Golden Alley Press

READING GROUP GUIDE

The House in Prague

by Anna Nessy Perlberg

Introduction to the Book

1939: the Nazis have invaded Prague. Little Anna huddles with her doll in the corner of a train car while a German officer shrieks, “You are Jews!” Fleeing for their lives, her family has abandoned their elegant house near Prague Castle, bringing their life of privilege to an abrupt halt.

In this memoir that reads like a novel, we meet Anna’s shining and beautiful opera singer mother, her prominent lawyer father, and their circle of friends that includes Albert Schweitzer and the family of Czech President Thomas Masaryk.

Through Anna’s eyes, we relive magical Christmases, summers in the country, and a terrifying trip to Nazi Dresden that changes everything. We witness the family’s escape and voyage to Ellis Island and Anna’s struggle to become an American girl in a city teeming with immigrants and prejudice. Post-war life brings cherished Holocaust survivors and their harrowing stories.

After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Anna’s family sues for the return of their house in Prague. But will they prevail? And if they do, what then?

The House in Prague is richly illustrated with pictures from the author’s family archive. Written with straightforward, lyrical clarity, Anna Nessy Perlberg’s family members and the many famous musicians, authors, and poets that pass through their lives come alive for the reader. A gripping story on its own merits, this tale of war, love, and loss dares us to think about the immigrant experience in fresh ways.

Discussion Questions

1. Immigration, especially when it takes place during childhood, is a major theme of this book. In the preface, the author recounts several of her visits with groups of young students in Chicago's public school system. Why do you think they relate so well to Anna, despite their age gap? How does her experience as an immigrant compare with that of today's children?

2. Anna's mother, Julia, makes it a point to expose her children to the country folk songs and tales of Czechoslovakia (p.13). Why do you think this is so important to her? Is there an American equivalent, or has the time for that passed?

3. When she is eight years old, Anna's parents make the difficult decision to take her with them to Nazi Dresden, Germany (p.40). What was your reaction to this part of the story, as you experienced it from Anna's vantage point?

4. In chapter 9, Anna's family is prevented from entering Holland without proof that they are only passing through. Her family is rescued by a kind Dutch business associate, but many others were not so lucky. Was your reaction to this scene influenced by your viewpoint on current immigration issues? Why or why not?

5. Sometime during the Bacher family's first year in New York City, Paul's employer tells Father that he wants to adopt Paul (p.75). How did Anna's father respond? What can we learn about prejudice and assumptions from this event?

6. Learning English was key to Anna's success in school. There were no special ESL classes at that time; she had to learn by immersion. Do you think that was an advantage or disadvantage?

7. More than anything, Anna wants to become an American girl (p.81). Why do you think it is so important to her to fit in? How does this compare or contrast with the experience of immigrant children in our country today? What lessons can we learn from Anna's determination?

8. During the war, many people had to make incredibly difficult decisions about whether to flee or remain in Europe. Anna's Aunt Miluska and Uncle Leo decide to stay (p.97), and they do not survive. How are other people in the book forced to make choices? How do they reach their decisions?

9. When Anna and her father go to Temple Emanu-El after the war, there is a moment which makes the extent of the Holocaust concrete. Have you experienced a similar defining moment?

10. At the beginning of Part Two (p.109), the author's 'voice' and time perspective changes. Why do you think she chose to do this? How did it affect your reading experience?

11. Anna's relationship with three Holocaust survivors, Liselott Fraenkl, Aunt Malva, and Paul Heller, has a profound effect on her life. Have you known any Holocaust survivors, or other people who have lived through great difficulties? How has knowing them affected your life?

12. Anna and her husband, Mark, traveled every chance they got. How did that influence their lives? How has travel influenced your life?

13. Evaluate the theme of home. How is it defined in the book? How is it represented in Anna and Kate's last walk through the house in Prague?

Enhancing Your Book Club

1. With regard to her family's initial wealth and attempts to regain ownership of their house in Prague, Anna's book has been compared with the 2015 movie, *Woman in Gold*. View the movie; discuss similarities and differences between the two family sagas.

2. Use *The House in Prague* as a starting place to discuss the subjects of immigration, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia. Why is Anna's story relevant today? What can we learn from it?

3. Choices made by many of the characters in Anna's book affected their families for generations to come. Consider how you would have acted under similar circumstances. Discuss a choice you have made that has had an enduring effect on your family.

4. To find out more about the Holocaust, visit: https://www.ushmm.org/ .

Author Q & A

A Conversation with Anna Nessy Perlberg

1. What first inspired you to write your family's story? Have you always been a writer or did your wish to tell the story compel you to become one?

I have not always been a writer. But I have always loved stories. From the time I was a little girl. I adored fairy tales; I memorized them and loved them. And I loved stories that people told me. It is just part of my nature to love stories, to make up stories, to listen to stories and to enjoy them. That love has stayed with me throughout my life, so it was very natural that I sort of drifted into writing.

As I grew up, I became very involved and interested in the story of our escape, and the unexpected surprises and twists and turns of it. I thought about it a lot, because it is the surprises in life and in stories that always get me. So naturally, when I really started to write, I wrote about our leaving Prague and that whole business of the surprises and the holy pictures, all of that.

As a child, I always thought that writing was something terribly important and serious. I remember even when I was in school, when I had to write a letter, I would first sketch it out on a yellow pad, then I would think about it, then finally I would write it. And that's still the way I write. For my story, I would think, then I would put it down, look at it, ponder over it, and say to myself, It's really a very boring story. And then write some more. So I still work that way. I always need an extra day to think and roll ideas over and over in my head.

2. You include stories of some of your family's Holocaust survivors. Can you share how you decided which stories to include? Was the choice difficult? What was your thought process?

I have very strong feelings about that, because I did not start out deciding that I would write about the Holocaust, or even about WWII, or anything grand. I was going to zero in on the people I loved. That's always what matters to me. And the three people I chose, and they all happen to be survivors, are people I loved without any question or reservation. That's why I wanted to write about them. It was their courage, their beautiful nature, the fact that all three of them just had the most terrible things happen to them, and they came through.

When Paul Heller got out of the concentration camps and came to New York, his biggest wish, he said, was to make up for the four years of medical study that he had lost. He must work hard, try hard. And my Malva, who went through such terrible things, had a natural passion for life, just a natural passion. And it came out in the most delightful, silly, and wonderful ways. When I think of those days, I think about her wonderful sense of excitement about the new things that

she found. I remember once, she came home from a store and came into the kitchen where I was sitting, holding up a box. “Aničko, look! Kleenex!” She just loved whatever was new, creative, whatever was done by people.

So that’s what lead me, not a philosophical decision. And I know that there were lots of people who went through the Holocaust who did not have this strength, and whose suffering continued unto the end of their lives. I make no judgments on that. I am just focusing on the three people I love.

3. In Part One of your memoir, you restrict yourself to speaking in the present tense and making age-appropriate observations. During the time you were writing those passages, what was it like, returning to the mindset of yourself as a young girl?

It was like being young again. It was fun, trying to recall how I felt back then. And the more I thought about that, the more I got little flashes of recollection, like what my bed looked like, as a tiny girl. These flashes came, and then I started thinking about that, putting it together with how this looked, that looked. The fun of building blocks, the fun of a game.

4. When you went through the traumatic changes of your childhood, you were surrounded by a loving, intact nuclear family. From that perspective, how did your early experiences shape the rest of your life, including your own parenting?

It strengthened me for the rest of my life. That is why I even sort of cringe a little when you use the word traumatic. Because when I think of traumatic, I think of Syrian children children going by themselves and getting on a boat that might sink. That’s traumatic. I was on a train, with my mother, my father. Heavens, I hate making it into a big thing. I was extremely fortunate because I had love and support all my life. And so that is how I believe you parent. You love and support. It is so important to me. And I’m horrified at the thought of saying, Oh, poor me.

5. The current issue of immigration, particularly how it affects children, is very important to you. Have your views on the subject changed much over the years?

No. My feelings have been consistent. I feel such a connection with immigrant children. I remember when I was an immigrant child, I obviously, how can I say this, I knew the feelings that I had experienced, and so I have connected with other kids, I knew what was going through their heads. I really feel that we connect, and this is something that happens to me whenever I speak to these young people in schools. I feel that we reach out across the generations and hold each other’s hands. I love them and understand their feelings. And I know that most of them had truly traumatic experiences, and I feel that connection.

6. You seem to have a knack for witnessing history. Why do you think that is so? Do you remember sensing the significance of any of these events at the time they were occurring?

It was pure luck, I think. It was just the time when I was born. There is a Chinese saying, “May you live in interesting times.” And I lived in an interesting time. It was the time, the family, the culture, and the connection with the Masaryks, the Masaryk idealism. That certainly didn’t hurt.

The historic moment of hearing about the Munich agreement on the radio, all I reacted to was the pain in the room. I knew and recognized that. But I could not make historical sense of it.

I can imagine my story, living in a well-to-do family, and the whole story being utterly boring. But there were things that went on in that life, and in the good fortune of my family’s way of life: the music, the culture, that it was part of our life. It was part of what one had to honor and learn about. In New York City, it was all around us. And even in the rebellion that I went through, that was good, too. Eventually everyone goes through a rebellion, and you think about it, and you are perhaps more strengthened in what you rebelled against, and what you turned away from, and what you accept.

7. You have crossed paths with a lot of famous people. Can you tell us an anecdote that isn’t included in your book?

Rafael Kubelík, the famous Czech conductor, was in Chicago in, I think 1953 or 1954. We had just come back from Japan. It was Christmas, and he came to see my mother because they knew each other well, really liked each other.

Suddenly, he put his head in his hands. Oh, it’s Christmas, and I don’t have vánočka, the Czech version of stollen. He was so sad. Mark and I suddenly looked up and caught each other’s eye, we each knew what the other was thinking. So we jumped up and said, Oh, we’ll see you later.

We went driving to the Czech section of Chicago, on Cermak Street (which, by the way, is named for the Czech who was killed when the assassin was aiming at Roosevelt). There were about three Czech bakeries, but it was late in the day. First one, they were all sold out. Second one, sold out, too. The third one, we got their last vánočka, and they wrapped it up for us.

By this time, we knew he would no longer be at our house. But we knew where he was staying, so we drove to the hotel. At the desk, we said we have a delivery for Mr. Kubelik, and they sent us up. We knocked on his door, and handed him the vánočka. So we had a part in his having a Christmas that was more of a Christmas.

8. Your memoir begins and ends with your house in Prague, although your own story obviously continues. Do you consider the house to be a closed chapter in your life, or does it continue to impact your life and the life of your descendants?

I cannot speak for my descendants, but for me it's a continuing symbol. Of history, of the past, of perseverance, of strength, and of great beauty. It was beautiful. I think I learned about beauty first from that house. So it has stayed with me and always will. My descendants will find other symbols, but for me, it is the house.

Well before there was any thought of the book, the first time we went back to Prague in 1983, when it was still in the grip of the Communist dictatorship, we photographed the doorway downstairs in the courtyard. And we came home, and I framed it. At that time, I thought, well, I'll never see it again, but it will be with me in this symbol of a symbol, the door to the house. That business about learning about beauty, it gets in your bones. When you are in a beautiful place, and are surrounded by beautiful things, they get inside you and talk to your bones even when you don't know it.

9. What is your favorite moment in the book?

The most powerful moment is the one that first made me start writing, and that is the escape on the train. The most beautiful moment was the fields of tulips in Holland that said the world is beautiful. Whatever happens, the world is beautiful. That spoke to me so.

10. As a reader, what are some of the books that you find most inspiring, and why?

The Russian novels are so extraordinary. I'm think of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky. *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Even more pertinent is Kafka, a Czech who wrote in German. I think of his extraordinary books teaching us about the perplexity of life and contemporary situations. In my life, so much that happened was Kafkaesque, surprising. Forgive me for talking about my experience again, but that business with the holy pictures when we were trying to escape, my mother not being really religious and those pictures by chance saving us, that's Kafkaesque. So his writing is extraordinary.

Of the Americans, the books that my brother got me to read when I was younger. *The Great Gatsby* is full of surprise. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, also full of surprise. Who is the father of this bewitching child?

11. Your memoir has been very well received. Are you back at your writing desk yet? Can you tell us about it?

No, I'm not writing again yet. I have taken time off. But I will start again soon, because I am terribly excited about the idea of writing my story for the young people I talk to in schools,

focusing more on what it was like to be a young immigrant girl who didn’t speak English, and all of those challenges. So I will enjoy writing that book.