

# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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# A Brief History of France's Resistance

In June, 1940, after four short weeks of fighting, France was defeated by Germany, and over 10 million French civilians became refugees, fleeing their homes to avoid the invasion. The newly appointed Prime Minister of France, Marshal Phillippe Pétain, requested an armistice, which divided France into a Nazi occupied zone and a Free Zone, governed by Pétain's new Vichy government. Pétain, a national hero after the Great War, was seen by many as a savior who would spare the French people the horrors of a disastrous war. The Vichy government, though, was not a friend to all French citizens, as it was actually a right-wing, ultra-nationalist body that sought to rid France of Socialists, Communists, Jews, and Freemasons, among others. In November of 1942, Germany occupied all of France and the Vichy government officially became subservient to the Nazi regime.

In response to Pétain's surrender, Nazi occupation, and the Vichy government's collaboration, the French Resistance began to take shape. Initially, the resistance movement was a loose network of cells in towns and villages—called the Maquis in more rural areas—comprised of people who refused to accept the loss of France and objected to the ideology of Pétain and the Nazis. By 1941, resistance groups began to organize themselves around particular ideologies, and were eventually coordinated by Jean Moulin into the National Council of Resistance.

Resistance took many forms, from subversive underground newsletters to spying and establishing escape routes to violent acts of sabotage. The most active groups tended to be in the cities, where the German presence was most concentrated and where

Allied forces focused their attention and resources. It is estimated that approximately 2% (400,000) of the French adult population was actively involved in resistance at some point during the war, and possibly up to 10% affiliated, if one includes those who were more passive in their resistance (readers of the underground newspapers, for example).

Working alongside the French national resistance fighters were French Jews. One guess is that Jews made up close to 15% of the Resistance (despite constituting just 1% of the population). Jewish groups came together to form the Armée Juive, which practiced armed resistance, helped distribute money from the American Joint Distribution Committee, and set up escape routes across the Pyrenees. They were joined in their attempts to save Jews by the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants, Eclaireurs Israelites de France and the Mouvement des Jeunesses Sionistes, among other lesser known local groups. Together these organizations found hiding places for children, forged identity papers, and smuggled children out of France, saving between 12,000–15,000 Jewish children.

Aside from the individual lives rescued by resistance fighters and the damage done to the Nazi war machine, the legacy of the resistance was evident in France's acceptance by the Allied nations post-war. By maintaining their struggle for the heart and mind of the French people, by refusing to accept the passive or collaborationist attitude of the French leadership, the resistance was able to overshadow the Vichy government—post-war, at least—and return France to a national French identity.

# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Questions

These questions were created by JBC Book Clubs as a supplement to those in St. Martin's Press' reading group guide.

1. How was reading this novel different than reading most other Holocaust novels?
2. Considering each of the characters' motivations for a moment, and the circumstances underneath which they have opted to participate in the resistance movement in one form or another, do you draw a moral/ethical line between those who you believe were more personally motivated and were only moved by their personal circumstances and what affected them directly and those who saw the larger picture and sacrificed and risked their lives for something that may or may not have touched them? Is there a line? Does it matter? Isabelle saves airmen from the U.S. and British armies and air force while Viann saves Jewish children. Is there any difference between these acts of heroism? Do you think either—or both—would be considered a Righteous Gentile?
3. Unlike Von Richter, Captain Beck is not the cold, cruel monster that one expects of a Nazi official. Instead, he offers a humanized view of the Nazis, a man doing his job with a family at home. Did you find Beck to be likable or sympathetic? How did that make you feel? Did Viann's relationship with him alter your view of her? Underneath it all, which side of him do you believe to be true, the decent man who helps Viann and gives advice to protect the de Champlain family or the Nazi who requested the list of names and wields a whip in the roundups?
4. How did you feel about the Jewish community reclaiming Ari? Does your opinion change when you consider that, as Viann's son, he probably would never know (or certainly not be raised in) his Jewish identity? What do you think Rachel would have wanted?
5. What made Viann shift her perspective from staying neutral for the safety of her family to actively saving children and putting her own life in danger?
6. When Rachel learns that all Jews must wear the yellow star, she becomes hopeless (p. 231). Why do you think the new statute affects her more than being fired from her job?
7. Even knowing what you do about Viann's involvement with the children, by the end of the book, do you think of her as a resistance fighter? If not, why do you think that is? Why do you think the author chose to write her that way? Why do you think Viann's interactions with the mothers of the 19 children she saved (aside from the first two) are not included in the book?
8. While reading the book from a Jewish perspective, it's difficult to not constantly contrast the hardships faced by Viann and her community and those that were happening simultaneously, and off-stage, to Jews across Europe. Were you able to sympathize for characters whose hardships appeared to be, on a scale, less dire than those out of the picture, knowing that for them, without the knowledge of the full picture of what was happening around them, the circumstances may have felt equally dire? Do you feel the author successfully recreated an experience through which we were able to sympathize for the characters' circumstance despite having the advantage of a hindsight perspective?

# Naturally Fermented Sour Dill Pickles

Viann does a lot of pickling and canning to make her garden harvests last through the winter. One of Viann's pickled vegetables is cucumbers, so why not serve pickles at your book club?

This recipe comes from Jeffrey Yoskowitz, a writer, pickler and entrepreneur. Learn more about Jeffrey following the recipe.

## Ingredients

- 1 quart jar
- 1 lb of small, fresh pickling cucumbers (Kirby or Persian cucumbers)
- 1 tbsp. non-iodized kosher salt
- 1-2 Bay Leaves
- 3 peeled but whole cloves of garlic
- 2-3 sprigs of dill
- 1 dried chili pepper
- .1/4 tsp. coriander
- 1/4 tsp. mustard seed
- 1/4 tsp. black peppercorns
- a few cloves
- Any other spices and herbs you want to add (optional)

Fill the jar halfway from top with cold water. Add salt, tighten lid and shake to dissolve salt. Add garlic, dill and spices. Pack quart jar with cucumbers. Make sure vegetables are below water level—you can wedge them under the neck of the jar.

Leave the jar out on the counter at room temperature with the lid on, but not too tight. After the first two days, “burp” the jar (open lid to relieve pressure). After 3-4 days (for half-sour pickles), 5 to 7 days (for full-sours) or whenever you like the flavor, transfer the jar to the fridge. Enjoy!

Jeffrey Yoskowitz is a writer, pickler and entrepreneur. He was recently named to *Forbes Magazine's* 30 under 30 list in *Food and Wine* and was a guest chef at the James Beard House kitchen in both 2013 and 2014

In 2012, Yoskowitz co-founded The Gefilteria, a venture re-imagining Old World Jewish Foods through unique dining experiences, talks and demos and production of an artisanal gefilte fish sold around the country. He got his start in the food world at Adamah Organic farm in Litchfield County, Connecticut, where he worked as a farm fellow and returned a year later as a pickle apprentice.

Yoskowitz has written about food and culture in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, *Tablet*, *Gastronomica*, *Meatpaper*, *The Forward*, among others. Through his writing and research he has become an authority on food and culture. In 2016, his cookbook *The Gefilte Manifesto* was published by Flatiron Books, an imprint of Macmillan.

# Strawberry Preserves

One Viann's preparations for the winter is to make preserves, and she and Sophie often have homemade preserves on bread for breakfast.

## Ingredients

2 lbs. whole strawberries, hulled

1 lb. sugar

1 oz. fresh lemon juice

Optional flavor additions: vanilla bean, balsamic vinegar, chipotle, basil, black pepper

Place strawberries, sugar, and lemon juice in a pot and boil until you see the mixture rise and then fall. The preserves are done when it falls off a spoon in a sheet. Add in any additional flavorings, and remove from heat. At this point, the preserves may be eaten or canned.

For canning: spoon preserves into prepared jars, leaving at least ff inch of space at the top. Put the jars in warm water so that they are completely covered, and bring to a boil. Boil for 10 minutes, then remove from heat and allow to sit in the water for an additional 5 minutes. Take the jars out of the water and leave them to cool for 24 hours.

We recommend serving the preserves on a freshly made baguette!

# Baguette

adapted from Saveur

Baguettes play a role in the resistance as well, hiding Isabelle's underground newsletters and delivering blank identity papers to Viann as an unusual filling, Henri's maman's special recipe. And, well, it's France

## Ingredients

1.5 cups tap water, heated to 115° F

1 tsp. active dry yeast

3.25 cups all-purpose flour

2 tsp. kosher salt

Canola oil, for greasing bowl

.5 cup ice cubes

Use a whisk to combine the yeast and water in a bowl, and let sit about 10 minutes, until the yeast is foamy. Add in flour and stir with a fork until a dough forms. Add salt and begin to knead on a lightly floured surface, until dough is smooth and elastic, about 10 minutes. Transfer dough to a lightly oiled bowl and turn over once to make sure that all sides have a light coating of oil. Cover with plastic wrap and allow to rise for an hour, until doubled in size.

Roll dough into a rectangle and fold all four sides in toward the middle (first with the long sides, then the short) to create a rounded packet. Seal the seam and return the dough, with the seam facing down, to the bowl. Cover with plastic wrap again, and allow to rest until it doubles in size again, approximately one hour.

Place a cast iron skillet on the bottom shelf of the oven and preheat to 475 degrees.

Transfer dough to the floured work surface, and divide it into three equal pieces. Form 12-14 inch ropes out of each piece. Cover a cookie sheet (or any rimless baking pan) with parchment paper and dust it with flour.

Evenly space the ropes of dough across the sheet, and then create dividers between the dough by pulling up the paper in between each loaf and use rolled kitchen towels under the paper pleats to help the loaves keep shape as they rise. Cover the pan loosely with plastic and allow the dough to rise again for about 45-60 minutes, until doubled in size.

Uncover loaves, remove the towel dividers, and straighten the paper to space the loaves out. Make four slashes (about 1/2 in. deep and 4 in. long) on each loaf with a paring knife. If you are using a baking or pizza stone (recommended), slide parchment paper onto the stone and place in the oven. Add 1/2 c. of ice cubes to the skillet on the bottom shelf of the oven (to create steam which helps create the soft inside before the crusty outside bakes). Bake for about 30 minutes, until the bread is golden and crispy (it should sound hollow when tapped).

# Sautéed Fish

adapted from Saveur

On page 147, Viann reluctantly—and with many justifications—accepts a gift of freshly caught fish from Captain Beck.

## Ingredients

1 large onion, chopped

1 lb. potatoes, cubed

2 lbs. white fish fillet

preserved lemons

parsley

2 tbsp. oil or butter

salt and pepper

Salt and pepper the fish fillets, and set aside.

Heat oil or butter in a pan or skillet, and add in the onions and potatoes. Salt and pepper to taste, and sauté until nicely browned.

Move the potato cubes and onions to the sides of the pan to create a well for the fish. Place fish in the center of the pan and add slices of preserved lemons on top. Cook 5-10 minutes depending on the thickness of the fillet, until the fish is opaque. Serve sprinkled with fresh parsley and pan juices.

# Recommended Reading

## Fiction

*Sarah's Key* by Tatiana De Rosnay (St. Martin's, 2007)

*Skeletons at the Feast* by Chris Bohjalian (Shaye Areheart Books, 2008)

*The Invisible Bridge* by Julie Orringer (Knopf, 2010)

*The Garden of Letters* by Alyson Richman (Berkley Books, 2014)

*All That I Am* by Anna Funder (HarperCollins, 2012)

*A Bag of Marbles: The Graphic Novel* by Joseph Joffo Kris, adaptation; Vincent Bailey, illus.; Edward Gauvin, trans. (Graphic Universe, 2013)

*Those Who Save Us* by Jenna Blum (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005)

*The Kommandant's Girl* by Pam Jenoff (Mira Books, 2007)

## Nonfiction

*A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of World War II* by Sarah Helm (Doubleday, 2006)

*Beautiful Souls: Saying No, Breaking Ranks and Heeding the Voice of Conscience in Dark Times* by Eyal Press (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012)

*Diary of the Dark Years, 1940-1944: Collaboration, Resistance, and Daily Life in Occupied Paris* by Jean Guehenno; David Ball, annotator and trans. (Oxford University Press, 2014)

*Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* by Nechama Tec (Oxford University University Press, 2008)

*Michelangelo in Ravensbruck: One Woman's War Against the Nazis* by Countess Karolina Lanckoronska (Da Capo Press, 2007)

*The Forger: An Extraordinary Story of Survival in War-time Berlin* by Cioma Schonhaus; Alan Bance, trans. (Da Capo Press, 2008)

JBC Book Clubs, a program of Jewish Book Council, provides resources and support for book clubs interested in reading books of Jewish interest. On the Jewish Book Council website, find thousands of book reviews, discussion questions and discussion guides, thematic reading lists, and more. JBC Book Clubs is a one-stop shop to build and enhance your book club's conversations—let us guide you on your literary journey.

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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