A Teacher’s Guide for

*Finding Zasha*

Author Randi Barrow

Recommended Grade Levels: 5-7

**Barrow, Randi. (2013). *Finding Zasha*. New York: Scholastic Inc. [Historical Fiction: Interest Level 5-7, Reading Level 6]**

**Award:** Parents' Choice Award Winner, Spring 2013, in the historical fiction category. (book is still relatively new)

In this four part prequel to *Saving Zasha,* 12-year-old Ivan’s world changed the day Leningrad, his home, was seized by the Germans during WWII in 1941. During these horrible times, Ivan was sent to live with his relative, Uncle Boris, when his mom had to work in a factory outside of the city. After the dangerous journey he had to take across a frozen lake, Ivan decided to stay with his grandmother-like neighbor, Auntie Vera, who had escaped Leningrad with him. Ivan is soon involved with the partisan movement (citizens of Russia secretly fighting the Germans) in the town where Auntie is staying. Shortly after, the Germans were there too. That’s when Ivan met two precious German Shepherd puppies, Zasha and Thor. Through a series of events, Ivan will try everything he can to make sure the puppies escape the horrible and abusive life of a war dog.

**Themes**

World War II

Dogs

Goodbyes

Camaraderie

Moving

**Vocabulary Words (Optional)**

Part One  
Leningrad (p. 8)  
Chastisement (p. 25)  
Gaunt (p. 39)  
Guttural (p. 65)  
Malevolent  (p. 66)  
Murmur (p. 69)  
Implore (p. 70)  
  
Part Two  
Partisan (p. 85)  
Succumb (p. 89)  
Bombardment (p. 92)  
Exhilarated (p. 96)  
Disheveled (p. 107)  
Vulnerability (p. 121)  
Furiously (p. 128)  
Imposing (p. 133)  
Observant (p. 135)  
Exuded (p. 141)  
Vigilant (p. 142)  
Caress (p. 150)  
Inquisitive (p. 163)  
Gratuitous (p. 180)  
Nonchalantly (p. 188)  
Repugnant  (p. 189)  
Simultaneously (p. 196)  
Ambivalent (p. 206)  
  
Part Three  
Impenetrable (p. 215)  
Emphatically (p. 226)  
Desolate (p. 243)  
Congealed (p.244)

Nomadic (p. 289)

Recuperation (p. 297)

Flirtatiously (p.302)

Agile (p. 311)

Enfeebled (p.328)

**Pre-reading:**

1. Study the cover of *Finding Zasha* closely. What do you notice about it? (Ex: There is a man in uniform. There are two puppies. The buildings are on fire in the background.) Based on the image and the title, what are your theories on the plot of this story?
2. Imagine that you suddenly had to leave your home to go live with a relative. Who would you make time to say goodbye to? If you had to pack light, what are the few belongings you take with you? Why is it important that you take these? What purpose do they serve?
3. Turn to page 337 in the back of the book. Read “Russia and World War II.” Pay close attention to the information as you may see a lot of these events mentioned or actually take place during the story.

Additional questions for students who have read *Saving Zasha*:

1. Who is Zasha?
2. What happened in *Saving Zasha*?

**Select Chapter Questions**

Chapters 1-3  
1. What country does Ivan live in?  
2. What war is going on? What made you think this?  
3. What job do the boys have to do after their home is bombed?  
4. What do you think will happen to Leningrad after the fire burned the city's food supplies?  
  
Chapters 4-5  
1. Why was Mrs. Bukova upset?  
2. Why was Auntie Vera so prepared? What did she have ready in case of a siege?  
3. What is a Molotov cocktail?  
4. What do you think will happen next to make things worst.  
  
Chapters 6-7  
1. Why does Ivan have to go live with his uncle Boris?  
2. How is Auntie Vera like a magician? (p. 49)  
  
Chapters 8-9  
1. What did Auntie Vera help Mrs. Bukova do?  
2. What does it mean to have a broken heart? (p. 59)  
  
Chapter 10  
1. Why is snowing a bad sign when crossing the lake?  
  
Chapters 11-12  
1. Why does Ivan have to forget his encounter with the partisans?  
2. Why does Galina hesitate to take Ivan in?  
  
Chapters 13-14  
1. What signal did Polina use to tell Ivan the meeting was starting?  
2. What is the puppet of the tunnels under Petr's house?  
  
Chapters 15-16  
1. What was the skill Polina taught Ivan and why was it important that he learned it?  
2. Why was the purpose of only hiding half if their food and fuel?  
  
Chapters 17-18  
1. Why was Ivan trying so hard to get the German officers to like him?  
2. What is Ivan's job at the German camp?  
  
Chapters 19-20  
1. Why does Axel not want Ivan around the dogs so much?  
2. What did Ivan receive from Axel that Petr intends to use against the Germans?  
  
Chapters 21-22  
1. What does Ivan want to do with the puppies? Is this good or bad idea? Why?  
  
Chapters 23-24  
1. What did Petr want Ivan to learn from Polina? Why?  
2. Why was Polina injured  
  
Chapters 25-26  
1. What must Ivan prove to Axel in order to save the puppies? How will this save them?  
2. After Zasha falls into the water, why is it important that Ivan gets her dry?  
  
Chapter 27  
1. Why do all the partisans and villagers need to leave?  
  
Chapters 28-29  
1. Do you think Axel is onto Ivan about using his letter for the partisans?  
2. What weapon did Axel use to be really good with?  
3. Who was the prisoner the soldiers locked up in the room beside Ivan's?  
  
Chapters 30-31  
1. How does Ivan plan to get Josef out of prison?

Chapters 32-33

1. Why did Josef go back to his house even though he knew it would mean being caught?

2. How did Josef get rid of the copy of Axel’s letter?

Chapters 34-35

1. What did Axel vow to do after Ivan escaped? Do you think he’ll be able to keep this vow?

2. What did make Ivan promise her before he left? Why would she have him promise this?

Chapters 36-37

1. Do you think that Axel will ever forget about Ivan and the dogs? Why or why not?

2. Why did Uncle Boris and Taavo switch places?

3. Why does Taavo believe it is a bad idea to make Thor and Zasha’s puppies be trained as war dogs? Does Ivan agree with him?

Chapter 38

1. Who is Mrs. Chemakova? Do you think she will be a problem in the future?

2. Why did Ivan write a letter to his mother pretending to be someone else?

3. How did Ivan and friends transform his uncle’s cabin to help the partisans?

Chapter 39-40

1. Why doesn’t Ivan want Mrs. Chemakova to know about Zasha’s puppies?

2. How did Axel Retch find Ivan?

Chapter 42-43

1. Why do Ivan and the rest the searchers choose to keep Axel alive?

2. What does Ivan choose to do after they give up on finding Zasha and Petr?

**Post-reading:**

1. *Finding Zasha* was split into four parts: Leningrad, Zasha and Thor, Escape, and Revenge. How does each title reflect what happens in that part of the story? Give examples from the text. (Leningrad talks about how the siege affected the people and why Ivan had to leave.)
2. Ivan becomes a partisan in the town Vilnov. What is a partisan? Who are some of the other partisans mentioned in the book? Do you believe the partisans played a big role in ending the war (at least for Russia). Why or why not? Support your answer with the text.
3. At the end of the book, Axel Retch is taken away as a POW (prisoner of war). Do you think there is a chance he could escape? Why or why not? Support answer by referencing the text. (Yes, because he spoke perfect Russian, he might be able to trick someone into thinking he actually is Russian, not German.)
4. (If they have not read *Saving Zasha*) At the end of the book, Petr and Zasha are missing. After his best efforts for finding them proves fruitless, Ivan decides to move on and accepts the fact that his friend and his dog may be dead. If Petr and Zasha are still alive, what do you think happened to them. Why might Petr refrain from contacting Ivan to tell him they are alive and well? Support answer with text.
5. Many of the characters in *Finding Zasha* contributed to Russia by helping fight its enemies or rebuild its cities and towns. (Becoming a partisan, working in a factory that made tanks, growing food, etc.) Now imagine that it was your town and country that was at war. What contribution do you think you would be able to make to help your country win the war, or after the war ended how would help your town rebuild?

**Follow Up Activities**

1. Create a timeline including all the major events in Ivan’s life that coincides with the book (Starts with Leningrad and ends with him returning to Leningrad).
2. In the book, Ivan receives two gifts: his father’s shaving kit and a compass. Ask the students to write about a time they were given a gift. Was it special to him/her or to the occasion? Does he/she still have that gift?
3. Have the students write a “Lost Dog” ad for a newspaper for Zasha.
4. Have students split up into groups and select a scene from the book (make sure they choose different scenes). Then have groups go up one by one and act out the scene charades style while the other groups guess what part of the story is being played out.
5. Have students pretend that *Finding Zasha* is being made into a movie. The students will select actors that will play the main characters and tell why they think they fit the characters. Then have them create a movie poster using cutouts of the selected actors combined with pictures that represent the story. Students may also choose to draw a poster.

**Cross Curricular Activities**

1. History: Have a lesson about Russia’s role in WWII.
2. History: Have a lesson on guerrilla warfare and compare Russia’s partisans to the colonial soldiers in the Revolutionary War
3. Geography: Have the student draw a map of north western Russia where Leningrad and all the town mentioned in the book. Make sure they know to label all the cities/towns. The students should use the map at the beginning of the book as a guide since many cities have a different name on today’s map. Once they draw a map, have them show the paths that Ivan took during his travels. Make sure to include a legend for the map.
4. Math: There are several ways math can be connected to the book just by giving problems that tie into the story. For example: Because Ivan had to pack light for his journey to his uncle’s cabin, he wasn’t able to take all of his clothes. If Ivan was able to grab 3 pairs of pants and 7 shirts how many possible outfits will he have?

**Diversity**

There have been several stereotypes about Russian people that Americans tend to hold, mostly because of the negativity between the two countries brought upon by the four decade long Cold War. Russians can be viewed as unfriendly and even cruel. There is also the belief that Russia’s weather is always cold, but just like America, Russia’s large landmass has different types of biomes and climates. Both of these stereotypes are challenged by the *Saving Zasha*. Many of the people Ivan meets welcome him immediately and are concerned for him. Also, one of the ways Ivan helps the partisans is to plant seeds and harvest food for them. He wouldn’t be able to do this if it weren’t for the warm summers.

**Annotated Bibliography**

1. Barrow, Randi (2011). *Saving Zasha*. New York: Scholastic Inc.

The story starts right after WWII has ended. Russia, having suffered a substantial loss at the hands of Germans, despise anything to do with them, even their dogs. When young Mikhail finds Zasha, his mother decides to let him keep her, but under one condition: She must not be seen or heard. Post-war Russia is empty of dogs because several were used during the war and died, making dogs a rarity and something precious. However, many Russians see German Shepherds as evil and their owners as traitors. Mikhail knows that if anyone were to find out about his German Shepherd, she would be taken away or killed. So he has to save Zasha from several people who mean to do her harm.

This is the first book in the Zasha series, *Finding Zasha* being the prequel. It continues telling about Zasha, this time it’s about her life with a different family. This book allows students to see how much WWII affect the people (and dogs) of Russia.

2. Kadohata, Cynthia. (2007). *Cracker!:The Best Dog in Vietnam*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Bred as a show dog, Magnificent Dawn of Venus von Braun was a German shepherd destined for greatness until a broken leg took her out of contention and into the arms of a boy named Willie. Reminded of the landlord's no-pet policy, the heartbroken boy answers a newspaper ad and Venus, now "Cracker," is accepted into a military canine unit to help soldiers sniff out booby traps in Vietnam. She and her handler, Rick Hanski, quickly bond and head to the front lines.

This is another story dealing with dogs and warfare. In *Finding Zasha*, the roles that Thor and Zasha would have served in the military were described to Ivan. In *Cracker!*, however, the main dog see the action that Ivan saved Thor and Zasha from.

3. Kalman, Bobbie. (2010) *Spotlight on Russia*. Ontario: Crabtree Publishing Company

*Spotlight on Russia* gives children a fascinating introduction to the largest country in the world, which is part of two continents!. Wonderful photographs feature Russia's many diverse people, its unique plants and animals, and its dramatic landscape, including beautiful Lake Baikal. The traditions and symbols of Russia are also featured from classical ballet to the Moscow circus.

This is a short informational book about Russia, the country in which *Finding Zasha* takes place.

4. Pyron, Bobbie. (2011). *A Dog’s Way Home*. New York: Katherine Tegen Books.

When an accident separates Abby and her dog Tam, it feels as though all the stars have fallen out of the sky and nothing will ever be right again. As the days between them turn to weeks, then months, dangers and changes fill up Abby's and Tam's lives. Tam will make an 400-mile trek to find his way back to Abby.

Tam, the dog that means so much to Abby, was separated from her. Just like Ivan, she doesn’t know if her dog is alive or dead or if she’ll ever see her again.

5. Schulman, Faye (1995). *A Partisan’s Memoir*. Toronto: Second Story Press.

Faye was an ordinary teenager when the Nazis invaded her town on the Russian-Polish border. Many of her family and friends were lost soon after the horrors of the Holocaust began. But Faye survived, and the photographs she took testify to her experiences and the persecution she witnessed. Decorated for heroism, Schulman uses her biography to tell an extraordinary story not just of survival, but of struggle and resistance against oppression. She talks about escaping from the Nazis, finding a partisan unit, and proving her worth. The photographs she took speak eloquently of her experience of surviving for years in the woods with the partisans. There she learned to nurse the ill and wounded, and took up arms against those who had decimated her world.

Faye and Ivan share the same homeland of Russia. Just like Ivan in *Finding Zasha*, Faye’s life was turned around when Germany attacked. She also made the decision to help her country as best as she could be joining a group of Partisans. This will give students a closer look into partisanship.

**Internet Websites**

1. <http://www.history.com/interactives/inside-wwii-interactive>

This is an interactive map highlighting events of WWII. For something even more specific to *Finding Zasha*, have students click “Europe & Africa” and then “Leningrad Siege” (middle right picture).

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTTZYsXTXq0>

This is a short video of a man playing different songs on a concertina, the instrument that Ivan plays frequently throughout the book. Students will no doubt be curious about the instrument that Ivan plays.

1. <http://www.ducksters.com/animals/german_shepherd.php>

This is a website listing some fun facts about German Shepherds.