

**Essential Questions:**

- What challenges do refugees face as they flee their homes, and how do these challenges shape their identities and resilience?
- How do Josef's, Isabel's, and Mahmoud's stories reveal patterns in the treatment of refugees throughout history?
- What responsibilities do nations and individuals have in responding to the refugee crisis, both in the past and today?
- How does *Refugee* help us understand the personal and global impact of forced migration?

**Subjects**

ELA  
Social Studies

**Grades**

5-8

**Lesson Objectives:**

- Analyze the experiences of Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud to identify common themes in refugee struggles across different time periods.
- Evaluate the role of resilience, sacrifice, and family in the survival of displaced individuals.
- Compare and contrast historical and contemporary responses to refugees
- Reflect on the legacy of the Holocaust in shaping global refugee policies.
- Develop and support an argument about the ethical and moral responsibilities of the world in aiding refugees

**BACKGROUND/CONTEXT FOR THIS LESSON**

In *Refugee*, author Alan Gratz shares the stories of three young people looking for a place to live in peace — Josef in 1930s Nazi Germany, Isabel in 1990s Cuba, and Mahmoud in 2015 Syria. Though they all come from different places and grew up in different times, they all share similar struggles as they seek out a better life for themselves and their families. These stories provide an opportunity to learn about the harsh realities of war and economic crisis that motivate people to seek refuge.

This lesson uses *Refugee* to help students understand the dangers faced by refugees and the world's response to humanitarian crises, both historically and today. Through close readings of key sections, students will analyze the struggles of Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud as they flee persecution and violence, drawing connections to real-world refugee experiences.

## EXTERNAL LINKS

- USHMM [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)
- Echoes and Reflections [Timeline of the Holocaust](#)
- [Love Thy Neighbor: Immigration and the U.S. Experience](#) (Museum of Jewish Heritage Educator's Guide)
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## MATERIALS NEEDED

- *Refugee* by Alan Gratz
- [Photo Essay- What's In My Bag](#)

## LESSON SEQUENCE

### DO NOW

Set a timer for 10 minutes. Tell students to imagine that their home is no longer safe, and they and their family must leave immediately. You can only take a small backpack with a few essential items that can be packed in 10 minutes.

- What items would you bring with you? Why?
- What are the challenges when deciding what to take and what to leave behind?
- How would you feel about having to leave behind family photos or treasured possessions?

### WHOLE CLASS DISCUSSION

Show students the [photo essay](#) of what Syrian refugees packed when they had to flee their homes.

- What stood out to them the most in the photographs? Why?
- Why do you think these items are considered essential?

- How might the priorities of what to bring change depending on the situation (war, natural disaster, political persecution)?
- How might carrying these items provide comfort or strength during a difficult journey?
- How might these items help a refugee maintain a sense of identity while in a new place?

## CLOSE READINGS - JOSEF

**Teacher Context:** Josef is an 11-year-old Jewish boy living in Berlin, Germany, in 1938. His family's life is upended when Nazi soldiers raid their home and take his father to a concentration camp. Upon his release, Josef and his family attempt to flee Germany aboard the MS St. Louis, hoping to find safety in Cuba.

Have students read pages 1-11 for an introduction to Josef. As they read, have them answer the discussion questions.

- What does this introduction to Josef reveal about life for Jewish families in Nazi Germany?
- How does Josef's understanding of the world change when the Nazis invade his home?
- What emotions does Josef experience, and how do they shape his actions?
- What do you predict will happen to Josef and his family based on this opening?

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**Teacher Context:** After a long and hopeful journey, Josef and the passengers of the MS St. Louis are denied entry to Cuba. The news is devastating, as Cuba was their last hope for safety from the Nazis. Josef and his mother plead with the authorities, but they are refused entry.

Have students read pages 128-136 (The MS St. Louis is Turned Away from Cuba) As they read, have them answer the discussion questions.

- How does this moment change Josef's understanding of the world?
  - How do different passengers react to the news? How do their responses reflect their desperation?
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- What parallels can you draw between Josef's story and modern refugee crises?

## CLOSE READINGS - ISABEL

**Teacher Context:** Isabel is an 11-year-old girl living in Havana, Cuba, in 1994. Her country is in crisis due to food shortages and economic collapse. After her father is nearly arrested for protesting the government, Isabel and her family attempt a risky escape to Miami by boat.

Have students read pages 42-51 (Leaving Cuba) for an introduction to Isabel. As they read, have them answer the discussion questions.

- What do we learn about life in Cuba during this time? Why is Isabel's family willing to take such a dangerous journey?
- How does Isabel's love for music and her trade of the trumpet for gasoline reflect her priorities?
- What role does community play in Isabel's decision to leave Cuba?
- What similarities and differences do you notice between Isabel's and Josef's situations?

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**Teacher Context:** Isabel and her family face extreme challenges at sea—running out of supplies, encountering a storm, and experiencing loss. Just as they near Miami, her grandfather chooses to jump into the water, sacrificing himself so that the others can reach land and gain asylum.

Have students read pages 199-206 (The Journey Nears an End, But at a Cost). As they read, have them answer the discussion questions.

- What does Isabel's grandfather's decision reveal about the sacrifices refugees must make?
  - How does this moment reinforce the theme of resilience in the novel?
  - What emotions does Isabel experience, and how do they shape her character development?
  - How does this part of Isabel's journey compare to Josef's experience on the MS St. Louis?
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**CLOSE READINGS -  
MAHMOUD**

**Teacher Context:** Mahmoud is a 12-year-old boy living in Aleppo, Syria, in 2015. His city has been devastated by war, and he has learned that staying invisible is the best way to survive. When an airstrike destroys his apartment building, Mahmoud and his family realize they must flee Syria to find safety in Europe.

Have students read pages 53-62 (Bombing of Aleppo & Decision to Leave). As they read, have them answer the discussion questions.

- How does Mahmoud's life in Syria compare to Josef's and Isabel's experiences?
- What does Mahmoud mean when he says, "They only see us when we do something they don't want us to do"? How does this idea relate to the theme of invisibility?
- How does the war in Syria shape Mahmoud's personality and actions?
- Why do Mahmoud's parents decide to leave their home? Do they have a choice?

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**Teacher Context:** After a grueling journey through multiple countries and the loss of his sister, Mahmoud and his family finally arrive in Germany. In a surprising twist, they are taken in by an elderly woman—Ruth, Josef's younger sister, who survived the Holocaust.

Have students read pages 278-285 (Mahmoud's Family Reaches Germany & The Connection to Josef's Story is Revealed). As they read, have them answer the discussion questions.

- How does Mahmoud's journey compare to Josef's? What patterns of history do you notice?
  - What is the significance of Mahmoud's choice to take action rather than remain invisible?
  - How does Ruth's survival and her willingness to help Mahmoud reflect the novel's themes of resilience and historical connection?
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**ASSESSMENT**

Throughout *Refugee*, Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud each face life-threatening challenges as they flee their homes in search of safety. Their stories highlight not only the dangers that refugees endure but also the ways in which the world responds - sometimes with compassion, but often with indifference or rejection. Evaluate the perils that refugees face and analyze the role that the world plays, or should play, in responding to humanitarian crises.

**Guiding Questions:**

- What commonalities did you find between Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud's situations when their families had to make the decision to flee?
- What common dangers did Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud face on their journeys?
- How did different countries respond to Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud in the novel?
- What ethical or moral obligations do you think the global community has towards refugees?

**INTERDISCIPLINARY  
& EXTENSION  
ACTIVITIES**

[Entry Denied, Dignity Restored: The Story of the St. Louis](#)

lesson from Yad Vashem in which students discover and reconstruct the personal story of a Holocaust survivor, Ana Maria Gordon. **\*French resources available**

[Jewish and World Response](#) lesson from the Museum of Jewish Heritage that explores a letter written by a Jewish teenager asking for refuge and considers the world's response to the refugee crisis during the Holocaust.

[Challenges of Escape, 1938–1941](#) lesson from USHMM allows students to explore why German Jews sought to emigrate from Nazi Germany and the complex factors that impeded their immigration to the United States in the 1930s and 1940s.

**\*Spanish resources available**

[What did Americans know about the Holocaust?](#) iWitness Mini Quest that explores what Americans knew about the Holocaust and when Americans had the opportunity to learn about it.

[Obstacles to U.S. Immigration: 1938 and Today](#) lesson from the Leo Baeck Institute explores the obstacles people face in migrating to the U.S. and compares the process of Jewish immigration in 1938 to the one experienced by Dominican immigrants today.

[Refugee Crises and Individual Experiences](#) Virtual IWalk in which students explore historic and current day examples of refugee crises and ways refugees have received aid and protection.

[Refugee Stories: Mapping a Crisis](#) lesson from the Choices Program in which students will examine one refugee's story and use it to map their experiences as they consider the challenges facing refugees today.

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