I. PRE-READING QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT & DISCUSSION:

1. What do you already know about the Holocaust, and from what sources have you acquired this information?

2. What is meant by “a life that matters”?

3. Describe someone you know who was directly/indirectly affected by The Holocaust.

4. Who are “Holocaust Deniers,” and why do they deny this historic event?

5. Where are there genocides taking place in the world today?

6. What is “The American Dream”?

7. Do you know anyone who has achieved “The American Dream”? How did they do it?

8. How might the Albert Camus quotation, “Life is the sum of all your choices,” apply to everyday life as well as The Holocaust?

9. Look at the Vocabulary List on p.16 of this Guide, and see how many words you already know.

10. Describe the most influential people in your life, and show how they have affected you.
II. READER-RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. DEAR READER

1. What do you learn about Ben in his introductory letter to the reader?

2. Research the origins of, explain the meaning of and tell how the following quote applies to The Holocaust:

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,”

3. Who is responsible for the genocides that are occurring today?

4. Who is Yehuda Bauer, and what is the meaning of his quote:

"Thou shalt not be a victim,
thou shalt not be a perpetrator,
but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander."

2. DEAR MAMIKO AND TATEKO

1. At the beginning of the story, where is Ben, and how old is he?

2. Why does Ben begin his story with a letter to his parents?

3. “Mamiko” and “Tateko” are terms of endearment in Hungarian. What terms of endearment are used in other languages?

4. What does this letter tell you about his relationship with his parents?

3. THE NIGHTMARE AND THE DREAM

1. Research the origins, explain the meanings, and then tell how the following quotes relate to Ben’s story:

A. “You might leave the concentration camps, but they will never leave you”

B. “Those who do not learn from History are doomed to repeat it”

C. “If not now . . . When?”
2. Why was Ben experiencing a flood of “mixed emotions”?

3. Describe a time when you were flooded with mixed emotions. How did you deal with them?

4. What’s in a Name?

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “For in our name lies our soul and self”

2. In what way do names reflect both personal and historic circumstances?

3. Why do many cultures have “Naming Ceremonies” for newborns? Does yours?

4. How would you respond to having your name replaced by a number?

5. 1928-1939: The Early Years

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “With each child, the world begins anew”

2. What is your happiest childhood memory? What sensory details do you remember?

3. Describe a time when you had to shut down your emotions in order to deal with a difficult situation.

6. How Could the Holocaust Happen?

1. Research the origins, explain the meanings, and tell how each of the following quotes relate to Ben’s story:

   A. “Monsters exist, but they are too few in numbers to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are . . . the functionaries ready to believe and act without asking questions.”

   B. “All that is needed for evil to exist is the silence of good men”
2. What are some of the root causes of anti-Semitism?
3. What made it possible for Hitler to turn anti-Semitism into an “Industry of Death”?
4. How did Darwin’s theory of “Survival of the Fittest” support Hitler’s plans?
5. Do you believe that only the strong should survive?
6. Describe a time when you spoke up against injustice.

7. SUMMERS IN MUNKÁCS

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “And even if you were in some prison,
   the walls of which let none of the sounds of the world
   come to your senses -
   would you not then still have your childhood,
   that precious, kingly possession,
   that treasure-house of memories?”

2. In what ways might Ben’s short, but happy childhood have prepared him for and sustained him during and after the Holocaust?
3. Using a variety of sensory details, describe a room from your childhood, and show why the room is important to you.
4. Why are holidays and traditions important to people?

8. 1939: AUTUMN IN KRAKÓW

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “Where books are burned,
   in the end,
   people will be burned”

2. In what ways did Hitler make his campaign against the Jewish People legal?
3. How did government-sponsored anti-Semitism affect German citizens?
4. Could something like Kristallnacht happen in the 21st century United States?

9. September 1, 1939: THE GERMANS OCCUPY POLAND

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following word relates to Ben’s story: “Blitzkreig”
2. Have you been directly or indirectly involved in a major historic event? How did it affect you?
3. In what ways can a person’s everyday life be affected by political events?
4. Are there “ghettos” in America today?

10. 1941: ESCAPE FROM KRAKÓW

1. Research the origin and explain the meaning of the following quotes. Tell how they relate to Ben’s story:

   A. “Giving your son a skill is better than giving him one thousand pieces of gold.”

   B. “Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.”

2. In what ways does Ben’s father, Lazar Leser, demonstrate the relationship between careful planning for the future, quick-thinking and the ability to adapt to unexpected dangers?

3. What examples are there in this chapter that the basics of humanity can still exist even within the most dehumanizing circumstances? What examples are there in the world today?

11. 1943: ESCAPE FROM NIEPOLOMICE

1. Research the origin and meaning of the following quote. Tell how it relates to Ben’s story:

   “. . . What can man do to me?”

2. What were the unique challenges faced by Mr. Miller?
3. Is there any way that people today could prepare themselves for having their lives suddenly changed beyond their control or imagination?

12. A MODERN-DAY QUEEN ESTHER

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “. . . but Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background . . .”

2. What was unique about Schomberg?

3. Why did the Rabbi tell Lola that she was like a “modern-day Queen Esther”?

4. Who are the Righteous Gentiles?

13. ESCAPE FROM BOCHNIA

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “When you have no choice, mobilize the spirit of courage”

2. At the age of 14, Ben had to risk his life own lives in order to protect his little brother and escape certain death. How would a typical 14-year old deal with a situation like this in today’s world?

3. Was there a time when you were young and had to confront a life and death situation while also protecting someone else?

4. A HAPPY MUNKÁCS REUNION

1. Research the origin and meaning of the following quote:

   “The great enemy of the truth
   is very often not the lie,
   deliberate, contrived and dishonest,
   but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.”

2. In what way did the Jewish People of Hungary unwittingly ensure their own deaths?
3. How does Mr. Rapps exemplify the essential goodness of humanity? Do you think that people like Mr. Rapps exist today?

15. 1944: THE NAZIS INVADE HUNGARY

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   "A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep."

2. Why was it so easy for the Nazis to Occupy Hungary?

16. AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU AND DURNHAU

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “We know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning.”

2. What choices did Ben have to make during his time in Auschwitz-Birkenau? What factors motivated his choices?

3. How did Ben’s previous experiences and understanding of the Nazis allow him to save his Uncle’s life?

4. What do you think happened to the “humanity” of the Nazis?

17. THE DEATH MARCH

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “I ask not for a lighter burden, but for broader shoulders”

2. What was the purpose of the “Death March”?
3. Why does Ben think he was motivated to live by his cousin?

4. Compare and contrast Buchenwald with Auschwitz-Birkenau

5. What was ironic about Goethe’s Tree?

18. THE DEATH TRAIN

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

   “It is a brave act to despise death;
   but where life is more terrible than death,
   it is then the truest valor
   to dare to live.”

2. How does Ben’s behavior show the essence of his character?

19. APRIL 29, 1945: LIBERATION!

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quotes relate to Ben’s story: “Freedom is the oxygen of the soul.”

2. How did the concentration camp experience affect Ben’s faith in God? Do you think he will change his mind?

3. How does Ben’s attitude toward work become apparent?

4. What was Ben’s reaction to Liberation?

5. Why did so many inmates die on Liberation Day or soon thereafter?

20. HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR
1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

“... I never dreamed that such cruelty, bestiality, and savagery could really exist in this world . . .”

2. Why did the Liberators see distinctly different levels of prisoner suffering?

3. What unexpected lessons about humanity is Ben learning?

21. PURIM IN JULY

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

“Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.”

2. In what way does the creation of a surrogate or substitute family aid in Ben’s recovery from the Holocaust?

3. Why was it appropriate to have a Purim Party in July?

6. What evidence is there of Ben’s strong connection with his father?

7. What qualities of creativity, management and determination does Ben exhibit?

22. THE CHALUTZIM

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

“To be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem”

2. Why did Zionists believe that a Jewish State of Israel was necessary to ensure that another Holocaust would never happen?

3. In what ways did the young Zionist group affect Ben’s perspective on world events?

4. In what way did Rachel’s hospitalization become a turning point in Ben’s life?

23. A JOYOUS REUNION!
1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

“What greater thing is there for human souls than to feel that they are joined for life - to be with each other in silent unspeakable memories?”

2. In what way did the birth of Heshi provide a powerful “answer” to Hitler’s heinous “Jewish Question”?

3. Describe a time when you had to live with friends or family, or when someone had to come live with you temporarily. What adjustments did you have to make in order to get along with one another? Did you stay in touch with each other when you no longer lived together?

24. LIFE IN POST-WAR GERMANY

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, or the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

2. What would it be like if you had to live in an apartment that had been confiscated from someone else? Would you allow the owner to stay and live with you?

3. What would it be like if you had to live in an apartment that had been confiscated from someone else? Would you allow the owner to stay and live with you?

4. What was life like for Germans after WWII?

25. LEAVING THE OLD WORLD

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s story:

“Home is where the heart is”

2. Describe a place where you feel you are at home.

3. Why was Ben so casual about his upcoming voyage to the New World?
4. Did you ever help a newcomer feel comfortable?

26. 1947: AMERICA!

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how following excerpt from a famous poem relates to Ben’s story:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me . . .”

2. What evidence do you see of Ben’s determination to become successful?

3. Why did Ben decide to leave his family and go to California?

4. Did you ever have to move away from someone you loved? How did you cope with the situation?

27. TRUE LOVE

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how this Hebrew word relates to Ben’s story:

“Bashert”

2. What would have made Ben and Martin so interesting to the Singers?

3. What is today’s popular version of a Shadchan?

28. ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and tell how the following excerpt from a very important document relates to Ben’s story:

“... Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

2. What are some of the wedding customs observed in Ben and Jean’s ceremony?
3. What is the purpose of wedding customs? What customs does your family observe?

29. A NEW CAREER

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning of and relate the following quote to Ben’s story:

“No labor, however humble, is dishonoring.”

2. What was the secret to Ben’s success at UPS?

3. Describe a time when it was important for you to do your best.

4. What was important about the Salk vaccine?

5. What kind of new father was Ben?

6. In what way are children a bridge to the future from the past?

30. AN AMERICAN CITIZEN

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning of and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s life:

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.
   Live the life you’ve imagined.”

2. How is Ben affected by his lack of education?

3. What steps does Ben take to achieve the American Dream?

31. AMERICAN ADVENTURES

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning of, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s life:

“Without ambition one starts nothing.
Without work one finishes nothing.
The prize will not be sent to you.
You have to win it.”
2. What were some of the challenges that Ben had to face, and what personal traits allowed him to succeed?

3. What might have drawn Ben to uranium mining? What lessons did he learn from it?

32. BEN LESSER & ASSOCIATES

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning of, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s life:

   “Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.”

2. What choices does Ben make and what personal traits enable him to successfully meet the challenges of going into business for himself?

33. RETIREMENT AND A NEW CHALLENGE

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning of, and tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s life:

   “A man can't retire his experience. He must use it.”

2. How did Adam influence his Grandfather Ben’s life?

34. 2006: TRANSPORTED TO THE PAST

1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s life:

   “Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is to never stop questioning.”

2. Do you think that Ben’s return to Poland was a good idea?

3. Tell about a time when you returned to a place that had bad memories for you.
1. Research the origin, explain the meaning, and then tell how the following quote relates to Ben’s life:

“Because I remember, I despair.
Because I remember,
I have the duty to reject despair”

2. What might be some positive as well as negative consequences of telling others about traumatic experiences?

3. What is the ZACHOR Foundation?

1. Explain what the following quote means to you. Is there a “legacy” that you would like to carry on to future generations?

“As the last generation to come in contact with actual survivors, it is our responsibility to carry on their legacy to future generations as well as to spread their message to the present one.”

2. What was so incredible about Ben being able to dance in a Temple in Krakow?

3. What does the change in group’s travel itinerary tell us about the students’ feelings for Ben?

1. Why does Ben end his story with a letter to his parents?

2. If Ben’s parents were able to write a letter to him, what do you think they would say?

1. What important lessons did Ben learn in the process of writing his memoir?
2. What important lessons have you learned?

3. If you could write a letter to Ben, what would you want to tell him?

4. 

III. ACTIVITIES FOR EXTENDED LEARNING:

A. Selected Vocabulary:

During the course of reading “Living a Life That Matters: from Surviving the Nazi Nightmare . . . to Achieving the American Dream,” there have been opportunities to learn or refresh your memory about many word/phrase meanings, historic events/eras, religious and ethnic holidays, concepts, and important people. How many of the following do you remember?

1. **Adolph Hitler**: Known as Der Fuhrer, or Dictator, Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1934. He and his Nazi Party embarked upon a murderous campaign known as the “Final Solution” with the goal of eliminating the Jewish People of Europe.

2. **Anti-Semitism**: the hatred of Jewish People based on nothing more than their ethnicity.

3. **Arbeits Macht Frei**: written on the sign over the entrance gate to Auschwitz, these words ironically say that, “Work Makes Man Free.”

4. **Aryan Master Race**: Hitler believed that only people of Northern European descent should rule the world.

5. **Blitzkrieg**: the strategic, lightning-fast coordination of all mobilized military equipment in order to break through borders and quickly overwhelm the enemy.

6. The **British Mandate**: Britain’s legal control over Palestine from 1922 to 1948.

7. **Chanukah (Hanukkah)**: the Jewish Festival of Lights, lasting 8 days and celebrates two “miracles”: 1. the re-dedication of the Temple after it had been defiled by Syrians; and 2. The small amount of sacred oil that burned for 8 days instead of just one.

8. **Chalutzim**: the Zionist pioneers from many European countries whose goal was to create the independent Jewish country of Israel.

9. **Concentration Camps**: Hitler’s brutal, often deadly prisons for Jews and others he considered undesirable. There were labor camps where prisoners were worked to death, and death camps, where prisoners were murdered in massive gas chambers and then burned in crematoriums.
10. *Death Marches*: When the Germans saw that they would soon lose the war, in an effort to hide evidence of the camps, they evacuated prisoners to more centralized camps by marching them for weeks at a time. Thousands of these died from starvation, thirst, exposure, disease, or were murdered by the guards during forced marches from one camp to another. They were left where they fell and died.

11. *Death Trains*: When available, trains were used to evacuate prisoners from one camp to another. Stuffed into over-crowded, filthy cattle-cars that were devoid of sanitary facilities, 1,000s of these prisoners were provided neither food nor water. The trains sometimes just went back and forth without stopping or unloading their “cargo.” When liberated, sometimes 2 or 3 prisoners would climb out from under the pile of corpses with whom they’d been “traveling” for weeks.

12. *Diaspora*: The 6th century BCE exile of the Jewish People from Judah, the area that is now the state of Israel.

13. *Final Solution to the Jewish Problem*: Phrase coined by Hitler to describe his plan to exterminate the Jewish People of Europe.

14. *Exodus*: The 2\textsuperscript{nd} book of the Bible tells the story of the Israelites escape from Egypt; the name of the ship that tried to carry Jewish refugees to Palestine in 1947, but was seized by the British and sent back to Europe.

15. *Genocide*: Geno = race of people/cide = murder. The deliberate, systematic, government-sponsored annihilation of a people. The term was first coined by Raphael Lemkin at the Nuremberg Trials following WWII.

16. *Gestapo*: Hitler’s secret police. Another branch of his military was his ruthless personal body guard unit that was called the “SS” (*Schutzstaffel*).

17. *Ghetto*: A section of a town where Jews were forced to live in crowded, squalid conditions.

18. *Great Depression*: Caused by the 1929 American Stock Market Crash, this world-wide economic disaster lasted until 1939.

19. *Hamantaschen*: 3-cornered Jewish filled pastries traditionally eaten during Purim, that are said to resemble the ears of dead Haman, the vicious enemy of the Jewish People.

20. *Holocaust*: Means totally consumed by fire, and usually refers to Hitler’s systematic campaign to exterminate the Jewish People of Europe.

21. *Israel*: The independent Jewish country founded in 1948 as a homeland for all Jews.

22. *JUDE (JUDEN plural)*: A Jewish Person; *Judenfrei* means free of all Jews.

23. *Kaddish*: Jewish mourners’ prayer for the dead
24. **Kapos**: Ghetto residents or concentration camp inmates appointed by Nazis to positions of authority over other residents or inmates.

25. **Kibbutz**: A collective farm/settlement in modern Israel. Residents are called, *Kibbutzim*.

26. **Kristallnacht**: The “Night of Broken Glass” which took place on the night of November 9-10, 1938, was a massive government-sponsored series of anti-Jewish pogroms throughout Germany and Austria. Its goal was to terrorize the Jewish People by smashing the windows and burning Jewish homes and businesses, beating and murdering Jews and taking 30,000 Jewish men to concentration camps.

27. **Mandelbroyt (Mandelbrot)**: This crispy, rich, traditionally twice-baked Jewish biscuit-shaped cookie or “Almond Bread,” originally contained chopped almonds, but in modern times can also include different nuts, dried fruit, and chocolate chips.

28. **Mein Kampf (My Struggle)**: Written in 1925-6 by Adolph Hitler during the time he was in prison for treason, this 2-volume book describes Hitler’s plan to exterminate the Jewish People of Europe.

29. **Nazis**: Hitler’s fascist National Socialist Party based on the belief that Germans were part of the Aryan Master Race and therefore should rule the world. They demonized the Jewish People as being a threat to Aryan supremacy.

30. **Nuremberg Laws**: These brutally anti-Semitic laws were established in Germany in 1935, depriving Jewish residents of Germany their basic human rights including citizenship, employment, and property ownership.

31. **Nuremberg Trials**: A series of post WWII military trials held in Nuremberg, Germany and conducted by the Allies to prosecute Nazi War Criminals

32. **Orthodox Judaism**: A traditional interpretation of the Torah (The first 5 books of Moses in the sacred Jewish scriptures) that stresses strict adherence to religious rules.

33. **Passover**: A Jewish holiday commemorating the Exodus of the ancient Israelites when they were freed from slavery in Egypt and journeyed across the desert to Jerusalem. The flat, unleavened Matzo made of flour and water is one of the traditional foods of Passover.

34. **Pogrom/Aktion**: A violent, often government sanctioned, riot directed against a specific ethnic/religious group

35. **Purim**: This joyous Jewish holiday celebrates the deliverance, arranged by Queen Esther, of the Jewish People from the murderous plans of the evil Haman. It includes masquerades, festivals, special gifts and delicacies.

36. **Rabbi**: Is a teacher of Torah, and the leader of the Jewish congregation. A *Cantor* assists the Rabbi by singing and leading the congregation in sacred songs.

37. **Righteous Gentiles**: In Israel, non-Jews who risked their own lives to help to save Jewish people during the Holocaust are known as “Righteous Gentiles.”
38. **Shoah:** The Hebrew word for The Holocaust

39. **Shtetls:** Jewish villages in Central and Eastern Europe (this area was known as The Pale of Settlement) that were originally settled by Yiddish-speaking Jews who had been expelled from Russia.

40. **Star of David:** The 6-pointed Jewish Star, also known as the **Shield of David** (Mogen David).

41. **Swastika:** The symbol of Nazi Germany.

42. **Torah:** According to the Jewish religion, Moses received the Torah from God on Mt. Sinai. Thus, it is considered to be Judaism’s most sacred Jewish book.

43. **Talmud:** The Talmud was written around 70 AD, and contains rabbinical interpretations and commentaries on the Torah.

44. **Third Reich:** The German government under Adolph Hitler from 1933-1945.

45. **Yad Vashem:** Established in 1953, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority’s living memorial to the Holocaust safeguards the memory of the past, and transmits its meaning to current and future generations. It is the world center for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust.

46. **Yarmulke:** Small round skull cap traditionally worn to temple by religious Jewish men.

47. **Yiddish:** This Jewish language, originally spoken since the 10th century by Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jews, is a fusion of several languages and dialects including: German, Slavic, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Today, it is spoken throughout the world.

48. **ZACHOR:** Remember

49. **Zionism:** The Jewish political movement that supports the self-determination and defense of the Jewish people in Israel, the Jewish national homeland.

50. **Zyklon B:** the cyanide-based pesticide used by the Nazis to kill human beings in the gas chambers of extermination camps during the Holocaust.

**B. Extended Learning Activities for Different Learning Styles**

1. Create a real/ virtual model or map of a Ghetto or Concentration Camp.

2. Dramatize a scene from Ben’s life story.

3. Create a contemporary literary or dramatic version of an event in Ben’s story.

4. Create a court-room scene where the Jewish People put other countries on trial for participating in or ignoring the Holocaust.

5. Re-create a 1939 radio broadcast from Jews in Poland.
6. Re-create a 1939 Nazi radio broadcast to Europe’s Jewish People.
7. Create a board/video-game based upon the events in Ben’s life.
8. Write a letter of advice to one of the characters in Ben’s story.
9. Write a poem or song about one of the scenes or characters in Ben’s story.
10. Create a diary written by a Jewish teenager in the camps.
11. Create a montage of pictures and symbols to represent Ben’s story.
12. Create pro- and anti-Nazi posters from the point of view of different European countries.
13. Create graphs showing the statistics from the various countries and concentration camps.
14. Create a Timeline showing the events of Ben’s life in relation to history.
15. Create a website/blog that represents events during the Holocaust.