

Reading Group Guide

Shores Beyond Shores: From Holocaust to Hope

By Irene Butter with John D. Bidwell and Kris Holloway

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A good book is enjoyed twice: first when you read it, and then when you gather to discuss it. It gives us much joy to think that *Shores Beyond Shores*, five years in the making, might spark discussion in *your* living room.

On Writing

- 1) Kris and John have described the writing of Irene's book with her as an "organic process that involved the opening of memory and the building of story." They didn't know what the journey would be, but it was a creative back and forth (in person, via skype, and through primary sources such as old letters) of barely remembered events and conversations leading to more fully remembered scenes and conversations. How does the passage of time and the presence of trauma affect memory?
- 2) Kris has said that writing from the first person perspective over the course of five years meant that she had to do her utmost to "see and feel so that I could write all that Reni saw and felt." She believes it deepened her respect and love for her friend and gave her more compassion for survivors. As non-Jews, what is the responsibility to carry a Jewish story?
- 3) Mrs. Mandel was particularly cruel to Reni. She is the one character in the book with a pseudonym, though the authors know her real name. As Irene wrote in the Character/Biography section, page 266, "Mrs. Mandel is a pseudonym. Mrs Mandel was one of my first lessons in understanding and forgiveness. I honor that by giving her and her descendants anonymity." Why do you think this was important to Irene? Would you make the same choice in your autobiography?
- 4) Irene has said "I was never truly free until I started to tell my story." What does this mean? How might the last five years of iterative depth-diving and revelation have affected Irene?

On characters and scenes in the different book sections

- 5) In the first section of the book "The Happy Childhood" (pp.1-26), Reni is young and living in Berlin and then Amsterdam. She doesn't understand all that is happening in the world, yet she is perceptive. Where is she correct in her perceptions and where is she not? What decisions did her parents make to protect their family? What did her family do to keep some normalcy? What would you have done?

- 6) In “The Start of War” (27-76), the Nazis systematically took rights away from Jews through a series of decrees. Which loss do you think had the biggest effect on Reni’s family? What about on Reni personally?
- 7) In “Prisoner” (pp. 77-130), Bergen-Belsen was a much harder place than what Irene’s family imagined and much harder than Westerbork. In what ways did the two camps differ? Do you think Reni’s family truly thought Bergen-Belsen would be better, or do you think Reni heard what she wanted to hear?
- 8) The kapos are a controversial subject. They were prisoners who kept order and discipline among other prisoners. German historian Karin Orth wrote that “there was hardly a measure so [evil] as the SS attempt to delegate the implementation of terror and violence to the victims themselves.” Discuss.
- 9) Irene has talked about the “miracles” that happened to her: being released from the Schouwburg Theater after being rounded up, having their fake passports arrive at Westerbork when no other mail arrived for them, and being mistaken for her mother that allowed the family to be part of the prisoner exchange and board the train out of Bergen-Belsen. Do you believe these are miracles? Why or why not?
- 10) Irene has said that the fact her family could stay together in the same barrack in both Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen was critical to their survival. In what ways did staying together make a difference?
- 11) After escaping Bergen-Belsen, in “Freedom and Loss” (pp. 191-222), Reni and her family are officially displaced people, refugees. Was Reni ending up alone in a displaced persons camp preventable? Or is this simply what happens in the chaos of war?
- 12) In “Rebirth” (pp.223 - 252), at the refugee camp in Algeria, Irene learns to swim. Swimming has remained an important part of Irene’s life. Why do you think it was so important to her at Camp Jeanne D’Arc? What might it represent to her? How might it be connected to the title *Shores Beyond Shores*?

On the deeper themes of the book

- 13) One of the themes of the book, and the title of Irene’s documentary film is “Never a Bystander.” The Nazis had many collaborators, even in Amsterdam, and yet many people also resisted them. What are examples of people who were generous to Irene and her family and took a risk to do so? Why does someone join one side or the other? And what are the consequences of each during and after the war?
- 14) “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” –Viktor Frankl. How does this famous quote apply to the members of Irene’s family and their survival?
- 15) Among Holocaust survivors, there can be a “hidden hierarchy of suffering. A cruel satisfaction [that] takes place under a magnifying glass. Every survivor is seen in relation to what other survivors saw or experienced.” – Dan Bar-On, *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust*. Irene’s family was privileged and her father leveraged that privilege at every turn to help his family to survive and stay

together. What would you have done? Can there be a hierarchy to suffering? What value is it to compare suffering?

- 16) 107,000 Jews were deported from the Netherlands from 1942 to 1944. Only 5,200 survived. Irene is one of them. She has said she feels a special responsibility to help others and live a good life because she survived when so many did not. This can also be called “survivors’ guilt.” Can you identify with this feeling? In what ways does it manifest in people’s lives? What is the process through which it can be used for good?
- 17) Irene co-founded the group Zeitouna, an Arab-Jewish discussion group that works towards a just peace through engaging in listening and dialogue. She deeply believes that “peace will be achieved when we see ‘the other’ in ourselves.” Have you had an experience where you came to know or love someone who belonged to a group you had deeply negative feelings about? Describe how it happened. Given the deep divides in our country today, how could this type of experience help heal those divides?
- 18) If you could ask Irene any question, what would it be and why is it an important one? Send it to us through the Contact form on www.irenebutter.com!

On using the themes to start conversations in your community

Racism. Irene’s family faced extreme hatred and intolerance. A theme in the book is how important it is to not be a bystander to acts of discrimination or violence. What situations have you encountered in your own life when you were faced with a decision to act or not act? What pressures did you feel and what guided your choice? If you have been privileged in your life so as to not suffer hatred or intolerance, what role can you play as an ally? What defies the difference between bystander, ally, and resistor?

Nazis and Discrimination. The Nazis enacted many discriminatory laws against Jews (and others) before the Holocaust began. They also made use of misleading information that discouraged Jews from entering certain professions and participating in civic life. What are some examples, perhaps here in the U.S., in which law or misleading information discriminates against or discourages people from participating in fully in life?

Victim vs. Survivor. Irene views herself as a survivor, not a victim of the Holocaust. She believes that everyone who has suffered injustice, hatred, or discrimination can choose how to interpret their horrific experiences and move beyond them. What is the difference between these two conceptions of self? What are the implications of each? Does emphasizing survivorship take responsibility away from the perpetrators?

Forgiveness. It is an inescapable fact of history that people, as individuals and as societies, commit awful acts against each other. However, many believe that in order for individuals and humanity to move forward, we must forgive those who committed those acts (even if we vow never to forget.) Suppose those who committed that act are not sorry. Can we still forgive them if there is no remorse? What do you think are the benefits of forgiveness?