

READING GUIDE

The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain by Peter Sís

Peter Sís has written a multi-faceted account of his life growing up in the politically charged geographic area now known as the Czech Republic. Depending on the age of the reading audience, the content of the book can be chunked and shared in several reading sessions. For younger students, the initial reading could include the introduction, followed by the bottom sentence on each page, and the afterword. For the next reading session, the more in-depth chronological journal entries could be read. The final reading session could include a page-by-page rereading incorporating and discussing the additional words and details on each page.

Before Reading Activities

1. Before showing the class the cover of the book, have each student sketch a picture to go with the title, **The Wall**. Have them jot down a few words that they associate with the purpose and properties of the wall in their illustration. Students can then share one or more of their words with the class as you record them on a chart or board. Ask the group to come up with categories for the words. Discuss whether each word is associated with something positive, negative, or neutral. Show the class the cover of the book and see if they want to add any other words to their list.
2. In addition to reading a personal account of how Peter Sís grew up and was affected by the political climate of his homeland, students will learn about the coping skills he chose to use to survive in an ever changing environment. Students can be asked to think about a situation in which they were uncertain or afraid. They can discuss what actions they took to survive or get through the situation.
3. The history of the Czech Republic included many changes in the daily lifestyles of its people based on who was in authority. Students can role play how life in the classroom would be different in each of the following 3 scenarios:
 - Your teacher makes all the rules. Students must obey without question and do what they are told.
 - Your teacher and the students make the class rules together.
 - No one is in charge and there are no rules.

After acting out the scenarios, students can discuss which type of classroom management style they liked the best and why.



(Note: The vocabulary used in *The Wall* includes complex and unfamiliar terms that may need some explanation before the complete reading. It may help to organize the words as characteristics associated with life under a totalitarian dictatorship like the role play in which the teacher made all the rules.)

Discussion Questions

1. Many activities became compulsory during the time of the Soviet leadership of Czechoslovakia. What activities are compulsory for you to do at home? At school?
2. A variety of books, written materials, and music selections were banned by the Soviets. Why do you think these items were not permitted? What is the title of a book(s) that is currently banned here in the United States? What reason do you think caused it to be banned?
3. Explain which activities and behaviors you think should be controlled by our government. Is there anything currently controlled by our government that you think should not be controlled?
4. In the book, a number of objects were illustrated in red and were associated with life under Soviet rule. What color(s) and objects do you associate with your day to day life in the United States?
5. Growing up in Czechoslovakia, Peter Sís experienced total control, freedom, and then a repeat of total control by the Soviets. Was there ever a time you (or someone you know or read about) were given something that you really wanted only to have it taken away? How did these experiences influence your outlook on life?
6. Peter Sís created a timeline of events in his life. What events that have happened in the world since you were born have made an impact on you?
7. The author states that some of his friends and family who live in what is now the Czech Republic are not happy with the image of their country as detailed in *The Wall*. Are there any events in the history of the United States that you would not want others in the world to know about?
8. *The Wall* uses words, drawings, pictures, journal entries, and captions to tell the story of Peter's life in Czechoslovakia. What do you think are the advantages and/or disadvantages of telling a story using all these techniques?



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Further Activities

1. Peter Sís maintains a website at petersis.com. You can learn more about other his life and other books that he has written there.
2. Design a paper mural that expresses your dreams for your life in the United States.
3. Prague is now a very popular tourist destination. Do some research and plan what you would like to see and do if you were going there for a visit.



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