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Gertruda's Oath by Ram Oren

Discussion questions used at SPL January 12 & 13, 2016

1. Knowing what we know now about the rise of the Nazi Party and the Holocaust, did you learn anything new about historical events depicted in this book?
2. Karl Rink needed to support himself and his family and that is why he took the job being an SS Soldier. Why do you think he refused to see what his wife warned him about (the systematic removal and alienation of Jews and others) until it was too late? Page 58
3. How are Karl Rink and Jacob Stolinwtzky(Michael's father) alike? Do you think that they both were in denial for too long? Would you say that many people were in denial of what Hitler would do and was doing? Was it self-preservation?
4. Page. 66 Karl describes his loyalty to the SS and his love for Mira and Helga as being equally as strong. Do you understand his sense of loyalty to the Party and loyalty and love for his family?
5. Were you shocked about what happened to Mira? Why or why not? Is Karl to blame for what happened to his wife? Should Mira have simply gotten the divorce or better yet left when Karl asked? In hindsight, what would you have done given the situation?
6. Page 102. In a letter to Helga from her father Karl, Karl writes that he hopes that he won't be "assigned work I don't like". What kind of work did he think he would get assigned? He is being sent to Poland to fight for the invasion of that country by Germany and he suspects that the Party has taken his wife who is Jewish, what kind of work does he think he would get assigned? Is his denial for his daughter's benefit? As a parent, maybe he is trying to protect her from the atrocities of war and the Nazi Party or is he still in denial about the Nazi Party?
7. We have read other books on the subject of World War II, how does this book compare to them? What things are similar or different?
8. "This is war...In war, there is no pity. If you don't kill, you get killed". Does this explain Emil's violence against the thieves? What about the desensitized bystanders who did not react at all? Page107
9. Does Emil's previous violence against Gertruda foreshadow what he ultimately does to the family? Dr. Berman said, "The war turns men into monsters." What do you think about this statement? Is the doctor being naïve or is he rationalizing bad behavior given the circumstances?
10. Gertruda promised to take care of Michael after Lydia's death. Is this the meaning of the title of the book? Is there more to the title than the literal meaning? What else does Gertruda's oath involve?

11. Jacob Stolorow's money had always "opened every locked gate" for him and when money could not help him find his family he cried like a baby. "His money had become worthless." What does this say about the value of money or more accurately the value that people place on money especially during a time of crisis?
12. After reading the story of Jacob Gens and Itzik Vittenberg, do you think you would have given yourself up to the Germans? Do you believe that Vittenberg did the right thing by turning himself in and taking the poison pill to save the Jews in the Vilna ghetto? If you lived in the ghetto would you have turned Vittenberg in to the Germans to save your life and others? Does the life of one leader outweigh the lives of many followers in this situation?
13. Did you know that the Jewish people organized themselves and were prepared to fight against the Germans? Was the resistance in Vilna an isolated case or were there more groups in other villages?
14. Let's talk about Gertruda's courage and strength. She affected so many lives from Lydia, Dr. Berman, the Jewish boy from the camp in Vilna, and of course Michael. Do you see Gertruda as the heroine of this book? Why or why not?
15. There are several people throughout the book who acted courageously, did any one person stand out? Please describe which character(s) showed courage through such a horrible period of history.
16. Page 174...Why does the author refer to Denka, as a "guest"? He is a smuggler, abuser and an aggressor without morals and conscience. Gertruda does not invite him into the apartment he pushes his way in and attempts to rape her. What do you think about his choice of words and writing style?
17. What do you think about Gertruda giving away her only means of protection, the gun? By giving the gun away when she did do you think that saved her and Michael's lives?
18. Karl Rink never saw Helga (Elisheva) again. What are your thoughts about the timing of his death, on the eve of his trip to Palestine?
19. Should Rink be absolved for his acts as an SS officer because of his merciful treatment of Jewish victims during the war?
20. The "Righteous among the Nations" were defined as non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. According to the author, Gertruda is bestowed this recognition, "Righteous Gentile". Is there another person from the story you think is deserving of this recognition also?

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Discussion questions taken from a website: RandonHouse.com

website address: https://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/teachers_guides/9780385527194.pdf

1. Why was Karl and Mira Rink's marriage controversial, even though mixed marriages were common at the time in Berlin? How does Karl's decision to join the SS affect his relationship with his wife, Mira, and his relationships with his extended Jewish family and friends? To what extent does Rink seem to be in denial about Hitler's agenda for Jewish populations in Europe?
2. Why does Gertruda Babilinska react the way she does when she learns that the Stolowitzky family is Jewish? As a Catholic, what does her reaction reveal about her own biases and feelings about Jews? How does her priest's advice: "There are good Christians and bad Christians and good Jews and bad Jews," influence her decision to accept the nanny position? (p. 42)
3. How does Karl Rink's unwillingness to participate wholeheartedly in the destruction wrought on Jewish people and properties during "Kristallnacht" jeopardize his reputation within the Nazi Party? Given his ambivalence about participating in such violence against Jews, why does he stay in his position as SS officer?
4. What do the abduction attempts made against Michael Stolowitzky suggest about his family's insulation from the economic turbulence experienced by others in Warsaw? How is the direct involvement of Emil, the family's chauffeur, foreshadowed by his violent behavior toward Gertruda during Jacob Stolowitzky's absence from home?
5. When Unit Commander Schreider tells Karl Rink that he must choose between his Jewish wife and the party, he orders him to divorce Mira by the end of the week. Why would the Nazi Party be concerned about the loyalty of an officer married to a Jewish woman? By refusing to divorce Mira, despite a direct order from his superior, to what extent is Karl responsible for Mira's tragic fate?
6. Compare the efforts of Dr. Joseph Berman, a Jewish doctor from Warsaw, and Father Andras [tk Andreas? Check] [Andras is correct JC]Gedovsky, a Catholic priest at the Ostra Brama Church in Vilna, to protect Gertruda and Michael. Why would two people from radically different backgrounds find themselves drawn to help a vulnerable woman and her adopted child?
7. What do Karl Rink's efforts to get his daughter, Helga, to a kibbutz in Palestine suggest about his awareness of the dangers his family faces by virtue of its Jewish ethnicity? How does Karl Rink's predicament—being responsible professionally for the conditions that require his daughter to flee the country—call his judgment into question?

8. When Lydia, Gertruda, and Michael escape from Warsaw to Vilna in their Cadillac, they witness Emil's treachery first-hand. After saving them from the knife-wielding farmers who threaten them on the road, why does Emil go on to abandon and rob them of all their belongings? How might his seemingly contradictory behavior be understood?
9. What does Gertruda's behavior as a refugee in Vilna—nursing her boss, Lydia Stolorowicz, at night and working by day as a dishwasher, using all of her savings to help Lydia and Michael secure an apartment, deceiving the landlady about her companions' Jewish ethnicity—suggest about her character? In what respects does she seem hard-wired for sacrifice and serving others above herself?
10. "Take off my wedding ring...[w]ear it now. From now on, you'll be Michael's mother." (p. 128) How does Lydia's deathbed request of Gertruda reveal her absolute trust in her son's nanny? What does Gertruda's oath to Lydia reveal about her feelings for her young charge, Michael?
11. Why does Jacob Stolorowicz remarry Anna Massini before learning the truth about Lydia and Michael's whereabouts? In addition to her love and companionship, what does Anna, an Italian national, offer Jacob? To what extent does his marriage seem driven by self-interest? What do the terms of his will suggest about his hopes for his first wife and child?
12. What does the collective Lithuanian response to the occupation of their country by Germany reveal about the prevailing Lithuanian opinion of the Soviet Union? How do these sentiments extend to the Lithuanians' treatment of the Jewish refugees who have deluged their country from other parts of Europe?
13. "The Jews were forbidden to travel on public transportation, to own a telephone or a radio, to sit in cafés, to attend the movies or the theater, to go to the barber, to walk on the main streets, and to have any contact with non-Jews. They had to wear yellow armbands." (p. 151) How does the treatment of the Jews during wartime isolate them socially and racially? To what extent were the German prohibitions on Jews during wartime specifically designed to be dehumanizing?
14. Why is Gertruda willing to risk everything to deliver Emil's gun to Dr. Berman in the Jewish ghetto in Vilna? In what context does Gertruda's smuggling of a weapon into the Jewish underground—an illegal act, according to German military law—seem like a sensible act? How does she benefit directly from having taken such an incredible risk?
15. When the German soldiers command six-year-old Michael to undress so they can determine if he is a Jew, how does Gertruda's reaction betray her fear that Michael will be exposed? What would such a discovery mean for Gertruda? Why does SS Officer Karl Rink's gesture of benevolence stand out in the course of their perilous journey to safety? What do you think accounts for Karl Rink's compassion to these Polish refugees and to those he encounters in the Kovno Ghetto?
16. "'Don't shoot! We're Poles!' The soldier lowered his weapon and smiled. He was a

Russian.” (p. 210) How does the fact of their Polish ethnicity save Gertruda and Michael when they encounter a Russian soldier aiming a submachine gun at them in the Lithuanian bunker where they have sought shelter? How do life and death hinge on nationality and religious affiliation during World War II?

17. To what extent do Gertruda’s parents seem justified in reacting with dismay and disbelief when she tells him that she intends to bring Michael to Palestine to raise him as a Jew? As a faithful Catholic, why doesn’t Gertruda attempt to convert Michael to Christianity? After all she has overcome during the war, why does she choose to live with Michael abroad, among other displaced Jews, rather than stay with her biological family in her homeland?

18. How can one reconcile Karl Rink’s act of vengeance against Reinhard Schreider—killing him in cold blood to avenge the murder of his wife, Mira—with his compassionate behavior toward Jews in the course of World War II? In what respects should Rink be absolved for his acts as an SS officer because of his merciful treatment of Jewish victims during the war?

19. Why does Gertruda have to draw attention to her religious identity as a Catholic in order to gain admittance to the Exodus? Why are the organizers of the ship inclined to leave Gertruda behind? Compare and contrast life on the Exodus to life in the Vilna ghetto.

20. After Gertruda is granted the honorary title of “Righteous Gentile” by Yad Vashem, she moves to a special home for Righteous Gentiles in Nahariya, Israel. Why does Gertruda embrace her new identity as an Israeli gentile? How do the unusual circumstances surrounding Gertruda Babilinska’s burial—first in a Jewish grave, then in a Christian grave—seem symbolic, given the extraordinary life she led?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & RESOURCES –

What is the SS:

Excerpt:

“SS men were schooled in racial hatred and admonished to harden their hearts to human suffering. Their chief “virtue” was their absolute obedience and loyalty to the Führer, who gave them their motto: “Thy honour is thy loyalty.” During World War II the SS carried out massive executions of political opponents, Roma (Gypsies), Jews, Polish leaders, communist authorities, partisan resisters, and Russian prisoners of war. Following the defeat of Nazi Germany by the Allies, the SS was declared a criminal organization by the Allied Tribunal in Nürnberg in 1946.”

SS. (2015). In Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved from
<http://www.britannica.com/topic/SS>

Learn more...

The Holocaust Memorial Center
28123 Orchard Lake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48334

<http://www.holocaustcenter.org/>

What is a kibbutzim:

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/kibbutz.html

History of Vilna

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/background/20century.asp>

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005173>

Jacob Gens

<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/gens.html>

A group of Jewish partisans in the Rudninkai Forest, Near Vilna



<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/rescuepic2.html>