

Book Details

The Plum Tree follows a young German woman through the chaos of World War II and its aftermath as she tries to save the love of her life, a Jewish man.

“Bloom where you’re planted,” is the advice Christine Bolz receives from her beloved Oma. But seventeen-year-old domestic Christine knows there is a whole world waiting beyond her small German village. It’s a world she’s begun to glimpse through music, books—and through Isaac Bauerman, the cultured son of the wealthy Jewish family she works for. Yet the future she and Isaac dream of sharing faces greater challenges than their difference in stations. In the fall of 1938, Germany is changing rapidly under Hitler’s regime. Anti-Jewish posters are everywhere, dissenting talk is silenced, and a new law forbids Christine from returning to her job—and from having any relationship with Isaac. In the months and years that follow, Christine will confront the Gestapo’s wrath and the horrors of Dachau, desperate to be with the man she loves, to survive—and finally, to speak out.

Set against the backdrop of the German home front, this is an unforgettable novel of courage and resolve, of the inhumanity of war, and the heartbreak and hope left in its wake.

Quiz:

- 1) Why does Christine have to stop working for the Bauermans and seeing Isaac? (answer: The Nuremberg Laws forbid Jewish people to employ German women as domestic workers and also forbids relationships between Germans and Jews)
- 2) What is Hitler announcing the first time Christine’s parents listen to *The People’s Radio*? (answer: the annexation of Austria into Germany)
- 3) When Germany went to war with Poland, what law came into effect for German Jews? (answer: an eight o’clock curfew)
- 4) What was the punishment for Germans caught listening to foreign radio broadcasts? (answer: six years in prison or death)
- 5) Where do Christine and Isaac meet in secret? (answer: a root cellar)
- 6) Where is Christine’s father sent after he is drafted? (answer: the Eastern Front)
- 7) Why did the Allies start bombing Christine’s village? (answer: there was an air base outside of town)
- 8) What did Christine see the first time her mother took her into the root cellar turned bomb shelter? (answer: the corner of the tablecloth she and Isaac used during their secret meetings)
- 9) Why did Christine take her mother’s treasured tapestry to Frau Klause? (answer: to trade it for a rooster)
- 10) Where was Christine’s father’s unit, The Sixth Army, trapped? (answer: Stalingrad)
- 11) In the bomb shelter, a soldier talks about an air raid on Hamburg, his hometown. What made that air raid different than the others? (answer: It was the first time the Allies used firebombs)

- 12) Who is killed by the collapsed wall of a burning barn during an air raid? (answer: Christine's grandfather, Opa)
- 13) What is Christine doing when she sees the train filled with Jewish people? (answer: picking apples for a farmer)
- 14) Why are Jewish prisoners brought into Christine's village? (answer: to rebuild the air base)
- 15) Where does Christine hide Isaac after she rescues him? (answer: the attic)
- 16) How do the Gestapo find Isaac's hiding place? (answer: they see marks on the floor from the bookcase being moved back and forth)
- 17) Where are Isaac and Christine sent after the Gestapo find Isaac? (answer: Dachau)
- 18) Near the end of the war, where is Christine's sister, Maria, sent? (answer: East to dig anti-tank trenches)
- 19) After the United States Army liberates Dachau, they force the nearby villagers to do what? (answer: bring food for the surviving prisoners and bury the bodies of the deceased)
- 20) When Christine returns to her village and sees the gallows, she worries that the SS might have hung her little brothers. Why? (answer: for hiding and refusing to fight)
- 21) After the war, how is Stefan able to hide the fact that he was an SS guard in Dachau? (answer: he burns his party card and steals a uniform to blend in with the regular soldiers)
- 22) What does Stefan do to threaten Christine after she tries to expose him? (answer: kidnaps her father, dresses him in an SS uniform and turns him over to the Americans as a war criminal)

Historical Notes:

Told from one of the best vantage points for witnessing the first cruelties and final ruin of the Third Reich—the German home front—THE PLUM TREE was inspired by mother's stories of life in Nazi Germany during WWII. She was the eldest of five children in a poor, working-class family. When WWII broke out, my grandfather was drafted and sent to the Russian Front, where he was captured and sent to a POW camp. Eventually, he escaped, but for two years my mother and her family had no idea if he was dead or alive until he showed up on their doorstep one day. He was a foot soldier, not SS or a Nazi. During the four years he was off fighting, my grandmother repaired damaged military uniforms to bring in a small income. She stood in ration lines for hours on end, dealt with food shortages, and put blackout paper over the windows so the enemy wouldn't see their light. Under the cover of night, she put food out for the passing Jewish prisoners and listened to foreign radio broadcasts on an illegal shortwave—both crimes punishable by death. And there were rules about everything, from how often a person was allowed to bathe, to the list of acceptable baby names. I'll never forget the first time I went inside the bomb shelter where my mother and her family hid, terrified and hungry, for nights on

end.

The seeds for *The Plum Tree* were planted during my high school years, during our studies of the Holocaust when my classmates started calling me a Nazi, saluting and shouting “Heil Hitler” in the halls. That was when I began to understand the concept of collective guilt. Few people realize that, at its peak, the Nazi party consisted of less than 10% of the German population. But I was too young to understand or explain that being German doesn’t make you a Nazi, that protesting something in America is easy compared to protesting something in The Third Reich, or to ask them what they would have done if they had had to choose between someone else’s life and their own. Collective guilt as opposed to individual guilt is senseless; retrospective condemnation is easy.

Years later, I realized I needed to write a novel about what it was like for an average German family during the war, while still being sensitive to what the Nazis did to the Jewish people. While doing research, I learned a lot of things we weren’t taught in school. Before the war, the Nazis confiscated all shortwave radios and made it illegal for German citizens to listen to anything other than Nazi-controlled radio. Once rationing was put into effect, among numerous new laws, it was illegal to buy and butcher a pig and use extra wood for cooking. All resources, including church bells and frying pans, which were melted down to make bullets, went towards the war effort. The Allied bombing campaign became a deliberate, explicit policy to destroy all German cities with populations over 100,000 using a technique called “carpet bombing”--a strategy that treated whole cities and their civilian populations as targets for attacks by high explosives and incendiary bombs. Among the many horrific air raid stories were the firebombing of Hamburg in July 1943, dubbed “Operation Gomorrah”, which killed 45,000 civilians, and the firebombing of Dresden in February 1945, which killed 135,000 civilians. After reading numerous survivor accounts that mirrored and expanded on my mother’s stories, I knew this was a story that needed to be told.

Further reading:

German Boy by Wolfgang W. E. Samuel

The War of our Childhood; Memories of WWII by Wolfgang W.E. Samuel

Memoirs of a 1000-Year-Old Woman by Gisela R. McBride.

Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich by Alison Owings.

To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and its Human Consequences in WWII by Hermann Knell

Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombings of Civilians in Germany and Japan by A.C. Grayling

The Fire by Jörg Friedrich

Crimes and Mercies: The Fate of German Civilians under Allied Occupation by James Bacque.

Night by Elie Wiesel

Eyewitness Auschwitz by Filip Müller

I Will Bear Witness by Victor Klemperer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) Christine and her family were not members of the Nazi Party. When the war started in 1939, the population of Germany was over 80 million, with 5.3 million being members of the Nazi Party. The party reached its peak in 1945 with 8 million members. Many of these were nominal members who joined for careerist reasons, but the party had an active membership of at least a million, including virtually all the holders of senior positions in the national government. Not all Germans or all military were party members. Does this surprise you? Did you think all Germans were members of the Nazi Party? What do you think most people believe? Why?

2) Christine works as a domestic for a Jewish family where she falls in love with Isaac. What brings them together? What do you think it was like the first time they met? Do you think they fell in love instantly or over time? How do you think Isaac felt about her family, knowing how the Nazis felt about Jews? Do you think Christine was envious of his family's wealth or did she give it little thought?

3) The first anti-Jewish poster Christine sees explains who is a Jew and who isn't, and forbids Jews to enter public places like banks and post offices. It is said that Hitler drew his first ideas about how to treat the Jews from blacks being denied civil rights in the South. What do you think are the differences? Why was the KKK kept in check while the Nazis were not?

4) Christine offers to hide Isaac before the Nazis take him and his family away. Would

you have taken the opportunity to go with her, or would you have stayed with your family? Do you think Isaac's decision was based on loyalty to his parents and sister, or was made because he thought they'd be okay since he had no idea how bad it was going to get?

5) The Nazis said they were going to "relocate" the Jews. What if this was happening where you live? How far would you be willing to go to protect your friends and neighbors? Would you risk your life or the lives of your children to save someone else?

6) We live in a world where global news and information is instant. During WWII in Nazi Germany, public information was manipulated and limited. Propaganda was used to sway public opinion. There were only two Nazi-run newspapers available, and the Nazis controlled the radio. Listening to foreign broadcasts was a crime punishable by death. After the Nazis were defeated, most Germans found out that Roosevelt had died, that the Wehrmacht had unconditionally surrendered, and that the atom bomb had been dropped on Japan, by word of mouth. How do you think the availability of information affects the way people think and act? Do you think the Holocaust could have been stopped if information had been more readily available? Do you think the war would have ended sooner? What differences would better access to information have made?

7) Lagerkommandant Grünstein is loosely based on a real SS officer, Kurt Gerstein, who tried to tell the world what the Nazis were doing. After the war, Gerstein turned himself over to the French and gave them a detailed account of what had happened in the camps. Before his trial, he was found dead. There is some speculation that other imprisoned SS might have killed him. If he'd been given the chance to go to trial, should he have been punished with the rest of the SS or let free?

8) Christine thinks of her mother as key to their survival and the last thread to anything familiar and normal. From food in their stomachs to clean clothes and warm baths, Mutti provided the only bits of comfort to be had. During the war, Germany was made up of women, children, and old people, struggling to survive food shortages and air raids while the men were off fighting. What do you think it was like in Germany for the women left behind? What differences would there have been between single women and those with children to take care of? At one point Christine mentions that some women sell themselves to feed their children. How far would you go to keep yourself and your children alive?

9) How do you think Christine changed over the course of the novel? What about Isaac, Maria, Heinrich, and Karl? Even though siblings are raised together, sometimes they turn out differently. What differences do you see in Christine and Maria? Heinrich and Karl?

10) Christine and the Lagerkommandant talk about what the prisoners will do to stay alive, from spying on each other to pushing their fellow Jews into the ovens to burn. How far would you go to stay alive in a place like Dachau? Do you think you would be strong enough to keep going like Hanna and Christine, or do you think you'd give up?

11) The Americans bombed Christine's village and shot at her and her little brother. How do you think she felt when they occupied her village? Do you think she saw them as saviors or monsters? Why?

12) When Christine and Isaac are sent to Dachau, she worries that he has lost his will to live. Discuss the will to live. Do you think it's the same for everyone, or is it stronger in some than others?

13) Discuss the significance of the plum tree. What does it symbolize, both as a pit when it's first planted and later, as a blossoming sapling at the end of the book?

14) Do you think Christine and Isaac's secret meetings are romantic or frightening? Do you think fear of the future made their love stronger and more passionate? They didn't have sex because they were afraid she would become pregnant. Do you think that is realistic, or do you think the author used it to add more tension to the story? When Isaac puts an end to their meetings, Christine only tries to see him twice. Would you have agreed to wait and see what happened, or would you have gone to his house more often, Gestapo or no Gestapo?

15) Mutti agrees to put food out for the passing Jewish prisoners even though it's dangerous and she can barely feed her family. Why do you think she does it? Would you have done the same thing?

16) When the Gestapo finds Isaac in Christine's attic, they spare the rest of her family out of respect for her father's military service. Do you think that would have happened, or do you think they would have shot her family or taken them all away?

17) After the war, Christine's friend Kate doesn't believe her when Christine tells her about the camps and Stefan's role as an SS guard. Do you think Kate is in denial because she is in love and wants to get married, or do you think she really doesn't believe

Christine? When Christine tries to expose Stefan in church, again no one wants to believe her. Do you think people were in denial, were too busy with their own problems, or just didn't want to talk about it? Do you think they felt guilty?

18) When Christine gets off the train from Dachau, she doesn't realize where she is. How do you think Christine felt when she realized she was already home? How do you think she felt when she saw her house was still standing and her family was alive? How do you think it feels to survive something so horrific when so many others didn't? She tastes the grass in the goat's milk and thinks even chickens are beautiful. Do you think almost dying makes a person more aware and grateful for the little things?

19) Maria hates herself because the Russians raped her. She thinks no one will ever love her. When she finds out she is pregnant, she is devastated. Do you think she died by accident trying to get rid of the baby, or do you think she killed herself? What would you have done in her situation?

20) If Christine had ended up with Jake, what would their future have looked like?