



Squirrel is Alive

A Teenager in the Belgian & French Underground

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About the Book

Squirrel is Alive is the true story of Mary Rostad, a teenager in the Belgian resistance and French underground during WWII and the Holocaust. She was raised in a Catholic family in Brussels, Belgium, and made the decision to resist the Nazi occupation of her home country.

Mary was not a bystander; she was an upstander. She was a hero.

For two years Mary, along with hundreds of other young people, walked away from her home one morning without telling her parents to fight back against the German invasion of her country. Using the code name Squirrel, Mary risked her life as she traveled through France secretly passing messages, small arms and sometimes ammunition to freedom

fighters. She witnessed the allied invasion on the beaches of Normandy in 1944 and joined the American Army Counterintelligence Corps as a translator. At the end of World War II, she met U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Allen Rostad who became her husband.

To the Teacher

This teaching guide is based on the pedagogical approach of the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Guidelines for Teaching](#). It is strongly recommended teachers familiarize themselves with these guidelines, as well as create a [rationale](#) for having students read and study this book. *Squirrel is Alive* should be taught within the context of WW II and the Holocaust and is appropriate for students in middle and high school.

Although teaching about the Holocaust can seem daunting, the resources in this teaching guide are invaluable for teacher preparation. The questions and activities are designed to support student understanding of resistance during the Holocaust and promote critical thinking.

Background

The information in this section provides historical context and places Mary's story within the framework of the events taking place during World War II and the Holocaust. As with all literature, an understanding of the context of the story will help readers understand and appreciate the decisions made by the characters.

Historical Context

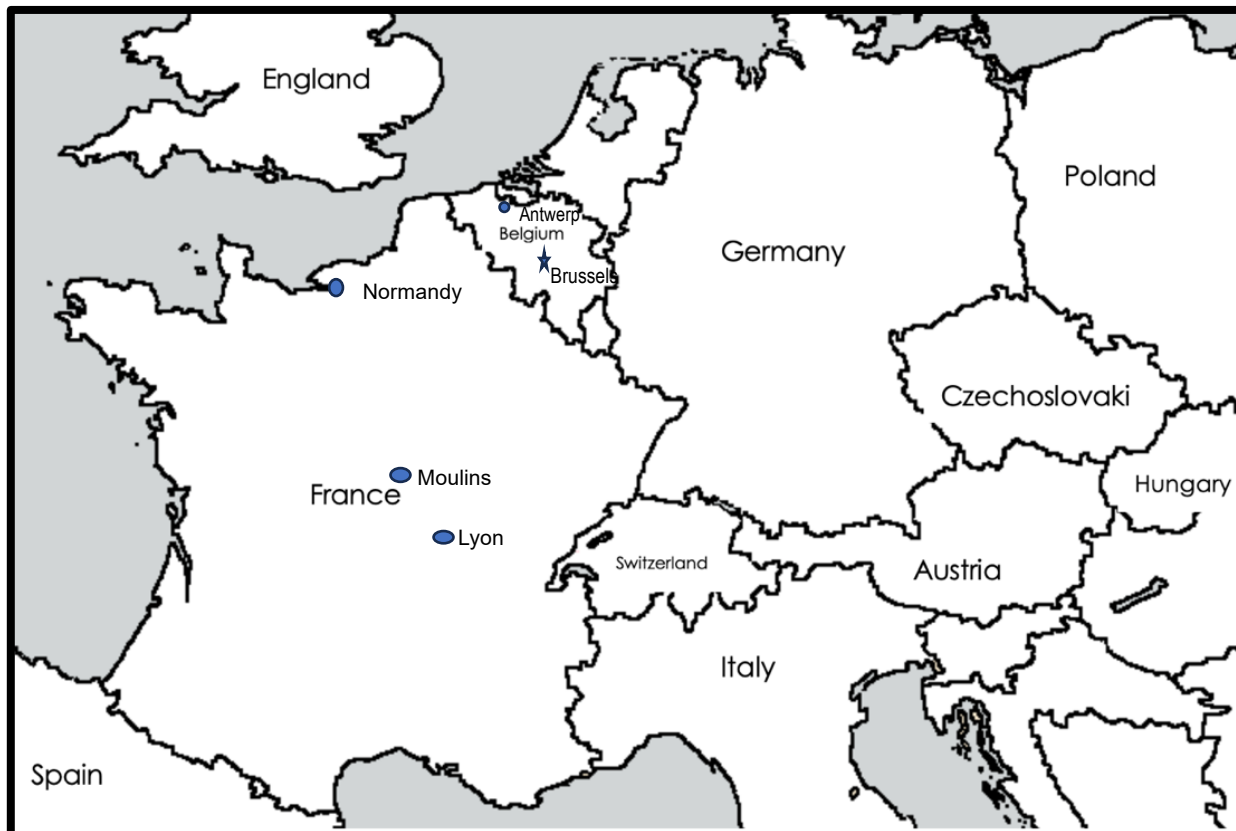
It is important for readers to have a historically accurate definition of the Holocaust when reading *Squirrel is Alive* so they can place the characters within the historical and geographical context of the setting. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum defines the Holocaust as:

the systematic, state-sponsored, persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.

Students need to understand the Nazis believed Germans were racially superior and Jews were a threat to the so-called German racial community. While Jews were the primary victims, the Nazis also targeted other groups for persecution and murder because of politics, ideology, or behavior. These groups included Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, gay men, and people the Nazis called "asocials" and "professional criminals."

Geographical Context

The map below will help readers place Mary's story geographically in Europe and provide background on the setting of the story for students.



Holocaust Timeline

Placing Mary's story within the context of the timeline Holocaust will also help readers understand the relationship between the actions and decisions made by the characters in *Squirrel is Alive* and what was happening in Europe at the time.

1933

January 30: Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany; Nazi party assumes control of the German State.

February 27: The German Reichstag (Parliament) Building burns down.

February 28: President Hindenburg suspends constitutional protections in Germany.

March 23: Enabling Act passed, giving the Chancellor power to make and enforce laws without the involvement of the Reichstag or Weimar President Paul von Hindenburg.

April 7: Laws for Re-establishment of the Civil Service passed, barring Jews from holding civil service, university, and state positions.

April 25: Law Against Overcrowding in Schools and Universities passed, dramatically limiting the number of Jewish students attending public schools.

May 10: Public burnings of books written by Jews, political dissidents, and others not approved by the state takes place.

July 14: Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases mandated the forced sterilization of certain individuals with physical and mental disabilities.

1934

August 2: German President von Hindenburg died. With the support of the German armed forces, Hitler became President of Germany.

August 19: Hitler abolished the office of President and became the absolute dictator of Germany.

1935

March 17: Nazi Germany reinstated military draft.

September 15: Nazi Germany enacts the Nuremberg Laws. These Anti-Jewish racial laws determined who was considered a "Jew," and deemed that Jews were no longer considered German citizens and that Jews could not marry Aryans, nor could they fly the German flag.

1936

March 3: Jewish doctors barred from practicing medicine in German institutions.

August 1-16: Olympics held in Berlin, Germany. They were a show of Nazi propaganda, stirring significant conflict. In Germany, many non-Aryans were excluded from participating and attending.

1937

July 15: Buchenwald concentration camp opens.

November 8: Opening of the antisemitic exhibition *Der Ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew) at the library of the German Museum in Munich, Germany.

1938

March 11-13: Germany annexed Austria in what is known as the *Anschluss*.

April 26: Mandatory registration of all property held by Jews inside the Reich.

July 6-15: Evian Conference in Evian, France was held to discuss the growing refugee crisis.

August 17: The Executive Order on the Law on the Alteration of Family and Personal Names required German Jews to adopt an additional name: "Israel" for men and "Sara" for women.

October 5: Germans marked all Jewish passports with a large letter "J".

November 9-10: Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass)

November 12: Decree on the Elimination of the Jews from Economic Life passed, forcing all Jews to transfer retail businesses to Aryan hands.

November 15: All Jewish pupils were expelled from German schools.

1939

March 15: Germany occupied Czechoslovakia.

August 23: German-Soviet Pact was signed allowing Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to control/invoke portions of eastern Europe, while pledging not to attack each other for 10 years.

September 1: Germany invaded Poland.

September 3: Great Britain and France declared war on Germany.

1940

April 9: Germany invaded Denmark and Norway.

May 10: Germany invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France.

May 20: Concentration camp established at Auschwitz.

1941

April 6: Germany invaded Yugoslavia and Greece.

June 22: Germany invaded the Soviet Union.

June 24: Germany invaded Lithuania.

September 1: Jewish badges/Stars of David were required to be worn by Jews in the Reich.

December 7: Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

December 8: United States declared war on Japan, entering WWII officially a few days later.

1942

January 20: Wannsee Conference held in Berlin where plans for the "Final Solution" were made.

June 3: Jews in Belgium required to wear yellow stars.

Summer: Jews departed to killing centers from Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Poland.

1943

September 8: Italy surrendered to the Allies.

September-October: Danish Jews escaped to Sweden with help of Danish resistance.

1944

January 22: US president Franklin D. Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board.

March 19: Germany occupied Hungary.

May 15: Nazis began deporting Hungarian Jews.

June 6: D-Day occurred as U.S., British, and Canadian troops landed on the beaches of Normandy.

July 23: Soviets liberated Majdanek.

1945

January 17: Death march began from Auschwitz.

January 27: Soviet Army liberated Auschwitz.

April 4: Liberation of Ohrdruf by US Troops. This was the first Nazi camp liberated by US troops.

April 15: Liberation of Bergen Belsen by British Army.

April 29: Liberation of Dachau by U.S. Troops.

April 30: Hitler takes his own life by suicide.

May 7: Germany surrendered.

Spring: Large numbers of Holocaust refugees were housed in Displacement Persons (DP) camps across Europe.

November 20: Nuremberg Trials began.

World War I and Belgium

It is also important to understand the role WW I had on the citizens of Belgium, including Mary's family. Much of this Mary explains in her story, but additional background information may need to be provided for readers unfamiliar with the history.

Belgium considered itself a neutral country, yet it was invaded by German forces in 1914. This led to a brutal occupation that lasted most of the war. The civilian population faced widespread suffering mainly due to the requisitioning of food and forced labor. Most struggled to meet their basic needs.

When the war ended and the Treaty of Versailles was signed by Germany and the Allied Nations, the Belgians began the task of rebuilding their lives and their country. The Treaty of Versailles held Germany responsible for starting the war and imposed harsh penalties on the Germans, including loss of territory, financial reparations, and demilitarization. With these penalties and restrictions, Belgium felt secure again and able to declare themselves a neutral country once again.

Roles of Individuals During the Holocaust

Millions of individuals witnessed the crimes of the Holocaust. Some chose to join the Nazis in their persecution, some chose to stand by and do nothing, and others chose to help the persecuted. The choices they made were based on individual and complex motives and pressures. The motivation behind these choices were complicated and often intertwined with personal beliefs, societal and peer pressures, and survival instincts. An understanding of the various roles of individuals during the Holocaust will help readers understand the motives and decisions made by characters.

- **Perpetrators:** The people who committed and executed the crimes against Nazi victim groups, mostly the Jews. They carried out the policies of discrimination and murder set forth by the Nazi Party. People from all walks of life and educational levels were perpetrators. They had several reasons for committing these crimes including a desire for power, financial gain, and "following orders."
- **Collaborators:** Those who helped or went along with the Nazi ideology. Collaboration took many forms. Some actually assisted the Nazis in the military takeover of their countries, some fought in various military formations on the side of Germany, some revealed the names and locations of Jews in hiding, some cooperated in the German governing of their countries, and some helped directly or indirectly in the murder of Jews.
- **By-Standers:** Ordinary people who did not openly persecute the victims or actively help them; they stood by and watched. Many by-standers complied with the laws against Jews and other victim groups however, they tried to avoid terrorizing activities. Many were afraid of the consequences for themselves and their families for helping victims. Many profited from the deportation and murder of the Jews.
- **Up-Standers:** Those, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who actively resisted the Nazis and their collaborators. Jewish resisters defied the Nazis through spiritual resistance as they tried to preserve their religious and cultural life. Armed Jewish resistance in ghettos and camps also occurred as well as partisan groups who hid and lived in densely wooded areas. Non-Jewish resisters formed resistance groups and networks. Some groups sabotaged the Nazi war efforts by

destroying equipment, some helped people escape from camps and ghettos, and others disseminated anti-Nazi pamphlets.

- **Rescuers:** This group was the smallest group of people during the Holocaust, but the most courageous. Rescuers took great personal risk to help those who were persecuted. These were ordinary people who demonstrated extraordinary courage and empathy. Rescue took many forms including leaving food by ghetto fences, hiding victims in their home, sabotaging Nazi policies and laws, and creating networks to help Jews emigrate.

Approaches and Strategies for Teaching

There are several approaches for reading and teaching the book to students. Teachers may choose to read the book as a whole class, as a book club selection or as part of a themed text set on the Holocaust. Likewise, there are different strategies to use when having students answer questions and analyze the text. Some strategies to consider incorporating into your lessons include:

- **Socratic Seminars** engage students in self-driven discussion and promote critical thinking, communication, and active participation.
- **Fishbowl Discussions** allow for focused discussion and observation as students take turns participating and analyzing the discussion.
- **Gallery Walks** provide a format for collaboration and physical movement as students examine and discuss different excerpts or aspects of the book posted on the walls.
- **Silent Discussions** allow all students to have a voice in a collaborative discussion that is written first and then orally discussed. Students can respond to questions, images, quotes and or excerpts of text.

In addition, it is important to give students time and a space to process what they are reading and discussing, as the content is complex and can be emotionally challenging for many students. A journal or response log allows students to synthesize and grapple with the content. It provides a space for them to think and pose questions they might not otherwise express. It will enable you as the teacher to see how individual students are responding to the content and allow you to clarify misconceptions, enhance content, and provide emotional support as needed.

Teaching Suggestions

This section provides suggested vocabulary terms, analytical questions for discussion or written response and research/enrichment ideas for each chapter. These resources are not meant to be all inclusive. Remember to adapt and expand upon the suggestions to meet your teaching style and the unique needs of your students.

Forward

Often times the forward to a memoir is overlooked or simply skipped by readers. The forward to Mary's story not only provides context for her story, it also serves as a reminder to readers of their power to act when witnessing injustices. Teachers may choose to have students read the forward before reading the memoir, after completing their reading, or both.

Introduction

Consider reading the introduction together as a class and discussing it as you read. Take time to define unfamiliar vocabulary and familiarize students with the setting using the map of Europe, and the context using the Holocaust timeline. It may also be helpful for students to begin a [character](#)

[chart](#) to complete during their reading to help them see how Mary is impacted by the setting, other characters, and the plot as her story unfolds.

Chapter 1 - My Country Invaded

Suggested Vocabulary: Treaty of Versailles, reparation, propaganda, scapegoat, Communist, Socialist

Questions:

- What is significant about the title of this chapter? What does this tell us about Mary?
- What is the relationship between Hitler's violation of the Treaty of Versailles and the trajectory of Mary's life?
- Mary says, "As a teenager with more guts than brains, I naturally wanted to fight back anytime I was told I could not do something. And that happened constantly under the Germans." (pg. 5)
 - What is the difference between breaking the rules for the sake of doing it verses breaking the rules to right a wrong?
 - What is the purpose/effect of the repetition of the phrase "**my** country" throughout the chapter? What does this say about Mary?

Research/Enrichment: Nazi propaganda, analyze the poem "In Flanders Field"

Chapter 2 – My Family

Suggested Vocabulary: jukebox, fanaticism, demagoguery, diphtheria, cantankerous

Questions:

- What can you infer about Mary from these quotes:
 - "I could never understand racism. (pg. 17)
 - "It felt normal then, but now I know that my parents were unusual. (pg. 22)
 - "We were never afraid, as nothing dangerous or violent ever happened in our neighborhood. (pg.33)
- In what ways was Mary's life similar to your life?
- How do the photos illustrate the relationships Mary had with her family?
- How do the photos help you understand Mary's life before the occupation?
- How do the photos help you connect Mary's life to your own?

Research/Enrichment: Carrier Pigeon Service in WWI

Chapter 3 – The Nazis Attack

Suggested Vocabulary: collaborators, shrapnel, cognac, occupation, Luftwaffe, ration cards, pulverized, ominous, requisition

Questions:

- In what ways did Mary and her family prepare for the ensuing war?
- In what ways were they resourceful and able to adapt with less after the war started? Cite specific examples from the text.
- What was their attitude toward this resourcefulness? What evidence supports your answer?
- Mary says, “At not quite sixteen, I was the oldest child and had no idea what to do next but felt an internal drive to do something—anything to defend our small country.” (pg. 36) What can we infer about Mary from this quote? Do you think this same feeling was shared by other sixteen-year-olds? Why?
- What does Mary mean when she says, “I came face to face that day with the reality of war.”?
- Why do you think Mary continued to go back to the Red Cross station for many days to help the nurse?

Research/Enrichment: Fifth Columnists

Chapter 4 – Fighting Back

Suggested Vocabulary: conscripted, resistance, underground, clandestine, partisan, mimeograph, insignia, Free Belgian forces

Questions:

- Mary says, “I didn’t initially set out to work in the underground...It began with someone asking me to do a little favor. One favor led to another.” (pg. 45) Why do you think Mary was asked to do the favors? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
- In what ways did Mary and her friends demonstrate resistance to the Nazi occupation of Belgium? Cite examples from the chapter.
- In what ways did the Belgian people dispute the Nazi propaganda? What did Mary do herself to dispute the propaganda?
- What was the meaning of the punchline to the joke Mary told on page 47?
- Mary described her resistance work as “forbidden fruit” and said, “Telling us not to resist is like ordering kids today not to smoke. Anything banned seems more exciting and foolish to young people who like thrills.” (pg. 49) Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- Mary discusses the Jews in Belgium in the section *Disappearances*. How were the Belgium Jews targeted?

Research/Enrichment: *Libre Belgique* underground newspaper, Nazi propaganda, Free Belgian forces

Chapter 5 – I Knew I Had to Go

Suggested Vocabulary: circuitous, allies, complicit

Questions:

- “I left the house with a very heavy heart. I could not tell Maman or Papa where I was going or even that I was leaving.” (pg. 53) What internal conflict does Mary face when she makes the decision to leave? Give other examples of internal conflict Mary faces in this chapter.
- What factors influenced Mary’s decision to leave?
- Mary said “To find myself in resistance work, I needed a certain frame of mind that I would look for and care for others far above myself. I also had to believe that I could do something very important.” (pg.56) What does this reveal about Mary?
- What do the following quotes tell us about Mary?
 - “As beautiful as the day was, it was so hard because my eyes were clouded with tears.” (pg. 56)
 - “What I lacked in food, clothing, and money I made up for with determination.” (pg.57)
- The Holocaust occurred because people made choices to act or not act in a particular way. Who were some of the people who made choices which affected Mary positively and negatively?
- What was Mary’s perspective of D-Day?
- How did the events of D-Day change Mary’s feeling of working in isolation to feeling a sense of belonging and a sense of hope? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
- On page 67 Mary explains American “soldiers took me under their wing and used me to help identify local people trying to hide their complicity.” What does she mean by this statement?
- What did the servicemen recognize in Mary?
- As an adult, how does Mary feel about her decision to join the resistance and “go underground?” Has Mary’s perspective changed now that she is a parent? Explain your answers with evidence from the text.

Research/Enrichment: Le Réseau Comete, Free French, analyze Eisenhower’s two Order of the Day texts

Chapter 6 – Rejoining the Americans

Suggested Vocabulary: war crimes

Questions:

- How is Mary’s attitude about the occupation of her country different from her attitude about the occupation in Chapter 3?
- When Mary worked for the CIC she learned about the horrors the Nazis committed. She said “We should have known what they planned to do and fought back, a reason that many of us still beat ourselves because of our guilt... How could we know and yet how could we not know?” (pg. 83) Discuss the complexity and depth of Mary’s guilt. Do you think her guilt is justified? Explain.
- What traits does Mary’s demonstrate when she comes to America? Support your answers specific examples from the text.

Research/Enrichment: Nuremberg Trial

Chapter 7 – Speaking Out About My Experiences in World War II

Suggested Vocabulary: travesty, ardent, nationalist, antisemitism

Questions:

- Mary states that she didn't speak about her experiences as she didn't want to burden her children. When she did speak, she said "the dam burst." (pg. 104) Why do you think she changed her mind and started to speak? What evidence supports your answer?
- Re-read the lines by Martin Niemoller on pages 105-106. How did Mary's actions during her time in the resistance exemplify these lines?
- Mary explains why she has been inspired by these lines: "because they speak to the need to face up to hate whenever and wherever we see it...If we do not, we, too, are saying by our silence that we are agreeing with the words or actions we see." Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
- On page 111 Mary states if more people had responded to injustices in the 1930s, "Hitler might not have had the power to kill tens of millions of people." Do you agree with her? Why or why not?
- Mary ends her story by saying "while we cannot prevent inhumanity in others, we can and must preserve our own." What can we do to preserve our humanity?

Research/Enrichment: Ellis Island Medal of Honor

Culminating Activities

The following questions can be used as final activities or summative assessments after students have read and discussed the book.

- Describe Mary's journey from a naïve teenage girl to a mature adult. How did Mary's experiences shape her journey?
- What is resistance? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
- In the forward, Alexandra Zapruder says Mary reminds readers "that the power to act is in our own hands, even in the smallest ways. She reminds us to honor the quiet voice inside that refuses to accept injustice and that finds its own ways to resist." How does Mary do this? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
- In what ways does Mary continue her family history of resistance?
- Mary states several times that what she did was not heroic. Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

Closing Thoughts

The approaches, strategies, suggested activities, and discussion questions in this guide encourage students to develop critical thinking skills and reflect on the complexities of Mary's story. By fostering a classroom environment that values and encourages open dialogue teachers can empower students to explore the relevance of Mary's story to their own lives and inspire them to stand up and reject injustice in their world.