

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

VIENNA

1. What changes in Vienna disturb Lisa most? How do those changes affect Lisa and her family?
2. In what sense is Kristallnacht a “wake-up call” for Lisa’s family and other Austrian Jews?
3. To what extent was the decision to place Lisa on the Kindertransport an act of desperation? To what extent was it an act of courage? An act of faith?

LONDON

1. How did Lisa’s commitment to her music shape the choices she made in her first few months in the country?
2. How did Lisa inspire the other residents of Willesden Lane? What other examples of inspiration have you encountered in this story?

THE MUSIC

1. How did music shape Lisa’s identity?
2. Explore what Lisa meant when she said, “I want to make something of myself. I don’t want to be a servant. I want to learn something.”
3. What helped Lisa stay true to her music during the years she lived on Willesden Lane? What part did the Royal Academy of Music play in helping her maintain that commitment?
4. How did her relationship to her music change as the war came to an end? Why do you think the end of the war affected her music so deeply?

THE WAR

1. Why do people tend to come together in time of war or other crises? Explore the way a nation defines its identity at a time of crisis.
2. What is patriotism? How do you account for the rise in British patriotism among the residents of Willesden Lane?
3. How did the children of Willesden Lane respond to the declaration of war? Have you ever lived through a crisis? How did you respond? How did the people around you react?
4. How did Lisa’s life change at the end of the war? What qualities helped her survive the losses she experienced?

AFTER THE WAR

1. As Lisa is about to walk on stage for her debut, she thinks to herself about how much she has changed since the days she fantasized about playing in Vienna. To what extent has she achieved her dream? How is her life different from the one she dreamed of in Vienna? What parts of her life are unchanged by her experiences?
2. What did Lisa, Gina, and Gunter mean when they told Mrs. Cohen they would “always be the children of Willesden Lane?” How did their years at Willesden Lane help shape their identity?

Q & A with Mona Golabek

Why did you want to tell your mother’s story?

When I was a little kid, she taught me the piano, and she made it the most extraordinary experience. They weren’t really piano lessons; they were lessons about life. We’d be working on a Beethoven sonata and out of nowhere she would say, “Mona, did I ever tell you about the time that Johnny ‘King Kong’ read poetry to me at nighttime when the bombs came down?” Before she would answer the question, we’d go into a Chopin nocturne. And then out of nowhere she’d say, “What about when Aaron whistled the Grieg piano concerto to me at nighttime to comfort me?” And I thought, who were these amazing characters? One day when I was in my thirties, I was engaged to play the Grieg piano concerto with the Seattle Symphony. I thought, “Wow, this is the piece the kids would whistle when they would see her walking on Willesden Lane. This is the piece that tells the story of her life.” I knew I had to tell her story. I believed in my heart that if I could get it published, I could have the opportunity to inspire so many to the powerful messages in the story.

Is it possible to put into words how music contributed to your mother’s survival?

She would tell me how my grandmother, the woman for whom I’m named, gave her a gift at the Westbahnhof train station in Vienna, when she was put on the Kindertransport and sent away from Vienna to save her life. My grandmother looked at my mother, took her face in her hands, and said, “You must promise me that you will hold on to your music. It will be the best friend you ever have. I will be with you every step of the way when you’re playing that music.” It was that phrase at the train station that guided her through this dark period. Ultimately, she ended up at this Jewish hostel in the northern part of London, and she told me how her music became a beacon of hope and inspiration for these thirty kids. The music reminded them of what they had left behind and what they had lost.

What happened to your mother after she emigrated to America? Did she play in concerts?

My mother played some concerts, but she put her whole passion and soul into my sister, Renée, and me. And she taught piano—to many hundreds of students.

How do you think your mother’s experiences—in the Kindertransport, living at Willesden Lane, and losing her parents—affected her in life?

Those experiences made her very strong, yet very sensitive to other people’s pains and losses. They fueled her determination to make something of her life, so that she would forever honor her parents and their memory.

What did your father, Michel Golabek, do during the war? What did he do when he came to America?

My father, who was born in Poland, fought in the French Resistance during the war. He was one of the highest decorated Jewish Resistance of officers, receiving the Croix de Guerre from General Charles De Gaulle. When he came to America, he got odd jobs to survive. Eventually he saved money and bought a men’s sportswear factory. He became successful and bought real estate, also. But he never became the doctor he hoped to become before the war. That dream was cut short.

What was it like for you not having grandparents, and knowing how they suffered?

It is hard to miss what you have never known. But sometimes, when I was growing up, I envied other kids who had wonderful grandparents. I imagined what Malka, my grandmother, would have been like. Mostly, I felt so sad for my mother and father and for their losses at such a young age.

How old were you when your mother started telling you about her experiences in the Kindertransport?

I was seven years old. It was like a fairy tale, in a strange way. She told me the stories during my piano lessons with her. She would always tell me how each piece of music tells a story, and that’s what saved her life.

You and your sister, Renée, performed at the sixtieth reunion of Kindertransport children in London in 1999. What was that like?

That was an amazing experience. About one thousand people showed up for that event, and the late Richard Attenborough, the director, was the keynote speaker because his family took in two sisters from the Kindertransport. What was most touching was that my niece Sarah, who I think was nine years old at the time, said to the audience in a little squeaky voice, “I make a pledge to you that I will tell my children, so you will never be forgotten.” This is what it’s all about: who’s going to tell the stories when they’re gone? This year, 2015, I hope to perform at what will be the very last Kindertransport reunion.

Did your mother stay in touch with other children from the hostel later in life?

Yes. She wrote to many of the kinder; sometimes they spoke on the phone. Through the years, they saw each other on occasion. When I made my London debut, many of the kids

from the hostel sat in the first row and cheered Lisa's daughter, who came back to England to complete the dream!

Did you get to meet any of the children from the hostel?

Yes, I met Aaron, Gina, Gunter, Hans, and Paul. I knew Ricky, Gina and Gunter's son. We were the children of the refugees, and we heard the stories from our parents.

What did Sonia and Rosie and Leo and Esther do in the United States?

Everyone lived near each other in Los Angeles. The families supported each other through the years. Leo worked with my father in the factory. Rosie and Leo's daughter, Esther, grew up and became a cantor. Sonia had two children and lived across the street from my mother until she passed away in 1996; Lisa passed away the following year.

Did you ever get to meet Mrs. Cohen or Mr. Hardesty or Mrs. Canfield?

No, they died before I could meet them. But I met Hans, the son of Mrs. Cohen, when I returned to perform in London for the reunion of the Kindertransport. It was amazing. Hans, Renee, and I walked down Willesden Lane as he shared about the hostel and our mother.

Is your mother still alive?

No. I lost my mother a few years before the book was published. But I have to believe that somewhere she has heard the words of thousands of students across America who write to share their stories, poems, artwork, films.

Did you have other piano teachers besides your mother?

Yes. I studied with several outstanding pianists: Leon Fleisher, Reginald Stewart, and Joanna Graudan. But my mother was my true teacher and inspiration.

You established *Hold On to Your Music* to tell your mother's story to teachers and students. How much do students across the country know about what happened during the Holocaust?

Many of the students who read the book are not familiar with the Holocaust. However, each student responds powerfully to the universal themes of "man's inhumanity to man" and the horrors of the Holocaust. They relate it to world events today and to the struggles in their own lives. All the students respond to Lisa's struggle to survive through incredible losses, holding on to her music to give her strength through one of the darkest periods in history.

Many children of survivors comment that they try so hard to achieve so much because they feel they have to "make up" for all the relatives who died in the Holocaust. Do you find that to be true about yourself?

Absolutely! I think that is so true. All of us feel this incredible “weight” on our shoulders—to make something of our lives, to stand up and make a difference somehow, to take away the pain our parents held in their hearts.

How long did it take you to write *The Children of Willesden Lane*?

It took me many years to write the book—nearly ten. I started and then stopped and started again and reworked the manuscript several times.

What was Lee Cohen’s role in writing *The Children of Willesden Lane*?

Lee Cohen was my co-writer. He went to Vienna and London to research my mother’s story. He is a poet and screenwriter, and much of his work is about young people.