



Discussion Questions

We Are Here

Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust

By Ellen Cassedy

We Are Here offers a wealth of discussion material for book club members and students. Ellen Cassedy would be glad to talk with your book club (in person or online) or to visit your classroom. Please be in touch with her at www.ellencassedy.com.

1. At the beginning of Ellen's journey to Lithuania, she says, "Maybe a homeland could be a place to stretch myself, to grow." What kind of growth is she hoping for? How does Ellen's study of Yiddish affect her journey?
2. Historically, Jews and non-Jews lived in peace in Lithuania. Yet by the end of World War II, fewer than 10 percent of Lithuania's 240,000 Jews remained alive. The German invaders gave the orders, but in most cases Lithuanians pulled the triggers. What are some reasons why the murder of Jews in Lithuania was among the most brutal in all of Europe?
3. Irena Veisaite, a leader of tolerance efforts, says: "As long as you are hiding the truth, as long as you fail to come to terms with your past, you cannot build your future." Do you agree?
4. "Very few of our people took part in the Jewish Holocaust," Violeta tells Ellen. "If you add up how many took part in murdering and how many took part in rescuing, the balance would be positive." The philosopher Leonidas Donskis rejects this calculation. "Bystanders are the crucial majority," he says. "To remain silent, not to lift a finger — that is to side with the killers." What do you think?
5. Before and after World War II, the Soviet regime deported tens of thousands of Lithuanians — mostly non-Jews, but Jews, too — to Siberia. For nearly 50 years after the war, Lithuania was a republic of the Soviet Union. It gained independence in 1991. Can the Soviet and Nazi systems usefully be compared to each other? Why or why not? Soviet actions in Lithuania are sometimes referred to as "genocide." What do you think about the use of this term?
6. Aldona suggests that instead of accusing Lithuanians of war crimes, Americans should examine their own responsibility for the suffering of Lithuanians under Soviet rule. Do you agree?
7. The question of what Lithuanians know and do not know about the Holocaust, and when they learned what they know, arises repeatedly in the book. Why do you think some people say they have always known, and other say it was impossible to learn the truth during the Soviet era? Is it useful to compare this situation, as Ellen does, to how white Americans speak about racism? To how traces of Native American culture appear in place names in the U.S. — seen but not seen?

8. Why does Steponas, the old man who had witnessed the persecution of the Jews in Rokiskis in 1941, want to speak to a Jew before he dies? Would you have met with Steponas? Why does he weep? How does Ellen's view of Lithuanian "bystanders" change over the course of the book? How did the book affect your view of bystanders?
9. A Holocaust education curriculum in Lithuania asks students these questions. How would you answer them? What do you think of Albert Einstein's saying, "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing"? Have you ever been in a situation where someone needed your help and you didn't provide it? If so, why did you behave like others, rather than following your conscience?
10. The Nazi invaders required Jews in the ghettos to appoint their own police, who carried out Nazi orders, including murderous ones. The role of the Jewish police was controversial during the war, and has remained so. Primo Levi, an eloquent survivor of Auschwitz, coined the term "the gray zone" to characterize the role of the police and other functionaries under Nazi command. What did this book teach you about the Jewish ghetto police? How do you evaluate Efrayim Gens, the chief of the Jewish police in Uncle Will's ghetto?
11. Why did Uncle Will wait so long to reveal his "secret" about the Holocaust years? Why did he tell the truth when he did? Why did Ellen choose not to push her uncle to reveal more about his past? What would you have done?
12. Several thousand Lithuanians helped to save their Jewish neighbors. Irena Veisaite says, "All the rescuers were saints." Yet Viktorija Sakaite, who compiles rescuer stories, says that many rescuers saved Jews simply for practical or self-interested reasons. Do the rescuers' motivations matter? How?
13. Since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Lithuanian government has been criticized for not bringing Nazi collaborators to justice, for harassing Jewish survivors, for delaying the return of Jewish property seized by the Nazi and Soviet regimes, and for allowing expressions of anti-Semitism. Some say that Lithuania's Holocaust education efforts are simply cynical ploys designed to win international approval. What do you think about the educational efforts described in the book? Do they seem sincere or cynical to you?
14. Indre, a Holocaust educator, states that "our goal is to transform ourselves from a society of bystanders into an active civil society." Can this goal be achieved? How will examining the past help?
15. Ellen learns that Lithuanian teachers were invited, but not required, to teach courses about the Holocaust. What do you think about this?
16. When Ellen's fellow Yiddish students speculate about how they would have behaved in the ghetto, at first she feels offended. Later, however, she comes to believe that "imagining oneself into unimaginable situations is at the very heart of moral behavior." What do you think?
17. In the course of her journey, Ellen draws upon many different sources of information, including interviews with leaders and ordinary citizens, old newspapers, trial records, oral histories, survivor testimonies, family interviews, family relics, museum visits, visits to historic sites, even the experience of "breathing the air" in ancestral sites. How trustworthy are these sources? Does Ellen succeed in her goal to "keep an open mind, but not let her brains fall out"?
18. "Hatred destroys you, destroys the world," Irena Veisaite says. "You should not live with this feeling." Do you agree?

19. Ellen's journey changes her. By the end of her journey, she feels less inclined to judge than she was at the beginning. Instead, she says, she came to feel that "to open my mind in my heart, to listen and to comprehend: this was my role and my responsibility." What do you think about this? Did the book change your views?