



Reading Guide



Esfir Is Alive

by Andrea Simon

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Esfir Manevich is a young Jewish girl who lives in the Polish town of Kobryn in 1936. Facing anti-Semitism in public school, Esfir moves in with her charming aunt who runs a boardinghouse in the bustling city of Brest. Being younger than the other boarders, Esfir struggles to find a place in her new life, all the while worrying about her diminishing role in the family she left behind.

As the years pass, Esfir experiences the bombing of her hometown during the German invasion of 1939. When the Russians overtake the area, Esfir sees many of her socialist relatives and friends become disillusioned by the harsh restrictions. During the German occupation, Esfir and her family are enclosed in a ghetto where they develop heartbreaking methods of survival.

In the summer of 1942, shortly before Esfir's thirteenth birthday, the ghetto is liquidated and the inhabitants are forced onto cattle cars destined for the killing fields—and Esfir must face unimaginable horror. *Esfir Is Alive* is a gut-wrenching historical novel capturing great pain and resilience.

From the Author

The inspiration for this book comes from my memoir: *Bashert: A Granddaughter's Holocaust Quest*, published in 2002 by the University Press of Mississippi, a personal journey investigating my ancestral Belorussian village and the events leading to the death of my relatives. *Esfir Is Alive* carries many of the same themes and characters, broadening them into a novelized arena. I was most interested in exploring the rich intellectual and social life of the Jews of Eastern Europe in the interwar years, as well as the psychological impact of extraordinary events on the life and survival of a young person.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the author choose to open the book with the quote by I.L. Peretz: "I'll make you listen to me! You will have to hear me!"?
2. Esfir was a young girl when she experienced anti-Semitism in her school. What effect did it have on her and how did she respond? Have you ever experienced discrimination; if so, what was your reaction?
3. Both Ida and Esfir depend on their Journal of Important Words to express their thoughts and feelings. Do you have a similar creative outlet?
4. Esfir and Ania have a special relationship, despite their different religions. Do you have a friend from a different religious or ethnic background? How do you deal with these differences?
5. Yiddish is sprinkled throughout the book. What is special about the language?
6. What role does Esfir's doll Miriam play in her life and in this novel? Have you ever had a childhood object that meant so much to you?



7. One of the most wrenching scenes in the novel is the beard cutting of Esfir's grandfather Yankel and his subsequent death. How do these events change the nature of the novel?
8. Drora is a very spirited and courageous character. How does she debunk one of the stereotypes of the "passive" Holocaust Jew?
9. Discussions about the Holocaust often examine the issues of guilt and responsibility. What would you do if you or your family were threatened by torture or death? Or, what would you do if you were a witness to (or suspicious of) an atrocity?
10. The scene at Brona Gora is unimaginable. Can you understand why humans do this to each other? Can you imagine how a person can survive such an ordeal?

About the Author

Andrea Simon is the author of the memoir *Bashert: A Granddaughter's Holocaust Quest*, as well as several award-winning published stories and essays. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York where she has taught writing. Andrea is also an accomplished photographer. She lives in New York City with her family.

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