

Book Discussion Guide

“We are going to pick potatoes”: Norway and the Holocaust, the Untold Story,

by Irene Levin Berman

1. The author, Irene Levin Berman, breaks the silence in America about the Holocaust in Norway. At different times in the book she writes about keeping silent in front of the children, silent about those who “disappeared,” and silent after the war. What about your own background or that of family members – has there been silence regarding the Holocaust or World War II? Why do you think that is? Has the veil of silence begun to ease? Why now? Are we any less silent about genocide issues today?
2. Why did the housekeeper and nanny, Ruth Simensen, tell little Irene, “We’re going to pick potatoes” just before their escape to Sweden? Why did this become Irene’s earliest childhood memory at four years of age and then a defining moment to begin her memoir?
3. The Norway portrayed in Berman’s book is different in many ways from the widespread Scandinavian images portrayed in writing and films related to the war years. By 1851 the Norwegian constitutional ban was lifted and Jewish families started to emigrate from Lithuania, Russia and many other parts of Eastern Europe. Irene’s paternal grandfather, Leib Levin, was among the very first and participated in the establishment of the first Jewish congregation in Oslo. What did you think of the author’s vivid portrayal of Jewish life and her family in Norway? Did it surprise you?
4. Sweden was neutral. Norwegian Jews and other Norwegian political refugees arrived daily across the border and were welcomed into Sweden. At the same time, German troops were allowed to cross the country. What was life like for the Levin family and other Jews in Sweden? How did that country deal with the war and the Holocaust?
5. Irene’s aunt, uncle and cousins, the Steinfeld family, “disappeared,” another euphemism, like “picking potatoes,” that meant having been murdered by the Nazis. In spring of 2007 a few people answered a newspaper ad on Berman’s behalf with knowledge about the family. How did you respond to this Chapter 5?
6. A saying among many Jewish Holocaust survivors is, “Despite all the terror, thank goodness we didn’t know the next chapter.” Why do you think many Jewish families delayed leaving until escape was too late?
7. The Norwegian State Police, as opposed to the Danish Police who carried out the rescue of the Danish Jews, rounded up the Jews for deportation, then forced them on to the ship *Donau*, bound for Auschwitz. This was done by order from the occupying forces but very few of the Norwegian policemen initiated active objections. This has become the topic of many books in Norway during the past 10-15

years. What do you think the arguments about this shameful behavior are based on? How can this be explained?

8. The concept of identity is a theme that runs throughout Berman's book. The author did not know she too was a Holocaust survivor – a child survivor – until told to examine the label. Her memoir is about personal discovery and transition with identities as a Jew, Norwegian, and American. How is the legacy of the Norwegian Jews different from others who died or survived the Holocaust?

9. After the family was brought safely to freedom in Sweden, what was the conflict Marcus Levin had about arrangements with their Norwegian resistance escorts? Are all resistance people heroes? Is human nature such that there is good and bad in every one?

10. There are Jewish writers whose memoirs have inspired historians and Holocaust survivors to write their own important contributions to this genre of remembrance. What makes Berman's book unique?

11. At the end Berman asks, "Have we learned our lesson? Do we have more respect for human lives today than more than half a century ago?" She concludes, "Sadly, we are not there yet." Do you agree or disagree with the author's perspective?