

In Paradise Study Guide

In Paradise by Peter Matthiessen

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

In Paradise Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-3.....	4
Chapters 4-6.....	7
Chapters 7-10.....	11
Chapters 11-14.....	14
Chapters 15-16.....	17
Characters.....	19
Symbols and Symbolism.....	22
Settings.....	24
Themes and Motifs.....	25
Styles.....	28
Quotes.....	29



Plot Summary

"In Paradise" is a historical novel by Peter Matthiessen which details the journey of Clements Olin to Poland to learn more about his mother. Clements was born in the Cracow ghetto to a Jewish woman, later sent to be raised by his biological father in America. Olin grows up unaware that his mother was Jewish, until his grandmother reveals the information years later while dying. Olin, now in his fifties and divorced, ultimately travels to Auschwitz to learn more about his mother, and to see the place where she likely died. While there, he falls in love with a Catholic nun. "In Paradise" examines the legacy of the Holocaust, and how it continues to haunt both those who were directly affected and those affected in distant ways.

Clements arrives in Cracow, late for the beginning of a spiritual retreat at Auschwitz. Olin gets a ride to the camp from two local people who have little knowledge of the atrocities that took place at there, and Olin finds himself growing angry with their lack of understanding.

When Olin arrives at the camp itself, he keeps himself separate from the others who have come to see where they or their family members suffered more than fifty years before. Olin visits Birkenau, the place where the mass executions were usually carried out, but he cannot force himself to go in at first. He visits the museum with the others but finds the lack of empathy annoying. He later returns to Birkenau only to run into another man who is also angry and obtuse.

Olin remains a spectator at the camp while the other visitors argue over who has more right to be there and why some should not be allowed to visit. Some of the stories of the people, or their family members, begin to come out. At the same time, Olin finds himself attracted to a young novice nun, Sister Catherine, and he begins attending her morning worship sessions.

Olin finally takes a picture of his mother that was given to him by his stepmother in the village where she lived. Olin has trouble finding anyone willing to speak to him about the past. Eventually, a local woman offers to help him and he finds the house where his mother once lived. He learns that the estate agent for his family took over the house after his mother's family left it. He also learns that a local man who was a guard at Auschwitz remembers his mother being brought there for execution.

Olin tells the others that he believes his mother was Jewish and she was killed at Auschwitz. They make fun of him, and Olin finds himself struggling with this new definition of himself. Olin also worries that the nun he loves will think of him differently now that he has announced he is a Jew. She does seem to think of him differently, but not because of his Jewish heritage, but because of his own shame in relation to it.

Olin ultimately leaves the camp and goes to Cracow. There, he runs into Sister Catherine, who leaves him once more. Olin is left alone and saddened by all he has learned and lost.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

Prologue. A story is related from one man to another about a childhood memory of someone trying to reach a belt in the mud while locked in the cattle car of a train.

Chapter 1. The man arrives late to an airport in Poland. He takes a cab to Crakow, but learns that he has arrived in the wrong place and missed the train to Auschwitz I. The man goes to a café where he meets a young couple, Mirek and Wanda. Mirek and Wanda take him on a tour of the city, unaware that he knows a great deal about the place. They convince him to buy a piece of amber for a woman who does not exist back home. The man tells them some things he knows about the history of Jews in the city. The couple offers him a ride to Auschwitz when they learn that this is where he was headed.

Chapter 2. On the drive, the man upsets the young couple by telling them horrible things about the Jews who lived in and around Crakow, but were persecuted during the war. When he becomes too intense, the young couple cannot get him out of their car fast enough. The man attempts to make amends by offering the girl the piece of amber she told him to buy and by giving the boy money for gas, but they refuse. When he arrives at Auschwitz, the man is chastised for being late, but given something to eat and taken to the room he is to share with another.

Chapter 3. Over breakfast the following morning, the man meets his roommate, Dr. Anders Stern, and several of the other people taking part in the week-long pilgrimage to Auschwitz. Among them is G. Earwig, a mysterious man with a dark disposition. Like Olin, Earwig has his own secrets, which are yet to be revealed. There is also Ben Lama, the retreat's unofficial spiritual leader. The man who arrived late is Dr. Clements Olin, a fifty-five year-old Polish-born American poet and scholar, divorced from his wife.

Olin studies Jewish writers, such as Tadeusz Borowski and poets like Akhmatova, Herbert, and Milosz. He has come to the retreat to do research. Rather than join the rest of the group for a film, Olin goes to Auschwitz II, Birkenau. Olin wants to experience the camp by himself, but changes his mind when he becomes incredibly unnerved before walking through the gates. Olin returns to Auschwitz I and joins the rest of the group for a tour of the museum. Olin wonders if the German people knew that many of their sweaters and jacket linings were made from human hair.

Analysis

In the opening chapters, readers are introduced to a Polish-born American scholar, Clements Olin, who studies Jewish writers of the period before, during, and after the Holocaust. Olin has come to Poland, specifically to the extermination camp at Auschwitz, in order to see it firsthand and to see it as it relates to the writings he has



studied - specifically, the writings of Borowski. He knows more about the place than even the locals, and he becomes annoyed with one young local couple for their lack of even general understanding of the history of the area.

The reader comes to understand that Olin's knowledge of the atrocities committed at Auschwitz appears to be more than scholarly in nature. He appears to have some personal connection with the place, though this is not yet revealed. The fact that he studies writers who personally experienced such a traumatic and terrifying time, rather than merely studying history, provides additional evidence that there is something deeply personal to Olin about Auschwitz. Although this will ultimately be revealed, the reader can see that a theme is emerging with Olin -one of self-discovery. His belatedness to the camp (another important theme), as well as his drifting around rather than fully engaging with the other members of the retreat, give rise to the idea that he is not merely drifting, but traveling. Most specifically, he is journeying - on a journey of self-discovery.

The most telling incident about Olin's connection to Auschwitz comes with his decision to visit the Birkenau camp alone - and the fact that he is unable to do so. Visiting such places understandably exacts a severe emotional toll on people, yet Olin's own reaction to the camp - that he is unable to even go inside - demonstrates that he must indeed have some sort of personal connection to the place. The sheer hatred and horror that such a place meant to the people living at the time, and to those who have come after, is clear. The extermination camps set up by the Nazis were the culmination of years of prejudice, specifically, Antisemitism. At the same time, Olin's inability to head into the camp illustrates his own inability to as of yet confront the past - either in general, or with respect to his own personal history.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Olin? Why is he late to Auschwitz? How does this touch on the theme of late comings?

Discussion Question 2

What is Auschwitz? Why have so many people come to see Auschwitz? Why has Olin come to Auschwitz?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Olin become agitated when the local stranger stops to give the young couple with him directions to Auschwitz? Why does Olin upset the young couple with vivid descriptions of the horror at Auschwitz?



Vocabulary

rudeness, truancy, stupefied, acoustic, mannered, melancholy, multilingual, ironic, indignation, paradise, genitals, nameless, volatile, unobtrusive, hideous, mute, mistake, offended, mechanical, monotone, spectacles, cocoon, statistics, exhibits, droning, seedy, insane, apparitions, horrified, absence, companions



Chapters 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4. The members of the retreat are taken on a tour of the entire compound of Auschwitz. When they enter the death block, the area where prisoners condemned to death were kept, a Catholic novice nun lights a candle to Saint Maximilian. Mr. Earwig becomes angry and tells her that such actions have no place there. Olin intervenes, but only to silence them in a house of death.

In the first crematorium at Auschwitz I, the retreat members see a tribute wall to those who died there. The members participate in a brief ceremony. As they tour the former camp, Olin finds himself wondering who of them truly has the right to be there. He does not understand why tourists come to this place and what interest anyone other than survivors might have in it. Over dinner, a similar conversation takes place as several members of the group discuss Earwig's earlier outburst. Afterwards, Olin returns to Birkenau only to find Earwig there. Earwig talks to Olin, but some of what he says about the place makes little sense to Olin. After Earwig leaves, Olin thinks of some of the things Borowski wrote about Birkenau.

Chapter 5. During a meeting of the retreat, Olin watches the young Catholic novice take notes. It makes him think of his own youth, and in so being, his own past. In 1939, Olin's grandfather, Baron Olinski, convinced his son, a lieutenant in the cavalry, to help he and his wife escape Poland. Olin grew up listening to his grandparents talk about the terrible things that happened in Poland during the war, despite their prejudices towards Jews, Catholics, and other groups of people.

About six months after leaving Poland and settling in the United States, Baron Olinski heard from his estate agent that their son had impregnated a young girl in the neighboring village of Oswiecim. The girl, the daughter of a doctor, was not the kind of girl the Baron wanted his son to marry, but he was not surprised to learn of the relationship.

During meditation, Earwig again gets into a conversation with the novice nuns about the people who survived Auschwitz. The novices claim it was faith that helped them, but Earwig cannot understand how faith could have got them through those horrors. His words make Olin think of survivors' guilt that plagued many people who lived through the Holocaust, when so many did not.

Before bed, Ben Lama takes the group into a room where they are to share their feelings and experiences. Earwig continues to be the voice of disbelief and skepticism, voicing these emotions as others talk about faith and a coming together of the different belief systems of which they are a part. Then others are invited to talk. The Germans take the stage and attempt to defend themselves, but their words fall on deaf ears in most cases. An argument ultimately breaks out over who has more right to be at



Auschwitz. There is even some race-bashing as one woman claims she can no longer eat with the Germans and others claim the people from Palestine should not be allowed to be there.

That night, unable to sleep, Olin walks to the house that once was the residence of the camp commandant, Rudolf Hoess. Hoess claimed he ran Auschwitz according to orders. When the war ended, he was tried and returned to Auschwitz to hang.

Chapter 6. The next morning, Olin attends the Christian services with his roommate. He has grown fascinated with Sister Catherine, the young novice who lit the candle that so upset Earwig the previous day. At lunch time, a wagon delivers a meal resembling one the prisoners of Auschwitz would have received during their time there. Olin walks over to Sister Catherine and tries to speak with her. The nun is polite at first, but becomes annoyed by Olin's questions and his desire to see what she has written in her notebook. Olin manages to read some of her notes and discovers that she has had some of the imaginary visions he has also had -something of a transcendental experience, in which there seems to be greater forces at work in such a place as Auschwitz -to do with man and evil.

Olin thinks of the real reason he has come to Auschwitz, but he hesitates to begin his investigation. Instead, he thinks back on his childhood. His family held deep prejudices against both Jews and Catholics, but were devoted to their Protestant religion. Olin grew up amidst these prejudices without really understanding them until he was older.

As before, there is more argument during dinner, much of it incited by Earwig. There is a great amount of anger against the Germans who have dared come to this retreat.

Analysis

As the retreat progresses, the theme of prejudice takes center stage, as there is a growing amount of animosity against those who have come for reasons other than to remember the Jewish victims. Although the camp was first used for Polish citizens, and that many of them died there as well, several people believe that only the Jews who were unfairly imprisoned and put to death in the camps should be remembered and mourned. There also those who believe that only those who survived the camps or have relatives who died have the right to visit and mourn. This causes a great amount of tension against the Germans who have come there, despite the fact that it is later revealed that many of them had relatives who were somehow injured by their association with the camp. There is also tension against a couple of Americans who have no real connection to the camp, or to things that happened there. There is also similar animosity toward a couple of people from Palestine. The prejudice on display between nearly all members of the group is startling, especially given the context and the place in which they are attending a spiritual retreat.

The reader should especially take note of the outbreak at dinner. Eating is a communal activity, which brings people together to consume a meal whether they are family,



friends, coworkers, or others. Meals are meant to be an enjoyable, intimate act which unite; however, the meal in Chapter 5 leads not to solidarity, but to disharmony. The meal becomes ironic, and continues to tear the group apart. Some people refuse to even eat with the Germans who have come to the retreat, and many accuse one another of having no right to even be at Auschwitz. The very thing that ultimately led to Auschwitz - prejudice - has broken out in strong form.

As Olin witnesses the rising tension in the retreat, he struggles with his own emotions and motives. It slowly becomes clear that Olin has a family connection to the area and it is suggested that he also has a family connection to Auschwitz even though he admits he is not Jewish. The reader is left wondering why Olin is truly there and why he has made it his life's work to study the writings of Jews who were there, especially given his own upbringing and the prejudice of his family against Jews. His journey of self-discovery continues, leading the reader to suspect that the journey of self-discovery will not be an easy one for Olin.

This is also the case when it comes to Olin's love life. Olin is divorced, and is not currently attached to anyone. Part of this stems from his own inability to commit to anything in a timely fashion -the theme of belatedness apparent - but also because Olin seems to set goals that are impossible to achieve. His noticing of the young, pretty nun who lights a candle is not merely recognition or observation, but something much deeper to Olin. She has enchanted him on a romantic level. Readers should also not miss the point that Sister Catherine lights a candle - a light in the darkness, a spark in the darkened void, and a light in Olin's own dark life. She appears in light to him in the middle of darkness, and she becomes an unachievable goal for Olin, in which he sets himself up for failure in the coming chapters.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Olin want to visit Birkenau on his own? Why is he surprised to find Earwig there?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Olin become fascinated with Sister Catherine? Why does she get upset while talking to him?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Earwig often get angry during the sharing part of the day? Why does he argue with the others about their reasons for being there? Should non-Jews with no connection to Auschwitz be there?

Vocabulary

consulted, extraordinary, survived, suggesting, defeated, triumphant, awards, permission, gathering, consulted, pioneer, retreat, partisan, activities, regress, millennia, progressed, academic, sadistic, scarcely, technological, compared, civilization, pathological, commandeers, conversation, executed, humor



Chapters 7-10

Summary

Chapter 7. There is tension again during sharing time, a continuation of sorts from dinner. Sister Catherine arrives and invites everyone to join her morning worship services, annoying the priest leading sharing time. Then a German stands and tells the group that his uncle was a soldier who confessed to his love for a Jew girl. He was sent to Auschwitz as a guard. He was eventually castrated for refusing to follow orders. Another woman, Rebecca, talks of how her family was taken to Auschwitz and all killed because she cried out when the Gestapo broke into their house, forcing the family to give up their hiding place. Olin later meets Stefan, a monk defrocked for pushing a petition of reform on the Pope without going through proper channels.

Olin thinks again about his past. His grandfather learned through his estate agent that the girl his son had loved was sent to the Crakow ghetto because it was rumored that her mother was of Hebrew descent. When the father protested, he was sent there, too. There was a boy born to the girl and the boy was sneaked out of the ghetto and sent to America to live with his father. Olin's father was said to be heartbroken. He wore a black armband for the rest of his life and always swore he would go back for the girl, but he never did. Instead, he married a rich American woman. When Olin's father died, his stepmother gave him a picture she had found among the father's things. It was, presumably, of Olin's mother.

Chapter 8. Olin attends morning services with the novice nuns again. The plain nun, Sister Ann-Marie, forgets the cross and tries to fashion a makeshift one, but it does not work. Olin steps forward to help, but when he and Sister Catherine smile at one another, Sister Ann-Marie thinks they are mocking her and walks off. Olin goes to find her in the women's barracks, but when she does not appear immediately, he leaves because of memories of the writings he has read about this section of the camp.

Olin goes into town to search for someone who might give him information on his mother, but he finds no one. In fact, the people seem hostile to his inquiry. He then goes to see his family estate just past the crematorium outside the camp gates. Earwig accompanies him uninvited.

Stanislav K, or K, is the only man to escape Auschwitz and not be recaptured. He has to come to the retreat to speak. K tells them how he escaped in 1942 with his work group. The rest of the group was captured and hung, along with many others during the search for K. K then questioned why the Jews did not send home letters as he and his fellow Poles did and why they did not escape. He even questions if there really was a Jewish Holocaust.

Chapter 9. Olin speaks with Sister Catherine about poetry, even showing her an anthology he has put together of famous Polish writers.



Chapter 10. The strange Polish woman, a local who calls herself "the other side", reappears. She tells everyone that she is a survivor of lifelong abuse and that she feels nothing for the horrors that took place at the camp. However, she begins to cry before she leaves.

A Polish woman, Erna, helps Olin find the house where his mother's family lived. The neighbor tells him that the family left one day and a lawyer for the Olinski family moved in and lived there until he died. Olin recalls that on her deathbed, his grandmother told him that his mother was likely Jewish and that it was possible she had survived the war. Olin walks the road where his mother, if she was transported to Auschwitz from the Cracow ghetto, would have walked to the camp. He finds an old whistle stop and some of the cattle cars that were likely used to transport the Jews. He runs into Mirek, who is living in a small cottage there.

When Olin reaches the camp, he joins another worship ceremony with the Catholics. He sees Sister Catherine drop to her knees in reverence. He has learned that she is on probation and another bad report from a priest could cause her to be kicked out of the convent. The look on her face tells him she is convinced that might happen now.

Olin sits alone in the crematorium and imagines his mother and her sister dying there. He blacks out and feels ill. Afterward, he walks and talks with Sister Catherine.

Analysis

The reader has finally discovered why Olin has come to Auschwitz. He believes that his mother, a young girl his father had an affair with prior to his family escaping Poland, was a Jewish woman who was executed at Auschwitz. Olin wants information about his mother and her family, but all he can discover is basically what he knows: that the family disappeared early in the war and never came back. The village where his mother lived was a heavily-Jewish area before the war, and it would not be unlikely that they were Jewish. Olin comes to the awful reality that prejudice can even infect a family against its own members -as was the case against his mother, courtesy of his father's family. All Olin has related to his mother is a photograph of her -and just as she became central to his existence, her existence becomes central to his identity.

Olin's connection to Auschwitz explains a lot about his motivations. It is now clear why he has become something of a Jewish scholar and why he has sought out so many Jewish friends even though his family was prejudiced toward Jewish people. Olin is clearly haunted by what may or may not have happened to his mother and her family. In an effort to understand the terrible experiences of the camp, he has not sought out secondary historical books, but firsthand experiential accounts of the Holocaust by people who were there.

At the same time, Olin struggles to learn more about his past, he begins to befriend and, perhaps, fall in love with Sister Catherine. She has become a spark in his otherwise darkened existence. Sister Catherine is a troubled nun who is close to being kicked out



of the convent. Olin feels a connection with her and she makes him feel happiness in a horrible place. It becomes apparent that all of those who have come to Auschwitz have personal reasons of some kind or another, mostly that of searching. For one woman, it is due to the abuse she suffered; for others, it is to mourn the dead and understand their terror; for Olin, it is to connect to his past and his journey of self-discovery. But Sister Catherine is a nun. Despite having nearly been thrown out of her order, she is doing everything she can to stay in. Olin presents something of an obstacle to her. Clearly, she is intrigued by him - perhaps romantically - and this stands in the way of her getting back in good with her order. The commitments she has made to that order are in direct contradiction to what Olin seeks from her. The ability to find love, and to be accepted (Olin has been given up by his mother for a better life, a form of rejection; he is not close with this father's family; he is not close to anyone among the retreat, and his ancestors have long been persecuted) seems possible with Sister Catherine for Olin - but he is reaching for something that is impossible.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Olin's grandmother not tell him that his mother might have been Jewish until she was dying? What is the significance of her calling him David only when discussing his mother?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Olin want to learn about the fate of his mother? Why is the town initially reluctant to talk to him? Who helps him?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Olin continuously seek out Sister Catherine? What do they talk about?

Vocabulary

honorable, secular, strict, consequences, compliments, distracted, attention, unamused, entirely, chastened, unsteady, tentative, executioners, language, educated, lullaby, region, couched, staggers, peering, overwhelmed, solitude, begotten, creatures, exhausted, biomass, strongest, violent, succumbs, terrifying, packed, jammed, cyanide, canisters



Chapters 11-14

Summary

Chapter 11. Rebecca worries about Olin and his search for his mother during dinner. Afterward, no one wants to testify at the sharing episode, so Ben Lama leads everyone in a ceremonial dance. Olin joins in with the two novice nuns. There is some argument that what they have done is disrespectful, but others argue that it was right, for it was healing.

Chapter 12. Olin runs into Sister Catherine the next morning and learns that Sister Ann-Marie has decided to leave, which means Sister Catherine will have to leave as well. Sister Catherine believes the local priest has made a bad report about her and she will be dismissed from the convent when she returns. Later, Earwig teases Olin for spending so much time with Sister Catherine. He also tells Olin that he was part of a group of Jews in a Romanian village who was left behind when the Jews were rounded up by the church. He ended up with a group of Romas. It is to honor them that he has come to Auschwitz. Earwig has spent most of his life looking for the ship that took his mother and the other Jews from his village, but he has never been able to find it. One of the Germans has offered to help look through records in Berlin, but Earwig cannot remember his family's last name.

Adina chastises Olin over Sister Catherine and warns him not to hurt her. Earwig, too, cautions Olin about hurting Sister Catherine. Olin has been married, but he has never had much success with women.

Chapter 13. Olin is walking to a church where one of the retreat members has been working on a mural, and he is joined by Father Mikal. Mikal assures Olin that he does not plan to offer a bad report on Sister Catherine. He also admits to making the pink triangles many of the retreat members wear to remember the homosexuals killed at Auschwitz. Father Mikal leaves Olin when he reaches the church. Olin is surprised by the oddness of the artist's paintings that he sees, but learns the artist creates paintings in such a way was to help rid himself of his memories of Auschwitz.

Olin thinks of his research on Borowski. Borowski was liberated from Auschwitz after the war and reunited with his fiancée in Sweden. They married. Three years later, and three days after the birth of his daughter, Borowski would commit suicide. No one would ever, truly, know why.

Olin finds a cross on the way back to Auschwitz in the ground, and digs it up with his fingers. Sister Catherine sees him and cleans his hurt fingers afterward. As they walk into the camp, Olin confesses he loves her. Sister Catherine walks ahead of him and Stefan, the defrocked monk who once knew Sister Catherine, and whom, it is revealed, was the cause of her nearly being kicked out of the convent, speaks to Olin. Olin thinks



that Sister Catherina and Stefan had an affair and it makes him imply to Sister Catherine that he did not mean his confession.

Chapter 14. Olin learns that his mother was seen coming into Auschwitz by a local man who worked there as a guard. Afterward, he tells the group about his mother's identity, and that he himself was a Polish Jew. The group makes fun of his confession, and one person calls him out for calling himself a Polish Jew because there is no longer any such thing. Afterward, Olin talks to Sister Catherine, convinced that she can no longer want him because he is Jewish. She tells him she cannot love him because she is a nun, and feels differently about him not because he is Jewish, but that he is ashamed of it. Olin feels bad about himself afterward and wonders why he even came.

Analysis

As the novel unfolds, Olin is warned multiple times not to hurt Sister Catherine with his attention or feelings for her. Olin disregards all these warnings and confesses to Sister Catherine that he loves her. She tells him that she cannot be involved with him because she is a nun. Later, Olin confesses to the group that he is Jewish, and secretly expects Sister Catherine will think differently, and negatively, about him. As Sister Catherine gently rejects Olin's advances, so too does the group reject dismissively Olin's claims to being a Polish Jew. They derisively respond that he cannot be a Polish Jew, because they no longer exist. Olin, who has observed the tensions among the different members of the group at Auschwitz, now finds himself the brunt of such tension, and he feels isolated and lonely. This drives him even more to despair, especially given the rejection by Sister Catherine. His identity -his journey of self-discovery- seems to be predicated on the idea that he must be accepted somewhere - but in truth, he needs to accept himself as a human being. His validation cannot come from others, but only himself.

Apart from the rejection of both his love and his identity, Olin's emotions become a state of turmoil. He is struggling to understand who he is and how he came to be at Auschwitz in the first place, especially because two of the primary defining characteristics of human beings - both their identity as human beings, and the love that they can freely give to others - have been rejected outright. This further complicates his journey of self-discovery. He learns, in the process, that his mother was indeed believed to have been sent to Auschwitz. In a metaphorical way, his mother's sentencing to Auschwitz mirrors Olin's sentencing of himself. The hatred of others toward his mother has doomed her; Olin's hatred of himself has doomed him. While validation cannot come from someone else - namely, Sister Catherine - it is also Sister Catherine who points out to Olin (for he has been unable to clearly see it beforehand) that he is ashamed of himself for being Jewish.

Herein, Olin's discovery of an old cross buried in the ground should not be missed. Crosses, though essential to Christianity, symbolize the idea of sacrifice for all. Such is the sacrifice that Olin's mother made in caring for him, and later giving him up. The excavation of this cross equates to the digging up of the past -and so Olin is digging up his own past -the sacrifice of his mother to give him a future.



Discussion Question 1

What kind of art does Malan create at the church? Why? How does it help him deal with memories of Auschwitz?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Olin tell Sister Catherine he loves her? Why does he make her think it was a joke? Was it?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Olin tell everyone he thinks his mother was Jewish? Why is he teased for calling himself a Polish Jew?

Vocabulary

tarn, admission, nowhere, protest, retreat, distinguished, horrible, handsome, stigma, reassign, exclusion, covert, subtle, excluded, subjected, alienated, awaited, fastened, detested, history, mourned, fostering, begotten, drunkard, disappointment, provenance, truthful, ransomed, missing, embraced, affection, contracted, ironic



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15. Olin visits the death chamber one last time and leaves the piece of amber as an offering to his mother. He runs into Sister Catherine again, during which time they say their goodbyes. Olin boards a bus for Cracow and comes upon Earwig. Earwig regretfully says that he finally learned that the ship on which his mother was taken away, the Struma, was turned back from Germany, and sent to return to Romania, but was not allowed to dock there, either. It was eventually blown up by the Russians with more than seven hundred passengers still aboard. Only one man survived.

Chapter 16. Earwig gets off the bus at the airport. Olin rides into Cracow with others from the retreat who are still talking about the things that happened there. When Olin arrives at his hotel, he finds a note from Sister Catherine waiting for him. Over dinner, Olin learns from Stefan that Father Mikal has been beaten and run out of the village. The next morning, Olin runs into Mikal. Mikal tells him that it was Stefan who spread rumors about him in the village. Stefan was an orphan raised in the church and sexually abused by a priest. To be run out of the Church was a horrible fate for such a man. He took out his hurt on Sister Catherine by seducing her with his petition.

Olin later goes to a museum to see his favorite Da Vinci painting, Lady with an Ermine. Sister Catherine is there. They talk for a minute and then she leaves. Olin goes after her to stop her, but she leaves anyway. He then goes to a church and sits alone.

Analysis

Olin leaves Auschwitz with only some of the answers he wanted. In essence, the ending is bittersweet. He makes an offering to his mother, implying to the reader that he has accepted who he is, and honoring his mother's memory and paying his respects to her for the horrors she endured. However, he has not accepted that Sister Catherine has chosen her vows over him. He attempts to fight for her, but she continues to walk away from him.

The book's main theme is about self-discovery; in particular, it is about a man trying to find out who he really is. Olin attempts to do this by learning more about this mother's family. He never really learns a lot, just enough to confirm what he already suspected or believed. He struggles to accept himself as a Jewish man. He also struggles to accept that his mother and her family died tragically in the death camps. At the same time, he finds love in the camp, but the love he so freely gives to Sister Catherine is roundly rejected. She does not trust that he believes enough in himself, and thinks differently of him because he is initially ashamed of his past. Catherine, likewise, does not want to be fooled a second time by a man claiming to love her. It is a difficult ending to the novel,



one that leaves Olin depressed and seeking solace in a Christian church, just as the artist Malan has before him.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Olin leave the amber in the death chamber? Why does he want to make amends to his mother?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Sister Catherine leave Olin poetry and show up at the museum in front of his favorite painting? Why does she do all this, and then walk away anyway?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mikal get run out of the village? What lies were told about him? Who told the lies? Why?

Vocabulary

amorphous, entranceway, vanished, pennant, sense, eventually, locates, chorale, invisible, torments, precipitous, cannonades, entrance, disappears, stubborn, journey, knowing, overtakes, protest, determination, awe, murmurs, mortician, crimson, artificial, hideously, difficulties, foolishly, overjoyed, permits



Characters

David Clements Olin

David Clements Olin is the son of a Protestant man and a Jewish woman. Olin did not learn much about his mother until his grandmother lay dying. The old woman told him that his mother was likely a Jew and that she likely died in Auschwitz. However, she never told him if she knew for sure that his mother had died.

Olin becomes extremely interested with the writings of Jewish Holocaust survivors, especially Borowski, and so devotes his life to studying their work and that time. As an older man, Olin travels to Poland to find out what he can about his mother. Unable to get much information, what Olin does learn about his mother seems to support the idea that she died at Auschwitz.

While at Auschwitz, Olin falls in love with Sister Catherine, a Catholic novice nun who serves in the area. She, however, does not appear to return his feelings, at least not to the extent that she is willing to give up her vows for him. Olin is left at the end of the novel sad and alone, still trying to figure out who he is.

Baron Olinski

Baron Olinski is Olin's overbearing grandfather. Baron Olinski looked down on both Jews and Catholics. Baron Olinski was never affectionate, and never showed his grandson any kindness. He frequently spoke poorly of Olin's missing mother.

Alexi Olinski

Alexi Olinski is Olin's father. A lieutenant in the cavalry in 1939, he is asked by his father to help him get the family out of Poland. Alexi helps his parents move to the United States of America where they settled happily on the East Coast. Soon after their arrival, Alexi's parents learn that he left behind a pregnant girlfriend. They arrange for the baby to be brought to America, but do nothing to help the mother and her family. Alexi always swore he would go back for his former lover, but he never does. He eventually commits suicide.

Emi

Emi is a beautiful and kind young girl who lives in a village near where the Olinski estate was located. Emi and Alexi had a love affair shortly before the war began. Emi was pregnant when Alexi helped his family escape Poland for America. Alexi always said he would go back to find Emi, but he never did. Olin eventually comes to Poland to find out



what happened to Emi, but all information points to the fact that she died at Auschwitz with her family, confirming Olin's worst suspicions.

Sister Catherine

Sister Catherine is a novice nun who serves at Auschwitz, and is currently on probation because of her relationship to Stefan and his petition. Sister Catherine is afraid she will be expelled from the convent completely if she runs afoul of the priest, Father Mikal. Catherine later seems to fall in love with Olin, but refuses to give up her vows to be with him. She worries about his discomfort with his identity, and she has already had her heart previously broken by untrue love.

G. Earwig

G. Earwig was only a child when the Jews in his Romanian village were loaded onto a ship and sent away. Earwig hid and was taken in by gypsies known as Romas. He has come to Auschwitz to honor his Roma friends. When one of the visiting Germans learn of Earwig's past, the German helps him find information on the ship that took his mother and his friends away. Earwig learns the ship was refused at all ports it attempted to dock at, and was eventually brutally destroyed by the Russians. There is only one survivor, a man who now lives in New York. Earwig plans to visit the man to see if he can learn his family name.

Father Mikal

Father Mikal is a priest who is at Auschwitz to watch over Sister Catherine. Father Mikal is also the priest who reported Sister Catherine for her relationship with Stefan and his petition, causing some animosity between them. Sister Catherine is afraid Father Mikal will have her thrown out of the convent, but he is not the one who has caused her trouble, as it is truly Stefan. Stefan also causes Mikal troubles, spreading rumors that lead to his beating and expulsion from the village.

Stefan

Stefan is a defrocked monk who comes to the retreat to see Sister Catherine. Olin learns at the end of the retreat that Stefan was an orphan raised by the church. Stefan was sexually abused by a priest, a fact that led him to be untrusting and cruel. Stefan was kicked out of the priesthood when he created a questionable petition for reform, though the main source of contention is that Stefan did not send the reform through proper channels. Stefan involved Sister Catherine in this petition and it nearly led to her removal from the convent. Stefan and Sister Catherine were also rumored to have had an affair. Not only this, but Father Mikal suspects Stefan spread rumors about him in the village outside Auschwitz, leading to him being beaten and expelled.



Sister Ann-Marie

Sister Ann-Marie is a novice nun who is at Auschwitz for the retreat. Sister Ann-Marie is an unattractive young girl who is clumsy and feels mocked quite often by the others. Sister Ann-Marie is also of a weak constitution and ends up leaving the retreat early.

Ben Lama

Ben Lama is the unofficial spiritual leader of the retreat at Auschwitz. Ben Lama runs most of the activities and acts as mediator at many of the sharing sessions. Ben Lama is the only one who seems to be able to keep Earwig under control. Ben Lama also has a camera crew following him around during the retreat, causing some discomfort for some of the guests.



Symbols and Symbolism

Amber

Wanda convinces Olin to buy a piece of amber for his love back home in the United States after Olin arrives in Poland. Olin ends up leaving the amber in the extermination chamber at Auschwitz in honor of his mother as a sign of respect for all the tragedy and terror she endured.

Lady with an Ermine

"Lady with an Ermine" is a famous painting by Leonard da Vinci, and it is Olin's favorite work of art. Wanda encourages Olin to buy a postcard of "Lady with an Ermine" when they are unable to see the painting itself. Olin later gives the postcard to Sister Catherine. At the end of the novel, Olin goes to visit the painting itself, only to find Sister Catherine there, as if waiting for him. He hopes that this means she has some feelings for him, but in the end, Sister Catherine walks away from him again. Traditionally, ermines symbolize purity and fertility, and this should not be lost on the reader. Both the painting, and the painter, are known to be near, if not, perfect -and taken together, form a symbol of beauty and purity that is an ideal to which others ascend. For Olin, being broken and searching for himself, it is only natural that he be drawn to such beauty and purity -and this beauty and purity can be seen in his reaching for Sister Catherine as well. Indeed, that he sees Catherine as the Lady in the painting should not be lost either, especially in the giving of the facsimile postcard to her -a clear sign that he is transferring his love of the beauty and purity represented by the painting to Catherine. Yet, sadly, it is a beauty and purity that he will never have, himself.

Cross

While at Auschwitz, Olin discovers a cross half-buried in the ground. With his bare hands, he digs up the cross - a measure of both respect and symbolism for the uncovering of the past. The event is witnessed by Sister Catherine, who later soothingly tends to Olin's hands. The act of compassion demonstrates that there may be an emotional connection between the two, perhaps romantic in nature. The cross, essential to Christianity, symbolizes sacrifice, and the cross dug up by Olin becomes symbolic of his mother's sacrifice for him, to give him a future -and this is recognized by Olin as he digs up the past: his mother's sacrifice for his future.

Notebooks

Both Olin and Sister Catherine write their observations in notebooks during the retreat. Sister Catherine is much more secretive about her journaling than Olin is about his; nevertheless, he manages to read enough of Sister Catherine's journal to learn that she



has had some of the same thoughts that he has - about there being a sort of transcendental presence in Auschwitz, one which relates to man and evil.

Picture of Olin's Mother

Olin's stepmother finds a picture of Olin's biological mother among his father's things after he died. Olin keeps a copy of his mother's photograph with him, for it serves as his sole piece of hard evidence to his past. He later uses the photo in Poland to try to find information about his mother, and he is even able to locate a former guard who recognizes her.

Petition

Sister Catherine and Stefan got into trouble with the Church over a petition they once circulated which advocates for reform. The issue with the petition is not primarily that which it advocates, but that it was done improperly, without going through the correct channels. As a result, Stefan is defrocked and Sister Catherine placed on probation of sorts.

Cattle Cars

Rail cars constructed for cattle were among the numerous, cruel ways in which the Nazis brought Jews and other groups to concentration camps. The horrible symbolism of moving human beings in cattle cars should not be lost on the reader, for the Nazis viewed certain groups of human beings as animals. As Olin visits Auschwitz, he comes across several cattle cars believed to have been used to transport Jews and others, and it disturbs him.

Cracow Ghetto

Following the occupation of Poland by the military forces of Nazi Germany, various places of detention were constructed or mandated for those groups deemed inferior by the Nazi regime. One such place was the ghetto in Cracow, created specifically for the remaining Jews. It is in the Cracow ghetto that Olin is born, and later spirited away from to America.



Settings

Cracow

Cracow, also spelled "Krakow", is a city in Poland. Cracow is located near the concentration camp, Auschwitz. The novel begins in Cracow when Olin arrives there to attend a spiritual retreat at Auschwitz, and spends some time in the city. It is in the Cracow ghetto during the war that Olin is born to a Jewish mother and is later spirited away to the United States.

Auschwitz I

Auschwitz I is the location of the main concentration camp and its associated buildings near Cracow, Poland. It is where most of the German SS officers were housed and where the first prisoners of the camp were brought and exterminated. It is also where the commandant of Auschwitz was executed after the war. Auschwitz I is where most of the retreat occurs that Olin attends. It is in Auschwitz I that the members of the retreat both commune with each other, and relegate each other based differences between them by way of prejudice.

Auschwitz II/Birkenau

Auschwitz II, or Birkenau, was the location of the main extermination camp and related facilities at the concentration camp outside of Cracow, Poland. Quite ironically, the name "Birkenau" is one of beauty, meaning "The Birches". It was here that most of the prisoners were executed and their bodies destroyed. When the novel begins, Olin attempts to enter Birkenau on his own while the other members of the retreat are busy with other activities, but Olin is unable to do so. This is reflective of the fact that Olin is not yet prepared to confront the past -either history at large, or his own. Only as the novel gets underway, and Olin begins to learn about his own mother's past, and the past of Sister Catherine, that he is able to move into Auschwitz II. There, he confronts the extermination process, and must contend with the fact that so many people were doomed to it. At the same time, this becomes symbolic of Olin's own self-prejudice, which ultimately dooms him (see "Prejudice" in the themes section).



Themes and Motifs

Self-Discovery, Identity, and Loneliness

Self-discovery is a major theme in the novel "In Paradise" by Peter Matthiessen. Self-discovery involves learning more about one's own identity, nature, and character, often through a process or journey that involves real-world experiences. In the novel, self-discovery is crucial for Olin, who travels to Poland in an attempt to find out more about his family's heritage and, thereby, his own identity as a man. Specifically, he wishes to learn more about his mother, Emi, who is believed to have perished at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. Olin has lived a relatively lonely life, from not being close to his father's family to his own divorce -and so he is seeking answers, and acceptance, both in love and in his identity.

While spending time in and around Auschwitz and Krakow, Olin comes to discover that his mother was indeed Jewish, and was his father's lover before World War II began. While his family left Poland, and later arranged for the baby Olin to be brought to America, they did nothing to help Emi or her family. As a result, Emi and her family became victims of the Holocaust, with Emi being part of the mass killings at Auschwitz as confirmed through Olin's visit. The same is true

Olin finds himself struggling with the idea that he is a Jew. He feels he is being teased about his revelation and that people are judging him for it. Olin grew up in a household where neither Jews nor Catholics were appreciated or respected. This leaves Olin struggling between what he understands intellectually, personally, and what he has been taught by his family about Jews. Regrettably, though Olin does come to find out more about his mother, and grows to respect her for the terrors she endured, he is ashamed of his Jewish heritage, and is left questioning, still, just who he is as a person.

Olin is not the only person to struggle with a sense of identity, a determination for self-discovery, and loneliness. Sister Catherine, too, is searching for her purpose. She believes she has found it serving God as a nun, though the life she leads necessarily requires physical human loneliness. She is not allowed to love a man, or marry, as made plain by her commitment to her order, and to God. Sister Catherine finds this especially difficult given a broken heart, which has obviously demonstrated two things: First, that she has the capacity to love deeply and wholly; and secondly, that she has a broken heart that has not been mended, and might only come to be mended and made whole once again with love from another man. Olin is a possibility for this, but his rejection of himself, and Catherine's desire to be a nun mean that such love can never come to fruition.



Belatedness

Belatedness is an important theme in the novel "In Paradise" by Peter Matthiessen. When the novel begins, Olin is late in arriving at Auschwitz for a spiritual retreat. This begins the theme of belatedness that runs throughout the novel. Olin's lateness to the retreat is criticized and mocked by other members of the retreat. It quickly appears as though he does not fit in with the retreat members because he was not directly involved in the Holocaust in at least some way. Olin only later learns who his mother was, but he learns too late to do anything to help her or to even find out about her and to include her belief system in his own upbringing.

As the novel develops there are other ideas, descriptions, and events of belatedness as well. Olin falls in love with Sister Catherine, but he is too late in confessing his love for her because she has already recommitted to her vows in the convent. Olin searches for the truth about himself, but he waits too long to tell the others what he has learned, leading to their mockery and dismissal. Sister Catherine recognizes that he is ashamed of his Jewish past, and still has not come to appreciate it. When the novel ends, Olin is still attempting to figure out just who he is, and the answer is still late in coming.

Indeed, Olin's very identity as a person seems to be coming relatively late in life, though Olin is by no means near the end of his own actual life. Generally, people come to understand who they are in their twenties and thirties. Olin is middle-aged. A large part of Olin's crisis in identity comes not with what he does for a living, but rather, who he is as a person. He is part Jewish, and the prejudice he has encountered for this, even from his father's part of the family, cause Olin to doubt himself, and indeed, become ashamed of himself. Half-Jew and half-Christian, half-Polish and a naturalized American, half in the Old World and half in the new, trying to live for the future, but being drawn back into the past, Olin is belatedly coming to define himself in the present day.

Prejudice

Prejudice is a major and dominant theme in the novel "In Paradise" by Peter Matthiessen. The novel ultimately approaches prejudice in several different ways, from the virulent antisemitism and racial hatred that led to the Holocaust, to divisions among the survivors and visitors to Auschwitz long after World War II ends. Readers may be surprised to learn that Auschwitz saw the deaths of not only Jews, but others as well, including average Polish citizens, gypsies, and homosexuals -all victims of the visceral hatred of the Nazi regime and its supporters and soldiers. The novel also demonstrates the prejudice of other nations toward Jews, including Russia, which chose to destroy a ship full of hundreds of passengers rather than allow it to dock safely.

At the spiritual retreat, some survivors of the Holocaust believe that they alone have the right to be at Auschwitz, and question why the Americans and Palestinians are present, and outright disapprove of the presence of German citizens. Many in the group later castigate and reject Olin's belated Jewishness, relegating him to the same isolation they themselves were relegated to decades before. Olin believes that his own Jewish



heritage will cost him a chance with the Catholic Catherine, but in the end, it is Olin's being ashamed of his own Jewish heritage that Catherine disapproves of. Nevertheless, by the end of the spiritual retreat, prejudices among the attendees have been overcome, and some even come to confide in others, such as Earwig's confiding in Olin about the ship on which his family was murdered by the Russians.

Prejudice also occurs at a deeply personal level. Prejudice does not have to be directed at others, but can actually be directed toward the self. This is clearly the case with Olin, who resents his Jewishness. Indeed, Olin's prejudice for himself ultimately dooms him. There are two primary reasons Sister Catherine will not be with Olin: first, she is trying to remain a nun; and second, she recognizes Olin's hatred of himself. This startling revelation really shakes Olin to his core: He has been prejudiced against himself, influenced by the prejudice of others. Just as the vile racism of the Nazis doomed six million Jews, Olin's self-hatred dooms himself, in everything from seeking to be comfortable with his identity to love.

Styles

Point of View

"In Paradise" is written in the third person personal point of view. The narrator is Olin, an American born in Poland who has come to believe his mother was a Jew executed at Auschwitz. The novel follows Olin through his journey of self-discovery as he not only learns more about his mother, but falls in love with an unlikely woman.

The third-person narrative mode allows the author to examine various characters and their motives, as well as Olin -and this also allows the author to include important historical context and other related information (such as the meaning of certain terms or phrases not in English) as it pertains to the novel. This is especially important given the terrible events that serve as a backdrop to the novel.

Language and Meaning

Because the novel "In Paradise" revolves around the character of Clements Olin, an educated man, the language employed in the novel is, itself, a higher form of English. Because Olin also speaks several languages, words and phrases appear in the novel that are not in English, but are given due explanation so the reader may understand these words and phrases. This lends an added layer of believability not only to the character of Olin, but also reinforces the setting of the novel, a place in which English is not a native, primary language.

Structure

The novel is divided into a prologue and four parts. Each part contains multiple chapters. The novel is arranged in both a linear and chronological fashion. This makes the novel easy to follow, allowed the reader to focus on the plot and the importance of key points in the plot, rather than to be distracted by the actual structure of the novel. Given that the novel has one main, overarching plot -Olin's search to find his mother -the structure also allows the emergence of several important subplots, such as Olin's love for Catherine, Catherine's backstory, and Earwig's search for his own family, among others.



Quotes

And as the transport moves out of the yard, he sees an old belt coiled in a puddle between rails, its buckle glinting in the sunlight like the head of a wet snake.

-- Narrator (Prologue paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is part of the dark imagery that begins the novel. Specifically, the symbolic imagery of the snake-like belt should not be missed. Snakes are often equated with Satan, and are seen as evil. The transports on which Jews traveled were instruments of evil, being drawn to their deaths the way a snake draws in its prey.

The one thing he will make sure he sees in Cracow is the Leonardo da Vinci portrait of a Renaissance girl holding a white winter weasel in her lap.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 5)

Importance: This describes Olin's favorite painting, an object that will prove important at the end of the novel. The painting, representative of beauty, perfection, and purity, are things to which Olin aspires, but will never reach. It also later becomes symbolic of the love he places in Catherine, in which he sees her as his own Lady.

Leaving Auschwitz I, he crosses the main railroad tracks, following directions to the outlying farmland community known as Brzezinka, 'The Birches'—in German, Bikenau.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 12)

Importance: Olin is visiting the part of Auschwitz where most of the exterminations took place. This quote ironically identifies the place with the pretty name of the Birches. Even in the midst of such beauty, great tragedy and grotesqueness can occur.

On a stretch of platform between tracks where discerning SS doctors selected those few prisoners with enough strength left to be worked to death, the first silent meditation in homage to the dead is being organized.

-- Clements Olin (Chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: Olin points out the irony of the location chosen for meditation by the retreat members. In a place where a select few are chosen to live, they pay homage to the dead. Ironically, those fit enough to live are fit enough to die, by being worked to death.

On this second evening, most look stunned by Birkenau, and the mood is darkening.

-- Clements Olin (Chapter 7 paragraph 1)

Importance: Olin describes how the participants are handling the retreat so far. The horror, evil, and sadness of the place overwhelm the attendees of the retreat. It is a mood that will prevail for much of the novel for some, and all of the novel for a few - such as Olin.



My God, man what's got into you? You'd like to kiss her, right? You're a damned fool, Olin. Truly.

-- Clements Olin (Chapter 9 paragraph 10)

Importance: Olin realizes he is falling in love with Sister Catherine and he is chastising himself. His heart is urging him toward Catherine, while his reason is telling himself that he is setting himself up for failure. He is falling in love with a nun, who by commitment, cannot fall in love.

Despite her torment, she is too honest to pretend she is troubled by late-life compassion for the victims, nor does she feel the least sympathy with their mission, and because she refuses to give ground, even those who recoil from her are stirred.

-- Clements Olin (Chapter 10 paragraph 6)

Importance: A local woman, Erna, talks of her own abuse at the hands of her father and husband, and how it has caused her to not care what happened at Auschwitz. Because she has endured so much abuse, she has become numbed to pain and suffering - which is in and of itself, a tragedy.

In the welling of relief he feels in the intimacy of fingers, he knows that she is present, right there with him.

-- Narrator (Chapter 11 paragraph 15)

Importance: Olin describes his joy not only at dancing with the others, but with holding Sister Catherine's hand. Here, at last, is real human connection, with people who are alive, breathing, and living in the moment, such that it is. And like the candle Sister Catherine lights, Olin feels a spark of life in the darkness because of her.

This one we dismiss from her novitiate,' she rules in stern diocesan voice. 'She is a troublemaker. She is unworthy of it.

-- Sister Catherine (Chapter 12 paragraph 3)

Importance: This is Sister Catherine voicing her fear of being kicked out of the convent. Sister Catherine's fear of being kicked out underscores her determination to stay in, and spells trouble for Olin, who is romantically admiring of her, now.

Erna has sniffed out somebody's uncle whose elderly brother-in-law, a longtime patient of Dr. Allgeier who later took work as a camp guard, recognized Madame Allgeier and her daughters on the selection platform in late 1942; he risked execution by the SS, he claims, for trying to slip them his lunch sandwich for old times' sake. In fifty years, he has never forgotten how the young schoolteacher had urged him to go feed his damned sandwich to that other collaborator polluting her father's house.

-- Clements Olin (Chapter 14 paragraph 1)

Importance: This witness seems to confirm that Olin's mother died at Auschwitz. Olin has been looking for proof as to whether or not his mother was at Auschwitz, and



whether or not she died there. The former guard confirms that Olin's mother was indeed at Auschwitz, and more than likely died there.

Here he chips out a niche and painstakingly inters his Polish amber, entreating Emi to forgive him this small offering already refused by others after taking all these years to come find her.

-- Narrator (Chapter 15 paragraph 5)

Importance: Olin gives the amber as a gift to the memory of his mother at Auschwitz. It is a simple, but touching tribute from son to mother, and is also an apology of sorts for having not come sooner, or bothered to learn more about her, sooner. When so many others have rejected Olin, the love of a mother for a son still remains, even when the mother does not. Olin finds some small comfort in this, but also great sadness in that his mother is no longer around.

Though the man strikes Olin as doom ridden and narrow, he had the courage of his own closed mind and a faith strong enough to brandish the Torah's strictures against 'that travesty you people call "the Dancing.

-- Clements Olin (Chapter 16 paragraph 4)

Importance: This illustrates how the members of the retreat continue to struggle with their emotional reactions to their visit to Auschwitz. Here, the man remains pure and faithful to his own beliefs, even against the others when it comes to something like dancing. He preserves the faith that his relatives were killed for practicing, and in doing so, honors their faith and their memory.