

THE WOMEN'S ORCHESTRA OF AUSCHWITZ:

A Story of Survival

By Anne Sebba

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. There are many aspects of this story that seem unbelievable, even bordering on the absurd. The idea of having music in an extermination camp at all might be considered the greatest absurdity. How would you explain it? What are some of the other absurd aspects?
2. Do you believe that by playing in the marching band the girls and women collaborated with the Nazi regime?
3. Can you understand why the orchestra were often despised by other prisoners in the camps and do you think that was a fair response?
4. Why do you think it was so difficult for these women to talk about what happened to them after the war?
5. What in your view was the greatest privilege for the musicians?
6. Do you believe Alma Rosé, the conductor, was unnecessarily strict or cruel? Do you believe her disciplinarian attitude was justified?
7. Why might Alma have been deliberately poisoned?
8. What was your reaction to the decision by the Polish women not to share their food parcels? Was it sensible?
9. Survivor guilt is often talked about in relation to the Holocaust. Who do you think might have suffered survivor guilt from the orchestra and what elements of the story in particular caused it?
10. Do you think you can understand why Maria Mandl wanted an orchestra and does her action in this regard mitigate any of her other actions?
11. Can you think of a positive aspect to Maria Mandl and did she deserve to be hanged?
12. Why did the German Nazi regime believe music was an integral part of their philosophy?

13. Primo Levi, the Italian survivor, described much of what went on in Auschwitz as the 'Gray Zone'. Do you understand what he meant by that?
14. Is there one particular character who played in the orchestra with whom you can most identify?
15. Can you think of any way in which the women in the orchestra can be described as resisters?
16. Do you believe that music saved the girls and women who played in the band? Or do you think it was it luck and having something to concentrate on rather than music itself?
17. What was the most painful aspect of the story for you?
18. Can you understand why antisemitism occasionally erupted into the music block?
19. Can you give examples of occasions when sisterhood overcame difficulties of nationality, language or religion?
20. Can you possibly imagine what you would have done if deported to Auschwitz and asked to play in an orchestra in order to survive?

