired Schindler as a hero, but it is clear that Leyson was also a hero.

Styles

Structure

The memoir is divided into ten chapters, a prologue, epilogue, and afterward. The prologue introduces the reader to the themes of the book by showing the reader how the author, Leyson, came to meet Schindler again when he arrived in Los Angeles for a reunion with some of the Jews he saved during the war. The memoir then goes back in time to tell Leyson's story. Schindler does not play a big part in Leyson's memoir, but he plays the most important part, the man behind the scenes who saved Leyson, his parents, and his surviving siblings from the concentration camps of World War II.

The epilogue is the author's chance to tell the reader what happened to him in the more than sixty years that had passed since the war ended. It is a simple tale, one that is buried in minutia. The author got married, had two children, and lived a quiet life as a high school teacher. What he fails to tell the reader is how heroic it was for him to live such a quiet life after such a horrible experience, how it inspires readers that someone could survive something so blatantly wrong and return to the minutia of life as though it never happened. In the afterward, the author's wife informs the reader that Leyson died of cancer without knowing that a publisher had agreed to publish his book. Also in the afterward, the author's children talk about the man they knew, the simple man who deeply loved a cup of black coffee.

Perspective

Tone



Quotes

After all, I was the youngest of our group, and it was only right that those who were older should go ahead of me. To be honest, I wanted to postpone as long as I could my disappointment if the man to whom I owed so much didn't remember me.

-- Leon Leyson (Prologue)

Importance: The author went to the airport in Los Angeles in 1965 to be part of a reunion with Oskar Schindler, the man who saved the lives of him, his parents, and his two surviving siblings, during the war. Leyson is afraid Schindler will not remember him since he was only fifteen when they last met.

What made the escapades even more exciting was that my mother had forbidden my going to the river.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote illustrates the carefree, and universally defiant, childhood Leyson had before the war.

What excited me most was the indoor plumbing.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 2)

Importance: This quote shows the naivety of Leyson in the first moments in Krakow, a move that would prove to be both dangerous and a lucky stroke for the Lejzon family.

As the Nazis tightened their grip on Krakow, Jews were barraged with all kinds of insulting caricatures.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 3)

Importance: Leyson was only a child, but even he became aware of the insults being targeted toward his family and friends as the Germans took control of the country.

Then one night, I experienced the soldiers' wrath firsthand.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 4)

Importance: Leyson defied the rules enforced against Jews because he was too young to wear an armband, but the German soldiers he befriended found out the truth broke into his apartment and slapped him in punishment.

Without valuables of our own, my family's only hope to fend off starvation was work, since work meant food, maybe soup at lunchtime and sometimes a small chunk of bread to take home.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 5)

Importance: This quote illustrates how hard it was for the Lejzons to survive in the ghetto because of lack of food and lack of money or valuables to buy food.



My father delivered the latest news. He, David, and Pesza had been ordered to report immediately to the Plaszow labor camp, about two and a half miles from the ghetto. For the first time since our family had been forced into the ghetto some eighteen months before, the five of us still together were to be separated.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 6)

Importance: This quote describes the ultimate separation of the Lejzon family and the beginning of the last push to put the Jews in camps.

My first impression of Plaszow as hell on earth never changed.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 7)

Importance: This quote illustrates that, despite the poor conditions in the ghetto, the work camp was so much worse.

Sometimes, the morning after one of his late night visits, I would go to get my rations only to discover that Schindler had left word I should receive two portions. He had to make a special effort to do this, and I was overwhelmed by his kindness.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 8)

Importance: This quote illustrates some of the unusual, but deeply kind, things Schindler would do for his Jewish workers and the Lejzon family in particular.

My mother, in her early forties, was classified as useless and sent to the left, shunted to the barracks for the old and sick, the ones the Nazis didn't bother to feed, the ones destined for the gas chamber. In the midst of this misery Schindler had performed his magic. Had Schindler arrived just a little later, it would have been too late to save not only my mother but all the women in his company who had been sent to the left.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 9)

Importance: Another example of Schindler's kindness, as well as the dangers that remain even for those who were under his umbrella of protection.

Sadly, in Krakow, I soon realized the suffering wasn't over.

-- Leon Leyson (Chapter 10)

Importance: The Lejzon family arrived in Krakow to find that the gentiles there were still untrusting of the Jews and did not want them to return to their city.

In the United States, I rarely spoke about my experiences during the war. It was too hard to explain to people. There didn't even seem to be a vocabulary to communicate what I had gone through.

-- Leon Leyson (Epilogue)

Importance: The author explains not only why he did not talk about his past once he made Los Angeles his new home, but this quote shows how hard it was for people to even comprehend the horror the survivors of the Holocaust suffered.



Topics for Discussion

Topic for Discussion 1

Discuss Oskar Schindler. Who is he? Why is he a well-known historical figure? What did he do? Why does the author consider him a hero?

Topic for Discussion 2

Discuss the treatment of Jews in pre-World War II Poland. How were Jews treated? Were they treated differently than Catholics or other Christians? Were they punished or made to stay segregated? In what way?

Topic for Discussion 3

Discuss the Lejzon family. How were they like all the other families in their tiny village? How were they different? Were they treated differently from other families? Were they rich or poor? Were the siblings unusually close or distant to one another? How did their status in the village impact their lives?

Topic for Discussion 4

Discuss Krakow, Poland in 1938. What kind of city was it? Why did Leyson find it exciting? Was it different from his home village? In what ways?

Topic for Discussion 5

Discuss the invasion of Poland by the Germans in 1939. Why did Germany invade Poland? What did this invasion mean for the citizens of Poland? What did it mean for the Jewish citizens of Poland?

Topic for Discussion 6

Discuss the treatment of Jews in the aftermath of the German invasion in Poland. Why were Jews forced to wear armbands? Why were Jewish children no longer allowed to attend school? Why did Jews have to get off the sidewalk when German officers passed? How did Leyson disobey this rule? What was the consequence?



Topic for Discussion 7

Discuss the ghetto that was built in Krakow for the Jews. Why were they forced to live in these ghettos? Why were the conditions so deplorable? How did the Jews learn to deal with the daily life of overcrowding in these ghettos? How did the Lejzon family survive?

Topic for Discussion 8

Discuss the concentration and work camps for Jews during World War II. What was the purpose of these camps? Why were Jews sent to these camps? Why did Schindler fight to keep his workers out of these camps? How did Schindler save the Lejzons from these camps? What might have happened to Leyson if he had been forced to remain in the work camp? Why?

Topic for Discussion 9

Discuss Oskar Schindler's actions during the war. How did he treat Jews different from other Nazi businessmen? How did his employees avoid the camps? Why did he build his own camp? Why did he not save more of the Jews? What difference did Schindler make in the lives of the Jews he did save?

Topic for Discussion 10

Leyson mentions the treatment of blacks in 1950s America at the end of his memoir. How does the mistreatment of American blacks compare to the persecution of Jews in Europe during World War II compare?