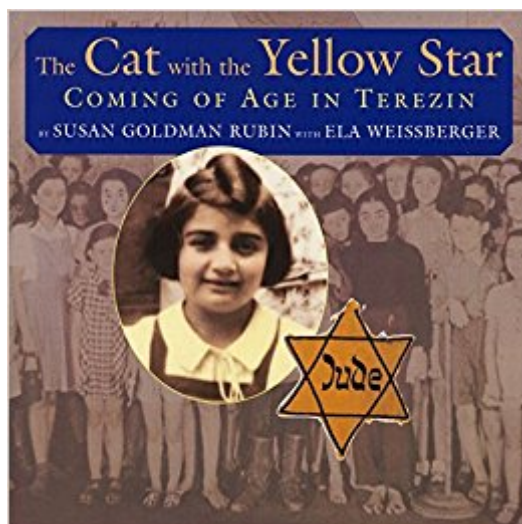


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# The Cat With The Yellow Star: Coming Of Age In Terezin



## Synopsis

Ela Stein was eleven years old in February of 1942 when she was sent to the Terezin concentration camp with other Czech Jews. By the time she was liberated in 1945, she was fifteen. Somehow during those horrendous three-and-a-half years of sickness, terror, separation from loved ones, and loss, Ela managed to grow up. Although conditions were wretched, Ela forged lifelong friendships with other girls from Room 28 of her barracks. Adults working with the children tried their best to keep up the youngest prisoners' spirits. A children's opera called Brundibar was even performed, and Ela was chosen to play the pivotal role of the cat. Yet amidst all of this, the feared transports to death camps and death itself were a part of daily life. Full of sorrow, yet persistent in its belief that humans can triumph over evil; this unusual memoir tells the story of an unimaginable coming of age.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 11 years

Grade Level: 3 - 6

## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Grade 3-6 — Rubin first met Weissberger, a Holocaust survivor, at a contemporary production of Brundibar, a children's opera most famous for having been performed by Jewish children imprisoned at Terezin. Rubin was researching *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin* (Holiday House, 2000) and Weissberger was there to see the opera in which she herself had acted during her internment. The

Cat in the title is the part that she played, and this memoir is a result of that meeting. This finely tuned collaboration weaves together narrative and memories into one cohesive story of trauma, friendship, and survival. The clearly written text incorporates countless quotes taken from numerous personal interviews, providing readers with a true and immediate account of Ela's experiences before, during, and after the war. Extensive use of historical photographs, drawings, and primary visual sources brings even greater depth to readers' understanding of the daily life endured by Terezin's children and the importance of the relationships they formed with one another and their caregivers. Rich in detail, yet not overwhelmingly dire, this is a book about remembering, and the importance of sharing one's stories with the next generation, and the next. —Teri Markson, Los Angeles Public Library Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Gr. 4-7. With sepia-tone family photographs and children's full-color artwork on every page, this poignant biography of a Holocaust survivor tells middle-grade readers what happened without concealment or exploitation. In 1942, at age 11, Ela Weissberger was transported with her Czech family to the Nazi concentration camp Terezin. She survived, and now, based on extensive personal interviews, Rubin tells Weissberger's story of being a Jewish child in that camp, including how the young prisoners rehearsed and performed the opera *Brundibar*. There's a hopeful message about the power of music, art, friends, and teachers, but the account never denies the fact that transports were always leaving for the death camps and some of the prisoners did not survive. The sources are part of the story, and individuals who want to learn more will welcome both the extensive notes and the lists of further resources. Goldman is also the author of *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin* (2000), for older readers. Hazel Rochman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is an easy read about a young girl, Ela Weissberger, who survived the Holocaust. It is well illustrated. Through her life, she tells the story of *Brundibar*, the opera played for Theresienstadt concentration camp occupants. *Brundibar* languished until 1986, when it was performed on Radio Prague, and later picked up by opera groups all over the world. Ela Weissberger travels the world telling her story.

Beautiful book about a horrific time. I recently read "Alice's Piano." Alice was also at Theresienstadt.

(I probably spelled that wrong.) There were lots of excellent pictures in this book that helped me understand better what Alice was talking about. This book gave yet another picture of the Holocaust. I am glad I got it.

One of the children who spent time in Terezin, Ela Stein Weissberger, here recounts from the beginning of Hitler-directed devastation, how she & her family & friends were affected. Ela is one of the children written about in the book, "The Girls in Room 28," & here she expands on her experiences, but from the start of hostilities aimed specifically at Jews. A short book, a moving story, very good photos, a must-read.

This is a great book about an amazing person in a part of history that should not be overlooked. I highly recommend it.

Sad but a story that needs to be heard! Thanks to Ella it is!!

Susan Goldman Rubin ever so eloquently details the life of a young, mentally and physically strong girl during her time in Terezin and beyond. Ela Stein Weissberger was only eleven years old when she boarded a train with her mother, sister, grandmother and uncle for a German ghetto in Czechoslovakia because she was Jewish. During her time at Terezin she becomes part of larger family of approximately 28 girls that lived together in Room 28. The friendships that developed between these girls have become everlasting. Through countless interviews Rubin documents Ela's experience in her own words. Ela's quotes are powerful and moving. This book belongs in every school classroom that studies the Holocaust. It provides factual information in an age appropriate way. It is a model text on how to use interviews to gather information for writing a biography. As a picture book, it is filled with photos of Ela's life and her amazing artwork done while imprisoned at Terezin. The strength of Ela Stein Weissberger must be shared, celebrated and admired by everyone!

My husband and I met Ela Weissberger when we were in college in Dayton, Ohio. We were broken-hearted to know all that she had to go through along with all of the other Jews during that time but were so touched by how she overcame adversity that when we were expecting our first child we knew we wanted to name her Ella after this wonderful lady. Little did we know that when we

were expecting our first child that she would be born with two heart defects that would require open heart surgery as an infant. God placed the perfect name for us to name our survivor after another one.

A couple of years ago, Maurice Sendak and Tony Kushner collaborated together to bring the world a picture book by the name of "Brundibar". Based on the opera that the Jewish children of the Terezin concentration camp had to sing, the book was filled to brimming with good intentions and sadly lacking in any and all factual information. It was more a labor of love than a book meant to enlighten children as to the significance of its content. When "Brundibar" came out, it felt as if it was reliant on a book that had not yet come to exist. Where oh where was the children's work of non-fiction that would tell younger kids what Terezin was, why "Brundibar" was important, and what it all meant? Three years later, Holiday House publishes Ms. Susan Goldman Rubin's, "The Cat With the Yellow Star" and a gap in children's collections everywhere is filled. And quite frankly, no other book could have felt quite as satisfying as this. The story of young Ela Stein begins on Kristallnacht in Sudetenland, after it was annexed to Germany. Ela was eight when that terrible night occurred, and she and her family soon ran away to Czechoslovakia. Then, in 1942, Ela was sent with her mother to Terezin from their home. A converted fortress, the camp was a place where Ela and the other children who lived with her in Room 28 would secretly study, learn art, and cast themselves in the opera Brundibar. In the show, Ela was cast as The Cat and the Nazi leaders of the ghetto decided that they would use the children's show as an example to the Red Cross of how well they treated their Jewish prisoners. Of course, of the 10,632 children sent to Terezin, only 4,096 survived. Ela was one of those survivors and the book shows how she grew up, met her friends from that time period years later, and has participated in Brundibar productions ever since. The end of the book shows a magnificent series of shows performed by children and Ela's presence at them over the years. The title is a rare creation: A children's book memoir under fifty pages. As with her other 2006 publication, "Andy Warhol: Pop Art Painter", Ms. Rubin is particularly good at writing factual biographies for younger readers. She knows that you can pen a book without growing overly reliant on chapters of fifty pages or more. As such, a lot has been left out of "The Cat With the Yellow Star". The book makes the assumption that kids reading this will already be familiar with Hitler, the Holocaust, and The Final Solution. "The Cat" concentrates primarily on Ela's tale, and explanations will not be forthcoming for those kids that don't already have some of the basics of this story down. A person could learn so much from this book too. The fact that in 1945, "the Nazis turned Terezin over to the International Red Cross" as a way of liberating the prisoners amazed me.

Ela's mother even stayed on when her daughters left because she had been hired by a female Russian officer as a maid. Rubin carefully culls all the information she has been given, then keeps the book moving seamlessly from page to page. You may not be able to remember all the names of the girls as Ela befriended them, but you care for them just the same. The level of documentation in terms of pictures, photographs, records, and images in this book is also astounding. Paintings created by the children of Room 28 are reproduced here and are sometimes able to shock because of what they leave you to figure out on your own. For example, there is a watercolor created by Ela's friend Helga called, "Arrival In Terezin" that shows families walking past a guard into the camp. Look closely at the picture and you'll see that everyone in the picture is smiling pleasantly, as if this were just a Sunday stroll in the park. Why would Helga present the people in this picture this way? Was it because she worried that the guards might see it and hurt her if they thought it was anti-Nazi propaganda? Was she just automatically making the smiles without thinking about it? Pictures of this sort raise all kinds of interesting questions suitable for debate amongst child readers. Of course, it would have been nice to be able to get a little more information from some of them. There's a photography of the "special ghetto money" printed specifically in Terezin that shows an old man with a beard holding two stone tablets with Hebrew writing on them. The bills themselves even have small stars of David on them. Why would the Germans have taken this level of care in creating money for people they were just intending to kill anyway? Was this a part of the Nazi effort to fool the Red Cross into thinking that people were being taken care of? Maybe just a little more info here and there wouldn't have been out of place. Not that Ms. Rubin ever skimps on the quality source material. The Acknowledgments alone are worth the price of admission. Ms. Rubin's Source Notes are of equal interest, to say nothing of the excellent list of Publications, Articles, Videos/DVDs, Sound Recordings, Interviews, and Internet Sites all clearly presented and beautifully aligned. If I'm going to get picky I might suggest that Ms. Rubin could have placed her four sentence Author's Note at the beginning of the book (where it would have put everything to follow in context) rather than at the end, but that's neither here nor there. All in all, this is a truly impressive piece of work. It pairs rather nicely with Kushner and Sendak's, "Brundibar" (which only makes sense in conjunction WITH this book, to be frank) as well as the recent Jennifer Roy title, "Yellow Star". "The Cat With the Yellow Star" really makes an effort, though, to show how life in a concentration camp wasn't the be all and end all in Ela's life. She made friends, left, created a life of her own, and is still speaking about what happened to this very day. This book is a testament to her strength, and it tells an important story to an audience that might otherwise never hear it. Certainly worth eyeing, at the very least.

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