

step inside

the world of Secret Buttons

It's a world of forged passports, changed names, closed gates, a scary plunge into a new culture and language... then learning, adapting, growing up, and making a big difference.



turn the pages

Hello!

I'm Ellen Shapiro,
a writer and graphic designer



Inspired by my mother's memories, I wrote *The Secret Buttons*, a novel about the experiences of two young fictional characters during the Holocaust and World War II.

I hope this guide deepens your understanding of the history behind the book and helps you relate the fictional story to what's going on in the world today.

And I hope that working with this guide will help you become a better reader of other books.

All illustrations are by Caterina Baldi, a leading Italian artist

what's it about?

March 1939. Anni Blum, age 12, and her rambunctious little sister Rosie, 7, are put on a passenger train leaving Nazi-occupied Austria for England, disguised as Aryan holiday travelers. Papa is in a Nazi labor camp and Mutti (mommy), realizing that things will not get better (and learning that was too late to get them on a Kindertransport), gets them forged passports and domestic servant visas via a distant relative in England.

The frightened girls are squeezed into a train compartment next to a man reading the Nazi newspaper. After some quick thinking that prevents them from being discovered and thrown off the train, they knit and practice English phrases.

At dawn, they cross into Holland, take the ferry to England, and are picked up at the ferry terminal by their new Uncle Benjamin and snooty Aunt Vivian. Exhausted, they arrive in a village that – like all of England – is deep in preparations for war.

A

t their new family's country house, they meet equally snooty teenage cousin Ronald, who thinks their accents are hilarious, and neighbor lads who accuse them of being German spies.

Over the next two years, besides learning a new language and culture, they learn to move forward from the memories of the past that haunt them. They dig backyard bomb shelters, make fashionable blackout curtains, write letters home using a secret code so clever the censors never catch on, make tasty meals with rationed ingredients, become comfortable with Jewish rituals and traditions, and – when their uncle faces an impossible dilemma – figure out how to help refugee families arrive in the USA with more than the shirts on their backs.

Finally, in Brooklyn, NY, they rebuild the knitting table of Vienna with new, multicultural American friends.

Most stories about Jewish children in WWII are about what was done to or for them. This one is about what they do – and what they build, one stitch at a time, across two continents.

parents & kids

reading together is a smart idea, to:

- talk about a dark time in history; relate the era to today's news.
- look up historical events and unfamiliar words together, for example, the Anschluss, Kindertransport, Aryan, affidavit.
- share family stories.
- consider making a family scrapbook.



- discuss what you learned from each chapter

Pages from the scrapbook I made in 2005 for my mother's 90th birthday

timeline

Anni and Rosie's story: March 1939 - September 1941

The Anschluss:
New Nazi
Government in
Austria

Kristallnacht
Jewish shops looted,
synagogues burned.
Jewish children
expelled from school

Kindertransports
begin.
Trial blackouts
in England

Britain and France
begin military
planning to stop
German aggression

Germany invades
Poland. Britain and
France declare war
on Germany

Polish Jews
ordered to wear
yellow stars

Rationing
begins in U.K.

March 1938

Nov 1938

Dec 1938

March 1939

Sept 1939

Nov 1939

Jan 1940

Churchill becomes
U.K. prime
minister

The Blitz, German
bombing campaign
against the U.K.
Yellow stars in Germany

Blackouts in U.S.
east coast

Pearl Harbor attack
by Japan. Axis powers
declare war on the U.S.

Murder operations
begin in
concentration camps

Germany
surrenders

US drops atomic
bombs on Japan.
Japan surrenders.
WWII ends

May 1940

Sept 1940

Sept 1941

Dec 1941

Mar 1942

May 1945

Aug 1945

GERMANY BOMBS LONDON

At 4 pm on September 7, German bombers, flying in a formation 20 miles wide, crossed the English Channel. Their approach was plotted by the British Fighter Command, which was ready to meet the enemy. Londoners came out onto the streets at the sound of the approaching aircraft. Many watched in disbelief and listened as the first air raid siren sounded. It was the first night of The Blitz. There had been warnings before, but this time



Research at least one date and learn more
about what happened that month and year.
Find photos to illustrate the event and

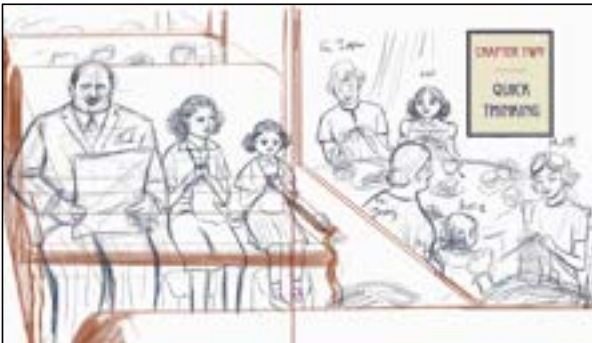
script type in green
boxes =
suggested class
work, homework, or
discussion topic

the illustrations

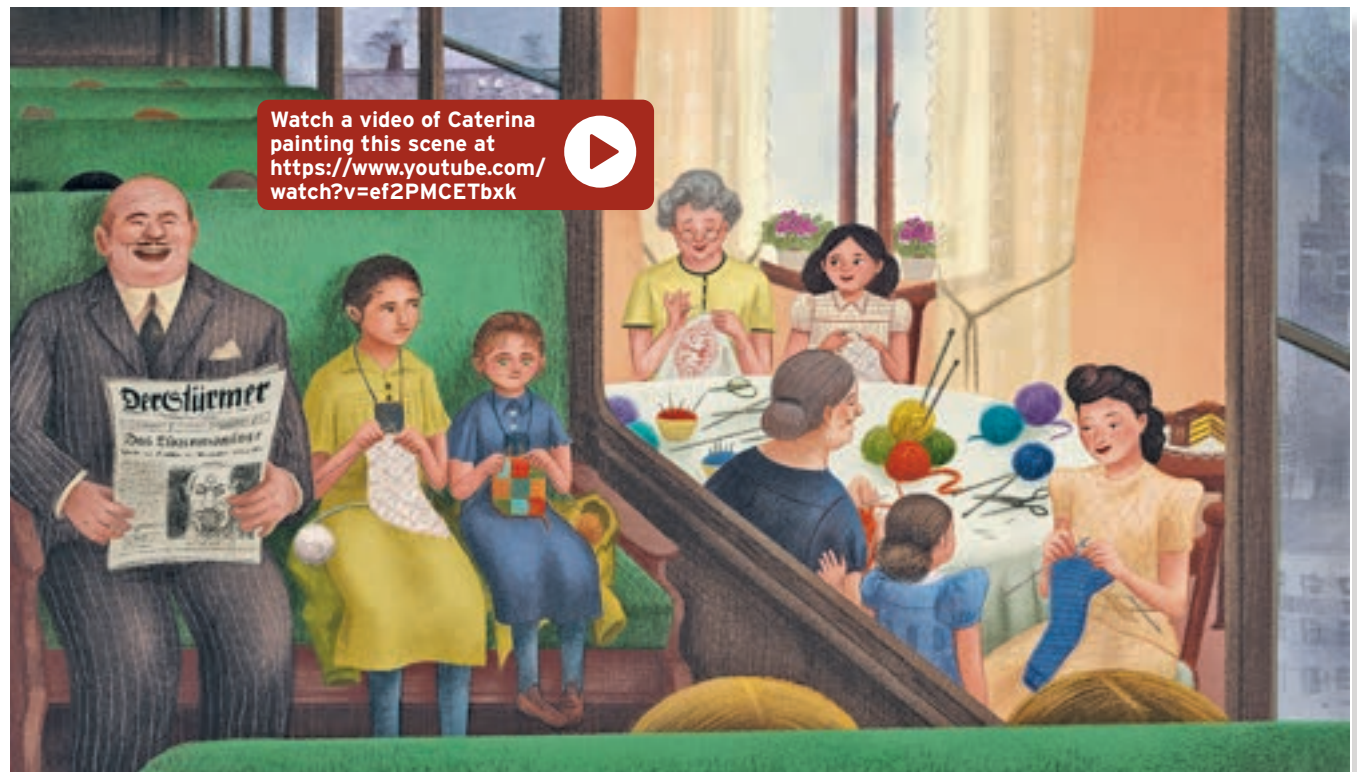
I've been a graphic designer for my whole career. The book has many references to design: Design of an indoor playground, postage stamps, clothing, posters, and more. Part of design is being an art director, working with an illustrator to make the story feel alive to readers.



In Caterina's first sketch, Anni is on the train, leaving home with Rosie, knitting, and remembering the knitting parties at her family's Vienna apartment.



The sketch is tightened with more detail and attention to the space needed for the header and the 'gutter' dividing the pages.



This finished painting opens Chapter Two, "Quick Thinking." Using Procreate on the iPad, Caterina made 16 paintings and 50 smaller "spot" illustrations. She says, "The tablet is a digital tool that saves paper and paints, but in reality everything is done by hand. I don't even use the fill tool. I prefer to color the way I would on paper, to preserve the natural effect. Many people think technology alone is enough to know how to draw. Not at all! Sometimes it even makes things more complicated."

writing

Everyone who writes fiction is always asked, How do you write about something you didn't experience yourself?

I put myself into each scene, imagining what it could have been like. Given the circumstances, how did my characters feel? What did they think, say and do? What would happen next? How would they change? It was challenging, exciting work.

There were difficult moments writing about terrible things. But I wanted to express them in a way that was more thought-provoking than scary. And to shine a light on events young readers might not know about.

The fun moments were working – 100% online – with the illustrator, Caterina Baldi, who lives in Italy. I sent her a description of the general content for each painting: the setting, what the characters should be doing. I included “scrap” references, photos of 1938-1941 cars, bicycles, kitchens, clothing, mailboxes, the things that would make each scene feel authentic.



Some of the scrap for Chapter 7, “The Postal Code”



the characters you'll meet



Rosie Blum



Anni Blum

Example:

“Here, the Nazis are in the sky, not in the streets.”

Rosie Blum, the rambunctious little sister, is a handful for Anni – the protagonist, the first-person narrator– to handle on the train. We learn all about the terrible things that happened in Vienna, including witnessing a Nazi parade, from Anni's point of view, but Rosie is always right there. She's clever, outspoken, hardworking, and a dedicated animal-lover, vowing to become a veterinarian, even when Izzy, the diamond merchant on 47th Street tells her that science classes are too hard for girls.

Write a short bio of one of the main characters, beginning with a quote that reveals something important about them. How does she change during the story?

script type
in green
boxes =
suggested
class work
or homework



more characters

Main Characters:



Mutti (Mommy)
Josephine Blum



Papa
Karl Blum



Granny
Sarah Schatz



Grandma
Lilli Blum



Aunt Vivian
Asher



Uncle Benjamin
Asher



Cousin Ronald
Asher



Judith, Asher
daughter-in-law



Camp Survivor
Anton Grajek



Gentleman
farmer
Spencer Lewis

Example:

“There are so, so many people. It seems like everyone wants my help. I can't sleep, imagining all of them standing in line at my desk.”

Benjamin Asher is a watch and jewelry merchant who wants to help refugees. Before the borders were closed, some sent money for him to keep in the Bank of England. But now, during wartime, it's illegal to take any money or valuables out of Britain. It's all needed for the war effort. What to do?

Write a short bio of another main character, beginning with a quote that reveals something important about them and explain how s/he changes by the end of the story?

Minor Characters:

Frau Adler, Anni's teacher in Vienna

The Sarah Club girls: Leni Dannah, Leah

The Hitler Youth girls: Deidi, Freddie, Bette, Elke

Lotte Weiss and family

The Train Conductor

Or-Po men, Nazi Order Police

In Tuppashire, England: Mr. McCormick, the butcher and Mr. Peters, the grocer

Neighbor boy Keith Hodgson and his football gang

Dinner Guests: Nelson, The Professor; Claude, The Artist

The Postal Clerk and the Home Guard man

Miss Julia Evans, shopkeeper and Alice Lewis, customer

William Asher, the older son and his fiancée, Judith

Dr. and Mrs. Perlstein, Judith's parents

Mrs. Coldfield, the librarian

Vicar Thomas and Mrs. Thomas

Walter S. Heinz, the German paratrooper

Perkins and Poole, British officers

Other victims of the Nazis: Roma people (gypsies), dark-skinned people, homosexuals, the disabled

The Church Ladies, Mrs. Dalrymple, Mrs. Smyth, Mrs. Farnsworth; daughters Molly and Francie

Mr. Lewis, dad of Spencer and Alice

Ralphie and the sheep-shearers

Hildi Bauer, friend on the troop ship to America

Nathan Stern, the boss's son

Izzy Berkowitz, of the Diamond District

New friends at the Brooklyn knitting table: Barbara, Min, Linda, Miguel

anni & rosie's journey



BONN in the 1930s was a regional center for the Nazi party. Less than 500 Jewish people remained after Kristallnacht, when synagogues were burned. After WW II, Bonn became the capital of West Germany until it was moved to Berlin in 1999. Bonn's most famous citizen was composer Ludwig van Beethoven, born in 1770. Today, several United Nations organizations are headquartered there, and Bonn is known for its university and Beethoven celebration.



Find out about a city marked with a red dot. What was going on there in 1938? Find pictures. What is it like now?

How far was the train trip?

It's about 750 miles from Vienna to Hoek van Holland port, now a 12-hour drive. 88 years ago, it was a tiring 24-hour trip.

Notice how much bigger Germany is than some of its neighbors.

That made it easier for Germany to invade and take control. For example, Holland is about the size of Maryland. Imagine how difficult it was for these countries to protect themselves from invasion.

chapter by chapter

This is your place to think and write about the story:

What's the most interesting thing you learned in each chapter? Write about it in the blank spaces.

Be part of it: Choose a character and a scene. Role-play. What would you feel, think, and do if you were in that character's position?



March 1939
Vienna, Austria

CHAPTER 1

ALL
ABOARD



On the Train
and Boat

CHAPTER 2

QUICK
THINKING



That Afternoon
Tuppington, England

CHAPTER 3

EVERYTHING
IS DIFFERENT



The Following
Morning

CHAPTER 4

ENGLISH
LESSONS

learning

a new language
and culture
is never easy.

The good news is that the younger you are, the easier it is. That's because most

babies are born with the ability to imitate just about any sound. In their native countries, kids are immersed in the language 24/7. In their new schools in the U.S., they're immersed all day. But adults usually have to go to work and don't have time for classes. Because they've already developed set speaking patterns that are difficult to change, "foreign accents" have been called "the last marker of immigrant identity."

Many people who had to emigrate for their own safety still miss their hometown, friends, food, and music. They often bring pieces of their culture in America and speak their native language at home. We can learn a lot by visiting immigrant neighborhoods.

During their first lessons, Anni and Rosie are confused by English pronunciation and feel humiliated. After all, they'd only practiced from a traveler's phrase book. As you read, notice what their challenges are and how they learn and become more fluent.



Be a change agent:

Be a real friend to kids from other countries.

Take a genuine interest in their culture and traditions.

Invite them to your home and parties.

Tutor a child or an adult.

Choose one or more of these suggestions and start doing them as soon as you can.



July 1939
CHAPTER 5
DIGGING
A HOLE



September 1939
CHAPTER 6
THE POSTAL
CODE



January 1940

CHAPTER 7

THE BLITZ
AND THE
BLACKOUTS



April 1940

CHAPTER 8

ALL
WHO ARE
HUNGRY

antisemitism

What were Jews blamed for in 1930s Germany?

What about here and now?

Were Jews always welcome in the United States?

questions
to ponder
and discuss

Research one of
these questions
and report your
findings to the
class.

immigration

Which peoples of other ethnicities, national backgrounds, and religions have been singled out as scapegoats in the U.S.?

Are citizens of who live in other countries being persecuted now? Where?

Is it hard for them to immigrate to the United States? Why?





November 1940
CHAPTER 11
THE
INTERROGATION



December 1940
CHAPTER 12
CHURCH
LADIES TO THE
RESCUE

jewish values

are values for everyone

Tikkun Olam **תְּקוּן עוֹלָם** *Repairing the World*
Participating in social action, caring for the environment

Chesed **חֶסֶד** *Lovingkindness*
Acts of compassion and care

Mitzvot **מִצְוֹת** *Following the Commandments*
Loving God, honoring one's parents, not killing or stealing

Hachnasat Orchim **הַכְנָסַת אוֹרְחִים** *Welcoming the Stranger*
Welcoming people from other traditions and communities

Tzedakah **צְדָקָה** *Charity*
Donating to worthy causes

Mishpat **מִשְׁפָּט** *Justice*
Fairness in laws and rulings; equitable treatment for the most vulnerable

Emet **אֱמֶת** *Truth*
Honesty and integrity in speech and action

Find, read, and describe in your own words a scene in the book
in which one or more of these values is put into action.
Then write a short scene from your own life.

Jewish Holidays

celebrated in
The Secret Buttons

Anni and Rosie
spent their early
childhoods in a
secular home.
In England,
they learn to
appreciate Jewish
traditions and they
discover their own
spirituality through:

SHABBAT
At first, the girls
don't know the
Hebrew in the
blessings, but learn
to recite them and
eagerly participate.

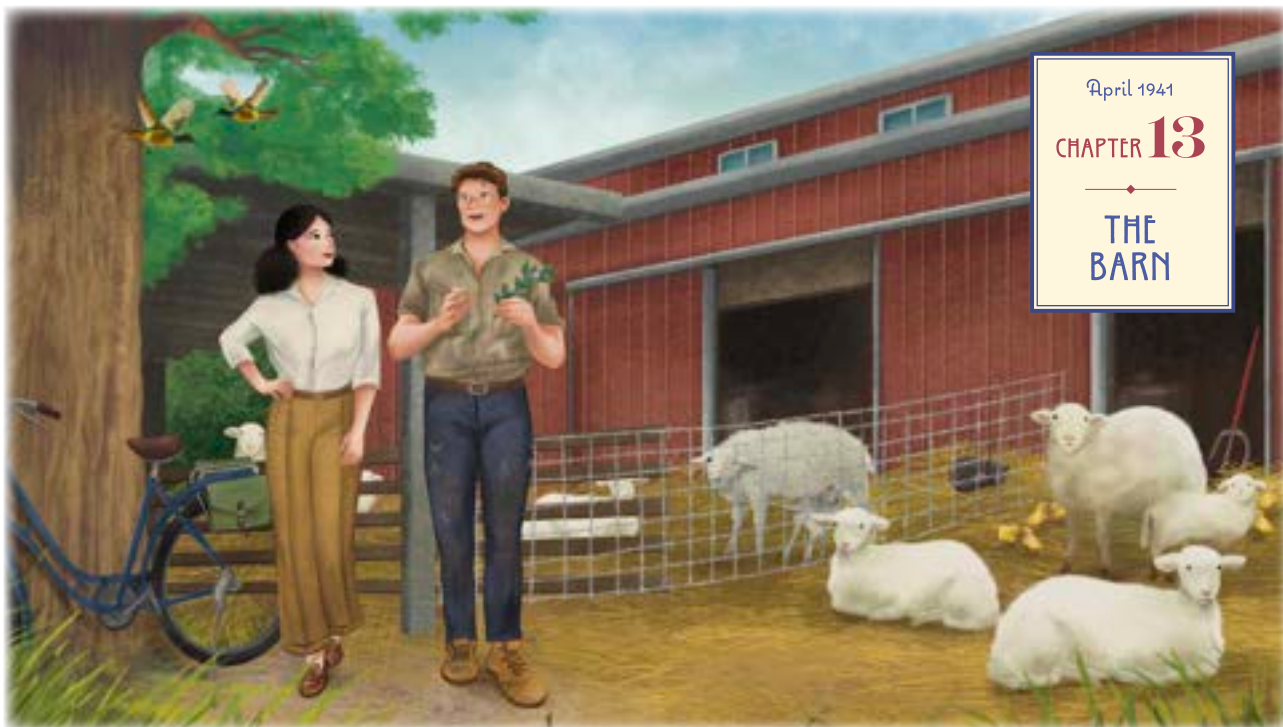


PASSOVER
They don't believe
the story in the
Haggadah and
refuse to read from
it. Instead, they and
write and deliver
their own essay.
It's a significant
moment.



CHANUKAH
At this point in
the book, Anni
and Rosie are
committed to
bringing their own
light into the world.





April 1941
 CHAPTER 13
 THE BARN



June 1941
 CHAPTER 14
 THE GRANNIES
 WOULD
 BE PROUD



July 1941
New York City
CHAPTER 15
—♦—
ANOTHER
ARRIVAL



September 1941
Brooklyn, New York
CHAPTER 16
—♦—
THE AMERICAN
KNITTING
TABLE

the buttons

Everyone wants to know, is the story true?

Did your mother really crochet
around diamonds and make them into
buttons she sewed to sweaters that
refugees wore on boats to America?
For how many people? Who were they?
What happened to them?

I wish I'd made more of an effort to get my
mother to tell me. She didn't want to talk
about it! She died nearly twenty years ago,
so I built the story of *The Secret Buttons*
through research and speaking with
survivors who are still alive.



Photo of
wooden
button



We know
that
refugees
hid jewels
in clothing
and shoes.

Learn your family stories from your grandparents, great-grandparents, or other relatives now, while you can. Record at least one story and write it down. Or learn the story of a neighbor or family friend who came to America from a different country and had to learn English. (see page 19 for more info)

knitting is a thread that ties the story together

Most European girls learned to knit, sew, and crochet. For fun, relaxation, and to relieve boredom; to make warm shawls, pretty pillowcases, and fashion stylish clothing.



My mother, Elizabeth Nussbaum Shapiro (1915-2007), known as Lisl, owned a knitting shop in California. The photo at left is another page from the scrapbook I made for her 90th birthday. Her Tyrolean sweater pattern was featured in a 1975 knitting company catalog. **Tyrolean Sweaters** are still fashionable. Finished sweaters and patterns are available on Etsy and other sites. Know someone who might want to make this design? Contact me and I'll send you a PDF of Mom's original pattern.

from the Viennese knitting table, to making sweaters for refugees in England, to rebuilding the knitting table in multicultural Brooklyn



1



4



2



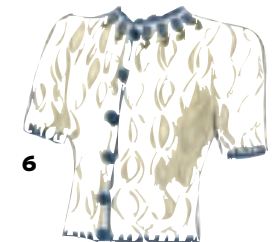
5



3



7



6

Scenes from the book:

1. Anni, wearing the Tyrolean sweater she just finished, is forbidden from entering the park.
2. Knitting on the train.
3. With the grannies in their ghetto apartment.
4. Making checkerboard vests with the Church Ladies.
5. Back of a checkerboard vest.
6. The "Tyrolean shorty" Anni and Rosie make with Lewis Sheep Farm wool for their voyage on a troop ship to New York.
7. The Brooklyn knitting table, 1941.

What have Americans been knitting that was in the news? Why? Is it helping? How?

food & cooking

This is my mother's gugelhupf (yeast cake) mold with one of her Viennese recipe books and needlework she made at age 9



Vienna was, and is, known for its food, especially pastries like many-layered chocolate tortes. In the pre-war years, shortages began and there was almost no meat and fresh vegetables, little sugar and flour. Everyone in England was issued a ration book, listing the small amounts of foodstuffs each person was allowed.



One of Anni and Rosie's talents was the ability to make tasty meals with the meager ingredients available.

in Vienna

Schnitzel
Strudel
Dobos-torte
Papa's Favorite
Cucumber Salad

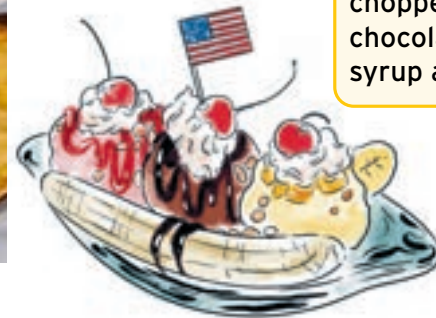
in England

Ersatz Chicken Soup
Lord Woolten Pie
Special Fruit Pudding

in the USA

The Neapolitan Banana Split
Egg Cream
Mutti's Brooklyn Torte from a Mix

TO MAKE THE TREAT ANNI AND ROSIE ENJOYED WHEN THEY ARRIVED IN NEW YORK, cut a banana in half lengthwise. In between the two halves, place one scoop each strawberry, chocolate and vanilla ice cream. Top each scoop with a large dollop of whipped cream and a cherry. Sprinkle the whole thing with chopped nuts and drizzle with chocolate syrup. Strawberry syrup and flag optional.



Ask an elder to write down favorite family recipes. Cook one of them together, photograph it, and share the recipe and a picture.

music

Vienna, Austria, was the classical music capital of the world, but there and in England, people loved movies and songs that are still beloved today.

An outdoor concert at Schönbrunner Palace Gardens; Furtwängler conducting.



Music mentioned in the book:

in Vienna

Strauss Waltzes
Mozart and
Beethoven
Symphonies

in England

"Whistle While You Work"
from Snow White and the
Seven Dwarfs
"Somewhere Over the
Rainbow" from the Wizard
of Oz

on the Troop
Ship and

in the USA

"Follow the Yellow Brick Road"
from The Wizard of Oz
"Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy"
by The Andrews Sisters

Vienna was the center of the Hapsburg Empire and its court, which encouraged musicians and artists to flourish. Composers including Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Strauss, Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, and Schoenberg were born in Vienna or moved there – and wrote great music.

In Chapter 4 – when the dinner guests are praising her cooking and charming accent – Anni's mind flashes back to a concert in which "All Vienna was on the lawn at Schönbrunner Palace Gardens ... the stars came out and we joined in the wild applause when our own Wilhelm Furtwängler stepped up



to the podium. He lifted his arms and began to conduct the Philharmonic. You could almost hear everyone's hearts beating in unison with his baton. Rosie and I cuddled up between Mutti and Papa, and the violins and woodwinds and horns spread happiness over us."

WILHELM FURTWÄNGLER was a great 20th-century symphonic conductor. His recordings are legendary. When the Nazis came to power, Furtwängler saw himself as a defender of Germany's glorious musical heritage and continued to conduct even while Jewish musicians

What does Anni's memory tell you about her life before the Holocaust? What music was a favorite in your family's history? Bring in a recording or video.

posters were essential communications media before TV and the Internet

German

Nazi posters idealized the blonde, blue-eyed Aryan and vilified the Jew as the eternal evil-doer; Hitler was the “only answer.”

Anni and Rosie had to walk by Hitler Youth posters every day.



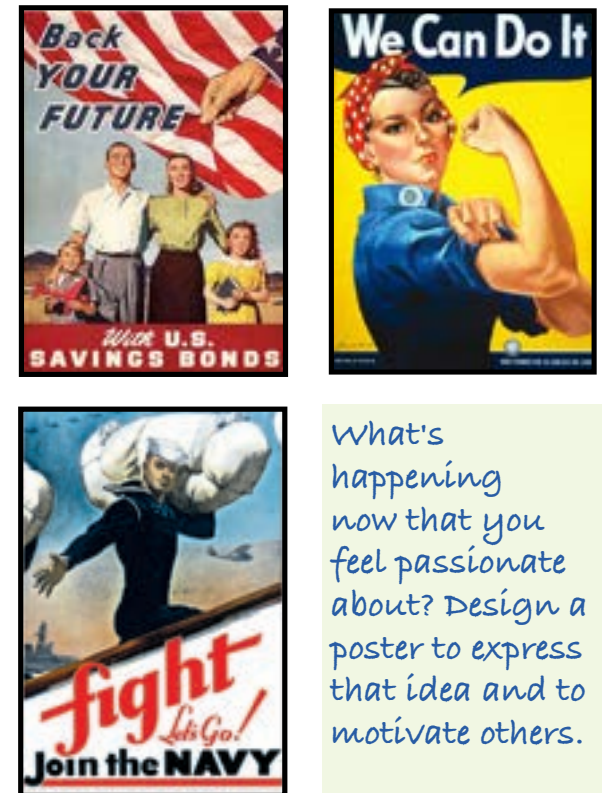
British

Wartime sacrifices and shortages made life difficult. Keeping calm and carrying on, now a cliché, was necessary to defeat Hitler at all costs. Five million people, including fictional Anni and Rosie, grew Victory Gardens.



American

Patriotic posters encouraged buying U.S. Savings Bonds and joining the armed forces to save American democracy and your family's future. For the first time, it was A-OK for women to join the workforce.



What's happening now that you feel passionate about? Design a poster to express that idea and to motivate others.

why not leave?

Years before “the final solution,” the Nazis strove to make their expanding territory “judenrein,” free of Jews.

They tried to make life so difficult that Jews would leave the country – and leave their money and valuables behind.

But many people, especially assimilated professionals – doctors, scientists, professors, engineers – stayed until it was too late. They loved their country and kept thinking, even as the Nazis took one step at a time towards annihilation, “Things can't get any worse than this.” Anni and Rosie's (fictional) Papa and my own grandfather are examples.

Now that you've learned a bit about the delightful culture, food, music (and we haven't touched on the museums and art) of the beautiful city of Vienna, Austria, why do you think so many stayed? They...

- a. couldn't get a visa to enter another country.
- b. didn't have enough money or the ability to bring their family on a long trip and relocate.
- c. felt that they couldn't learn a new language and get a good job somewhere else.
- d. wanted to stay among relatives and friends.
- e. couldn't bear to leave their paintings, furniture, and other valuables behind.
- f. the Nazis put them to work informing on other Jews and performing other functions.*
- g. really believed things would get better.

* source: *Eichman's Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna* by Doron Rabinovici, Politi Press, 2011

more
questions
to ponder

THE EVIAN CONFERENCE

In 1938, delegates from 32 countries met in Evian, France, to discuss taking in Jewish refugees. Hitler stated that if they agreed to take the Jews – who were desperate to flee Nazi persecution, but could not without permission to settle in other countries – he would help them leave. Attending nations took no official action to welcome Jews.

Think about these options (or come up with other reasons). Discuss your conclusions with the class.

Questions for young readers

(Ages 10-14)

These questions are designed for readers in grades 5 through 8, either in a classroom, book club, or family discussion.

Who Are You? Identity and Belonging

1. When Germany took over Austria, the Nazis forced all the Jewish people to add 'Sarah' or 'Israel' to their names. Anni thinks, "I'm not sure who I really am." Have you ever been in a situation where someone tried to tell you who you are – or who you aren't? How did that feel?
2. On the train, Anni worries that the woman who helps with the suitcase "wouldn't be so nice if she knew who we really are." What does she mean by that? Have you ever felt like you had to hide part of who you are to stay safe?
3. When the Tuppington lads accuse Anni and Rosie of being Nazi spies, Anni shouts, "Germany took our country from us!" What did she mean by that? What would you have done if you were Anni in that moment?
4. Is your home more like Mutti and Papa's secular apartment, or like the Ashers' more observant household? What kind of home would you like to build?
5. In the last chapter, Anni speaks English, is learning Spanish, and understands Brooklynese. Think about a place or time you felt like an outsider because of language or accent. How can language help you belong – or feel left out?

Brave Choices: Courage and Agency

6. Mutti tells Anni before the train journey: "You don't have a choice. And that's that." But from page one, Anni makes many choices on her own. What is the bravest decision she makes? What would have been hardest for you?
7. When the vicar's wife asks Anni to question the Nazi pilot Walter Heinz and translate his answers for the RAF, she has never done anything like it before. She's scared, but she says yes. What gave her the courage to do it? Have you ever said yes to something that frightened you?
8. Anni invents the idea of hiding diamonds inside buttons. Late at night she's crocheting buttons for her own sweater around little round molds – and the shape makes her think of Aunt Vivian's diamond solitaire earrings. Suddenly she knows exactly what she can do. Have you ever solved a problem by noticing a connection no one else saw? Where do you think unexpected ideas come from?
9. Rosie is only seven when the story starts and nine by the end. Make a list of three brave things Rosie does. Which one surprised you the most?

continued >

Knitting, Making, and Working Together

10. Anni says, “Knitting keeps me sane.” She knits on the train, after bad news, during the Blitz – the German bombing of Britain – while worrying about her parents. How can making something with your hands help when everything else feels out of control? Is there something you do that helps you feel better when you’re stressed?

11. The knitting party with the church ladies starts after Keith’s gang steals the needles and uses them as play weapons. Instead of giving up, Anni calls everyone together and gets the vests finished. What does this tell you about her character? What would you have done?

12. In Chapter 16, Mutti and kids from Vienna, China, Puerto Rico, and Brooklyn are gathered around a table sewing, knitting, and sharing cake and Coca-Cola. What do you think Ellen Shapiro wants readers to understand through that final scene?

History Up Close

13. The story is told through Anni’s eyes, but we learn about the Holocaust through small moments – a cartoonist’s ugly newspaper drawings, Anni barred from the ice-skating rink, and finally meeting Anton, the Auschwitz survivor who draws what happened to him because he can’t speak about it. How did those moments affect you as a reader? Which one hit you hardest, and why?

14. Ronald’s album is filled with stamps from British colonies including India, Jamaica, and Rhodesia. Anni wonders whether the British are getting so well prepared for wartime and “know how to do an invasion and a takeover” because they’ve done it in so many places. It’s a complicated thought. What do you think she means?

15. Anni and Rosie land in New York on the Fourth of July – Independence Day. What do you think Ellen Shapiro wanted you to feel by choosing that date? Does independence mean something different to immigrants than it does to people like Nathan, who was born in America?

Family, Loss, and Memory

16. Anni and Rosie don’t find out that their grandmothers have died until they arrive in New York. Mutti kept the news out of the coded letters on purpose. Was that fair? Would you have wanted to know?

17. When the girls are reunited with Papa, he has a cane, false teeth, and long sleeves he never rolls up. The book never tells us directly what happened to him in Dachau. Why do you think the author chose not to describe it?

18. Mutti photographed favorite places in Vienna before she left – the palace gardens, the park, the climbing castle – and framed the prints for the girls’ Brooklyn bedroom. If you had to leave your home forever and could only take pictures, what would you photograph?

Being Seen – Then and Now

19. When Anni and Rosie first arrive in Tuppington, they’re treated as outsiders, servants, and suspected spies. By the time they leave, the village gives them awards and gifts. Who and what changed the most?

20. Have you every misjudged someone or been misjudged? What helped you – or them – see things differently?

21. The last words of the Author’s Note are: “*May you never forget the past. And may your dreams always be of the future.*” What do you think Anni’s future will look like – and what will she build?

and for grown-ups

Here are discussion questions for adults – especially those who will share *The Secret Buttons* with children or grandchildren

Identity and Belonging

1. After Germany took over Austria, renamed it 'Ostmark,' and made Jewish citizens take new 'Sarah' and 'Israel' names, Anni reflects: "I'm not sure who I really am." Did you previously know about those renamings? Do you personally know anyone anywhere whose name or identity got changed? How do questions of identity run through the book, from Vienna to Tuppington to Brooklyn?
2. When the neighborhood lads accuse the girls of being Nazi spies, Anni shouts, "Germany took our country from us!" How would it feel to be an Austrian unwanted in Austria, then a German-speaker in England for which Germany was "the enemy of the nation?"
3. By the last chapter Anni speaks English, understands Brooklynese, and is learning Spanish. How does language function in the novel as a barrier and a form of belonging?
4. What kinds of things happen in England that cause Anni and Rosie, raised in a secular household, to want to light Shabbat candles and say the prayers? Do you think after arriving in Brooklyn they will try to convince Mutti and Papa to have a real Passover seder?
5. What do you think of Papa's lack of interest in moving to Israel, even when the Zionists offered to save the family? Did that ring true to you?

Courage and Agency

6. Anni's mother tells her, before the train journey, "You don't have a choice." Yet throughout the book Anni makes countless choices, large and small. Which moments of agency feel most significant to you, and why?
7. The interrogation of Nazi pilot Walter Heinz is the book's most dramatic test of Anni's courage. How does she manage to hold her ground against his taunts without letting him see how frightened she is? What did that scene bring up for you?
8. Anni's idea to hide diamonds inside crocheted sweater buttons is the pivot on which the whole plot turns. What does the author suggest about where creative solutions come from, and what conditions make them possible?

Craft, Work, and Women's Lives

9. Knitting and sewing appear throughout as both comfort and resistance. How does needlework function differently at different moments: in the *strick-klatsch* in Vienna, on the train, at night upstairs, in the backyard bomb shelter, and in the knitting party with the church ladies?
10. Anni explains her career plans to Izzy in NYC's Diamond District: she wants to own a chain of needlework shops where she'll teach all the immigrants. Why does Izzy think

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it's a crazy idea? How does the book trace the arc from Anni as a twelve-year-old who knits to stay sane to the person she intends to become?

11. The book ends with the new Brooklyn knitting circle, a gathering of middle school and high school friends born in China, Puerto Rico, Italy, and New York. What does the author suggest, through this final scene, about what immigrants share across cultures and eras?

History, Witness, and Character

12. Ronald's album, filled with stamps from the British colonies, prompts Anni to think the English are getting so well prepared for war because they "know how to do an invasion and a takeover." How does the novel invite readers to see parallels between different forms of occupation and displacement without drawing them too neatly?

13. Anni and Rosie learn about what is going on in the camps ("Papa is in one of those camps!") though the shocking appearance and artwork of Anton, the Auschwitz survivor. In your opinion, is this device a smart way to introduce young readers to the Holocaust?

14. At first, the townspeople in Tuppington see Anni and Rosie as aliens who don't belong there. By the time the girls depart for New York, the same people celebrate them with awards and going-away gifts. What does the book show us about how assumptions can soften and understanding and even affection can grow when people take the time to get to know each another?

15. About the young male characters: We meet neighbor Keith when he's throwing dirt clods and calling the girls Nazi spies. Even after he becomes a good knitter, he sneaks back to outfit his gang with bows, arrows, and swords

made from knitting needles and yarn. Ronald moves from snooty cousin to genuine friend, bonded with Rosie over stamp collecting. Spencer takes Anni on a walk through the hedgerows that nearly makes her want to change her mind about where she'll spend her entire future. And around that Brooklyn table sits young Miguel, knitting. What does the book suggest about what might happen when young men and boys start seeing girls as people worth knowing, respecting, and learning from?

Family, Loss, and Memory

16. Rosie and Anni learn of their grandmothers' deaths only after arriving in New York. How does the book handle grief that is kept secret, deferred, and held at a distance? Did the girls' reactions feel true to you?

17. Papa comes home changed: a cane, false teeth that click, long sleeves he never rolls up. The novel never describes his time in Dachau directly. Why do you think Ellen Shapiro made that choice, and what effect does it have on readers of any age?

18. How does Mutti change from the flashback scenes to the final knitting table scene?

19. The Author's Note reveals that this book grew from a single sentence Ellen's mother told her when she was ten years old. What does it mean to write a novel in order to reimagine a story you were never fully told?

20. The final line of the Author's Note reads: "*May you never forget the past. And may your dreams always be of the future.*" How does the novel itself hold that balance, moving between Anni's vivid, unavoidable flashbacks and her fierce orientation toward what she will build?

learn more

about the Holocaust and WWII



WHITE BIRD

A graphic novel by
R.J. Palacio, author of *Wonder*

Julien, a righteous Christian boy in a small farming village in France, hides Ruth, a Jewish former classmate, in a hayloft in his family's barn. Julien risks his life and family's safety to bring her food, clothing, and companionship.



Books I used to research The Secret Buttons

After you finish *The Secret Buttons*, read one book from this list and write a short report on the plot, theme, and why the book is important.

Have you read other books with a Holocaust theme?

Anne Frank's Diary, The Graphic Adaptation

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas

Goodbye Marianne

Hana's Suitcase

Memories of Survival

Number the Stars

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit

White Bird

and books about
young people from
other cultures during
upheaval and war?

Coolies

Hero on a Bicycle

Persepolis

Red Scarf Girl

your stories & art

We've created a place to share YOUR family immigration story and art!

You are invited to tell your immigration story or interview your grandparents, great-grandparents, or other relatives. If they weren't immigrants, you can interview a neighbor, family friend, or member of an immigrant family who lives in your community. You are also invited to draw a picture to illustrate an important aspect of your own, your relative's, family's, or friend's immigration story.

All (easy) instructions are on secretbuttons.com



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- Invite me to an in-person or Zoom event with your school or group.

and Thank You!

Questions? Comments?

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