

Emil and Karl

Yankev Glatshiteyn

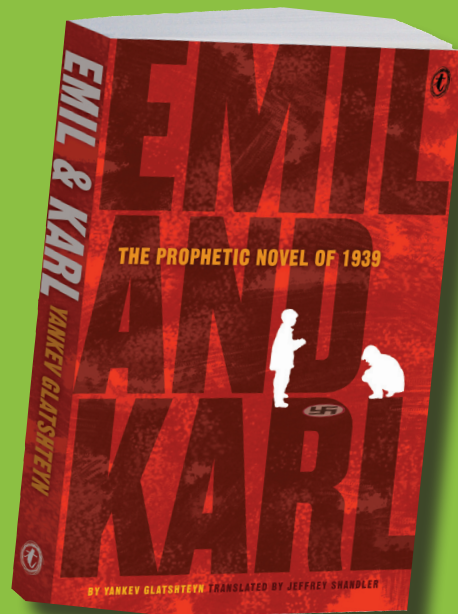
ISBN: 9781921351716

RRP\$ 19.95 Fiction paperback

Recommended for Secondary

Resource Kit Contains

- Synopsis
- Author Information
- Reading Exercises
- Debate and Essay Topics
- Questions for Discussion
- Writing Exercises
- Further Reading



Background and Synopsis

This story took place in Vienna, the capital city of Austria, in 1938, a year before World War II broke out but after Adolf Hitler, the Chancellor of Germany, had taken over Vienna. Hitler was a powerful and charismatic leader who believed, quite wrongly, that the Aryan race was the purest form of the German race. Therefore it became his mission to get rid of all Jews, Gypsies and those races he saw as 'yellow' or 'black' or generally inferior. He was not concerned with the Jewish religion as such but rather it was a racist attack on the Jews. Even Jews who had converted to other religions were targeted because they were not Aryans. Jews became the scapegoats who were blamed for all Germany's troubles.

As the war progressed, the Jews were sent to concentration camps where they underwent terrible torture and death in what was known as the Holocaust, or as the Nazis called it, 'the final solution'.

It was not only Jews who were persecuted by the Nazis, but also homosexuals and people whose religion would not let them in good conscience say 'Heil Hitler' (thus proclaiming that Hitler was absolutely right in all things). People were persecuted also for their political and social dissent. Groups like the Social Democrats, who were concerned for the poor and downtrodden, were also hunted and punished by the SA or storm troopers — soldiers who broke into people's homes and dragged them away to a certain death.

This story is about two nine-year-old boys — school friends who had been left to look after themselves. Emil was a Jew whose father had been murdered by the storm troopers and whose mother had no longer been able to cope with the horror of it all. Karl was an Aryan whose parents were Socialists. His father, too, had been

killed and his mother taken away, presumably to face the same fate.

The story tells of how they managed by themselves. They suffered terrible losses and sometimes torture, but also found good people who cared about them. But they underwent continual loss, not only of their parents but of the kind people who came into their lives. Nothing was ever certain and this lack of stability brought constant stress and fear and sometimes mistrust. There seemed to be nothing they could depend on.

This story is about suffering, bullying and mindless torture but is also about the resilience of children, which can help them to bounce back. It questions what causes people to behave cruelly and treat others like animals.

It is also about the need for love and for a sense of family. It is about the craving we all have for friendship. And despite all the horrible things that happen it is about the essential goodness of so many people.

Think about each of these issues as you read the book and make a note when they occur in the book. It is important that you read the Afterword, which starts on p 187.

Author Information

Yankev Glashteyn was born in Lublin, Poland in 1896. He was one of the major figures in the burgeoning Tiddish literary scene in New York City during the first half of the twentieth century, and a leading voice in early literary responses to the Holocaust

Activities

Before reading

1. Find a map of Austria and locate Vienna. What countries are close to it? If you have access to the internet look up pictures of Vienna, a very beautiful city.
2. Remember back to when you were nine years old. Write down your memories of the following things:
 - a. How much did you depend on your parents for your physical care?
 - b. How important were family relationships to you? Did you have grandparents or aunts and uncles who would look after you if your mother and father were away or sick? What about neighbours or family friends — how important to you were they?
 - c. What sort of things were you afraid of when you were nine? Who could you turn to for comfort when you were frightened?
 - d. How did you feel about the dark? What sort of stories did you make up?
 - e. What sort of games did you play with your mates?
 - f. How did you entertain yourself when you were alone?
 - g. Did you ever suffer any big loss at that age — the death of a friend or a family member or a pet? What helped you most to cope with this loss?
 - h. Have you ever been bullied at school? How did it make you feel? What did you do about it?
 - i. How does the weather affect your mood? Does your mood change in sunshine, grey skies, wind or rain? When you read the book notice how the weather can alter how Emil and Karl feel and even affect your feelings about what is going to happen next.

Close reading activities

Re-read chapter 1. The first page is very suspenseful. We don't know what has happened but we know it is bad. What is the effect of the short opening sentences? What is suggested by the broken vase and the overturned chair? Everything is still. Karl feels a chill. Notice how we find out about Karl's feelings before we discover the reasons for them.

It is important too that we see through Karl's eyes the relationship he had with his mother. Describe this in your own words.

What do we learn about Karl's character from this chapter?

How do we know that Karl is missing his mother terribly? Write about a time when you have missed someone? How did it feel?

Write down what you would do if you were in such a predicament. Why was Karl's situation harder than it might be even for you?

We usually expect adults to protect us from bullying. But in Chapter 2 we see that the adults are encouraging the bullying and they are being bullied too. What has made the teacher's behaviour towards Emil and Karl change? Can you sympathise with her behaviour? Is she right when she says all the children have been corrupted? How has this happened?

Already we have learned a lot about the personality of Karl. Write down two sentences which describe him.

Read p 14 again. It talks about the importance to Karl of his father's photo. This will be mentioned several times in the book. Why are memories so important to us? Make a list of memories that are important to you.

Several times in the book it is mentioned that Vienna has changed. Name three strange events that Karl notices in the street that emphasise this.

In chapters 4 and 5 we see how difficult it is for children to cope when their parents are unable to cope. It also shows the differences between Karl and Emil. Explain these differences. Where do you think Karl has got his strength and resourcefulness from? Why can't they find help from friends or relations?

We see that Karl and Emil are only two of thousands of abandoned children in Vienna. The rabbi feels that God has turned away from the Jews. Do you believe this is the reason for their suffering?

Berta and Josef are very good, kind people. And yet Berta is afraid. Self-preservation is a very strong instinct. How do you think you would have behaved if you had been in their shoes?

Re-read chapters 8 and 9 where the terrible account of the pavement scrubbing occurs.

What has happened to humanity here? What do you think makes the storm troopers do it? The old man says this is the right question to ask. Maybe it is the only way to stop it happening again.

Why does the old man sing and not want to leave the others?

Why does Karl tell Emil that he mustn't cry?

How do we see Karl's and Emil's longing for a loving relationship on p 74?

On p 79 their whole world seems to be collapsing. What has fallen apart so far in their lives?

Yet there is Berta's goodness. What does she mean on p 78 when she says, 'You can recognise good people but bad people all look the same.'

A park is a place for fun and leisure. The whole episode in the park is all the more terrifying because of that. The only amusement there was for Aryan children and adults to watch the terrorisation of the Jews. People were wanting to see their neighbours being tortured. Why do you think people talk of 'cleaning all the Jews out of our place' on p 84. Ethnic cleansing still takes place today. What does this term mean? In what context have you heard it used?

A colourful shower of paper falls on the park. FOR SHAME! DON'T LET THE AUSTRIAN PEOPLE BECOME ANIMALS! How had the Nazis in the park become like wild animals in their treatment of the Jews?

The aftermath of the pamphlets was even more frightening as storm troopers beat anyone who stooped to pick up a piece of paper. It degenerated into utter madness as mass hysteria took over. People were humiliated and seen as sub-human. They were made to behave like animals. It is here, on p 89 and the following pages, that we first see Hans. Write in your own words a detailed description of your first impression of Hans.

There is an element of suspense when the children meet the strange woman who promises to look after them. Why are they unwilling to trust her at first?

As they went towards Matilda's house there were premonitions of danger. Make a list of these frightening symbols.

The signalman in chapter 14 is a puzzle. Read this chapter again and then write a page which gives your impression of the signalman. Do you think he was a totally bad man or was he someone who believed what he had been told to believe? How much did he epitomise the behaviour of the German people who followed Hitler without thinking? Was he evil and frightening or had he just grown too tired and too old to struggle any more and had just given up? Why do you think the boys buried the pen knives that the signalman tried to give them? Does your attitude towards him alter by the time we last see him?

Do you think it is easier to believe what you are told than to think for yourself and follow your own conscience? What do Karl and Emil do?

On pp 115-116, Karl's delirium echoed his real feelings about his own identity. How is this shown? When Aunt Matilda had to go away, Karl believed that he would never see her again. It was a time of perpetual change. Nothing in their lives seemed stable or permanent or dependable. Matilda did return but only to repeat Karl's mother's statement that Vienna had become a completely different city and to tell the boys that tens of thousands of people had been locked up simply for telling the truth. However the power of goodness was shown in the true story of Hans and all the hundreds of people in the underground. In this context what does 'underground' mean?

In your own words describe the underground meeting. It is a symbol of light and hope to Emil. 'His eyes gleamed like a cat that could see into every dark corner with glowing eyes.'

They also learned for the first time about the unspeakable horror of concentration camps.

After Hans was taken away, the children were filled with desperate, if naively optimistic ideas of escape. When Matilda returned, she turned on the signalman. Why? When she realised her mistake she said, 'It's a terrible world, no one trusts anyone else.' Find other evidence for this mistrust in the book.

When Matilda could no longer safely care for the children she takes them at night through a wood to her sister-in-law. From there, they would go to a station to be evacuated to a sympathetic country in Europe. The children are frightened in the dark. How do the things that frighten the boys compare with the real causes for terror in Austria?

Read again p 175. Why do you think the mothers were not allowed to stay with their children on the last night?

What was the importance of the last little notes Emil and Karl wrote to each other? Matilda risked her life to get Hans' last note to the boys. What was the significance of the identical notes that they received and why was it so precious to them?

Symbols in the book

You have seen how the symbols of the overturned chair and the shattered vase created a feeling of foreboding in the opening pages of the book. Light is used as a symbol of hope and while shadows convey a sense of dread. Find 5 examples each of the use of light and shadow to create these feelings.

'You have to be very careful because a train can come by without warning.' The train is a very powerful symbol, particularly in the second part of the book. Remember that the boys were taken away to an unknown future by trains. Cattle trains were also used to take away the Jews to the dreaded concentration camps where they would find appalling suffering, starvation and death. Look at the way the trains are described on pp 99, 100, 101, 106, 139, and 144. Make a list of the way the trains are shown on these pages. What images make them things of dread, almost monsters?

Topics for debate

1. People can be made to believe anything if it suits their situation.
2. 'Each one of us is powerless by himself.'

Essay topics

1. 'It's a terrible world.'
'It's hard to believe there are no good people left in the world.'
Do you think this book is ultimately positive or negative in its view of humanity?
2. Aunt Matilda said, 'If you are going to daydream instead of keeping up with us, then we'll all fall down. We're all linked together.'
In what ways are the good people in this book linked together and how can this save them?
3. We all have a longing for close relationships, whether it be a need for family or a need for a close friend. How is this shown in this book?
4. 'The train goes Tra-ta-ta - Live!'
What evidence is there in the book that 'the living must continue to live in spite of their enemies'?

Topics for class discussion

1. Why do people have racist views? Do you see examples of it in your school or among your neighbours? On television and in the papers we read continually of the results of extreme racist views and the killing and terror that results. Is it inevitable or can people's attitudes be changed? How could you go about changing the racist views of person you know?
2. What is it that makes people bully others, either verbally or physically? How could you start a campaign against bullying in your school?

Creative writing

1. Write a story about what happens to Karl after he is evacuated. Where does he go? What is his family like? What becomes of him after the war?
2. Imagine Karl and Emil meet again five years after the war has ended and they are both twenty-one Write a conversation between them.
3. Imagine you are either Karl or Emil at the beginning of the book. Write a story telling what you did and what happened to you.

Other books to read

The Diary of Anne Frank

The Silver Sword by Ian Serraillier

