

The Berlin Boxing Club Study Guide

The Berlin Boxing Club by Robert Sharenow

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Plot Summary

The book "The Berlin Boxing Club" by Robert Sharenow covers a five-year period in the life of Karl Stern, a fictional German teen who trains under real life German world champion boxer Max Schmeling. The novel is set during the early years of Hitler's rule. Although the members of Karl's family aren't practicing Jews, they have Jewish ancestry. At school Karl is branded as a Jew and eventually kicked out because of his lineage. Karl uses his boxing as a refuge as Hitler's rules and regulations on the Jews becomes more and more restrictive. However, his dream to be a championship German boxer is killed when it is discovered he is a Jew. Soon afterward, the Stern family is torn apart when their home is attacked during a night of looting by members of the Nazi party. When Karl's father is accused of being a traitor and thrown in jail, it is up to Karl to find a way to help his family.

Karl first meets Max at a showing at his father's art gallery. That day at school, Karl had been attacked by several older boys who beat him badly and push him down the stairs because of his Jewish ancestry. Max is the only one who questions Karl's story that he got his injuries by falling down the stairs. He offers to train Karl in boxing in exchange for a painting of him that Karl's father has in his possession. Karl does well in his boxing career until he faces off against one of the boys who beat him up at school. When it appears Karl will win the fight, during the German Youth Boxing Championship, the boy tells the judges that Karl is Jewish. Karl is disqualified from the tournament.

Meanwhile, Karl's family life is in disarray. He had struck up a friendship with a non-Jewish girl that ended in the Stern family getting evicted from their home. Business for Karl's father has been getting more and more sparse with one buyer even stealing a painting from Sig. Since his father is no longer able to earn a living through his art showings since Hitler has banned the art he prefers to sell, the family has moved into the art gallery. Because she looks Jewish, Karl's sister, Hildy, is getting more and more abuse from the Germans. Finally, Karl's father is badly injured and their home destroyed when Nazi followers go on a rampage, vandalizing and looting Jewish homes and businesses.

Karl hesitates to ask Max for help as he's never been sure where the champion fighter stood politically but finally decides to make a trip to Max's hotel. Max takes in Karl and Hildy, and helps locate their mother and father. While he was once Karl's hero, Max becomes Karl and Hildy's lifesaver as he pays their way to safety in America.



Part I: How I Became Jewish, First Round Knockout, and Winzig and Spatz

Summary

The novel “The Berlin Boxing Club,” is set in Berlin, Germany during the beginning years of Hitler’s reign. The main character, Karl Stern, is a Jewish teen who finds refuge during this tumultuous time in boxing. Through a barter arrangement, Karl gets the opportunity to take boxing lessons from Max Schmeling, a championship boxer. Themes in the novel include the increasing restrictions put on Jews by the Nazi regime and the development of the father/son relationship.

In the chapter “How I Became Jewish,” Karl details the final day of the school year. He is asked by his teacher to stay after school to help put the students’ final essays in alphabetical order. All Karl’s friends are gone from school by the time he is finished. He hears footfalls behind him as he leaves the building and runs because he knows it is a group known as the Wolf Pack, older boys who torment the Jewish students, coming after him. Although Karl’s family does not practice the Jewish religion or any other religion, the boys have learned he has a Jewish background. One of them, Gertz Diener, commands the others to pull down Karl’s pants, exposing his circumcised penis. The boys spit on Karl, scaring him so badly that he loses control of his bladder. The boys kick him down, then command that he get up and fight him.

In the chapter “First Round Knockout,” Karl tells the boys he doesn’t want to fight but they insist. He sees the boy they’ve set against him is scared as well. The boy, however, gets several good punches in on Karl before the teacher hears the commotion. Gertz orders Karl to say that he fell down the stairs, then pushes him. The fall hurts more than the fight and knocks out one of Karl’s teeth. As instructed, Karl tells the teacher he fell down the stairs.

In the chapter “Winzig and Spatz,” Karl tries to be quiet going into his apartment so he can get cleaned up before his sister and the housekeeper see him. Hildy, however, hears him when he steps in, calling for him by the name Spatz, her pet name for him. He tries to get into the bathroom without her seeing him, but she turns on the light and screams, alerting the housekeeper. He lies and tells them he fell down the steps. Frau Kressel, the housekeeper, helps him clean himself up. As he finishes cleaning up alone, Karl realizes the priority of his concerns for his life have been rearranged. While Hitler and the Nazis had been low on list of concerns, he now realizes they will have more of an impact on his life. In the kitchen, Karl helps his sister dilute wine and trim a moldy cheese wheel for their father’s gallery showing that night. She tries to discuss her concerns about the family’s financial status with him but he refuses to make her fears any worse. Instead, he prompts her to complete the call to action from her favorite cartoon, Winzig and Spatz.



Analysis

This novel is set in Nazi Germany at the beginning of Hitler's reign. Anti-Semitism is just beginning to take hold of the country. Even school children have picked up on this hate, as is demonstrated by the Wolf Pack's decision to attack Karl because they have learned he has Jewish ancestors. Ironically, though Karl does have Jewish ancestors, his family does not have any religious connections. His father is an atheist and his mother is agnostic. Karl argues that he does not even look Jewish, unlike his father, who has dark hair, small eyes and a large nose.

Karl's list of priorities tells a great deal about him. He has the general worries that normal teens have. He wants to put on weight. He wants to get rid of his acne. He wants a girlfriend, and has a particular non-Jewish girl in mind. Perhaps not as typical for a teen, Karl is also concerned about his family's financial situation. Although his father owns an art gallery where he hosts showings, both Karl and Hildy know business is not going well for their father. Although he's been watering down his wine for years, he's been having his children add more and more water to the wine as the years go by. They additionally can only afford moldy cheese for the showings, so the children are tasked with cutting the mold from the wheel of cheese to make it presentable. Hildy worries that their father won't sell any work at the night's showing, a fear that Karl shares but tries not to show when his sister is around.

Also significant aspect in this chapter is not only Karl getting attacked because he is believed to be Jewish, but also the way he reacted to this attack. He doesn't want to fight and is scared of getting hurt. Even though the boys set the smallest of their group against Karl, he still loses badly. His fear even causes him to lose control of his bladder. The bruises on his face, and smell on his pants are embarrassing reminders of his inability to defend himself. He hopes to sneak into the house and get himself cleaned up before his sister sees him and realizes that he was beaten so badly. He is embarrassed to admit to Hildy, or to his housekeeper, that he is not brave or strong. He tells those who ask — including his teacher and sister — that he fell down the stairs, using the excuse the members of the Wolf Pack gave him. Even when his housekeeper, with whom he is not embarrassed to be unclothed because she has taken care of him since he was a baby, asks for the truth, he will not give it to her.

Notice also the way the author presents the main idea of each chapter in a short chapter title that is often almost a humorous presentation of the action. For instance, in the first chapter, the title indicates the reader will learn how Karl became Jewish. In reality, it is a group of boys who decide Karl is Jewish, even though he doesn't practice the religion. Karl doesn't really have any influence on the decision. It was instead made for him.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author illustrate how difficult the financial situation has become for the Stern family?



Discussion Question 2

Consider the accusation made by Karl's schoolmates that he is Jewish. How do they decide Karl is a Jew? What are the points in Karl's argument that he isn't Jewish?

Discussion Question 3

Why doesn't Karl tell his teacher, or even his housekeeper, what really happened to him? Is his unwillingness to tell what happened out of fear? Embarrassment?

Vocabulary

caricature, tedious, copious, connotation, posthumously, penchant, anonymity, propaganda



Part I: Galerie Stern, Der Meister, and The Barter

Summary

In the chapter “Galerie Stern,” it is already late when Hildy and Karl arrive at their family’s art gallery. It is apparent that their father is angry with them. He doesn’t notice Karl’s bruised face. Business hasn’t been good at the gallery since the beginning of Hitler’s rule. Sigmund Stern, Karl’s father, had opened the gallery in the ’20s to showcase expressionist artists. These artists have fled Germany since Hitler has deemed their work illegal. Sig has begun showing government approved work, but sales are slow and Karl knows his father’s heart is not in it. When his father sends Karl down to the basement for some fliers about the featured artist, Hartzel, Karl notices a flyer on the floor about The Countess. He wonders about the flier but his father interrupts his thoughts by calling for the papers. Upstairs, Karl notices the gallery has filled up since he left. Hildy excitedly tells him that the boxing champ, Max Schmeling, is there.

In the chapter “Der Meister,” Karl notes how the atmosphere in the room has changed when Schmeling and his wife, the actress Anny Ondra, have entered. Karl is surprised when Max walks over to his father, giving him a handshake and hug. Karl’s father motions for Karl and Hildy. He introduces them to Max, who immediately recognizes Karl has a wide reach, a sign of a good boxer. When Karl offers to take Max’s coat, Max asks who got him, telling the boy he recognizes the marks of a fight. He tells Karl there’s no shame in getting hit, as long as he fought back, a comment that shames Karl. Karl asks Max not to tell his father. Max answers with a wink.

In the chapter “The Barter,” Sig talks Anny and Max into buying one of Hartzel’s paintings. Max tells Sig he’s also interested in owning the painting that Grosz did of him. Although Sig tells Max that painting isn’t for sale, Max convinces him to have Karl bring it upstairs by saying that Anny wants to see it. Once he is back upstairs, Karl holds the painting for the guests to see it. Anny and Max beg Sig to sell the piece. As his father tries to come up with a price, Max decides to offer a barter. He says he will give Karl private boxing lessons in exchange for the painting. Although he knows his father wants him to say “no” because the family needs the money, Karl agrees to the barter.

Analysis

Despite his bad day at school, Karl’s introduction to Max at the art gallery signals a point of change in his life. He’s never thought of himself as a fighter before, but when Max points out how long Karl can reach with his arms, and calls the boy a born champion, Karl considers the idea that he might be good at something. He takes a chance in going against the wishes of his father when he agrees to the boxing lessons. While the family



could desperately use the money that Sig could get by selling the painting, payment will instead come in the form of boxing lessons.

Some information is given in these chapters about the strain in the relationship between Karl and his father. Karl's father is already angry with him and Hildy when they get to the gallery late. He doesn't notice the injuries on Karl's face and doesn't show any concern when he does notice them. In fact, Sig seems to believe Karl's lie that he hurt himself by falling down the stairs. Sig openly embarrasses Karl by commenting to Max that the boy is uncoordinated and not a sportsman. Max, however, seems to disagree when he comments about the length of Karl's arms and indicates that he has the makings of a champion.

It is interesting that although Sig had told his son he'd been friends with Max for some time, Karl hadn't really believed it until he saw the two interact with one another at the art gallery. Sig had told Karl that when Karl was just a baby, Max had made regular trips to the gallery. It seems that Karl thought his father was lying to him, or at least misrepresenting the truth to him, for years. As Karl watches his father and Max greet each other, then share a laugh, he seems to realize the stories he's been told must be true.

Notice also in this section that Karl shows growing concern for his mother. He had expected to see her in the gallery, or downstairs running the printing press, but she is in neither of these places. When Hildy approaches him, excited because of who has arrived, Karl thinks at first it is his mother. Although Karl is concerned for his mother, he doesn't ask his father about her, and no mention is made.

Significant also in this section is the flyer that Karl picks up from the floor of the gallery basement. The flier advertises something that appears to be a party given by a person referred to only as The Countess. Karl wonders why his parents are printing fliers such as this, but his thoughts are cut short by Max's offer to teach him to box.

Discussion Question 1

What has caused the changes in Sigmund Stern's art business? Why does he have so many paintings he can't sell?

Discussion Question 2

What does Karl learn about his father in this section of the novel? What is your first impression of Karl's father?

Discussion Question 3

What roles do Hildy and Karl serve at the art gallery?

Vocabulary

degenerate, dissipated, periphery, gallantly, furtive, barter



Part I: Boxing Lesson No. 1, Uncle Jakob, and Drawing in on Max

Summary

In the chapter “Boxing Lesson No. 1,” after the crowd has left the gallery, Hildy and Karl wrap up the paintings for Max. Hildy comments about Anny’s beauty, saying she wishes she were getting beauty lessons. Once the two are back upstairs, Max bounces a small rubber ball to Karl. He comments that the boy has decent reflexes. He tells Karl to exercise his hands using the ball daily. Max also instructs Karl to see if he can take over shoveling the coal for his building’s furnace, an exercise to build his arm and shoulder muscles. Finally, he tells the boy he needs to be able to do the three hundred, a basic for boxers consisting of one hundred pushups, one hundred sit ups, fifty chin ups and fifty minutes of running.

In the chapter entitled “Uncle Jakob,” Karl hears voices when he, his father and Hildy return home from the gallery. Frau Kressel takes Hildy and directs Sig and Karl to the kitchen where Karl’s mother is trying to remove a bullet from her brother’s left buttock. When she is finally successful, Sig demands to know what is happening. Rebecca, however, ignores him when she sees Karl’s beaten face. Jakob begins telling Sig they were having a meeting but Sig interrupts him, telling Karl to go to bed. Jakob tries to get Sig to allow Karl to stay, but Sig demands Karl go. Karl hopes his uncle will stand up for him but he does not.

In the chapter “Drawing in on Max,” Karl tries to hear what is being said in the kitchen from his bedroom but is unable to do so. He knows his uncle is part of a communist group trying to fight the Nazis. He assumes Karl was trying to flee one of these meetings when he was shot by the Gestapo. Jakob leaves about an hour after Karl was sent to bed. Karl lies awake thinking about his evening and Max. Because he won the world heavyweight title in 1930, Max is the most respected man in Germany besides Hitler.

Later, Karl hears his parents talking about the evening in their bedroom. Because she is afraid he will be hurt, Rebecca asks Sig to tell Max that Karl has decided he doesn’t want the boxing lessons. Sig argues it will be too awkward to try to go back on the deal now, and tells Rebecca that Karl wants the lessons. He reminds her that Karl looks as if a breeze could knock him over and tells her that he wants Karl to be able to defend himself. When Rebecca mentions Karl’s accident, Sig tells her Karl might have fallen down the stairs but had done so after he was beaten and pushed down the stairs.

Rebecca reminds Sig of Karl’s gift for art. While Sig hoped his son would be an artist, he did not want him to be a comic strip illustrator, as Karl did. To help himself sleep, Karl draws a caricature of Max. As he draws, he realizes how much Max looks like a Jew. He



wonders if he, like Max, might be the next champion boxer. In his dreams that night, Karl dreams that he wins a boxing match against all three members of the Wolf Pack.

Analysis

Much more information is given about Karl's family in this section of the novel. The author is clever in his method of dispersing facts about the family throughout the action of the novel. His technique keeps the novel from dragging with expanded sections of family history, but still gives the reader a full picture of the characters and events of the novel. For instance, because he is at their home having a bullet removed from his rear, the reader learns that Karl's Uncle Jakob is a member of the Communist or Red movement. These "Reds" are trying to organize against the Nazi party. Karl is ordered out of the room so he can't hear what is being said, but he thinks over his suspicions in his room. Their act of sending him out of the room shows that Karl's parents are trying to protect him from the reality of the situation, along with the danger involved in associating with people involved in any opposition groups. Sig is angry that his wife has even allowed her brother into their home, much less given him medical attention. Because the Reds are opposed to the Nazi party, having Jakob in their home could cause them to be arrested and thrown into prison if he were found there.

Rebecca's loyalty to her brother flows smoothly into the author's description of her personality. Although she is described as being quiet and possibly even submissive, Karl knows his mother's lack of energy and quiet nature comes from depression. He tells of times she would sleep or soak in a hot tub for hours as she seemed to be pulled down by what he describes as a "lead blanket." He admits these spells are scary, but they never affect the household much because Frau Kressel was in charge of much of the running of the house and care of the children.

It is when Karl's parents discuss his boxing lessons that some more information about Rebecca and her family is tucked into the novel. The reader learns that Karl has the gift of art, believed to have come from his grandfather on his mother's side of the family. Karl's mother had this gift as well and had worked as a painter until she was married, at which point she claimed to have lost interest in her art. Karl's father told him at one point that Rebecca did not have temperament for art. Although Karl's father supports his son's desire to be an artist he does not understand his son's chosen art genre. While Sig hopes Karl will be a great artist like some of the expressionist artists for whom he has gallery shows, Karl wants to be a comic strip illustrator.

The outward appearance becomes a theme in this section of the novel. One of the first references to one's outward appearance comes when Hildy mentions to Karl that she wishes Anny had offered her beauty lessons. This is the first time that Karl became aware that Hildy was unhappy with her appearance. She is short and dark with dark hair. When Anny comments on Hildy's beauty before she and Max leave the gallery, her kindness seems to inflate Hildy's self-image somewhat. Another comment about outward appearance comes when Karl sketches Max as he tries to go to sleep. As he studies his newly found hero's facial characteristics, Karl realizes that Max looks more



like a Jew than Hitler's idea of the perfect Aryan. Although his looks aren't ideal, Max is one of the most respected men in Germany, second only to Hitler, because he earned the world heavyweight boxing championship. As he also has a Jewish background, Karl takes hope that he, too, might be respected instead of being despised.

Discussion Question 1

What new things are learned in this section about Karl's parents and their relationship with their children?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Karl's uncle is a member of the communist party? What does this mean for Karl's family?

Discussion Question 3

What is unusual about Max's appearance? Why is Karl so impressed by the way Max looks?

Vocabulary

indulgence, superficially, pensive, advocated, emulate, protégé, prone



Part I: Greta, Principal Munter, and The Return of Piss Boy

Summary

In the chapter “Greta,” Karl wakes up early the following morning to begin his work on the three hundred. However, he is only able to do 17 push-ups and 2 chin-ups, but does manage 80 sit-ups and 45 minutes of running. He figures his total for the first day has come up to 143, quite a bit shy of the required three hundred. He makes a trip to the basement to ask Herr Koplek if he can shovel the coal. The superintendent seems afraid he will steal the coal and threatens him. He agrees to allow Karl to do the shoveling but stands and laughs at him during his first attempt. As he is almost finished, Karl hears a girl behind him referring to him as “Vulcan at his forge.” It is Greta Hauser, the girl whom he wants to date.

In the chapter “Principal Munter,” it has been months since Karl’s father made his deal with Max. Karl has been making steady progress toward the three hundred but is beginning to doubt he’ll hear from Max again. Although he has gotten stronger, Karl still dreads going back to school. On the first morning of the new school year, there is an address in the auditorium. The school’s new principal, Herr Munter, introduces himself. More students are wearing Nazi uniforms and symbols. The principal notes in his address that school policy will be less lenient toward negative influences and that all Jewish material and references have been removed from the curriculum.

In the chapter “The Return of Piss Boy,” Herr Boch, Karl’s teacher, does not put a great deal of effort into integrating Nazi ideals into his teaching. Although other Jewish boys in the school are being hazed because of their Jewish looks, Karl is mostly left alone because he doesn’t look Jewish. He avoids the Wolf Pack, but one day these boys follow him into the bathroom. He surprises the boys by being able to pull away from them, but the boys later overpower him and dunk his head in the toilet after they have all urinated into it.

Analysis

Although he’s very weak when he starts on his work to complete the three hundred, Karl is diligent in making progress toward the goal that Max has set for him. He increases his count from 143 to 225 during the months of Max’s absence. He’s also making progress on developing his muscles by shoveling the coal.

It is when Karl requests permission to shovel the coal that he introduces a colorful character who lives in his building. Herr Koplek is the building supervisor to whom Karl goes to request permission to shovel the coal. He is a hard cast supporter of Hitler. Karl’s parents believe that Herr Koplek is an imbecile. They have characterized him as



the type of person who would be caught up in the “sword rattling and chest pounding” of the Hitler regime. Koplek, on the other hand, seems to think Karl’s family is made of liars and cheats. He doubts that Karl’s father knows Max, states that Sig must have tricked Max into buying a painting from him and accuses Karl of asking to shovel the coal so he can steal it.

Karl’s coal shoveling gives him an opportunity he never thought he’d have. While he’s shoveling the coal on the first day, he encounters Greta Hauser, the girl whom he’d like to date. Greta flirts with him, referring to him as the “Vulcan at his forge.” Karl is obviously smitten with her as he struggles to put together adequate responses to her questions and comments. She overlooks his struggling.

As time goes by and Max doesn’t make any attempt to contact Karl, he begins to wonder if he will get the promised lessons. He knows that Max is back in Berlin but has still not gotten in touch about lessons. Even Hildy voices the opinion that she doesn’t think Max will ever call. Despite his uncertainty in Max and doubt in his new hero, Karl continues to do his exercises and increase his strength in preparation for lessons.

Once Karl is back in school, things have changed. The principal has been replaced because he would not bow to the Hitler regime. The new principal leads the students in salutes to Hitler and is actively cleansing the school from Jewish influences. Because he does not have the physical characteristics that the other Jewish boys do, Karl avoids a great deal of hazing, but is still attacked again by the Wolf Pack. Most interesting in this section is the decision of Karl’s teacher, Herr Boch, to continue teaching in the traditional way. Although one of the boys asks Boch if experiments completed in a particular experiment about the types of blood were done on Aryan blood only or other types as well, Boch does not humor this line of thinking. He tells the boy that all human blood is the same.

Discussion Question 1

How does Karl’s opinion of Max change as he makes progress on the three hundred, but does not hear from Max even though he knows the prizefighter has returned to Berlin?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the changes that have taken place in Karl’s school during the summer. Why does Karl perform the salute to Hitler like all the other boys even though he is a Jew?

Discussion Question 3

How is Karl’s run in with the Wolf Pack in this section of the novel different from his first encounter with this group? In what ways has Karl changed?

Vocabulary

regimen, avowed, imbecile, bemused, oblivious, meticulously, integrate



Part I: Barely Floating, and The Countess

Summary

In the chapter “Barely Floating,” it has been six months since Max promised to give Karl lessons in exchange for a painting. Since he hasn’t heard from him, Karl has decided Max has forgotten about their deal. He continues to work out for spite, hoping maybe to find another coach who would agree to train him. He imagines himself defeating Max in the boxing ring in retaliation.

In February, the family is forced to fire Frau Kressel because they can no longer afford to pay her. Hildy, along with Rebecca, takes the news hard. Rebecca stays in the tub most of the evening on which Kressel leaves. Sig has instructed the children to knock on the bathroom door every ten minutes to be sure she has not fallen asleep in the tub. After dinner, Hildy checks on their mother, but gets no answer. She calls for Karl who opens the door to find their mother floating with her face barely above the water. They get her out of the tub and to her bed. Once their father is home, he orders Hildy to make her some tea, and then tells Karl he must make a delivery for him.

In the chapter “The Countess,” Karl is excited because he believes he will finally have the opportunity to see what sort of documents his parents are printing for their customers. He imagines some sort of black market advertisements or announcements for a resistance movement. Karl’s father helps him hide the package in his rucksack and gives him the address to which he should deliver the package. He refers to the person only by the name the Countess. As Karl walks, he becomes more and more curious about what is in the package. He finally stops in an alley to look. The fliers have the image of two men dancing together and instructions on how to get admittance to a secret ball. Karl is disgusted by the idea that his father is working with some sort of homosexual group.

When the Countess comes to the door to receive the package, Karl realizes the Countess is actually a man. He tries to control his shock. The man asks if he is Karl, and when he realizes he is, his manner changes from a flirtatious one to one of interest and affection. Karl asks the Countess how he knows his father. The Countess says Karl’s father is a great man and that they go way back. A boy calls the Countess for his supper. Before he leaves, the Countess gives Karl some extra money. On his way home, Karl wonders if his father is homosexual, if that might be the reason for his mother’s emotional distress. At home, Karl is surprised to see his father and Max sitting together at the table. Max apologizes for his long absence, and then asks Karl if he is still interested in lessons.



Analysis

While Karl's relationship with his father has been tentative up to this point and his knowledge of his father scarce, Karl believes that he learns some very negative information about his father in this section of the novel. Because his mother almost drowns in the tub, Sig sends Karl out on a delivery. While Karl has known that his parents have been selling printed material that they made on their own press for years, he did not know the content of this material. Although his father tells Karl he doesn't need to know what is on the sheets he will deliver, Karl sneaks a peek anyway. What he sees are invitations to what appears to be a homosexual dance party. This sets Karl's mind in a whirl. He is disgusted that his father would make money off such a thing, and offended because he assumes his father is active in a homosexual lifestyle. He wonders if his father's hidden sexual orientation might explain why his mother is sick so often, because she is basically living a lie.

After Karl meets the Countess, a transgender man, he has even more doubts about his father's sexual persuasion. He is disgusted that his father knows such a person and wonders what sort of relationship the two men had with one another. Even though the Countess is extremely kind to him, even giving him extra money for the delivery, Karl pulls away from him and leaves almost rudely.

Also in this section of the novel, the Stern family has had to let Frau Kressel go, as they can no longer afford to pay her salary. This is another sign of how bad things have become in the Stern family monetarily. Because of his mother's illness, the housekeeper has basically raised Karl and his sister Hildy. They worry who will take care of them with the woman who was essentially their nanny gone and their mother in the habit of spending days in bed and hours in the tub. Rebecca's grief is so great that she retires to the tub. Even though the children check on her regularly, as instructed, she falls asleep and almost drowns.

Despite all the bad news and confusing signals that Karl has had to deal with in the final two chapters of this first part of the novel, there is some good news. When he returns home from his delivery to the Countess, he finds that Max has come to his house to visit. He has remembered his promise to Karl and has come to see if the boy is ready to start his boxing lessons.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the Stern family have to let Frau Kressel go? What does this mean for the family?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the Countess. Discuss his possible relationships with Karl's father.



Discussion Question 3

What does Karl find in the package that his father has sent him to deliver? What conclusions does he draw from it?

Vocabulary

prone, liquidate, covert, furtively, flamboyant, affectation



Part II: The Berlin Boxing Club: Pandora's Box; Learning to Stand, Breathe, and Eat; and Neblig and Joe Palook

Summary

In the chapter "The Berlin Boxing Club," Karl makes his first trek to Max's club, which is located on the top floor of a textile factory. Worjyk, the owner of the club, tries to throw Karl out because he isn't a member. Max comes into the club just in time to introduce Karl as his new protégée. Max instructs Neblig to set Karl up with a locker and some gear. Since Karl has no gloves, Neblig gives him an old pair of his. When Max learns Karl has not been in any fights, he asks Johann, a boxer who is practicing in the ring, to spar with him. In his first attempt to get into the ring, Karl trips and kicks over the spit bucket, causing the men to laugh at him. As the men continue to laugh at him, Karl gets angry. He begins throwing punches at Johann and even connects with one. Max praises him after they are finished, telling him he has a natural jab. Max gives Karl the book *Boxing Basics for German Boys* and tells him they'll work on some skills in the next lesson.

In the chapter "Pandora's Box," Greta comes to the basement again that night when Karl is shoveling the coal. He is finally able to share with her that he's training to box. He is disappointed she isn't more impressed. She continues flirting with him and kisses him. They kiss until they hear the sound of someone else breathing. They look to see Herr Koplek watching them. Greta hurries off. The two don't see each other for a week until Karl meets her on the way home from school and they go to an art supply store together. In the back of the store, they kiss. Karl slips up and tells Greta his family is Jewish, a fact of which she was unaware. She says it doesn't matter to her but would to her parents. They decide to meet each week at a park across from her school.

In the chapter "Learning to Stand, Breathe and Eat," Karl continues to train at the Berlin Boxing Club. Worjyk has taken to call him Knochen, meaning bones. Some of the hardest things for Karl to master are what seems to him should be the easiest things, like making a proper fist, the proper stance, and eating properly. He enjoys the discipline of the boxing life. Karl notices that Max rarely voices any opinion on politics. One day when the other boxers try to involve Max in a discussion about Hitler winning a boxing match, Max refers to the leader in terms of fighting. As time goes by, Karl begins to see changes in his body, increases in muscles and mass. He sometimes lets his sister help measure his width and girth. During one of the measuring sessions, Hildy jokes with Karl telling him that his head has swollen as well.



In the chapter “Neblich and Joe Palooka,” Neblich becomes Karl’s cheerleader and friend at the club while the others play pranks on him. Neblich and Karl share a love for comic strips. Neblich shares American comic strips with Karl while Karl shows Neblich the strips he has designed. They compare and contrast the famous boxers of the day. Neblich, however, can’t fight because he is blind in one eye. Karl practices his fighting with the adult boxers and slowly his technique develops. One day he is able to get a hit in on Johann’s solar plexus. Max and Worjyk tell Max he’s ready to fight in a real Youth Boxing Tournament.

Analysis

The majority of the text in these chapters deals with Karl’s training and development into a good boxer. Although Max tells the boy he has a natural jab, Karl struggles with what he feels are the more simple aspects of boxing, like proper stance and thumb position. After sparring with the adult boxers at the boxing club and finally being able to land a good blow on Johann’s solar plexis, Max and Wrojyk decide that Karl is ready for a real match.

Also in this section, Greta comes to the basement again while Karl is shoveling coal. Karl is ready for her and talks more intelligently. Greta surprises Karl by kissing him but they both get surprised when they realize that the building supervisor is watching them. When they see each other a week later, Greta tells Karl she is worried that Herr Koplek has said something to her father about what he saw in the basement. She says he’s asked if she’s been seeing any strange boys. Prompted by her mention of strange boys Karl asks if Greta’s father doesn’t like him because his family is Jewish. Greta was unaware that the family was Jewish but says it doesn’t matter to her. They agree to meet at a park across from Greta’s school. Note also Herr Koplek’s snide remark that he makes to Karl after Greta leaves the basement. He seems both jealous of and amused by the compromising situation in which he finds the two teens.

Note the mention of Pandora’s box in the title of the chapter in which Greta and Karl begin their relationship. The reference is obvious as the two discuss Greek gods and goddesses. The conversation between the two moves to Pandora and Pandora’s box. In the story, Pandora opens her box, letting out all of the evil into the world. In a way, Greta and Karl are opening a Pandora’s box by starting their hidden relationship. Their relationship, between a Christian and a Jew, are considered evil by the world. The relationship will also turn out to be an evil one for Karl and his family as the novel progresses.

Notice also the relationship between Hildy and Karl as she helps him to train for his boxing career. He has a daily routine of measuring his biceps and chest to see if his workouts are improving his girth. In what appears to be a compliment, Hildy tells him he’s definitely getting bigger. When her brother takes the bait, Hildy tells him his head is getting bigger as well and asks if he wants her to measure that, her way of telling him he’s getting a little stuck on himself.



Discussion Question 1

Of the skills that Max teaches Karl, which ones does he find the most difficult to master? Why?

Discussion Question 2

How do the others at the Berlin Boxing Club treat Karl when he first goes to the club? How does their treatment of him change?

Discussion Question 3

At what point do Max and Worjyk decide that Karl is ready for a real boxing match?

Vocabulary

guttural, quipped, demeaning, audibly, ascend, perverted, intercepted, muse, vulnerable, stance, font



Part II: A Prayer: Uniform Shirts and Rotten Apples; The Secret History of Jewish Boxers; and Stern vs. Strasser

Summary

In the chapter “A Prayer,” Greta and Karl meet each other in the park across from her school each week. They share their hopes and dreams with each other. Greta dreams of going to France. When Karl tells her about his upcoming boxing match, she is unhappy and tells him she doesn’t understand why someone would want to risk getting hurt for no reason. He explains boxing seems safer than the real world as there are rules in boxing that don’t exist in the real world. These rules give him a chance of winning, he says. Greta promises to say a prayer for Karl. As they walk toward their apartment together, Greta and Karl see two of his friends from school. Karl isn’t sure if they saw the two holding hands, but they act as if they suspect something is going on between the two.

In the chapter “Uniform Shirts and Rotten Apples,” Karl’s boxing keeps him distracted from the family’s financial situation. His father’s art business is getting slower and slower. He’s able to offer less and less money to buy art, and is forced to sell it for less than it’s worth. School becomes more and more difficult for Karl as more of his friends join the Hitler Youth program. He wishes he could join the organization just so that he wouldn’t feel like such an outcast. One night when he returns home from the gym he hears Hildy crying in her room. She tells him the girls at school call her a rotten apple because of a book they are forced to read. In this book Jewish people are referred to as rotten apples. He rips up the book and takes it to the basement where he has Hildy throw it in the furnace.

In the chapter “The History of Jewish Boxers,” Karl passes Herr Greenburg’s art supply store to discover two young Nazi posting a sign on the business ordering people not to buy from Jews. Greenburg reminds one of the boys that his mother and grandmother did business with him. The boy spits on him and tells him not to talk about his mother. After the incident, Karl takes out his frustration on the punching bag at the gym. After he’s finished, he notices a magazine featuring Jewish boxers in the dressing room. He learns from the magazine there have not only been Jewish boxers, but Jewish world champions. He borrows the magazines from Neblig. As he reads in bed that night, he is captivated by a profile of Barney Ross. He’d wanted to be a scholar until his father was murdered. It was then that he became a fighter hoping to reunite his family by winning in the ring. He tears a picture of Ross from the magazine to put up on his wall.

Karl learns Ross had been scheduled to fight against Jimmy McClarnin. He wonders who won, but he is scared to ask as he is afraid the men at the gym will suspect he is a Jew. He overhears the men talking about aspiring fighters. When Ross and McClarnin



are mentioned Karl takes the opportunity to ask what happened and learns that Ross had beaten McClarnin. Karl believes this win bodes well for Jews.

In the chapter "Stern vs. Strasser," on his way back from a delivery the night before his first fight, Karl is accosted by Greta in the hallway of their apartment building. She gives him her clover charm for good luck. Just before the fight, Woryjk gives Karl a new pair of boxing gloves. The next day at the fight, Karl chokes up during the first part of his first real fight. He forgets everything he learned, then throws up into the spit bucket at his first break. He gets his courage back in the second round when he realizes how softly the other boy is hitting him. Karl goes on to win his first competition. Karl is disappointed only because his Uncle Jakob has told Karl he would attend the fight, but never showed up.

Analysis

Karl finds a new hero during this section of the novel. He learns about a Jewish boxer named Barney Ross who has won a world championship. Karl doesn't like Ross just because he has won the championship. He learned about the fighter in a magazine borrowed from Neblig and Ross's story seems similar to Karl's. Ross became a boxer only after his father was killed and his family separated because he was a Jew. Before he decided to begin boxing in order to earn money to get his family reunited, Ross had wanted to be an Orthodox scholar, like his father. When Karl learns that Ross did indeed win the championship, he believes this is good news for Jews. He thinks that if a Jew is able to win this type of award, things cannot be too bad for their people.

It is noted in this section that relations between the Jews and the Nazis are continuing to worsen. Karl feels the stress as he sees more and more boys wearing the uniform of the Hitler Youth at his school. He is jealous of the boys who wear the uniform because he is at the age that he doesn't want to be different from others. Although he doesn't really believe in the Nazi cause, just as he and his family don't practice Judaism, Karl feels his lack of a uniform makes him stand out from the others. Hildy, who looks like a Jew with her dark hair, is feeling more of the brunt of the hatred toward the Jews because it is so obvious she has Jewish blood. She is tormented by students at her school after the teachers have their students reading a book that compares Jews to rotten apples. When Karl hears his sister crying and reads the book, he takes her to the basement where he helps her burn the offending book. Karl's act of having his sister burn the anti-Jewish book is his way of showing her they can revolt against the forces that are causing them such pain and misery. Just as Hitler and the Nazis can burn books, artwork and other items they find offensive, so can he and Hildy, he reasons.

Despite all of the turmoil in Karl's home life, he proves himself at his first fight. Karl gets a rough start, however, as his nerves get the best of him and he goes blank when he first walks into the ring. It appears he might lose the competition but Karl manages to get charge of himself in the second round to win his first fight. The only disappointment to Karl is that his Uncle Jakob, the only person in his family who has shown any interest in his fighting did not attend the competition even though he promised he would.



Interesting in this chapter is Karl's discussion with Greta about the reasons why he wants to box. She only sees it as putting oneself in harm's way for no reason, but Karl explains that in the boxing ring, he feels as if he has a chance to win his battles. The rules in the ring are the same for everyone whether they are Jews, Christians, black or white. Karl is learning that life outside the boxing ring is anything but fair. It is understood why he is uncertain about where he stands in the world as he and his family are being punished for their Jewish ancestry even though they are not practicing members of the religion.

In another point of interest concerning Greta and Karl, notice that she seems worried because her father has asked her if she has been seeing any strange boys. She is afraid that Herr Koplek has mentioned seeing the two teens together in the basement to her father. When Karl lets it slip that he is Jewish, Greta tells him that doesn't matter to her. They agree to continue to meet each other and set up a rendezvous spot at a park near Greta's school. Even though neither Greta nor Karl are concerned because of their relationship or Karl's Jewishness, it will soon spell trouble for them.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Hildy get more abuse at her school than Karl does at his?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Karl's new hero, Barney Ross. In what ways are he and Ross similar? In what ways are they different?

Discussion Question 3

How does Karl help Greta understand why he wants to fight? Is his argument sound?

Vocabulary

impediment, dejected, dexterity, fixated, hierarchy, surreptitious, indignantly, jollity, putrid, stymied, visceral, sniveling, welterweight, angular, omen, pummeled, regalia



Part II: Concentration; A Real Fighter; Early Dismissal; and Bertram Heigel

Summary

In the chapter “Concentration,” it begins raining right after Karl’s fight. The fights are canceled and Karl runs home, excited to share his success with someone. Hildy is happy for him and has drawn a cartoon in celebration of his win. Hildy tells him also that their mother got a phone call that had upset her. She’s gone out to find their father. It is 11 p.m. before their parents return home. They are arguing about hiring a lawyer. They tell the children that Uncle Jakob has been put in jail because of his political group. Hildy is worried they will be arrested as well. Rebecca tells Sig they need to do something, they need to leave, maybe go to America. Sig tells her they don’t have the money they need to go to America. Sig persists in believing that everything will just blow over. They argue until Sig leaves. Rebecca bursts into tears and sends Hildy and Karl to bed. Karl works on a drawing of Strasser, the boy he beat in his first fight, then tries to distract himself by reading his boxing magazines. His mother is still crying when he goes to sleep.

In the chapter “A Real Fighter,” the family is unable to communicate with Uncle Jakob but gets rumors of what happens to prisoners at Dachau, where he is being held. Rebecca stays in either the bathroom or her bedroom. Karl takes solace in the gym. In his first visit to the gym after his win, he is surprised when Worjky and Neblig don’t say much about his win. One of the men throws his glove at Karl, and then all the men do so. They congratulate him and slap him on the shoulders. From this point, Karl continues to develop as a fighter. He gains respect in the ring. After his tenth fight, one in which the other boxer gives him some real competition, Worjky comments that Karl may become a real fighter some day.

In the chapter “Early Dismissal,” a special assembly is called at his school. The principal teaches them about the Nuremberg Laws. Then, Karl and several other boys are singled out because they are Jews. These boys are expelled from school. The members of the Wolf Pack attempt to beat up Karl but he is able to outrun them. Another boy who is a Jew, Benjamin, is not as lucky. He knows his new fighting ability is not any good against a dozen boys. He sees a police officer and considers asking for help but realizes that because he is a Jew, the police might begin beating him. He realizes how vulnerable he is because of his Jewish blood.

In this chapter “Bertram Heigel,” it is decided Karl and Hildy will begin attending Jewish schools. One evening as Karl is drawing a comic his father sends him on a delivery to the Countess. Surprisingly, a man answers the door. He asks for the Countess or Fritz. The man tells him that Fritz no longer lives there. The way the man speaks makes Karl realize it is the Countess to whom he is speaking. He introduces himself as Bertram Heigel. He tells Karl he probably won’t have any more balls, but he will pay for this



delivery. Bertram asks Karl if he knows how he and his father met. He shows Karl a photo of six boys in soldiers' uniforms. Bertram tells Karl the story of Sig's bravery as he saved Bertram and another soldier during the war. Although Sig was awarded an Iron Cross for his bravery, Sig never accepted the award, Karl learns. As a gift, Bertram gives Karl the photo of his father and Bertram as young soldiers. Even though he wants to, Karl doesn't say anything to this father about what he learned about his war experience. He compares the picture of his father to that of Barney Ross and recognizes the similarities.

Analysis

It is in this section of chapters that Karl begins to develop a deep respect for his father. He knows little of Sig and is surprised to learn that Bertram and his father know one another not because they are homosexual partners, but because they were in the war together. In fact, Bertram credits Sig for saving his life and the life of another soldier. Bertram's loyalty to Sig is so great that he indicates to Karl that he plans to continue buying printed material from Sig even though he may no longer be having any of his balls. This act of buying material he doesn't need not only signifies Bertram's dedication to his friend, but also his awareness of the family's financial troubles. When Karl returns home after talking to Bertram, he studies the picture of his father as a soldier and the picture of Ross, his new boxing hero. Before that night, Karl had thought his father and Ross were opposites. Now he sees similarities in the stories of their lives.

In this section of the novel, Karl's Jewish roots begins to change his life in major ways. For starters, he and several other boys are expelled from school because they are Jewish. Of these boys, however, Karl is the only one who is not a practicing Jew. Because he can no longer go to a "regular" school, Karl's parents send him to a Jewish school. He's so far behind in Hebrew lessons that he doesn't even try to get caught up. His teacher chides him for not wearing a yarmulke, and gives him a paper one to wear. Karl doesn't understand the significance of wearing the skullcap, especially since he isn't a practicing Jew. He turns to his hero, the fighter Ross, whom he notes also doesn't wear a yarmulke, but still is a Jew, as a reason why he shouldn't have to wear the cap.

On the day that Karl and the others are kicked out of school, the Wolf Pack takes it upon themselves to haze the Jews one last time. Karl is able to run fast enough that he can get away from them but another boy is not as lucky. When Karl considers his options to help Benjamin, he knows he won't be much use against a group of older boys. He thinks about pointing out the fight to a passing police officer but realizes that as a Jew, he holds no citizenship, the police force will not even take his request for help into consideration. It is at this point that he realizes how vulnerable he is just because of his Jewish ancestry.

Making things worse for the family, on the day of Karl's first fight, Rebecca gets word that her brother has been arrested. He's put in the concentration camp Dachau. Rebecca and Sig have a major argument about how they should handle her brother's arrest and what they should do to protect themselves. Because Jakob is her brother,



Rebecca wants to get a lawyer and try to get him out of jail. Sig, however, argues this is a bad idea as they will associate the Sterns with Jakob and possibly put them in jail. In her fear, Rebecca rails at her husband to do something to change their situation. She suggests they should pack their bags and go somewhere they can be safe. Sig, however, clings to his belief that the troubles in the country will blow over. To make matters worse, the family does not have enough money to fund a trip to a place where they will be safe.

Discussion Question 1

About what do Sig and Rebecca argue after Uncle Jakob is arrested? What does Rebecca think they should do? Why does Sig argue they should stay where they are?

Discussion Question 2

How does Karl's opinion of his father change after he learns about his service in the war?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the author's comment on homosexuality and Judaism. How is the persecution of the homosexuals similar to those of the Jews?

Vocabulary

impervious, unanimous, insidious, defilers, secular, trivial, shrouded, anonymity, pacifist



Part II: The Brown Bomber; Sour Sixteen; The Reopening of Galerie Stern; and Word from Dachau

Summary

In the chapter “The Brown Bomber,” although he’s worked with Max for nearly two years, Karl is still confused by Max’s stance on the conflict between the Nazis and Jews. He is seen with Hitler and allows himself to be advertised as German perfection, yet he also has friends who are Jews. Even his manager is a Jew. Max had to use his position to get his manager a room in a German hotel when he came for Max’s fight against Hamas. After Max wins the fight, his manager is pictured giving a salute to Hitler. He is called a traitor in America and by members of his religion for this action. Meanwhile, the German’s refer to Max’s salute as an insult, especially since he was holding a cigar in his hand as he saluted.

Despite his age, Max is considered a favorite for the heavyweight crown. He is set to fight against, Joe Louis, a descendant of slaves from Alabama. One day as he is training with Karl, Max mentions one of Louis’ techniques. Karl takes the opportunity to ask Max if he is afraid to fight Joe Louis. Max tells Louis he isn’t afraid to fight, but that the governmental forces are trying to control his boxing more and more, a type of power that he doesn’t understand. Max says he’s found a flaw in Louis’ technique that he believes he can use to beat the man. When Karl questions his ideas of the government interfering in his game, Max tells Karl he doesn’t believe a win or loss says anything about the superiority of one race over another. He says that despite skin color all men have the same emotions and all men bleed the same. That night as Karl draws a sketch of Joe Louis, he realizes how young the boxer looks, how much the two have in common.

In the chapter “Sour Sixteen,” Karl admits Greta is his one distraction from his boxing training. For her sixteenth birthday, he draws her a card with a picture of the Eifel Tower on it. He also purchases her a small silver charm in the shape of the Notre Dame Cathedral. He plans to give it to her during their weekly visit at the park. She is not on the bench where they usually meet and he hears her crying out “no.” He follows the noise and finds Herr Koplek has her pushed up against a tree trying to molest her. Karl tells him to stop but Herr Koplek responds that if Karl doesn’t leave, he will use his knowledge of Greta and Karl’s friendship to get the two of them in trouble. Greta begs Karl not to leave. Karl spins Herr Koplek around by the shoulder and shoves him down. While he’s still on the ground he grabs Greta and they run away. Koplek tells Karl he will have him and his family out on the street. Once they are away, Greta begs Karl to help her make up a story to tell her father. He insists on telling the truth and wants to turn Koplek in to the police. She runs away saying she has to get home. After she leaves, Karl realizes he forgot to give her the birthday gift.



In the chapter “The Reopening of Galerie Stern,” Karl doesn’t say anything to his parents that night about what happened with him, Greta and the building supervisor. The next morning, he stays away from the basement. That night, during dinner, there is a knock at the door. It is Fritz Dirks, the owner of the building in which the Stern family lives. He tells Karl’s father that Karl has been accused of making sexual advances toward Greta. Karl tries to tell them it is all a lie made up by Koplek. Greta has said nothing about what happened and her parents don’t want her to get involved. Dirks has come to evict the Stern family. He argues there are Nazi party members living in the building and that things could get very bad if they were to stay. With the new laws in place, Dirks is not allowed to rent to Jews any longer. Although Karl expects his father to be angry with him, Sig is understanding. He seems worried only that he must find some way to break the news to Rebecca.

Karl and his father spend two days trying to find the family a new place to live. One apartment they see is half the size of theirs for double the rent. It is dirty and roach filled. Sig finally decides they will move into the art gallery. Rebecca is disgusted by the idea but agrees. They move what is needed to the gallery and sell the rest. Karl had tried to deliver Greta’s birthday gift to her but no one opened the door. The family leaves, leaving the front door of the apartment open. Karl looks back at the building and believes he sees someone watching them leave from the Hausers’ front room.

In the chapter “Word from Dachau,” Karl’s mother works with new energy transforming the art gallery into a sort of home. The work it took to change the gallery into a home seems to bring the family together and the closer living quarters forces them to spend more time together. Rebecca continues to try to find information about her brother. Because of the secrecy needed for protection she doesn’t know the names of any of his political associates. One day at an outdoor market, a man approaches her, telling her that her brother is sick. Rebecca wants to try to see her brother in the concentration camp but Sig convinces her it would be suicide. He makes contact with a former war buddy who is able to find out that Jakob has passed away.

Analysis

The Stern family’s situation goes from bad to worse in this section of chapters. First, they are kicked out of their apartment. Their eviction comes as a direct result of Karl’s relationship with Greta, and the fact that Herr Koplek has seen the two making out together. One day when he and Greta are to meet in the park across from her school, Karl finds Koplek there instead. Karl is first faced with the choice of whether he should run away from the situation or stay and try to keep Greta from being hurt. Being an upstanding young man, Karl stays and orders Koplek to leave Greta alone. Koplek takes advantage of the situation and levies the threat that he will get Karl and his family kicked out of their home if he doesn’t let Koplek have his way with Greta. True to his word, Koplek tells the building owner about the relationship between Greta and Karl. Because the building owner is worried about the scandal that will ensue, and the idea that other tenants may move out because this relationship has become public, he



orders the family to leave. He has no suggestions on where they can live as it has become unlawful for Jewish tenants to live in gentile buildings.

It is at this point that the Stern family learns how cruel the world has become to Jews. The only apartment Sig and Karl are able to find in a Jewish building is half the size of their current apartment yet the landlord is asking double the amount of rent. Additionally, the apartment is dirty and infested with insects. Most of the Jewish buildings they've visited are overcrowded because all the Jewish residents are being forced out of Gentile areas. Instead of allowing themselves to be cheated, the Stern family moves into the building that once housed the art gallery. Although it is not the ideal living arrangements, there is no rent. Notice the chapter that describes the Sterns' decision to move into the art gallery is another chapter given a tongue-in-cheek type name. The author titles it "The Reopening of Gallerie Stern" even though the gallery is not opening as an art gallery, but is being reopened as a home for the family.

Interesting in this section of chapters is Max's discussion of boxing and his view of fear in boxing with Karl. When Karl asks Max if he's ever been afraid to fight anyone, Max's answer to Karl is much like Karl's response to Greta when she asks him why he wants to box. Max says that he isn't afraid of fighting anyone inside the ring because there are "rules and codes of honor" that govern behavior there. He indicates to Karl that it is life outside the boxing ring that is becoming scary to him. He explains to Karl that the German government is trying to become more and more intrusive in his boxing career, trying to specify who he can and can't fight. Governmental leaders, for instance, don't want him to fight Louis because if Max were to lose to this negro, it would weaken their claims that the Aryan race was superior.

Another interesting aspect of this section of the novel is the response of Karl's father to the knowledge that his family will be evicted from their apartment. Based on past interactions, it can be assumed that Sig would be furious with his son for doing something that would put the family in jeopardy. Instead of being angry with Karl, Sig is strangely forgiving. He tells Karl that he hopes that Karl acted as a gentleman in his relationship with Greta, but is not critical of him in his choice of girlfriends. Instead, he tells his son he cannot be angry with him over his desire to have a friendship with a girl. He tells Karl this type of relationship is the sweetest he can ever hope to have.

Discussion Question 1

How is Max's explanation of his lack of fear in fighting Joe Louis similar to the way Karl explains his desire to box to Greta in the chapter entitled "A Prayer"? How do the two men see their sport similarly? What different challenges does each face?

Discussion Question 2

How does Karl's drawing help him solidify his view of the world and those around him?



Discussion Question 3

How does life change for Karl and his family during this section of the novel? What is the catalyst for these changes?

Vocabulary

enigmatic, ubiquitous, arbitrate, ajar, salvaged, habitable, levity, dissident, comrades, clandestine



Part II: Seeing Red; The Fight; and The Real Max

Summary

In the chapter “Seeing Red,” Lutz tells the family that Jakob has died of dysentery. The day after Karl learns of Jakob’s death, he is scheduled to box in an exhibition show. The first boy he is to fight is a member of the Hitler Youth Athletic League. During the fight, the boy bites his lip, causing it to bleed. Seeing the blood makes Karl want to see more, a phenomenon some boxers call “seeing red.” He keeps punching the boy until he stops hitting back. Karl is declared the winner, but Neblig is unhappy with Karl’s show of violence. As Karl looks at Neblig, he notices Gertz, a member of the Wolf Pack from his old school, watching the fight. Now, Karl is worried Gertz will tell others he is a Jew.

In the chapter “The Fight,” Max’s coming fight against Joe Louis is highly anticipated by the German leaders. The government builds up the fight as determining if the German race is really superior to other races. Worjyk even hosts a listening party at the club. During this party, Karl drinks beer for the first time. The fight goes badly until the fourth round when Max finally gets a chance to take advantage of Joe’s weakness. By the twelfth round Max finally knocks Louis out, and Karl is drunk. He goes to a beer hall with the other men where they get him even drunker. After an hour of solid drinking, Karl has to go to the bathroom. He doesn’t think about using the open trough-like urinal until another man comes in and expresses his wish that Max could beat a Jew in the boxing ring, and Karl realizes his uncircumcised penis is in clear sight. He tries to button his pants quickly but becomes sick to his stomach. He throws up twice, and then passes out in the bathroom. Karl wakes up later on a cot in the boxing club. Neblig greets him. Neblig had removed his clothes, but doesn’t mention if he saw Karl’s penis.

In the chapter “The Real Max,” Max is treated like royalty when he returns to Germany after his successful fight. Karl finds a copy of the book for which Max writes the introduction. He opens to a random page and is outraged by the anti-Jewish content. He learns the book is Johann and first believes the man has become a Nazi but Johann tells him he thought the book was useless as it was not about boxing techniques. After Karl reads the book in its entirety, he wonders more and more about the real Max. He wonders if Max will continue to train him even though Karl is a Jew.

The country of Germany cleans up when the Olympics come to town. Regardless, Hitler refuses to attend the medals ceremony when a negro wins four gold medals believing these wins disprove his claims that the Aryan race is supreme. Because so many different ethnicities of people from the United States participate on that country’s Olympic team, Karl becomes more and more obsessed with the United States. To his surprise, Max sends Karl and his father tickets to the last day of Olympic games and the closing ceremonies. Sig sells the tickets, which angers Karl until he realizes that his father is right, they need the money more than the tickets.



Analysis

Karl's fight the day after he learns his uncle has died in the concentration camp is a turning point of sorts for him. For starters, it is the first fight in which he violently beats his opponent. Some of this rage probably comes from his hurt and grief caused by the death of his uncle. Jakob had been one of Karl's first heroes. He was the only family member who showed any interest in Karl's boxing. He had promised Karl he would come watch his first tournament, however, this was the day Jakob was put in jail. Also during this tournament Karl learns that his old nemesis, Gertz, is a boxer. He's fighting at the same exhibition as Karl. Karl had once seen boxing as a refuge from the Nazi influence on his life but now he is worried that Gertz might make trouble for him since he knows Karl is a Jew. Along with his sighting of Gertz at the fight, Karl also causes possible trouble for himself when he gets drunk during a party after Max's championship winning fight. Because his mind is muddled by the alcohol, he doesn't think anything about using the public urinal in the bar. It is not until another man comes in who is loudly mouthing about Jews that Karl realizes his circumcised penis, a sign that he is a Jew, is in plain view. Later, when he passes out and Neblig strips him of his smelly clothes, Karl worries that Neblig has learned he is a Jew but his friend says nothing about it.

Through his relationship with Max, Karl has struggled to get a grasp on where Max stands politically and on the conflict between the Nazis and the Jews. When they are together, however, Max rarely talks about anything not related to boxing or Karl's training. When the men at the boxing club try to get Max to talk politics, he generally skirts the issue. When Max wins the championship and returns to Germany to a heroes welcome, Karl feels as if the real Max has come out. Since he sees news photos of Max dining with Hitler and other German leaders, he assumes Max is a Nazi supporter. Max's win is considered proof of Aryan superiority and Max seems more than happy to play into the German leaders' desire to use his win as fuel for their anti-Jewish argument. Karl is also angered when Max writes the introduction for a book "Germans Fight for Honor, Not Money: Boxing as a Race Problem." When Karl reads the book it turns out to be slam against Jews. Karl assumes that since Max wrote an introduction to the book, he approves of the material in it when in reality, Max may not even have read the book.

During the course of the Olympic games, Karl notes the differences in Germany. Although the anti-Jewish signs are removed, it is apparent there is still a racial issue in the country. Germany's Olympic team made almost entirely of people of an Aryan background. The United States, however, brings a team comprises of athletes from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. When a negro from America wins four gold medals, Karl becomes firmly obsessed with America. Hitler, however, refuses to congratulate the dark-skinned winner as his performance goes against his quest to prove that people of Aryan descent are superior to those of other races.

Karl and his father butt heads over some tickets to the Olympic games sent to them by Max. Karl is at first angry when his father sells the tickets and confronts his father, telling him he had wanted to use them himself. Sig quickly puts his son straight, telling him the



family needs the money the sale of the tickets will bring them. While it is a shame that Karl is not able to enjoy the Olympic games with his father even though they have gotten tickets as a gift, this is another sign of how desperate the Stern family has become for money.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Karl begin to worry when he sees Gertz at the boxing competition? How do the two know one another?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the public reaction to Max when he returns from America after winning the heavyweight championship. How does Karl feel about his hero?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the Berlin Olympic games make Karl even more intrigued with the United States?

Vocabulary

disposition, visceral, barrage, siphoning, nemesis, vied, perfunctory, covert, denounce, concerted, purged



Part II: Good-bye, Winzig; The 1937 Youth Boxing Championship; and Ice Cream

Summary

In the chapter “Good-bye Winzig,” Berlin returns its anti-Jewish signs and magazines to sight when the Olympics are finished. Karl is surprised one day when he goes to Herr Greenburg’s store and sees how depleted the stock has become. Herr Greenburg seems to have a defeated air about him. Karl buys the only two bottles of black ink left in the store. Herr Greenburg explains he’s having trouble getting supplies in stock, as doing business with Jewish business is now against the law. Greenburg coaxes Karl into buying an apple for himself and one for Hildy. Before Karl leaves the store, Herr Greenburg puts his hands on the boy’s head and recites a Jewish prayer for a safe journey. Karl notices that as the man prays, he seems to become more relaxed.

At home, Karl finds his mother in the bathtub. She says she is fine but does not sound fine. He hears sniffing coming from Hildy’s room. She tells him the boys from the Hitler Youth group hit her with a rotten egg after school. Hildy accuses Karl of not paying attention to her, and then tells him the family missed her birthday the day before. After Hildy runs out the front door, Karl looks at her journal. He notices a theme of increasing loneliness and isolation. One of her most recent poems talks about the hate she has for her dark hair. Karl is surprised by the maturity of her writing. He cleans her coat and puts it back on her bed. Karl goes downstairs and works out his frustration by exercising. He realizes, however, that even as strong as his body has gotten, he doesn’t have what he needs to make things better for his sister.

In the chapter “The 1937 Youth Boxing Championship,” Worjyk and Neblig sign Karl up for this Youth Boxing Championship, the opportunity Karl has been waiting for since he’s been training with Max. Although the organizers of the fight hoped to get Max to preside over the tournament, he is too busy with other engagements. It’s been a year since he’s been to the Berlin Boxing Club. When Karl asks Worjyk if Max’s absence bothers him, Worjyk says that Max is out for Max, and is unreliable at best. Once he’s at the tournament, Karl is intimidated by the huge crowd. After Worjyk and Neblig finish helping Karl prepare for the fight, they present him with a silk robe bearing the name of the Berlin Boxing Club. As Karl looks over the fighting line up, he realizes that Gertz, his nemesis from school, is also fighting in that competition. If they win their first fights, they will be scheduled to fight one another. He is excited with the idea of beating his old foe squarely, but also afraid Gertz might reveal Karl is a Jew.

Karl and Gertz do win their first fights. They face off against each other in the ring, but at the end of the first round when it becomes apparent that Gertz isn’t going to win, his friends from the Wolf Pack, Franz and Julius, tell the judges that Karl is a Jew. Karl is



thrown out of the fight. The crowd throws trash at him. Neblig signals to Karl to step out of the ring but what catches Karl's attention is the fact that Worjyk's face is white. He looks as if he has been betrayed. Karl runs from the arena until he reaches the park where he and Greta used to meet. He tries to control himself and his breathing. He feels as if everything he's been working for has been taken from him. He takes out the red ball Max gave him when he began boxing lessons, gives it one last squeeze, and then throws it.

In the chapter "Ice Cream," Karl sees Greta and a boy eating ice cream in a café the morning after his ruined boxing tournament as he returning from making a delivery for his father. He walks up behind the couple as they share their dessert. Greta's face turns white and her eyes fill with tears. Karl drops the clover charm into her bowl of ice cream.

Analysis

These final four chapters of the second part of this novel seem to catch the main character at a low point. His sister is suffering emotionally from the cruelty she's being shown because she is a Jew. To make matters worse, Karl and his parents have forgotten Hildy's birthday. Karl realizes that it doesn't matter how strong he's gotten physically, he still doesn't have the strength to make the world the way it should be for his sister.

When Karl gets tagged as a Jew and thrown out of the German Youth Boxing Championship, he may finally realize a little bit of the pain that Hildy has been feeling all along. Because he doesn't look Jewish, Karl has been able to avoid the hate that those who are easily recognized as Jews have been feeling. At the tournament, however, Karl is at the mercy of a crowd full of people shouting at him and throwing things at him.

However, it is in this section of the novel that the reader learns Gertz's real nature. He is a coward who is afraid of losing to a boy he once beat in a lopsided fight. Notice that it is not until Karl and Gertz are actually in the ring fighting and Karl is winning the competition that the judges are alerted that Karl is a Jew. It seems this "discovery" was made in order to keep Gertz from being embarrassed by how badly he was going to get beaten by Karl.

Once he is ousted as a Jew, Karl feels he won't be able to return to the boxing club again. Although he isn't sure, he believes all of his friends there were Nazis who will hate him now that they know he's really a Jew. The one image that sticks with Karl is the look on Worjyk's face when the announcement is made that Karl is being ejected from the tournament. Karl describes the man's face as being white, with an expression as if he's been stabbed in the back. Karl, of course, interprets this expression by assuming that he is the cause of Worjyk's distress as he believes he has misrepresented his real identity to Worjyk. In a different scenario, however, it could be that Worjyk is surprised that the judge is really ejecting Karl from the tournament. It could be the boxing and tournament officials that Worjyk feels stabbed by as it is later revealed that he is also a Jew.



It is just after he learns he will no longer be able to box that Karl happens to see Greta and a new boyfriend enjoying a treat in an ice cream shop. After he and his family were evicted from their home because of Herr Koplek's claim that Karl and Greta were having an improper relationship, Karl has held onto the hope that Greta was waiting for him, just as he was waiting for Greta. When he sees her with another boy, however, he is infuriated by her callous behavior. He and his family are suffering after he protected her and stood up for her honor. She refused to even tell the truth about what Herr Koplek did to her, leaving her parents and the others in the apartment building to believe what they wanted about the two of them. When he sees Greta having fun with this other boy, it is more than he can stand. His actions embarrass Greta because he knows the boy she is with will ask questions about who Karl was and why he accosted her in the way that he did. His act of returning the good luck charm that she gave to him proves that they once had an intimate relationship. The manner in which he returns it to her lets her know that he is angry and disappointed with her lack of faithfulness.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Hildy's poem and her despair over the way she is being treated. Do you think Karl really understands at this point how she is feeling? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the way Karl addresses Greta when he sees her with another boy in the ice cream shop. Do you think he handled the situation well? What might he have done differently?

Discussion Question 3

What is your opinion of Gertz after he arranges to have Karl ejected from the boxing tournament? Use examples from the book to support your answer.

Vocabulary

preside, resonated, boisterous, surrogates, berated, heft, mongrel, commenced



Part III: The Last Picasso; The Mongrel; Return to the Berlin Boxing Club; and The Rematch

Summary

In the chapter “The Last Picasso,” Karl keeps up his boxing training, but has not returned to the boxing club. One night Karl is working out with his punching bag when his mother comes downstairs. She tells Karl she knows he has been kicked out of boxing, but also knows that he’ll fight again. She shares with him that a lack of passion was the real reason she stopped painting, she sense he still has that passion for boxing. She tells him that both she and Karl’s father think he has the makings of greatness even though his father hides it. Before she goes upstairs, she tells Karl his father needs his help. Karl wants to tell his mother that he loves her, but isn’t able to do so.

Upstairs, Karl’s father is looking at a Picasso painting that had formerly hung over their mantle. He tells Karl he’s found a buyer for the painting who will pay them enough money to go to America but that he doesn’t trust the dealer. He wants Karl to go along as well. As Sig suspected, Kerner, the dealer, takes the painting without paying. When Sig questions him, Kerner introduces his muscle, Gustav, who has a gun. He tells Sig there is nothing he can do to keep him from stealing the painting. Sig moves as if he plans to smash the painting but Gustav pulls the gun on Karl, stopping him.

In the chapter “The Mongrel,” Karl receives a package from Albert Broder, who he later learns is Neblig. The box includes boxing magazines, comics and a letter asking Karl to visit the club. He suggests Karl pay attention to Superman, the new comic hero. Karl takes a liking to the new hero who is an outsider. As he studies the Superman character, Karl is inspired to create his own comic character whom he calls “The Mongrel.” When he finishes his new comic, Karl wants to share it, but knows there is only one person who can truly appreciate it.

In the chapter “Return to the Berlin Boxing Club,” Karl discovers Worjyk has sold the boxing club. It has become part of the textile factory. Worjyk left Berlin because he is a Jew. Karl tells Neblig about his family’s financial situation and their inability to leave Germany. Neblig asks why Sig hasn’t asked Max for money. When Karl tells Neblig his father is too prideful to beg, Neblig suggests Karl talk to Max. That night, Karl struggles with the idea that Max, whom Karl isn’t really sure he trusts, might be his family’s only hope for safety.

In the chapter “The Rematch,” a coming fight between Max and Joe Louis has become a political event, much more than just a boxing match. Karl listens to the match on the radio in the gallery with his family. Louis beats Max in less than one round. The radio signal is cut as soon as it is certain Max has been defeated. Sig’s response to Max’s



loss helps Karl to realize that if anyone asks Max for help, it will have to be him. He struggles to write a letter to Max, finally just writing a short note asking if they can meet after he returns to Berlin. He slips out of the gallery to mail the letter. While out, he is passed by three drunk men. He believes they don't harm him only because he doesn't look Jewish.

Analysis

When Max goes up against Joe Louis for a second time, the fight is about much more than just boxing. Louis represents the Americans while Max stands for the Germans. Instead of a match between two men, the men come to represent the countries from which they hail and what those countries represent. Hitler and the Nazis, of course, put on Max the duty of proving the idea that the Germans with their racial purity are superior. The Jewish Germans seem to be divided on how they believe it would be best for the fight to come out. Some believe a loss by Max would send a message to Hitler and the Nazis that their race is not necessarily as superior as they believe it to be. Others are fearful that if Max loses, the Nazis will take out their anger and frustration on the Jews. Still others root for Max, remaining loyal to their fellow countryman despite the treatment they are receiving from their country. When Max loses, Karl's father comments only the loss is "good" then sends the children off to bed. It appears that even though he and Max are friends, he'd been hoping Max would not win the rematch. Why he might have wanted the loss is unclear.

Also different for Karl this time than the last time Max fought is that violence against Jews on the streets at night has become so commonplace that he is not allowed to go and listen to the fight but instead must stay at the gallery with his family to listen. After the fight is finished and Karl goes out to mail a letter to Max does he realize the reality of the danger for Jews. Three drunk men walk down the street, blaming the Jews for poisoning Max and causing him to lose the fight. As they pass Karl, they look him up and down. Karl is convinced they don't bother him only because he doesn't look Jewish.

In this section of the novel, Karl's mother has a rare heart-to-heart discussion with him in which she talks to him about Sig's idea of good parenting. She reminds him of the time when he was smaller and Sig would dress him in a matching tuxedo for gallery showings. Karl remembers being proud of looking like his father but didn't realize his father had stopped this practice when people began referring to Karl as "little Sig." Rebecca explains to Karl that Sig has tried to stay out of Karl's way in his development as much as possible because he wants Karl to grow to be the man he wants to be, not the person his parents have programmed him to be.

Troubling in this section is the way that the art dealer, Kerner, treats Sig and Karl. Sig agrees to sell a Picasso painting to the man, hoping to earn the rest of the money needed to pay their way to America where they will be safe from Nazi oppression. Kerner, however, takes advantage of the way the German Jews are being treated and basically steals the painting from Sig. Although he'd made an arrangement that he'd pay in person for the piece of art, he changes his story and tells Sig he'll be sending him the



money. Sig seems to know if he doesn't get money from Kerner face-to-face, he won't be getting any money at all. Sig pushes the issue and Kerner basically tells Sig there's nothing he can do about the theft. Kerner is right in that regard. The painting is outlawed by the German government so if Sig were to go the police, they would just confiscate the painting and possibly put Sig in jail. Most likely, however, Sig would not even be able to get the police to listen to his complaint, as he is a Jew. Sig considers destroying the painting, but Kerner threatens Karl's life.

Discussion Question 1

Why will Sig not be able to take any action against Kerner when he takes the Picasso without paying?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Karl attracted to Superman? What does he have in common with the superhero?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Max's rematch against Joe Louis become such a political event?

Vocabulary

tentatively, demise, diminished, solace, conflicted, ascendancy, pragmatic, brazen, stoically



Part III: Broken Glass; Drop Cloth; An Evening Stroll with Our Aunt; and The Feint

Summary

In the chapter "Broken Glass," wild speculations are made about Max's loss to Louis. Karl has seen a photo of Max and Anny returning to the hotel where he has sent his note but he hasn't gotten any response from Max. As the months go by, the Nazis put more and more restrictions on Jews. Karl's mother reaches her breaking point when 15,000 Polish Jews are sent back to Poland by the Nazis. She yells at Sig to do something. He leaves and is gone all day. When he finally returns, he smells like cigars and liquor. He and Rebecca argue again. The next morning, the newspaper states a deported Polish Jew has shot a German diplomat. As they eat dinner that night, the policeman Dolph Lutz knocks on their door. He warns them the Nazis are attacking Jews and Jewish businesses. The police have been ordered to stay out of the attacks.

The family huddles together in the dark back room of the gallery for nearly an hour before they hear angry voices. The men are unable to break the door open so they break the gallery's plate glass window. Armed with a mop handle and hammer, Sig and Karl meet the four Nazis armed with clubs who are breaking in. Karl is surprised how well his father is able to fend off the four men. When they do get him down, Karl moves in but feels awkward with the stick so he throws it away and fights with his hands. One of the men hits Karl on the head with a club. Karl notices his father has gotten one of the men down on the ground and is fighting off another with the hammer. One of the men sinks a piece of glass from the broken window into Sig's side. Karl tries to help his father but one of the men stomps his head and he passes out.

In the chapter "Drop Cloth," Hildy is standing over Karl when he regains consciousness. His mother is holding his father, who has a dark red stain covering his shirt. Although he's weak, Sig takes charge of the situation. He has Rebecca call a few men who have cars and owe him a favor. Hartzel agrees to come take Sig to a doctor. He says they can't take the children as it would make them too conspicuous. Sig backs him up. Rebecca and Sig hide under a drop cloth in the back of the car. Hildy and Karl stay at the gallery. Before they leave, Karl's father kisses his cheek and comments that Karl must be a great fighter in the ring. Karl tries to tell his father that he loves him but the words get stuck.

In the chapter "An Evening Stroll with Our Aunt," Hildy is too scared to stay in the gallery without her parents so Karl calls Bertram Heigel, the Countess. He tells them they are to pretend as if he is their aunt, and they are walking home after a dinner party. They pass Herr Greenberg's destroyed art store. A group of teenaged boys, one that Karl recognizes as his old friend Kurt pass them. They appear to be looting the vandalized



stores and homes. Kurt recognizes Karl but doesn't say anything about Karl being a Jew. Once inside the Countess' apartment, he distracts Hildy with his makeup collection while he treats Karl's wounds and makes hot cocoa. Karl wants to try to find his parents but Bertram convinces him it would be best to wait until the morning. In the bedroom, Hildy is looking at Countess' jazz records, all of which are banned. He plays a song by Josephine Baker in which she sings about Berlin. Karl feels as if she is singing about a Germany that she knows is dying.

In the chapter "The Feint," the next day, Bertram and Karl are able to find no record of Sig being treated at any hospital. Karl decides to go see Max in person. Although Karl has to give the front counter clerk a veiled threat to get him to call Max, Max agrees to let Karl come up. Once in Max's apartment, Max has Karl wait in a sitting room until he finishes with other guests. Karl hears that they are talking about the possibility of a rematch. Karl thinks at first Max may not know what is happening to the Jews but when he sees a newspaper on his desk, he realizes Max knows all about it. Karl's anger comes to the surface and he asks Max how he could let the atrocities that are happening to the Jews continue. Max tries to explain to him that if he were to try to take a stand, he would only be thrown in jail. He describes a boxing strategy to Karl known as the feint. The feint is a trick to make an opponent believe you're doing one thing when you're really doing another in order to stay alive. Karl tells him the story of the vandalism and attack on his family, and then he cries.

Analysis

In this section of chapters, Karl's family is attacked by the Nazis. Hatred against the Jews has been growing and growing, incited by Hitler's rules against these people. Karl's father seems shocked by each new atrocity handed down by his country's leader. Karl's mother, Rebecca, is not as shocked by what is happening. She worries what might happen next and is afraid for her family. She loses her temper when she learns that 15,000 Polish Jews have been sent back to Poland by Hitler. She rages at Sig that he needs to do something to help his family.

The following day, one of the German Jews decides to take matters into his own hands, shooting and killing a German diplomat. Both Sig and Rebecca realize that even though something needed to be done, this murder was not the right thing. They know that this murder will bring bad news for the Jews. Just as they feared, there is a knock on the door. The police officer who is Sig's friend warns them the Nazis will be attacking the Jews, their businesses and homes. In retaliation for the murder of the German diplomat, the government will be allowing the people to riot and steal from the Jews. In fact, the police force has been ordered not to do anything to protect the Jews from the coming violence.

It is during this evening of rioting and looting that Karl and his family are split up. They hide quietly in a back room of the art gallery until the Nazi attackers are actually in their home. Sig has Karl go with him to the front of the house to meet the men who have broken in. This may be not only because he wants to meet the attackers head on, but



also because he hopes to keep them from hurting Rebecca and Hildy. Both Sig and his father learn a good deal from one another when they watch each other in action during the fight with the Nazis. Karl is impressed that his father is able to keep his cool and defend himself in a way that is both purposeful and intentional. Their attackers seem as if they are out of control when compared to Sig. Sig later tells his son how impressed he is with the way Karl joined in the fight. The moment when Sig and Rebecca are about to drive away in the car to find a hospital that will treat Sig is perhaps the most touching between the boy and his father. Although Sig had never seemed to take any interest in Karl's boxing before this time, he admits he must have been something in the ring. Karl tries to tell his father that he loves him, but the words get stuck. Unknown to both of them, this is the last time they will see each other before Sig is arrested by the Gestapo.

Also during this section of the novel, Karl recounts the destruction done to the Jewish parts of town by the rioting Nazis. One of the descriptions is that of Herr Greenburg's art store. It's the same place where Karl kissed Greta behind the display shelves in the back of the store. The same place he saw the boys from Hitler Youth gluing up the sign ordering people not to buy from Jews. On Karl's last visit, Greenburg had placed his hands on Karl's head and spoken to him the words of a Jewish prayer for safe travels. Now, Karl wonders if the red swirls mixed in with the spilled paint from the store are the blood of the elderly storeowner. Also as Karl and Hildy walk with the Countess to his apartment the night of the rioting, they pass a group of boys, one of whom went to school with Karl and knows that he is Jewish. Luckily, the boy does not mention Karl's background and they are allowed to pass without being molested.

Interesting to note in this section is how loyal Sig's friends are. Two of them, both the Countess and Hertzell, put themselves in harm's way in order to help him. In the case of Hertzell, he brings his car to take Sig to a hospital for treatment of his injury. Because Sig is a Jew, Hertzell takes the chance of being arrested for helping him. Also going out of his way for Sig and his family is the Countess. Of course, it is known that Bertram is one of the men that Sig saved while he was in the war, not all people would have risked their lives going out on a night like the one of the Nazi rioting in order to help the children of an old war buddy. The Countess shows both intelligence and compassion in his decision to dress as a woman to escort the children back to his home. It is more likely that the Nazis will leave a woman and two children alone than they might a man with children. Also, Bertram reasons that Hildy will feel more comforted by the belief she is with another female than if she were with an older man.

Also noteworthy in this section of the novel is Karl's confrontation of Max concerning his seeming approval of the Nazis' actions. Max seems truly agitated that Karl believes he approves the way the Nazis are treating the Jews, but at the same time, says there is nothing he can do. He explains that if he tried to take a stand, he would just be thrown in jail. In fact, he tells Karl that Anny had not even wanted him to return to Germany after he lost his rematch with Joe Louis. She was afraid that his act of losing the fight would be enough to have him put in prison. He describes his actions to Karl as a feint, a move in boxing where a fighter will make one move in order to cover the real intent of his actions.



Discussion Question 1

In what ways do Max and the Countess put themselves in danger by giving refuge to Karl and Hildy? What might happen to them if it were discovered they were harboring Jews?

Discussion Question 2

Do some research on the retributions in Germany after the Polish Jews were sent out of the country. How are the events of the novel similar to the real life events?

Discussion Question 3

What is Max's reasoning for acting the way he has in regards to his dinners with Hitler and appearances of being a Nazi supporter. What is your opinion of his reasons? Are they valid? Use examples from the novel to support your opinion.

Vocabulary

annexed, degenerate, petrified, contusions, boudoir, cabaret, ominous, ascot, filigree, disembodied



Part III: The Excelsior; Healthy Instincts; and The Amerika

Summary

In the chapter “The Excelsior,” Max sends Karl in his car to get Hildy. The Countess gives her a round, jeweled compact as a gift. Outside, Hildy asks why “he” was so nice to them. After Karl recovers from his shock that Hildy knew the Countess was a man, he tells her the story of Bertram and their father being in the war together. At the hotel, Karl and Hildy go in through a service entrance and are snuck into Max’s apartment. Max makes calls, trying to find their parents, and then leaves them alone while he goes out. While he’s out, housekeeping comes to clean. Hildy hides in a trunk while Karl conceals himself on top of a wardrobe in the closet. Max has no news when he returns but curses himself for not canceling the maid service.

In the chapter “Healthy Instincts,” Karl and Max drive around town the next day to see if they can find Sig and Rebecca. Karl is shocked when he sees in the daylight the damage that has been done to Jewish businesses and homes. Although the art gallery seems empty when they first arrive, Karl hears a wheezing sound coming from the bathroom. It is Rebecca. She seems to be in shock because Karl has to call her twice before she responds. She tells Karl and Max that the Gestapo took Sig. Karl convinces her they have to go but she insists on gathering some things first. She picks up some random books and snaps ferociously at Karl when he tells her there is nothing left worth gathering.

At the hotel Rebecca and Hildy are reunited and Rebecca seems to get control of herself enough to tell what happened. She says by the time she and Sig had gotten to a Jewish hospital, Sig had begun hallucinating. Doctors were able to remove the glass and stitch his wounds. He was kept in the hospital until the following morning even though he wanted to go looking for the children. When they did finally reach the gallery in the morning, Karl and Hildy were gone. While they were still at the art gallery, a careful of plain clothes Gestapo agents pulled up to the building and began questioning them. They find the printing press in the basement and arrest Sig as a traitor. She had been waiting, alone, in the art gallery since that time. She begs Max to help them get out of Germany.

In the chapter “The Amerika,” Max pays a bribe to a government official and learns that Sig is being held at Gerlach Haus prison. A week later, they have found nothing else out about Karl and Hildy’s father but Rebecca calls to children to her. She tells them she will stay with Max as long as it takes to find Sig. Hildy and Karl, however, will go to America. Karl is excited at first, but doesn’t want to go without his parents. Hildy follows suit. Their mother tells them much effort has been put into getting them out of Germany and the plans can’t be changed. Hildy will go to one cousin in New Jersey while Karl will go to Florida. Max has loaned them the money to leave on a ship the next day.



On a transport train the next day, Rebecca is questioned why she is not going to America with her children. Max helps her invent a story that she is helping to redecorate Anny and Max's county house. The Gestapo seems to believe the story and leaves them alone. They make it to the harbor just in time for Karl and Hildy to board the ship. Before they board, Rebecca asks Karl if he has the three books that she took from the art gallery. She tells him that if anything happens to her or Sig, he is to take the books to Louis Cohen in New York. She tells him that Sig hid things in the endpapers of the books that Karl can sell if he needs money. Max encourages Karl to keep up his training although Karl thinks to himself he isn't sure if he will box again. Standing on the deck of the boat, Karl and Hildy repeat the Winzig and Spatz call to action.

Later that night, Karl cannot contain his curiosity and slits open the endcovers of the books. He finds that his father has hidden artwork from various decades in these books, including drawings by Rembrandt and a Picasso. One of the final works Karl reveals is a drawing by George Grosz of Sig and a drawing of the painting of Max that had begun Karl's career as a boxer. He thinks of all the people who have risked themselves to help him and his family. He looks at the drawings of his father and Max and sees the similarities even though the men are very different. He realizes that he might not see either of them again. As he searches for similarities between each of these men who have influenced him and himself, Karl realizes he doesn't fit the description of either one, but must become his own person.

Analysis

The most significant part of the ending of the novel is Karl's realization that he must become his own person. He has admired Max for most of the course of the story and has come to realize that his father also is worthy of his admiration. He realizes that although neither one of these men fit the ideals he had for them, it was their aspiration to live their lives the way in which they wanted. Because of governmental intervention, neither of them were able to achieve this goal. Karl knows that he must go on and be his own person instead of trying to follow the dreams of his father or of Max. This realization on Karl's part is significant because it is exactly how his father had hoped he would turn out. While Sig had hopes and dreams for his son to be successful, he did not want Karl stuck living out some dream that his father had instilled in him. Sig wanted Karl to come to his own conclusions about what sort of person he was.

Also significant in this section is the collection of artwork that Sig has left his family. These pieces of art that he had hidden in the covers of several books are worth enough money to keep his family well set in America. It is important to remember the last time Sig tried to sell a piece of artwork in Germany it was stolen from him. Through this experience, Sig has realized the paintings are of no use to him and his family in Germany. The best thing for him to do with them was to hide them, keep them from being stolen and save them for money once some of the family members reached America. When Karl slits open the endcovers of the books and reveals the fortune in paintings, Rebecca's odd behavior when they were preparing to leave the art gallery with Max makes sense. While Karl had thought that his mother was just collecting odd



pieces of junk from the former home, there was actually reasoning behind the choices she was making.

Finally in this section, take into consideration the danger into which Max places himself by helping the Sterns. He not only arranges for Karl and Hildy to get to America, but also escorts them, along with Rebecca, to the harbor. There is one moment in which German guards ask to see the passports of Rebecca, Karl and Hildy. When Rebecca explains to the men that Karl and Hildy are going to America, he asks why she isn't going as well. In reality, Rebecca is staying behind in an attempt to get her husband out of jail, but if she were to tell the guard this, they could arrest the entire family. Max helps her to concoct a story that she will be helping him and Anny redecorate their house before she joins the children in America. By lying like this to the German guards, and claiming Rebecca as an employee, Max risks getting arrested, but takes the risk to help his friends.

Discussion Question 1

At this point, what is your opinion of Max and reasoning of why he has acted the way he has with the Nazi leaders? Could he have done anything to help the Jews, as Karl thinks he could have?

Discussion Question 2

How is Max's loss of the championship title both good and bad for him in his attempts to find Sig?

Discussion Question 3

How has Karl changed since the beginning of the novel? Discuss factors like his opinion of himself, his relationship with his parents, and his knowledge of others.

Vocabulary

furtively, melee, bureaucracy, anonymity, coincidentally, conclude, recede, encumbered



Characters

Karl Stern

Karl Stern is the main character and hero of the novel. He is 14 when the novel begins and 18 at its conclusion. He lives in Berlin, Germany at the beginning of Hitler's reign. Oppression of the Jews has just begun when the novel opens but Karl is already beginning to feel the abuse of this oppression as a group of boys known as the Wolf Pack give him a brutal beating after the final day of school because he is Jewish.

It is at one of his father's art showings the day of his beating that Karl meets Max Schmeling, the German championship boxer. Seeing Karl's injuries, Max offers to give Karl boxing lessons in exchange for a painting Karl's father owns. Karl's boxing lessons become much more than just a hobby, they are a way for him to escape from the increasing severity of oppression against the Jews. He exercises, trains and wins every fight that he takes on and even participates in the German Youth Championship before his old nemesis, Gertz from the Wolf Pack, lets the judges know that Karl is a Jew, a move that gets Karl eliminated from the championship.

Karl's story is about much more than boxing. During the course of the novel, he gets to know his father, a man who had always masked his past and love for Karl with his desire for Karl to be his own person. Karl learns the father he had thought at one time might be homosexual, was actually a war hero, rescuing two soldiers from death. Although he'd never thought he could admire his father as a hero, Karl begins to realize his father is more like his boxing heroes than he ever realized. He later watches his father in action as he battles against the armed Nazis who break into their home, admiring his concentration and ability to remain focused despite the situation.

Besides his boxing, Karl immerses himself in drawing. It is through his drawing and his creation of comic strip characters and superheroes that he interprets the world. Karl copies photographs of his boxing heroes, studying their facial features and what their faces communicate. He realizes how diverse the people who participate in boxing are, Karl additionally creates a cartoon based on Superman. His version of the superhero is The Mongrel, a term Germans use to refer to Jews.

After his family is attacked during a night of rioting by the Jews, Karl is forced to take charge of their fate. He turns to his father's friend the Countess for help and shelter. Karl also contacts Max, explaining the situation and asking him for help. Max helps pay the boat fare for Hildy and Karl to go to America.

Sigmund Stern

Sigmund Stern is Karl and Hildy's father. Although Karl doesn't believe he has much in common with his father in the beginning of the story, he learns through the course of the novel more and more about his father that is worthy of his admiration and respect. It is



only at the end of the novel that Karl realizes that his father was trying to be an individual, despite the pressure the government has put on him to follow their rules. Sig, however, failed at his plan for himself. For as long as Karl has known, his father has run an art gallery for expressionist artists. Though the gallery did well in the '20s when it first opened, all of the art that he once sold has been outlawed by the German government. Since the beginning of Hitler's reign, Sig has been forced to sell accepted art, work that does not sell well. Although his family is slipping quickly into a financial crisis because the gallery is doing so poorly, Sig sells art on the black market and does some private printing projects to help keep their heads above the water.

At the beginning of the novel, Karl seems afraid of his father. Their relationship is distant at best. Karl is quick to believe that his father might be homosexual when he learns that one of Sig's printing clients is a homosexual. Karl learns from this man, the Countess, that his father is actually a war hero, a detail Sig never revealed to Karl. He was awarded an Iron Cross for his bravery, but refused to accept his award. Sig cannot seem to believe that the country he has lived in all of his life and fought to protect is now denying him citizenship because of his German lineage. He seems to be in denial even as his wife pushes him to do something to help protect his family.

Instead of continuing to hide when the Nazis break into his home, the converted art gallery, Sig faces the vandals, making sure to keep the men away from his wife and daughter. Karl notes the way his father is able to fight off the men in a focused, composed way even though his attackers seem out of control in their fury. Even after he is badly injured, Sig keeps his head level and directs his family in getting him needed medical help. The following day, however, Nazis visit Sig's gallery again and arrest him because he has a printing press in the basement. He is jailed in Gerlach Haus prison for political crimes. When the story ends, Max and Rebecca are still unsuccessful in getting Sig out of jail.

Although Rebecca believed her husband was not doing enough to help their family, the works of art he has hidden in several inconspicuous looking books show that he did have his family's best interests in mind. After his experience with the Picasso where the buyer had promised cash for the painting but then refused to pay, basically stealing the painting, Sig knows selling any more art in Germany will be difficult. Instead, he has hidden a small fortune in selected art pieces in the books that Rebecca took from their home, and then sent with Karl on the boat to America. It is these pieces of art that will hopefully help establish a home for the Sterns in their new country.

Max Schmeling

Max Schmeling is Germany's former heavy weight championship. Max and Karl's father, Sigmund Stern, have been friends for years. One night during an art showing at Sig's gallery, Max makes an arrangement to give Karl boxing lessons in exchange for a painting owned by Sig that his wife wants.



Max coaches Karl, but their relationship during this coaching stage does not move much beyond boxing. Additionally, Max is still pursuing his career so he is gone for long periods of time to participate in matches in America. After the judges at the German Youth Boxing Championship learn that Karl is a Jew and he is expelled from the match, Karl drops out of his boxing lessons. He doesn't see much of Max but wonders about how the boxer, whose manager is an American Jew, stands on German politics.

It is Neblig, Karl's friend from the boxing club who suggests to Karl that he go to Max for help getting his family out of the country. When Max learns that the family's home has been attacked and that Sig and Rebecca are missing, he takes Karl and Hildy under his wing helping them locate their mother, who has returned to the art gallery, and their father, who has been arrested by the Gestapo. Max pays the boat fare for Hildy and Karl to travel to America. He also uses what political pull he has left to help Rebecca try to get Sig out of jail.

Abram Worjyk

Abram Worjyk is the owner of the Berlin Boxing Club. When Karl first visits the club, Worjyk tries to throw him out because he is a teen and the club is for adults only. Even after Max backs up Karl's claim that Karl is Max's protégé, Worjyk still picks on Karl and gives him a hard time. Before his first real fight, however, Worjyk presents Karl with a new pair of boxing gloves. When Karl participates in the youth boxing championship, Worjyk has a silk robe with the name of the club on it made for Karl. When it is revealed during the championship fight that Karl is a Jew, Karl believes Worjyk looks at him as if he has been stabbed in the back. After this incident, Karl does not go back to the club as he does not want to put Worjyk in danger of being accused of breaking the rules about mixing with Jews. Karl later learns that Worjyk was also a Jew. His look of shock at Karl's ejection from the championship match was probably because Worjyk knew that since he was a Jew, the same thing could happen to him.

Rebecca Stern

Rebecca Stern is Karl and Hildy's mother. She suffers from some sort of mental disorder, probably depression, which causes her to spend long periods of time in bed or relaxing in the tub. It is during one of her soaks in the tub that she falls asleep and nearly drowns, giving Karl the opportunity to meet the Countess, who tells Karl about his father's heroism.

Rebecca is dedicated to her family, which is shown by her desire to take care of her brother even though doing so could land the family in Nazi jail. She loves her children, but seems unable to be close to them. It is only one day when Rebecca goes to her son, Karl, to convince him to help his father with a project that Karl is able to tell that she has been paying attention to him, even though she seems to be in her own world much of the time. At the end of the novel, Rebecca stays in Germany, hoping to free Sig from jail, while she sends Karl and Hildy to the safety of America.



Gertz Diener

Gertz Diener is a member of the group at Karl's school known as the Wolf Pack. Gertz and two other students, Julius Austerlitz and Franz Hellendorf, attack Karl after school one day because he is a Jew. Gertz seems to be the leader of this group as he is the one who takes charge of telling the other boys to pull down Karl's pants to expose his uncircumcised penis. The next year the three haze Karl by pushing his head into a toilet in which all three of them have urinated. Gertz is the most significant member of this group as Karl sees him years later at a boxing exhibition. He is concerned that Gertz might reveal that he is a Jew. Karl's fear is proven correct when he is scheduled to fight Gertz in the Youth Boxing Championship. The two face off in the second round of the competition, but when Gertz realizes he will lose the fight, he tells the judges that Karl is Jewish. As a result, Karl is kicked out of the fight.

Neblig aka Albert Broder

Neblig is the janitor who works at the Berlin Boxing Club. Neblig becomes a friend and cheerleader for Karl. They share not only a love of boxing but also of comics. Neblig is one of the first people to whom Karl feels comfortable showing his cartoons. Although Neblig has a speech impediment that causes him to stutter, Karl finds he is very intelligent. He encourages Neblig to take up boxing again but Neblig tells Karl he is blind in one eye because of a fight when he was a child. After Karl is ejected from the youth boxing championship because he is a Jew, Neblig searches until he is able to get a letter to the boy. He invites him to visit the club again. Karl does visit and learns Worjyk has closed the club and fled the country because he is a Jew. The manufacturing company has taken over the space once used as the boxing club and has kept Neblig as its janitor.

Greta Hauser

Greta Hauser is a Catholic girl who lives in the same apartment building as Karl. He had a crush on her even before he began his boxing lessons. Greta stops to talk to him twice while he is shoveling coal in the building basement. In the second visit Greta kisses Karl. The two are seen by the building supervisor as they are kissing. They decide to meet in a park across from Greta's school. One day before one of their meetings Koplek, the building supervisor tries to sexually molest Greta. Karl catches the man in the act and interrupts him. The building supervisor lies about the relationship between Karl and Greta, getting Karl and his family kicked out of the building. Even though Karl put himself and his family at risk by protecting Greta, Greta does nothing to protect Karl. She will make no comment about the incident.



The Countess aka Bertram Heigel

Bertram Heigel is a friend of Sig's from the war who has become a cross dresser called the Countess. At first Karl, is uncomfortable around the Countess and offended by him because he believes there might be some sort of illicit relationship between his father and this man. Later, Karl learns from Bertram that the two men were friends during the war. Sig was responsible for saving Bertram's life. Because of his dedication to sig, Bertram continues to pay for fliers to be printed advertising homosexual balls even though he isn't hosting these balls any longer because of persecution against homosexuals. Later, after Karl's family and home is attacked by Nazis, he contacts the Countess for help. He comes to get Karl and Hildy from their home and escorts them to his house, pretending to be their aunt.

Hildegard "Hildy" Stern

Hildegard "Hildy" Stern is eight years old when the novel begins. She is Karl's younger sister. Even before hate against Jews becomes rampant, Hildy is unhappy with her appearance. She believes she's unattractive because of her dark hair and Jewish looks. As the hate against Jews gets more and more intense, Hildy faces more and more cruel bullying at the hands of Nazis. In one instance, she is hit with an egg thrown by a member of the Hitler Youth on her way home from school. While Karl has his boxing as a distraction from the Nazi oppression, Hildy has nothing. She finds solace in her writing but lashes out against her brother when the family forgets her birthday.

Barney Ross

Barney Ross is a Jewish boxer who becomes Karl's hero. Ross was the son of an Orthodox priest and had intended to become a scholar. He turns to boxing when his father is murdered and his family divided. Ross hopes to put his family back together using the money he earned in the ring. By the time Karl learns about him, Ross has earned championship belts in three different weight divisions. After Karl learns about his father's actions in the war, he compares the pictures of the two, believing he sees similarities between the two. Ross retires after he loses the welterweight title to Henry Armstrong.

Uncle Jakob Schwartz

Jakob Schwartz is Karl's uncle and Rebecca's brother. He is an active participant in the Reds, a political group opposed to the Nazis. After Sig's art show for Hartzel, Jakob is at the Stern apartment when the family returns. His sister is trying to remove a bullet from Jakob's rear. Sig believes Jakob was shot when the meeting he was attending was broken up by Nazis. Later, Jakob is arrested and put in the concentration camp Dachau. Rebecca wants to get a lawyer for him but Sig argues it will only put their family in



danger. Jakob later dies of dysentery in the camp. Jakob is one of Karl's childhood heroes.

Kerner

Kerner is the Swiss art dealer to whom Sig believes he is going to sell the last Picasso painting he has in his possession. Instead of giving him money for the painting, Kerner tells Sig he plans to send the money once he returns to Switzerland. When Sig argues with him, telling him the agreement had been for him to get cash that day, Kerner threatens to shoot Karl. Sig backs down and leaves without the money for the payment knowing he will never get any money. Kerner has basically stolen the painting from him.

Jurgen Koplek

Jurgen Koplek is the superintendent of the apartment building in which Karl and his family live. The older man expresses his interest in Greta after he sees Karl and Greta kissing in the basement. Later, he attacks Greta in the park. He threatens to expose Karl and his family as Jews if he does not let him have his way with Greta. True to his word, Kopleck tells the owner of the building about the "inappropriate" relationship between Karl and Greta, resulting in the Stern family being evicted.

Johann

Johann is the first boxer with whom Karl goes into the ring. Max sends Karl into the ring during his first visit to the club so he can see if Karl has any natural talent. Through his training, Karls spars with Johann often. It is after Karl scores a solid punch on Johann's solar plexus that Worjyk and Max decide he's ready for a real fight.

Frau Kressel

Frau Kressel was the lady who served as the Stern family's housekeeper and basically raised Karl and Hildy. Because the family becomes so short on money, they are forced to let the housekeeper go. It was the night that Kressel left that Hildy and Karl's mother almost drowns in the bathtub.

Dolph Lutz

Dolph Lutz is the policeman who brings the news of Uncle Jakob's death to the family. He also warns them of possible danger on the night that the Nazis take to the streets to attack Jews and their businesses.



Anny Ondra

Anny Ondra is Max Schmeling's wife. She is an actress and is admired for her beauty. Anny begs Sig to allow her to have the painting of her husband to remind her of him while he is on the road fighting.

Herr Munter

Herr Munter is the man who takes over as principal at Karl's school. Munter is proactive in adopting and putting into action Hitler's laws and regulations concerning Jews. It is Herr Munter who has the boys who are Jews, including Karl, expelled from school.

Gustav Hartzel

Gustav Hartzel is the Austrian artist for whom Sig hosts an art showing at his gallery. When Sig is injured in the Nazi attacks, it is Hartzel who picks him and Rebecca up to take them to the hospital.

Stefan

Stefan is a friend of Jakob. He reaches out to Rebecca to let her know that her brother, who has been sentenced to a concentration camp, is not well.

Joe Jacobs

Joe Jacobs is Max's manager. He is an American Jew. This is significant as he is coaching the German prize fighter during the time of the Nazi regime.



Symbols and Symbolism

Karl's Circumcised Penis

The members of The Wolf Pack pull down Karl's pants, exposing his circumcised penis, as proof that he is a Jew. This also becomes a source of worry for Karl when he gets drunk for the first time and becomes acutely aware of the fact that he is using a public urinal and a man spouting hatred about the Jews could easily see his uncircumcised penis and know that Karl is a Jew.

Die Abenteuer von Winzig und Spatz —The Adventures of Tiny and Sparrow —by Otto Berg

These cartoons, featuring a bird and sparrow, form a connection between Hildy and Karl. He calls her Winzig, the mouse, while he is Spatz, the sparrow.

A Blue Silk Scarf

Karl's father wears this blue silk scarf to all of his gallery showings. Karl doesn't like it because none of the other men wear scarves. Later, when he first meets The Countess, Karl wonders if his father is homosexual, because of the scarf.

Grosz Painting of Max

Although he'd rather have the money, Sigmund agrees to trade a painting that Grosz made of Max in exchange for boxing lessons for Karl.

The Three Hundred

Being able to complete the three hundred is the first challenge that Max gives to Karl. The three hundred, a basic building block for boxers, is made up of one hundred sit-ups, one hundred push-ups, fifty pull-ups and fifty minutes of running each day.

The Package

Karl cannot help but look at the contents of a package that his father sends him to deliver the night Karl's mother almost drowns. He is shocked to find the package contains fliers for a dance for homosexual men.



Old Pair of Boxing Gloves

When Karl goes to the Berlin Boxing Club for the first time, he doesn't even have a pair of boxing gloves. Neblig gives him a pair of his old gloves to wear.

Small Red Book

Max gives Karl this small red book, which is a copy of *Boxing Basics for German Boys*, to study but warns him that he can't learn boxing from a book.

Knochen

Knochen, the German word for bones, becomes Karl's nickname at the boxing club.

Fritz the Flying Fox, Herr Dunkelheit: Gentleman Spy, Danny Dooks: Boy Boxer and The Mongrel

These are names of cartoons created and drawn by Karl.



Settings

Holstein Gymnasium

The Holstein Gymnasium is the school that Karl attends. It is in this school that he is beaten badly by members of The Wolf Pack, boys who are Nazi followers. After the enforcement of the Nuremberg Laws, Karl, along with four other boys with Jewish background, are ejected from the school.

Galerie Stern

The Galerie Stern is the name of the building that houses Sig Stern's art gallery. After he is no longer able to make money selling the artwork of expressionist artists, the gallery closes. The family later lives in the gallery building after they are evicted from their apartment because they are Jews. It is in this gallery that Karl first meets Max and is promised boxing lessons.

Berlin Boxing Club

Although the club technically does not accept youth members, Max invites Karl to come and train with him at the Berlin Boxing Club, the place where he trains while in Berlin. The club closes after the owner flees Berlin because he is a Jew.

Fourteen Budapesterstrasse

Fourteen Budapesterstrasse is the address where the Countess, aka Bertram Heigel lives. It is to this address that Karl makes his first delivery for his father's printing business. Karl and Hildy later take shelter in the apartment of the Countess after the gallery (where they have been living) is vandalized.

Basement of Karl's Apartment Building

It is in the basement of Karl's apartment building that Greta Hauser first stops and talks to him. They also share their first kiss here though it is interrupted by Herr Koplek, the building superintendent.



Themes and Motifs

Nazi Germany

Life in Nazi Germany is a major theme of the novel as Karl describes the increasing regulations and restrictions put on Jews during Hitler's rule. Also touched on are the ways the persecution of the Jews hurts the Stern family in particular. Finally, homage is paid to the brave men who are willing to put themselves in danger in order to help save the Sterns.

Even though Karl and his family are not practicing Jews, this doesn't keep them from being affected by the persecution of this group of people by the Nazis. Because he has Jewish relatives (three of his grandparents are Jewish) Karl is considered to be Jewish as well. Even before the Nazis had put any real regulations on the Jews, a group known as the Wolf Pack has been hazing the boys they know are of Jewish descent. On his last day of school, Karl is beaten badly by this group of older boys. When school starts the following year, the Nuremberg Laws have been passed. One of these laws makes it official that Karl is classified as a Jew because of his three Jewish grandparents. Other laws prohibit German businesses from selling to Jewish businessmen. Those of Jewish descent are not allowed in certain public places or to participate in certain activities just because they are Jews.

One of the laws that affects the Stern family directly is the rule that German landlords are not allowed to rent to Jewish tenants. This doesn't become an issue for the Sterns until they are evicted from their apartment because of Herr Koplek's story about Karl's relationship with Greta. Once the Sterns are evicted, they are unable to find a decent place to live. They can find only one apartment, which is dirty and half the size of the one they'd been renting, and it would cost them twice the rent of their old apartment. For this reason they decide to live in Sig's art gallery.

Because Karl does not look Jewish he does not face as much cruelty as does his younger sister, Hildy. With her large nose and dark hair, Hildy easily fits the description of a Jew. For this reason, she takes much criticism from her schoolmates. While she is still attending a regular school Hildy is called a rotten apple after a teacher makes students read a book comparing Jews to this spoiled fruit. At the Jewish school to which her parents send her, Hildy isn't tortured by her classmates, but is instead heckled on her way home by older boys who are members of the Hitler Youth. These boys make a game out of throwing eggs at the girls as they walk home from school.

On the night that the Stern family's art gallery/home is broken into and Sig injured, there are a variety of people who step up to help them. The first of these is Hartzel. When Rebecca calls him to say Sig has been injured and asks him to come with his car to take Sig to a doctor, Hartzel does so even though he could be arrested. Also stepping up to help the Sterns is Bertram, or the Countess. When Karl calls him for help with his sister, Bertram walks to the gallery despite the danger in the streets from the rioters and



looters. Bertram takes Karl and Hildy back to his apartment even though he puts himself in danger for harboring Jews. Perhaps the person who risks the most for the Sterns is Max. After he learns what has happened to his old friend, he does everything in his power to locate him. He additionally arranges for Karl and Hildy to go to America where they will be safe from German persecution. Because Max has been built up as a German hero and symbol of Aryan supremacy, the punishment for him would be extremely strict if he were found to be helping a Jewish family. Despite this threat, Max allows Rebecca to stay with him and continues his efforts to have Sig freed from jail.

Heroes

Heroes, or perhaps better put, the choice of heroes is a major theme in this novel. As Karl grows up, he finds a variety of different men, most of them boxing champions, whom he admires. It is not until the end of the novel that Karl realizes that his father, with whom he'd lived his whole life, is as much a hero as any of these boxing legends.

Perhaps the first man whom Karl admires as a hero is Max Schmeling. Karl is flattered that a boxing hero like Max would take an interest in him. When Max tells Karl he has the reach of a champion and offers to give him boxing lessons, Karl is hooked. He takes to heart the first few bits of information that Max gives him about being a good boxer and follows these rules. He works out daily, improving his strength, waiting for Max to return. After months have gone by and he hasn't heard from Max, Karl becomes disillusioned with his new hero. Despite his disillusionment, Karl continues to work out and make progress on the strength guidelines Max has given him. When Max does finally return, Karl is ready for his training.

Another of Karl's boxing heroes is Barney Ross. Karl is attracted to Ross because Ross is a Jew, like him. When Ross wins the world boxing title, Karl wonders how bad things can really get for Jews. Although Ross had intended to be an Orthodox scholar, his life didn't turn out that way. His father was murdered and his family split apart. In order to earn money so he could reunite his family Ross began boxing. Although he's a Jew, Karl notices that Ross doesn't wear a yarmulke. Karl comforts himself with this knowledge that not all Jews feel the need to follow this clothing requirement when the boys at his Jewish school criticize him for not wearing the skullcap.

The American comic strip character Superman is another hero to whom Karl is attracted. Karl likes the idea of Superman because he is an outsider, just as Karl is. Many of the things that make Superman special, like his physiology, are the same things the Nazis say makes the Jews corrupt. Only Superman is not corrupt, he is stronger and smarter than others. Karl is additionally attracted to Superman because he doesn't fit the German description of perfection. He instead has dark hair and wears glasses. In fact, Superman is billed as being the champion of the weak and downtrodden, an idea to which Karl is attracted.

A final person whom Karl comes to accept as a hero though he'd never thought of him that way before is his father. Before his teenaged years, Karl knew very little about his



father or his father's past life. It is only when Karl happens to see Bertram Heigel when he is not dressed as the Countess that he learns about his father's bravery in the war. On this day, Bertram tells Karl that Sig saved him and another soldier from being killed in combat. Although Sig was awarded an Iron Cross for his bravery, Sig never accepted the award. Later, when their home is broken into by the Nazis, Karl sees his father in action. He notices that while their attackers' movements seem out of control, his father remains focused and makes purposeful moves. Although Karl had never thought of his father as a fighter, he is impressed by his father's composure in the midst of the melee.

Father/Son Relationships

The changing dynamics of the relationship between Sig and Karl makes up another significant theme in this novel. At the beginning of the book, Karl feels as if his father disapproves of him. His feelings toward his father are of fear at best. By the end of the novel, however, Karl has learned that his father is worthy of his admiration. Likewise, Sig is able to let his son know that he does admire his abilities.

When Karl and his father both appear together at the art show at the beginning of the novel, Karl seems to be a bit afraid of his father. In turn, his father seems to be continually disappointed in Karl. He's first disappointed because Karl is late to the showing, then because he agrees to the boxing lessons instead of insisting that Max pay Sig money for the painting he wants.

Karl's opinion of his father begins to change when he first meets Bertram Heigel. Karl has interacted with Bertram before when the man was dressed as his transgender alter ego the Countess. Up to this point in the novel, the Countess has always made Karl uncomfortable. He believes that his father might have some sort of homosexual relationship with this man. It is only when Karl meets Bertram as a man that he learns that Bertram and his father met when they were serving in the German army together. In fact, Sig saved Bertram's life as well as the life of another soldier. For his actions, Sig was awarded an Iron Cross.

Later, Karl has a conversation with his mother that helps him to understand his father and his father's ideas about parenting even more. While Karl has always hoped that his father would compliment him on his drawing or come to watch a boxing match, his father has never done so. Karl has always interpreted his father's distance as an indication that he did not love or approve of his son. Rebecca explains to Karl that Sig has distanced himself because he did not want Karl to grow up trying to be like his father or do what his father wanted him to do, only to please him. She says Sig came to this realization after those who visited his art shows began calling Karl "Little Sig" because Sig would dress the boy in a suit similar to his for the showings. It was at this point that Sig realized that was not the future he wanted for Karl. He instead wanted Karl to be his own person, a goal that Karl achieves.



Boxing as Politics

At different points in the novel, both Karl and Max make the point that they aren't afraid of boxing because there are rules in the ring. Karl tells Greta this when she asks why he would want to take the chance of getting hurt. Max tells Karl this when he asks Max if he's afraid to fight Joe Louis again. Despite the rules in the ring, both Max and Karl, along with most of Germany and America realize that boxing has taken on a whole new political meaning when Max faces off against Joe Louis for a rematch.

When Greta asks Karl why he wants to box even though it means he might get hurt, he tells her that he boxes because the fight in the ring is fair. In the ring, he feels that both he and his opponent have equal opportunity to win their fight, based on their abilities. They are required to follow the rules and can be disqualified if they don't follow these rules. Outside the ring, however, it seems to Karl that nothing is off limits. Because he is Jewish, it seems that life is against him from the beginning giving anyone who might challenge him an unfair advantage.

In a discussion about boxing that Karl has with Max, Max seems to agree with Karl on his ideas that boxing allows a fair fight. When Max has his rematch with Joe Louis, however, the match is decidedly not fair. The government puts pressure on Max to win in order to bring honor to Germany and the German race. He is supposed to help prove the supremacy of the Aryan people. The match becomes much more than just a fight between two men but one between good and evil, freedom and oppression, and democracy and monarchy. When Max loses the rematch, the Jews are blamed. Anny warns him to stay in America, afraid Hitler will have him arrested because of his loss. Max, however, returns to his home country despite the danger.

Hildy's Appearance

Even though Hildy doesn't have a terribly big role in the novel besides being Karl's younger sister, she is an important character because she helps to communicate a couple of important points. First, her concern with her looks, which she believes are unattractive, illustrates the German peoples' obsession with beauty. Second, because Hildy does look like a Jewish person, she provides an opposite look at the way Jews are treated by the German people from that experienced by Karl.

First, when considering Hildy's role in the novel it is important to remember the German idea of a perfect person was one of a certain height with light skin, blue eyes and blond hair. Physical perfection, including good eyesight, was also a characteristic of this perfect Aryan. Hildy, with her short stature, dark hair, large nose, dark skin and thick glasses, is the opposite of the German idea of perfection. Karl has never really thought of his sister being bothered by her looks until she mentions to him she wishes that Anny, Max's wife, had offered to give her beauty lessons. While the Aryan idea of beauty is something it is doubtful that Hildy could have ever reached, it is important to note that each culture of people develops for itself its own idea of ideal beauty. Those who don't fit this mold are left feeling unattractive and unaccepted.



Karl admits at various times in the novel that he is the most non-Jewish looking member of his family. He has light skin and dirty blond hair that keeps most from labeling him as a Jew from sight alone. Because Karl doesn't look like the typical Jew, he avoids a great deal of grief that Hildy faces because she does look so Jewish. Notice that when Karl goes to the hotel where Max is staying to ask him for help, he is able to enter through the front lobby and talk to the desk clerk with no one questioning his cultural background. When Max sends Karl back to Bertram's apartment for Hildy, however, they sneak her in through the service entrance. Max even pays the elevator operator extra cash to keep quiet about the fact he's sneaking a Jewish girl into his apartment.

Even though Karl and Hildy come from the same Jewish background, Hildy has a much tougher time because she looks Jewish while Karl looks more German. Hildy, like those around her, recognizes that she doesn't fit the German idea of beauty. Because she's still a child, Hildy hopes at the beginning of the novel there is some way she can be taught to achieve the German idea of perfection. It is only several years later that she realizes she will always look the way she does, an idea that she voices through her poem "Bald." Even as she struggles with the idea she will never fit the German ideal, Hildy searches for ways to make herself more acceptable, like shaving her head, only to realize this will make her even more unattractive.

Styles

Point of View

The story is told from the first person point of view of Karl Stern. Karl is a Jewish teenager who is living in Nazi Germany at the time of Hitler's reign. Ironically, even though Karl is descended from Jewish ancestors, he and his family are not practicing Jews. This first person point of view is appropriate as it tells the story of Karl's coming of age during this difficult time in his life and in his country's history. Karl tells the story not only of his own developing maturity but his growing relationship with his father and the deterioration of life in Germany for the Jews.

Karl's story is told in the past tense, as if he is looking back on the events of this part of his life. There are no flashbacks to the past and very little foreshadowing of coming events. Karl tells his story in a linear fashion from the day he is attacked by the Wolf Pack until several years later when he and Hildy are on board the boat headed for America. At the beginning of each part of the novel, the reader is given a time frame in which to reference when the action is taking place. As there are few time references given in the novel, it would be almost impossible to tell how much time has passed without these references being given.

Language and Meaning

One of the most significant aspect to take into consideration when reading this novel is that since it is set in Germany, the native language of the characters would be German. The novel is written in English, using the vocabulary of which a teen of Karl's age would be familiar. However, there are German phrases scattered throughout the novel. Most of the meanings, or at least general meanings, of these can be discerned using context clues. The term "Frau" for example is the equivalent of the English courtesy title of Mrs. or Ma'am. Similarly, "Herr" means Mr. or Sir. When Hildy tells Karl that the German boxing champion has come to their father's art gallery she refers to him as "der Meister" meaning the master. Other German terms like "ja" for yes, "danke" for thank you and "gute nacht" for good night are scattered throughout the novel. Note also that when characters make some sort of exclamation, like "Verdammt!" in the first chapter, these phrases generally appear in German.

As the story is told from the point of a teen boy, who doesn't understand a good deal of the confrontation between the Jews, whom he really doesn't even consider his people, and the Nazis, it might be helpful to have a little bit of background on what happened to the people during the time of Hitler's reign. For instance, when Karl first learns that his uncle has been sent to a concentration camp, he is puzzled by the wording. He asks his parents what this camp is but they are too busy arguing with one another to fully answer his questions. He later wonders what "concentrating" has to do with the camps as he tries to fit the phrase to the definition of concentration to which he is most familiar - that



of thinking hard and deeply about something - rather than the alternate meaning of containing something, in this case Jews, into a small, confined area.

Structure

The novel is structured rather simply. Karl tells his story in a linear fashion from his first major run in with the Wolf Pack in 1934 when he is 14 to the time he and his sister leave for New Orleans in 1938. The 398-page book is divided into three major parts. Each part of the book is labeled simply with a Roman numeral but the span of years in which each part of the novel covers is also notated. These parts are broken down into chapters. The individual chapters are titled with a brief label head that gives the reader some idea what the chapter is about even though these label heads are often written in a tongue in cheek style.

Part I covers the years of 1934-45. It is the shortest of the three major parts of the novel at about 100 pages. These chapters detail Karl's life from his first run in with the Wolf Pack to his meeting with Max and the beginning of his training as a boxer. At the end of this part of the novel, Karl had just given up faith in Max and his promise to give him private lessons when the champion shows up at his apartment one evening to ask if Karl still wants the training.

Part II covers the years of 1935-37, the time period of Max's official training as a boxer through his participation in the Youth Boxing Championship. It is during this tournament that Gertz, his old enemy from the Wolf Pack, has the championship judge alerted to the fact that Karl is a Jew. Karl's world outlook is completely changed by the end of this part of the novel when he sees Greta eating ice cream with another boy. This is the longest part of the novel, covering nearly 200 pages, or half the book.

The final part of the book takes place in the year of 1938. This text covers the time period after Karl's boxing dream is demolished to the time that he and Hildy sail to America. During this section of the novel, the Stern family's home is vandalized by Nazis and his father badly injured. He survives the injuries only to be arrested by Nazis because they accuse him of using his printing press to publish anti-Nazi propaganda. At the end of the novel, he is still in jail. Karl and Hildy's mother, Rebecca, stays in Germany trying to free her husband while the children are sent to America.



Quotes

I didn't really consider myself Jewish. Raised by an atheist father and an agnostic mother, I grew up in a secular household. I had absolutely no religious background or education.

-- Karl (Part I: How I Became Jewish paragraph 24)

Importance: Although Karl has Jewish blood in his background, he doesn't consider himself Jewish as he and his family aren't practicing Jews. Karl's lack of affiliation with the Jews and Jewish religion makes it even harder for him to understand and swallow the prejudicial behavior with which his fellow students and eventually Germans in general show against him and his family.

Whatever the reason, no matter how much the rest of me looked and felt like a gentile, I had a penis that was undeniably Jewish.

-- Karl (Part 1: How I Became Jewish paragraph 35)

Importance: The boys at Karl's school, known as the Wolf Pack, pull down Karl's pants, exposing his circumcised penis, as proof that he is Jewish.

There's adventure in the air . . . , I persisted. / 'And cake to be eaten.' She finally chimed in.

-- Karl and Hildy (Part 1: Winzig and Spatz paragraph 57)

Importance: Karl and Hildy share a love for a cartoon, Winzig and Spatz. They often repeat these quotes, a kind of inside joke between the two.

Think about that: They're melting art to make bullets. These are savages we're dealing with.

-- George Grosz (Part 1: Galerie Stern paragraph 6)

Importance: Before George Grosz, one of the artists whose works has been declared degenerate by Hitler, leaves Germany he stops to say goodbye to Karl's father. Although Sig tries to convince him to stay, Grosz won't stay in a country he says is filled with savages. He backs up his claim that the Germans are savages by pointing out that they are melting down statues by Belling to make bullets.

For years my father had claimed to be friends with the former heavyweight champion, but I had never quite believed him until that night.

-- Karl (Part 1: Der Meister paragraph 4)

Importance: It is not until Max Schmeling attends one of Sig's gallery showings that Karl really believes his father is friends with the boxing champion.

When he called for my first lesson, I would be ready. I vowed that every morning I would do sit-ups and push-ups as soon as I got out of bed; then I would run to the park near



my house, which had a chin-up bar.
-- Karl (Part 1: Greta paragraph 1)

Importance: Karl makes a vow to himself to follow Max's instructions so that he will be ready when Max comes back to Germany for their boxing lessons.

Then something happened. Instead of getting more scared, I got angry. The feeling built inside me like a quick-boiling pot until it shot me forward at Johann like a jet of hot steam.

-- Karl (Part II: The Berlin Boxing Club paragraph 90)

Importance: During his first sparring session with Johann, Karl becomes angry when the other men laugh at his pain. This anger incites him to overcome his fear.

Max taught me the fundamentals of boxing, from how to make a fist to how to stand to how to throw all the basic punches: the jab, the straight right, the uppercut.

-- Karl (Part II: Learning to Stand, Breathe, and Eat paragraph 4)

Importance: Karl describes how Max teaches him the basics of boxing, of which he says that some of the simpler seeming lessons were hardest.

While Max was my teacher, Neblig was my confidant, friend, and cheerleader. He kept an eye out for me and always seemed to be there with a word of encouragement when I needed it most.

-- Karl (Part II: Neblig and Joe Palooka paragraph 1)

Importance: Karl describes his growing friendship with Neblig, a man who works at the Berlin Boxing Club.

In boxing there are rules. You wear padded gloves. It's always a one-on-one fight. You can't hit below the belt or use a weapon. I may get beat, but at least I'll always have a fair chance of winning. The rest of the world isn't always like that.

-- Karl (Part II: A Prayer paragraph 20)

Importance: Karl explains to Greta why he feels safer in the world of boxing than in the real world, outside the boxing ring.

I stood beside Benjamin and looked out at the happy chanting faces of my schoolmates, as if it were all a game to them.

-- Karl (Part II: Early Dismissal paragraph 17)

Importance: Karl describes what he sees and feels on the day that he and the other boys who were suspected of being Jewish were thrown out of school. Although the ousting is very serious for Karl and the others, he notes how the other boys cheer and laugh as if their pain and embarrassment is a game.



I've fought dozens of men of all backgrounds, and you see every type of human emotion in the ring: heroism, cowardice, rage, fear, doesn't matter the skin color. Everyone bleeds the same.

-- Max (Part II: The Brown Bomber paragraph 20)

Importance: Max tries to explain to Karl how he doesn't see his upcoming fight against Joe Louis as a competition between races. He believes all men are equal once they are in the ring.