

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Near the beginning of the story, Julien says to Benjamin, “It’s not my job to know what it’s like. It’s my job to get you out of it alive.” Do you agree or disagree with this? When Julien does learn what it’s like on “the other side of the barbed wire,” does this new understanding have a practical value for his rescue efforts, or is it mainly helpful for his relationships with his Jewish friends?
2. In this story people have to make continual judgment calls in terribly risky situations, and their notions of what constitutes courage, cowardice, and wise caution often disagree. Which character did you see as the most courageous? Which actions did you see as especially foolish, brave, sensible, or cowardly?
3. Elisa implies to Julien that the people of his town have done a very good thing by never recommending Christianity to her when she was “at their mercy.” How did you feel about this and her parents’ fears about forced conversion? How do you respond to her determination to remain loyal to her parents and to Judaism?
4. What did you think of Grandpa’s refusal to give Julien specific guidance when he admitted to questioning his father’s beliefs? Have you ever experienced this type of approach from an elder or authority figure? Regarding his tale of the Huguenot *camisards* on page 63, is it right to defend oneself against religious persecution with violence? Are the ethics of religious persecution different from the ethics of purely political conflicts? Why or why not?
5. Julien’s relationship to his father and his father’s beliefs seems to come full circle in the book. What difference do you see between the beginning and the end—in their personal relationship, in Julien’s approach to nonviolence, and in Julien’s general faith in God? Did you feel, in the end, that he had grown up, or failed to do so?
6. What do you think of Albrecht’s philosophy of life? Is he in any way a “good guy”? What do you think of his very pragmatic take on nonviolence? How do the other non-pacifist characters in the book resemble or not resemble him?
7. One of Elisa’s last thoughts before risking her life to save Albrecht from the river is that she has the right to let him drown because, whatever else may or may not be true about him, the one thing she knows is that he serves the Nazis. Do you agree with her? Do you agree with Albrecht that her act is surprising and exceptional? What do you see as her reasons for saving him?
8. Elisa’s choice to rescue Albrecht turns out *not* to be the pivotal act that saves her life, yet it reverberates through the rest of the novel. What do you see as its effects?
9. Did you think Julien did right in aiding and abetting the assassination of Antoine Duval? Did you think he acted for the right reasons? What would you say he meant when he told Grandpa that it “was and wasn’t” the right thing? When Julien’s father

- asks him on page 234 whether he still thinks the assassination was right, what is your understanding of Papa's words about Jesus—and what is your take?
10. "The truth has power" is a refrain throughout the book, but its meaning changes as different truths are brought forward. What different meanings does it have, and what do you see as its meaning by the end? What meaning would you tend to choose if using this phrase for yourself?
 11. Do you think Haas really believes himself to be helping Julien and the other local French people? When he claims God for his own side, do you think he means it, and if so, in what way? (For those interested in a little research: though this didn't make it into the book, Haas is meant to be a member of the heretical movement known as Positive Christianity, a Nazified version of the faith.) Do you think he would really have shot Julien?
 12. Did you think Julien and Elisa should have ended up together? Why or why not? How do you imagine the futures of the characters in the novel? Which countries do they all end up in, and what do they do with their lives? Do Julien and Elisa ever see each other again?