

JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

Content provided by AJ Sidransky
Jewishbookcouncil.org



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Author's Note

The History and Personal History Underlying *The Interpreter*

At the end of World War II, the American government, along with the armed forces, initiated programs to recruit former Nazis to work with them against the Soviet Union. One of these programs, known as Operation Paperclip, was specifically directed at Nazi scientists. It brought former physicists and others to the United States to add their collective knowledge to ours during the Cold War. The Soviets had a similar program known as Operation Osoaviakhim. In all, thousands of former Nazis and their families were granted not only relief from prosecution, but new lives in the United States.

Imagine if our government or military had in fact recruited former Nazis as spies to fight communism in the coming cold war? While there are no other named operations on the part of our government or military to overlook Nazi activity or actively solicit the help of former Nazis and reward them for their new loyalty, unquestionably thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of former Nazis and Nazi supporters escaped justice, came to the United States and began life anew in the land of their former enemies. That supposition is at the heart of *The Interpreter*. From this author's perspective, the question is whether the perception of national security should have outweighed the need for justice and closure to begin with. In the end we turned a blind eye to the fact that these former combatants condoned the actions of their government when they had the chance to resist.

This book is a work of fiction. It does though contain

factual elements from the life of Kurt Berlin, the husband of my cousin, Susan Reichman. When I first heard the story of how Kurt's mother smuggled gold out of Nazi Germany in her corset, I was dumbstruck. When I approached Kurt, then in his 80's, to learn more about the circumstances of his escape with his parents from Vienna, he told me that I could use some of their experiences in a book, but that he didn't want a book written about him. He believed his story, while unique, was not exceptional. I agreed not to write a biography or memoir about him and his parents, but I disagree that the story isn't exceptional. It most certainly is.

Both Kurt and Susan were remarkable people. They exhibited the resilience that is so often the signature trait of survivors. What was so unique about them was that they were so young when they experienced the trauma of escape. Both born in 1927, they were twelve years old when the war broke out. Elements of both of their stories appear in *The Interpreter*.

I spent many hours over decades discussing those critical months in the year before the war began in 1939 with Susan, to better understand why so many members of our family didn't leave. They ended up murdered at Sobibór and Auschwitz. Some 35 years ago, when I asked her why they didn't leave she asked me a question. If what happened there was happening here would I leave and when? My answer was I would leave when I knew it was time. She then said that by the time you know it is time to leave, it's too late.

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I wrote this book during the election campaign of 2016, which was terrifying. Too many times what I heard on television news at the end of my writing day mirrored too closely what I had learned about the rise of the Nazis that day.

I would also like to say a word about the Kindertransports that saved the lives of thousands of German and Austrian Jewish children. Imagine how these children felt in those final moments looking back at their parents on train platforms all over the Reich never knowing if they would see their parents again. Many didn't. I asked Susan once why our relatives in Hungary and Slovakia didn't send their children away alone, the way Kurt's parents had. She told me that it was something unique to the character of the German and Austrian Jews. "We Hungarians didn't have the force of character to stand smiling stone-faced while our children disappeared from before our eyes." This comment was made with love and admiration not malice. As a parent I'm not sure I could have done it myself.

A J Sidransky

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Q & A with Author AJ Sidransky

What compels you to write about the Holocaust?

AJ: I write about the Holocaust for many reasons. First and foremost, there are literally millions of untold stories still out there. Each and every one must be accessible. That accessibility acts as a bridge for younger people who haven't had the direct contact to survivors and their personal experiences that my generation had. I consider myself fortunate to have known so many survivors and refugees, and feel it is incumbent upon me as a writer to bring their stories to the world.

There have been many, many, books-hundreds-written about the Holocaust. Everything from history to biography to memoir to historical fiction. How is your work different?

AJ: I respect and appreciate all the many books that have brought the experience of the Holocaust to the public. Telling the stories of the Shoah is holy work. I want to present stories that readers can connect with and which may strike a chord they haven't heard before. Not to be critical in any way, but I feel that for many reasons, writers, filmmakers and storytellers have concentrated on certain aspects of this history at the expense of others.

So, what do I mean specifically? Let's consider an aspect of filmmaking first. I call it the Tevye Effect. Invariably, the Jewish characters in many films about the Holocaust look like they just walked out of

Anatevka in 1907. Now, that's not to say that many millions of observant Polish Jews (and other Orthodox Jews) didn't perish in the Holocaust. But many of them, including my relatives, had by 1939 adopted more liberal dress, the language of their country, and a less observant position vis a vis Jewish practice. Many times, we don't see these people in films about the Holocaust, and even when we do there are always those among them dressed in an easily identifiable "Jewish" fashion to make it easier for the viewer or reader to identify the victims visually. I try to tell the stories I heard growing up, from people who looked and sounded and dressed just like their neighbors, but one day they woke up with a yellow star on their jackets.

I also tend to write the stories of everyday people, not historical figures known to readers. Yes, occasionally a historical figure like Rafael Trujillo or Adolf Hitler makes a cameo, but the protagonists are always based on real experiences of people like us. I also have chosen never to write a scene in a concentration camp, and I'm not criticizing those who have. Well over 100 members of my family were lost in the death camps, but I will never visit one. I read their names in shul every Yom HaShoah. No matter how hard I might try, I can't imagine what that experience was like, nor do I want to. I believe Elie Wiesel once said, "one can't write a novel about Treblinka because if it's a novel, it can't be about Treblinka, and if it's about Treblinka, it can't be a novel." My preference is to tell the stories of those who confronted evil, fought back against it, and found a way to triumph.

What kind of stories do you seek?

AJ: I seek stories like the story of Sosua, a haven for Jews in the Dominican Republic described in my debut novel, *Forgiving Maximo Rothman*. They demonstrate the true heart of Jewish resilience and our refusal to surrender. Isn't that the message we want our children to learn? In *The Interpreter*, I follow another such tale of furious courage and the will to survive, as well as the moral turpitude necessary to remain human in the face of monumental inhumanity. *The Interpreter* tells the story of everyday people, much like those who will read it.

Have you learned anything consistent in these stories?

AJ: Yes. Sadly, after years of research both into my own family and others, I have come to understand that those who escaped, unlike those who survived the camps, generally needed three factors to succeed; sufficient funds, a little luck, and the help of gentiles. In every story of escape I have studied that has been the formula. We need to recognize that more. There was terrible evil, but there was also unimaginable kindness. That theme plays out significantly in this book.

What real life events is *The Interpreter* based on?

AJ: Interesting question. It's actually based on more than one real-life story. One of the things I've learned over the years is that while a particular story may be fascinating, it may not be able to carry an entire novel. In the case of *The Interpreter*, the back story of the escape of the Berlins from Vienna to the United States and their perilous two-week journey through occupied France is based on fact, with some dramatic embellishments. The story of Kurt Berlin and his experience as an interpreter for the OSS was based on the experiences of former client of mine from my

time in the real estate finance business some twenty-five years ago. The two stories stitched well to make a more compelling whole. Of course, like other novelists, I've taken a little literary license when necessary. I also interviewed nearly a dozen people, including the real Kurt Berlin about Kindertransports to get a thorough feeling for the experience.

Speaking of literary license, in light of the recent controversies over some Holocaust novels, how do you feel about retellings that may be less than solidly grounded in personal history?

AJ: That's both a difficult and loaded question. I believe using fiction to tell Holocaust stories and teach about the Holocaust is a valid approach. Now, does that mean we can make things up or "sugar-coat" the story to make it more palatable to readers unfamiliar with the subject? NO!! Again, that's why I stay out of concentration camp scenes.

What fiction can provide that other literary forms don't, even memoir, is a connection between the character and the reader that a simple recounting of facts doesn't provide. We know that Jewish soldiers, specifically those whose first language was German, were used as interpreters in the interrogations of Nazi officers. But what does it feel like to sit in that room? To have a Nazi's words bouncing around in your head. To connect those words to your own personal history but have to remain calm and collected while reliving traumatic stress? That's what a novel gives you.

So, to get back to your question, I believe there's an important place in both Holocaust literature and Holocaust education for fictionalized works, but they must respect the experience of the victims. Never cheapen it.

Do you intend to write more books about the Holocaust?

AJ: Truthfully, not at this time. I do plan some short stories which will be available to my readers on my website as I complete and publish them. I may assemble them into a collection at some point, but a full-blown novel, no. The experience of writing *The Interpreter*, and *Forgiving Maximo Rothman* was very emotional and intense. I need a little break. My next book, *Forgiving Stephen Redmond*, the final book in the 'Forgiving' series, will be released in January 2021 by Black Opal Books, along with a rerelease of *Forgiving Maximo Rothman* and *Forgiving Mariela Camacho*. *Forgiving Stephen Redmond* explores the lives of Holocaust refugees and survivors in the two decades after the war, and the effect of their trauma on their children. It's also an exciting murder mystery and takes a hard look at the Fascist dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo. Right now, I'm working on a second book in the 'Justice' series of which *The Interpreter* was the first book. It's titled *The Intern* and is set during the McCarthy era and the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. I'm also completing a novella and a series of short stories set in the Dominican Republic titled *Becoming Bachata: The King of Arroyo Hondo and Other Stories*.

Much of your work has a Latin slant. What's that about?

AJ: As you may know my uncle was a refugee in Sosua, so I've been connected to the Dominican Republic all my life. I visit there each winter for a few weeks. My best friend is Dominican. I stay at his home and immerse myself in that world. It's a great way to disconnect and recharge. One friend says I was born in the wrong country! I feel very connected when I'm there, to a simpler way of life. It inspires me. Also, with its history of repression under Trujillo, I can see the lasting effects of such tyranny, a fact not lost on any American today.

I'm fascinated by the long-term effects of fascism on its victims. I'm at the beginning of a project right

now in conjunction with another writer on adopting the story of her family's escape from Cuba under Castro, and the lasting effects of that experience on their identity as both individuals and Jews. I'm also planning a novel on baseball, so what better place to do research than the Dominican Republic

Is there one thing you'd like for your work to accomplish out in the world?

AJ: Yes, of course, actually two. One is to touch my readers, to keep them connected to the ultimate humanity of good people. When someone tells me, they are moved by my work, it makes me feel it's all so worthwhile.

What's the second?

AJ: I'd like my books to be made into series on Netflix or Amazon, Hulu, HBO, or whatever. I'm not picky, so if you know anyone, please pass that along.

JBC Book Clubs

Discussion Questions

1. When the OSS approaches Kurt to return to Europe to act as an interpreter he is hesitant. Why do you think that is? Would Kurt have been better off to move on with his life and leave Europe and his past behind?
2. Whether the OSS actually recruited former Nazis as operatives in the Cold War is unproven. They did though recruit former Nazis into programs such as Operation Paperclip and other similar projects. How do you feel about that? Should former Nazis have been excused for their crimes? Was this action a betrayal of America's Jewish community, and ultimately America's morals and values?
3. Many thousands of Jewish children between the ages of 3 and 17 were saved through the Kindertransport program. Sadly, many never saw their families again. Similar attempts to evacuate children on this scale were not attempted in other countries under Nazi domination or the threat of it, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, France and Poland. Why do you think this was the case?
4. Elsa is persecuted by the Nazi regime because her father is a Jewish, anti-Nazi, activist and artist. How did the Nazis feel about mixed-race people known as mischlings? How did they feel about modern art and why? Why do you think they were so afraid of activism and resistance? Can you think of any other similar situations in modern history or even today?
5. When thinking about the United States, Kurt ponders the situation of African Americans. On page 9, he considers that Nazi racial laws already exist in the United States, only the victims are African

- Americans in the Jim Crow south. How do you feel about that? Do you think Hitler borrowed some of his methods and ideas from racists in the United States?
6. How do you think most Americans felt about a flood of Jewish refugees in the 1930's? Why? Was anti-Semitism a major problem in this country at that time? Did Americans want their sons to die in a war to save Europe's Jews? Did Americans associate Jews with communism?
 7. What similarities and differences do you see between the immigration crisis in the 1930's and the immigration crises we see today, both in terms of people from the middle east and Africa escaping to Europe, and central Americans attempting to come to the United States? As a Jew, do you feel we have a responsibility to help those fleeing political and economic violence?
 8. On page 207, Hertz observes that even in the trenches of the Great War he didn't feel more helpless. How do you feel about the way Hertz internalized and handled his stress and did he do the right things to save his family? Should he have been more careful when facing dangers?
 9. In the book, Kurt's uncle Sam observes that the Belgian Jews, like many others elsewhere, didn't think they would suffer the same fate as their German Jewish neighbors. This belief was common from country to country. Why do you think Europe's Jewish communities didn't believe what was right in front of their eyes?

10. Berta is left alone in Vienna with the responsibility to complete the liquidation of whatever assets the Berlins still have and to transport that wealth out of the Reich illegally. Considering the status of women at that time, what fears do you think she faced about what she needed to do and how did she defy stereotypes to succeed in her escape?
11. When Kurt and Saul have von Hauptmann in their hands, they come to realize that they are faced with a huge moral problem in how they will ultimately dispose of him. Kurt argues that to kill him is to become like him. What do you think? What should they have done with him? How subject to arbitrary concepts of morality should Kurt and Saul be when dealing with a confessed murderer?
12. Elsa has a unique situation in her story. How do you feel about her continued devotion to her faith in the face of the abuse she and her family experienced by the Nazis? Should she embrace her Jewishness? How does her faith compare to that of the Mandelbaums? How does their devotion compare to your own? Should she be judged for her choice?
13. Executing orders was a common excuse used by Nazis after the war to explain their behavior. Von Hauptmann spends a good deal of time discussing his devotion to executing orders and to executing policy, and what to do when those concepts conflict with each other. Do you think he was just an anti-Semite hiding behind his “orders,” or was he merely a functionary in the Nazi regime, doing his duty? Where does a citizen of a nation draw a line between dedication to one’s country and moral actions?
14. Colonel McClain and Captain Rosenthaler clearly break regulations to pursue the enlistment of von Hauptmann to their program. They, like von Hauptman, consider themselves patriots. What do you think? Did they cross the line or was their fear of a coming conflict with the Soviets justification for what they were planning? How dangerous did the fear of the Soviet Union and communism become to American democracy in the decade that followed?
15. What role did the Berlins’ gentile friends play in their escape? Could they have escaped without their help?
16. Both Kurt and Hertz kill a man in the course of the story. They both contemplate what the act of killing does to one’s mind, how it changes them. What do you think the act of taking a life does to a person? If it occurs in war is it different?
17. *The Interpreter* is a novel based on real events. In this case the book’s two storylines incorporate elements of the stories of two different people. Authors often have to take a bit of literary license to make a story more readable. How do you feel about that? Did the format of a novel help you to feel and understand the experience of these characters, or do you prefer to read an actual history or memoir of a person’s experience? Or do characters in a novel enable you to feel closer to the story?

What to Eat While Reading *The Interpreter*

A note from the author:

Food is an important element in my life and hence in my writing. In my world, food is love, and preparing food for someone is how you show them love. Sharing a meal together is how intimacy grows. Here are recipes for some of the foods described in *The Interpreter*.

Waterzooi Chicken

<https://food52.com/recipes/19840-belgian-chicken-waterzooi>



photo credit: [Tamorlan / CC BY-SA](#)

substitutions can be made with non-dairy cream alternatives

Tafelspitz, Viennese Boiled Beef

<https://www.thespruceeats.com/classic-tafelspitz-national-dish-of-austria-1446537>



photo credit: [Thomas Quine / CC BY](#)

Classic Matza Ball Soup

<https://cooking.nytimes.com/recipes/12348-joan-nathans-matzo-ball-soup>

Chocolate Crepes

<https://ohsweetbasil.com/strawberry-nutella-crepes/>

Checkerboard Cookies

<https://www.fifteenspatulas.com/checkerboard-cookies/>

Chocolate Mandelbread

<https://jamiiegeller.com/recipes/double-chocolate-mandel-bread/>



photo credit: [J Doll / CC BY](#)

Further Reading

For more on US Serviceman and Interpreter Services and the OSS

[Who were the Ritchie Boys?](#)

[John Dolibois Describes Interrogating Captured Nazi Officials](#)

[Moe Berg, Baseball Player in the OSS](#)

[What Cold War CIA Interrogators Learned From the Nazis](#)

[What Was Operation Paperclip?](#)

For more on Kindertransports

[Kindertransports 1938-1940](#)

[Kindertransports](#)

[Fit, Bright, and Not Too Jewish: UK Kindertransport Policy Revealed](#)

Seeing the Warning Signs

[My Grandmother Kept Telling Us About the Nazis: Now I Know Why](#)

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Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For nearly 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture.

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