

Discussion Questions

Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's German Village

By Mimi Schwartz

1. The story of the Torah, rescued by Christians in a small German village during Nazi times, is the catalyst for a search, fifty years later, to find out more about who did it, why, and how unusual they were. What does the author hope to find and how do her expectations match her discoveries?
2. One of the book's epigraphs is "There is a place that existed before you came to it, closed with the secrets and complexities of history, and there is the place you experience in the present." Why do you think the author chose it?
3. *Good Neighbors, Bad Times* combines memoir (which relies on memory) and literary journalism (which relies on interview and research). How does the author weave them together—and how do they complement each other?
4. The author says she changed the names of the village and its people "to protect the privacy of the non-famous." Do you agree with her decision? In literary nonfiction such as this, with its emphasis on making real people come alive on the page, how important is it to know the real names of people and of the village?
5. Each chapter takes you into another living room and another life remembering the same village before, during, and after the Hitler years. What happens to the concepts of Truth, Bravery, Loyalty, Betrayal, and Kindness as each person's version of the past and its legacy is revealed?
6. A quest that took twelve years is told in present tense, as if events were happening right now. How does this telling affect how readers experience people and events? Would telling the story in past tense change anything for you?
7. Kristallnacht, when the synagogue was burned, is a central memory for many villagers, both Jews and Christians. How do age, religion, and personality affect each version of what happened that night and afterwards?
8. The son of Herr Stolle says that when, at sixteen, he found out about the Holocaust, he had huge fights at home because he blamed his parents for not doing more to stop the deportations. What could they have done in this small village? What would you have done if you lived there?
9. One refrain throughout the book is "You can't understand. It was terrible times." Do you agree? Can we not understand past horrors unless we were there?

10. The percentage of Jews in most German towns and cities was under 10 percent, yet in this village of 1,200 it was 30 percent in 1933 and 50 percent in 1900. How did this affect village life and how villagers responded to Hitler's anti-Semitism? In other words, how much does anonymity breed hatred and neighborliness breed tolerance?
11. Throughout the book, the author hears echoes of her father's voice—In Benheim we didn't do such things! In Benheim everyone got along!—as well as family stories of escape. How do these echoes and family stories shape one's sense of the past and the present? What other characters also hear echoes of the past that shape who they are?
12. Scholars at her college warned: "Trust the records, not people's stories. What people say is unreliable!" Her first translator, Rolf, warned: "Don't be naïve." How does the author deal with these caveats—and how true do they turn out to be?
13. Was this village a special place? What does the author decide twelve years later? Do you agree?
14. Like many immigrant children, the author didn't want to know about her parents' foreign past. She was American, "the first Yankee in the family." And that was good enough for half her life. How do her discoveries about her father's village and its neighbors affect her attitude about herself? As an American? As a Jew? As a good neighbor in today's world?
15. What connections do you see between life in this one little village before and during Nazi times and your life in your neighborhood today? What, if anything, can people do to assure that neighbors, wherever they are, can be decent even when political extremists threaten those relationships?
16. On page 235, there is a list of small acts of kindness that happened during those Nazi years. The author calls them "small acts of defiance." Do you agree? What would happen if more people committed such acts? What is the tipping point to affect a whole community or a whole country?
17. There are two sources to understand history: records and personal story. What does each offer our efforts to reenter the past, understand it better, and learn lessons we can use today?
18. Many Jews, now living in America, remember a world where "everyone got along." Many Germans remember the Jews from this village escaping to the Holy Land. How much of such memories comes from the need for nostalgia, for good stories, and for surviving well? And how much is the way things were? How can we know?