



Reading Group Gold

Ten Green Bottles

by Vivian Jeanette Kaplan

Introduction to *Ten Green Bottles*

To Nini Karpel, growing up in Vienna during the 1920s was a romantic confection. Whether schussing down ski slopes or speaking of politics in coffee houses, she cherished the city of her birth. But in the 1930s an undercurrent of conflict and hate began to seize the former imperial capital. This struggle came to a head when Hitler took possession of neighboring Germany. Anti-Semitism, which Nini and her idealistic friends believed was impossible in the socially advanced world of Vienna, became widespread and virulent.

The Karpel's Jewish identity suddenly made them foreigners in their own homeland. Tormented, disenfranchised, and with a broken heart, Nini and her family sought refuge in a land seven thousand miles across the world.

Shanghai, China, one of the few countries accepting Jewish immigrants, became their new home and refuge. Stepping off the boat, the Karpel family found themselves in a land they could never have imagined. Shanghai presented an incongruent world of immense wealth and privilege for some and poverty for the masses, with opium dens and decadent clubs as well as rampant disease and a raging war between nations.

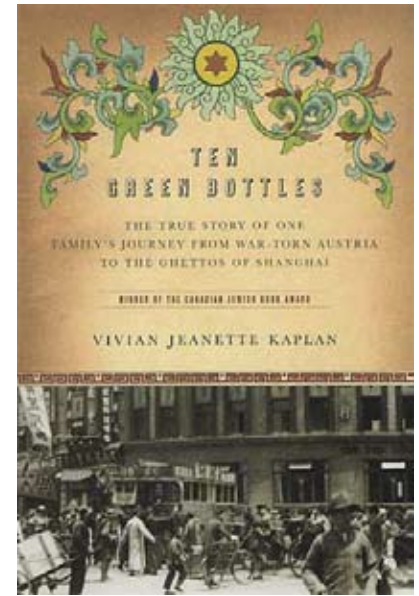
Ten Green Bottles is the story of Nini Karpel's struggles as she told it to her daughter Vivian so many years ago. This true story depicts the fierce perseverance of one family, victims of the forces of evil, who overcame suffering of biblical proportion to survive. It was a time when ordinary people became heroes.

Praise for *Ten Green Bottles*

"Spellbinding . . . evocative . . . remarkable achievement. China experience.....sets this book apart" – *Publisher's Weekly*

"Riveting . . . moving and memorable" – *Kirkus Reviews*

"Kaplan's prose is simply stunning . . . Kaplan's descriptions bring wartime Shanghai, its people and smells, to life . . . Although nonfiction, *Ten Green Bottles* reads like a novel. Kaplan captures the mood and feelings of her mother experiences as if they were her own." – *Canadian Jewish News*



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“Kaplan writes in the first-person voice of her mother . . . a decision that gives her book an emotional power and vivid immediacy.” - *Maclean's*

“Her powerful, harrowing story grips the reader. In an odyssey of horrors that takes place over a decade . . . what shines through is the family's indomitable will to survive.” - *Ottawa Citizen*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. In many ways Nini was a typical Austrian in her upbringing. What did she especially love about her youth in Vienna?
2. What Jewish cultural teachings impacted on her during childhood and adolescence that lay a foundation for her feelings towards her religion?
3. Nini's journey took her to self-discovery. From isolation to a world-view how did her outlook on the rest of humanity change because of the events of her life?
4. Nini attended a seder at Poldi's family's home. During the reading of the Haggadah she had a feeling of impending doom. The Passover tale is a foreshadowing of events that will take place. Consider the similarities between her life and the Exodus story. How many can you think of?
5. The book is written in a visual way. Words are used as pigments to depict the events that take place. Think of the story in terms of light and dark as a painter or film-maker might do. If light represents hope and dark is sadness what has the writer done to express the mood in descriptive terms?
6. The title “*Ten Green Bottles*” is enigmatic. It can be interpreted in various ways. Thinking of the actual words of the song that it is derived from, what other aspects of the title are present in the book? Think of the number ten, significant in various ways and then of the idea of broken glass. Even the color green is important. How are the words of the title evident throughout the book?
7. The book has been written as an exploration of the senses. How many can you find? Give examples of ways that the reader is invited into the pages to relive the experiences of the protagonist.
8. One aspect of the book is that of the strong female heroine. How is Nini the central figure in the survival of the family? Are there other strong women in the book? How do they take control of their destinies?
9. There are inanimate objects that play important roles in the story. What are they and what do they have to “say”?
10. Between them Nini and Poldi are hinges by which the Axis powers swung. They were involved with each of the three: Germany, Italy and Japan. How were these seemingly average people affected by the grand scheme of the warring nations? What did they do to take control of their own lives when they seemed destined to become victims?



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11. Nini and Poldi looked for help to get them through the most difficult of their ordeals. How did Herr Berger, Herta Weinstein, Leon Druck, and Mother Laula influence them and change their outlook on life?
12. Nini's father wrote a poem that had eerie foreshadowing elements. How did the words that he wrote years before the Nazi takeover and the war years provide comfort and advice to Nini when she needed guidance?

About the Author

Vivian Jeanette Kaplan was born in Shanghai, where her parents were married. As her family originated in Vienna, her mother tongue is German. When she was two years old, her parents arrived in Canada, settling in Toronto. She graduated from the University of Toronto, where she studied English, French, and Spanish. She is married and has three sons. For a number of years the family owned and ran a lakeside lodge in Muskoka, north of Toronto. For twenty years she had her own business, Vivian Kaplan Oriental Interiors, an import-export firm with interior design showrooms specializing in décor from the Far East. *Ten Green Bottles*, which tells her own true family saga, is her first book.