

OUR HOLOCAUST

By Amir Gutfruend

Translated by Jessica Cohen

First published in Hebrew by Kinneret, 2001

English translation published by The Toby Press, 2006

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel is the story of Amir and his cousin Effi, two Israeli children growing up in the Haifa suburbs in the 1970s who try to make sense of the impact of the Holocaust on their family. The children of survivors, Amir and Effi are repeatedly told that they are not “Old Enough” to understand what went on “Over There.” But the cousins are obsessed with understanding: They read library books, ask questions, snoop around, and read old letters, piecing together whatever they can. Their primary sources of information include an eccentric circle of relatives and acquaintances: penny-pinching Grandpa Lolek, Attorney Perl of the hardware store, and Gershon Klima the sewer cleaner. As time passes, Amir and Effi pursue their own lives: Amir gets married and has a son of his own, and Effi goes on to become a doctor. This book, which flashes forward and back between childhood and adulthood, offers a penetrating exploration of the impact of the Shoah on Israeli society and on childhood consciousness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Amir Gutfruend was born in Haifa in 1963. After studying applied mathematics at the Technion, he joined the Israeli Air Force. *Our Holocaust* was his first novel. It was awarded the Buchman Prize by Yad Vashem. His second novel, *Shoreline Mansions*, won the Sapir Prize in 2003, and his third novel, *The World, a Little Later*, was recently published in Israel. Gutfruend lives in the Galilee with his wife, a clinical psychologist, and their two children.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Amir Gutfreund has said, "Even if I write an instruction manual for a washing machine, it will always contain humor, and it will always contain the Holocaust. It's a part of me." How do you see this statement reflected in this thinly-veiled autobiographical novel?
2. There are several subterranean images in this novel, from the sewers that Gershon Klima cleans to the cellar of Grandpa Lolek's home. What do these underground areas signify in this story? Why are Amir and Effi so eager to excavate them?
3. What is the "Law of Compression"? How does it serve as a response to the Holocaust?
4. Gutfreund describes two Shoahs: the public one declaimed at school ceremonies by means of a siren, and the private one that involves his extended family (p. 49). What is the difference between the two Shoahs? What do they both have in common? How does this concept shed light on the meaning of the book's title?
5. Gutfreund writes, "The Holocaust extended its reach beyond the neighborhood. Traces of Shoah lurked in the most surprising places, like the little shops where Dad went to order wallpaper or buy light bulbs" (p. 85). What does he mean in saying that traces of the Shoah lurked in surprising places? Can you think of some examples in the book? Do you think the Shoah lurks as noticeably in America as it does in the Israel the Gutfreund describes? Why or why not?
6. In speaking of the period when he was finally Old Enough, Gutfreund comments, "We did not abandon the Shoah but we bundled it up into one single day like everyone else did. Holocaust Remembrance Day. Like a pile of leaves neatly raked" (p. 156). Do you think he is being critical of Holocaust Remembrance Day? How do you feel about this institution?
7. In telling his war story, Grandpa Yosef comments, "Today I am Shoah-smart, you could say, and I know that people like Adler were marked men from the beginning. Who would live? Who would die? Was there any way to predict? That's not what I'm saying. But there were those whose fate was marked on them from the beginning. The brazen would live, the pure would die" (p. 258). What does Grandpa Yosef mean by "Shoah-smart"? Do you think this is something of which he is proud? Is there any point to being "Shoah-smart" after the war is long over?



8. When Grandpa Yosef alludes to Yariv while telling his story, Gutfreund remarks parenthetically, "Suddenly, my Yariv, in the middle of the camps" (p. 263). Gutfreund's son Yariv was of course born many years after the war was over. So what does Gutfreund mean by this comment? How does it relate to the title of the book?
9. What is the difference in opinion between Gutfreund and Attorney Perl regarding the proper way to treat war criminals? Which side do you agree with, and why?
10. Gutfreund says that the people he most hates are those who were only doing their jobs – those who did not actually hate Jews (p. 364). Why are these individuals the most loathsome to him?
11. What is Gutfreund's reaction to the German washing machine that his wife brings home (see p. 373)? Are you familiar with this practice of boycotting German products? How do you feel about people who still do so today?
12. What is the Lebensborn that Hans Oderman describes (p. 400)? How does this relate to the Final Solution? Does Oderman's personal and academic interest in the Lebensborn remind you of another obsession in this book? What do you think Gutfreund is trying to show by suggesting this parallel?
13. Is Gutfreund a religious man? How does he account for his father's survival, and for the survival of those members of his family and community who share their stories?



REVIEW QUOTES:

Consider these quotes individually. What does each add to your understanding of Amir Gutfreund and his work? Do you agree with the claims they make?

"Amir Gutfreund wrote a wonderful book. He has a keen eye for observation, elegance of language and a captivating sense of humor. I can't wait for his next book!" --Meir Shalev

"A remarkable book, an impressive achievement as a literary creation and in its dealing with the subject matter without cliches or condescension, with psychological and social insights, black humor and a rare ability to tell a story. I read this book in one sitting."
--Haaretz

"Gutfreund's writing is brilliant, his teasing narrative mesmerizing, and the thought behind it subtle and extraordinarily limber in its shadings of Jewish life under the Nazis. This is no beginner's effort, but a powerhouse accomplishment rivaling Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum* or Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*."
--*The Seattle Times*

