

# Discussion Questions for *The Train to Crystal City*

## Part One: Without Trial

### Preface

#### 1. The importance of words

*The government's official name for the facility was the Crystal City Enemy Detention Facility. (preface, location 113)*

If *internment* is a synonym of *detention*, does it matter which one is used? Why would the government pick one word over the other? Why would the word *facility* be preferred over *camp*?

### Chapter 2: Eleanor vs. Franklin

#### 2. Fear in the media

*Walter Lippmann, the most influential journalist in America, published a column in the Washington Post on February 12, 1942, titled "The Fifth Column on the Coast." Lippmann insisted national security preempted civil rights. "It is a fact that the Japanese navy has been reconnoitering the Pacific Coast more or less continually and for a considerable period of time, testing and feeling out the American defenses. It is a fact that communication takes place between the enemy at sea and enemy agents on land." He argued that the arrest of Japanese Americans would not violate their constitutional rights. "Nobody's constitutional rights include the right to reside and do business on a battlefield. There is plenty of room elsewhere for him to exercise his rights." (page 22, location 463)*

For people like Lippmann, do non-citizens have any rights? Why does he use the word "battlefield"? Did putting national security over civil rights help during WWII? Is a man loyal to his home country automatically an enemy agent? Can you paraphrase/restate the last two sentences by Lippmann in a way that makes sense?

#### 3. Eleanor vs. Franklin

How would you describe Eleanor to someone who hasn't read the book? Why does the title of this chapter pit Eleanor against Franklin? In what ways did being President force Franklin to act in ways counter to his beliefs?

#### **4. Eleanor under surveillance**

*It's a measure of the general delirium of the times that the first lady was not immune from FBI surveillance. (page 27, location 536)*

What does the author mean by “delirium”? What might have made Hoover believe that Eleanor was a threat? What are other reasons why Hoover would keep such an extensive file on Eleanor until she died?

### **Chapter 3: Strangers in a Small Texas Town**

#### **5. The ethics of seizing people and property**

*“... The rationale for this international form of kidnapping was that by immobilizing influential German and Japanese nationals who might aid and abet the Axis war effort in the Latin-American countries where they lived, the United States was preventing the spread of Nazism throughout the hemisphere and thereby strengthening its own security.” According to Mangione, many in the INS, including himself, opposed the arrest of Latin Americans. One of the officers in charge of an INS camp told Mangione, “Only in wartime could we get away with such fancy skulduggery.” (page 39, location 723)*

If this was “skulduggery” (underhanded or unscrupulous behavior), then what was the real reasons for taking people from Latin American countries? If the U.S. was only doing this for security, why would it allow Latin-American countries to seize the property of the men they arrested? Why would the government rationalize their skulduggery with phrases like “preventing the spread of Nazism”?

#### **6. The ethics of forcing immigrants to register**

*... Francis Biddle, then the solicitor general of the United States. On June 28, 1940, Congress passed the Alien Registration Act, and Biddle decided to persuade Harrison, whom he knew from legal ties in Philadelphia, into public service. The act made it mandatory, for the first time in American history, for every alien living in the United States to register and be fingerprinted. Biddle agonized over the passage of the law, which he believed was a reflection of irrational congressional fears that would alienate millions of foreign-born residents who were not citizens. (page 47, location 841)*

What are the problem(s) with requiring people to be registered and fingerprinted? What is a law like this supposed to do? What are the unintended consequences? What is the reaction of a community when one of their own is labeled an “alien”? Is there any protection for the people who comply and become registered as an alien?

### **Part 2: Destination: Crystal City**

## Chapter 4: Internment Without Trail

### 7. The effects of arrests on the families left behind

*We realize that the internment of your husband, or any other alien enemy, is a hardship on the entire family,” wrote Ennis, “but this is not to be considered as important a feature as the protection of the peace and protection of the United States. If we were to consider these hardships in times such as these, the security of our country would be greatly imperiled.” (page 78, location 1283)*

If someone might be an enemy agent, is there any reason to care about the hardships placed upon his family? Do you believe Ennis when he says that to consider the hardships of the families would “greatly imperil” people in America? What does the phrase “protection of peace” mean in this quote?

### 8. The secrecy of the arrests

Why did the government not give any information to the men they arrested or their families? Is their harm to national security when informing men of the reasons for their arrest? Are there other reasons besides security to keep arrested men or their families in the dark? What’s the benefit(s) for the government to not be open about what and why they do these things?

### 9. Turning on each other

What happens when the government encourages people to turn in their neighbors? Should the government care whether the accusations are true or not? What benefits does the government expect from such a policy?

### 10. The immigrant’s burden

*Like many of his German friends in Strongsville, Mathias bore the immigrant’s burden. He had one foot on one side of the ocean in Germany and the other in America, which made him an outsider in both places. By nature, identity, and personal history, he was fully German, but in his aspirations and ambition he was fully American. He would live with this dilemma all his life. (page 73, location 1212)*

Why did people immigrate to America in the first place? Why stops them from becoming citizens? What does the author mean by saying that his aspirations and ambitions are American? What does the author mean by *burden*?

## Chapter 6: The Hot Summer of ’43

## 11. Con artists during the war

*What the presidency of the Bund did offer Kuhn was a platform for his con games. After Germany and Russia invaded Poland in 1939, the FBI received a tip that Kuhn had hatched a plan to extort \$500,000 from Helena Rubinstein, the fabled New York cosmetics manufacturer. According to the FBI's informant, Kuhn's extortion plan was to send Rubinstein, a Jew who was originally from Poland, a threatening letter decorated with a swastika on the envelope. The informant provided a copy of the letter to the FBI, with Kuhn's demand for \$500,000 and the threat that if the money was not paid, then Rubinstein's sister, trapped in Poland, would be exterminated by the Nazis. (page 98, location 1567)*

How was it possible for the FBI to know so much and so little at the same time? In times of war, how can you tell the difference between a con man and a true threat? Is it possible in times of war for people to be objective enough to tell the difference? What does the story of Kuhn tell us about life during the war?

## 12. Employees of Crystal City

*Most of those [O'Rourke] hired—clerks, secretaries, accountants, security guards—were native to Crystal City and the surrounding area. Life in Crystal City, as in all of Texas, was highly segregated. No “Negroes,” as the employment manual referred to African Americans, were hired; the few Mexican Americans employed at the camp were maids and stoop laborers. When Mabel B. Ellis, a social worker from New York, visited Crystal City, she filed a report to Harrison that concluded, “Because of the isolated location of Crystal City, the employees of the internment camp have relatively little more freedom than the internees behind the fence.” (page 104, location 1655)*

*“Selling these employees on the internment program was an obstacle in itself,” wrote O'Rourke, who recorded that he felt “squeezed” between the demands of internees and those of the employees, who believed that “anything received by the internees was too good and too much.” (page 108, location 1715)*

If Crystal City was a human, how would you describe that person? How did the pre-existing racism against Mexicans affect how the locals viewed the families in the internment camp? What kind of struggles did it seem like O'Rourke had with the employees from town?

## Chapter 8: “To be or not to be an American”

### 13 . Issei vs. Nisei

What do the terms issei and nisei mean? What were the struggles Japanese parents had in raising American children? The Japanese parents brought the idea of gaman with

them. What is *gaman* and how did the concept influence how both the parents and their children dealt with internment?

#### **14. Racism in America**

*“Yet the attitude of most of the people in town was that all Japanese were damn Japs,” recalled Tate in his oral history. “And they ought to all be hung.” (page 136, location 2111)*

How did racism in America affect how the Japanese were treated? How could we ask the Japanese to be loyal to America when so many Americans felt this way? What were the differences in how Americans felt about the Japanese vs. the Germans?

### **Chapter 9: “Yes-yes, no-no”**

#### **15. The choice to be an American soldier**

*For Ernie the decision to become a US soldier wasn't easy. He felt particularly let down by President Roosevelt. One year after Roosevelt had signed Executive Order 9066, leading to the incarceration of 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans, Roosevelt urged the formation of the 442nd. Ernie understood what was on the line for him and other Japanese Americans. The issue was whether Japanese Americans would fight and, if necessary, die for America. The paradox was that Roosevelt asked loyalty of a disenfranchised group of people—people like Ernie, who'd been stripped of their rights as Americans. Ernie decided to pay the price of Roosevelt's loyalty test. It was personal. He felt it was his duty to fight for America to counterbalance the actions of Buddy, his brother who fought on the side of Japan. (page 143, location 2218)*

Why does the government mean by “loyalty” when it makes immigrants take a loyalty test? Since a true enemy agent could simply lie, what did the government expect out of asking for loyalty? Why would someone who is denied citizenship would still be loyal to America? What were the consequences for saying “no” when asked? What does the author mean by “the price” Ernie has to pay? Why would a Japanese-American son decide to fight for America?

#### **16. Cost of internment camps**

*In March 1943, one month after his visit to Gila River, Myer publicly called for an end to the relocation camps. He reported that they were too expensive to build and maintain and said that in his opinion the Japanese Americans, as a group, no longer constituted a military threat. “After many months of operating relocation centers, the War Relocation Authority is convinced that they are undesirable institutions and should be removed from the American scene as soon as possible,” wrote Myer. “Life in a relocation center is an unnatural and un-American sort of life. Keep in mind that the evacuees were charged with nothing except having Japanese ancestors; yet the very*

*fact of their confinement in relocation centers fosters suspicion of their loyalties and adds to their discouragement.” (page 149, location 2302)*

What did the government gain by putting people in internment camps? What did the government lose by doing this? What makes internment camps “undesirable”? What’s the harm in making foreigner-born immigrants and their American children live a life that is un-American?

## **Chapter 10: A Test of Faith**

### **17. Provocative statements**

*“Crystal City is the showcase for President Roosevelt,” [Fukuda] told his peers. The food, shelter, and schools would be better than in any other camp. It was imperative, Fukuda said, that separated Japanese families reunite. . . . Fukuda replied that Japanese men, such as himself, should remain loyal to Japan, but nisei children, born in America, should be loyal to the United States. It was a provocative statement: most of the issei loyal to Japan wanted their children to be devoted to the home of their forefathers. . . . The opponents argued that volunteering to transfer to Crystal City would prolong their children’s imprisonment, and they feared that their sons would face increased pressure to join the American military in Crystal City. (page 163, location 2509)*

How would you describe Fukuda? What might be the reasons why Fukuda believed that American-born children should be loyal to America? What did it mean for Japanese men that their children would stay loyal to their homelands? Why did the Japanese despair that their children would join the American army?

## **Chapter Eleven: The Birds are Crying**

### **18. Prom**

*In many of the other Japanese relocation camps, such as Manzanar and Tule Lake, where anti-American feelings ran high, strikes and demonstrations had broken out over such issues as the mandatory loyalty oaths and harsh treatment by guards. In Crystal City, what seemed like a minor event—a junior-senior prom—turned children against parents, students against teachers, and the Japanese leaders against O’Rourke. (page 171, location 2625)*

How did the prom become such a divisive event? What did being born in America have to do with prom? Why was it so important to O’Rourke that the camp have a prom? How did the Japanese children respond?

## **Part 3: The Equation of Exchange**

### **Chapter Twelve: “Trade Bait”**

#### **19. The secrecy of it all**

*Before exiting the gates of the camp, Mathias and Johanna, like the other adult internees, signed an oath promising never to disclose details of their internment or the upcoming exchange. (page 187, location 2824)*

What might be official and unofficial reasons for stopping people from talking about the camps? What did the government fear from exposure?

### **Chapter 13: The False Passports**

#### **20. Options for Jewish families in Europe**

*It was hard to find people willing to hide Jewish families, and no amount of money could secure trust. Once families went into hiding, they could not buy food with coupons, but had to depend on the expensive and unreliable black market. Irene remembers her parents debating the issue. (page 203, location 3064)*

What does Anne’s presence in the book tell us about the options available to Jewish families in the months leading up to the war? While the choices for families might have felt real at the time, what choices mattered at the end?

#### **21. Grief during survival**

*“How can you eat when your father has just died?” the man said. Irene and Werner stared at him, unable to say a word. (page 209, location 3144)*

What does desperation and hunger do to typical emotional responses? How do actions seen out of context create bias in bystanders? What is the role of families during crisis and tragedy?

### **Chapter 15: Into Algeria**

#### **22. Anti-Semitism in America**

*In the face of fierce isolationism, nativism, and anti-Semitism at home, Roosevelt concentrated on domestic affairs. To save more Jews, Roosevelt would have had to relax a US immigration system based on discriminatory quotas that had been legislated in 1924. . . . Even a bill in Congress in 1939, supported by the Catholic Church and Jewish groups in America, that would have admitted ten thousand Jewish*

*children from Europe failed to pass. . . . Roosevelt did not intervene. . . . In the end, millions of Jews in Europe unknowingly faced a death sentence because of the visa restrictions. (page 230, location 3436)*

What is isolationism and nativism? What are possible reasons why anti-Semitism was too big a problem for Roosevelt to tackle? What were the consequences of American anti-Semitism leading up to the war?

## **Chapter 16: The All-American Camp**

### **23. O'Rourke**

*O'Rourke often said that he wanted the children in camp to have happy memories of Crystal City and grow up to be what he repeatedly called "good American citizens." (page 233, location 3486)*

How would you describe O'Rourke? Why did O'Rourke care whether the children had happy memories? What other things seemed important to O'Rourke while he was director of Crystal City?

### **24. The effects of being a prisoner**

*Compared to the concentration camps in Germany where millions of Jews died or to the prisoner-of-war camps in Japan in which 140,000 Allied prisoners of war and civilians lived in appalling conditions, the Crystal City camp was undeniably far more humane. However, the film exaggerated the positives in Crystal City, concealing the harsh reality of isolation and confinement. (page 242, location 3626)*

Does the fact that Crystal City was more humane than its German counterparts mean that it was acceptable? Is it possible to pass judgement on Crystal City without comparing it to the camps in Germany? Even if there is plenty of food and support, how does being locked up affect someone? Why would the government care about portraying Crystal City as a positive place?

## **Chapter 18: Harrison's Second Act**

### **25. Americans in charge of German concentration camps**

*Allied officials in charge said that since the camp had been liberated, thirty thousand Jews had died, most from starvation. (page 266, location 3970)*

*"As matters now stand, we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them" (page 269, location 4014)*



*In response to Harrison's criticism that Jews were living like prisoners, Patton defended the policy of not segregating Jews from other Germans and Europeans. He said that Jewish DPs "either never had any sense of decency or lost it during their internment by the Germans." He defended their still being under armed guard and opposed any "special treatment." Without the guards, Patton said the Jews would "spread over the country like locusts." (page 272, location 4062)*

Why didn't the army feel any empathy towards the dying in the concentration camps? How did anti-Semitism in the army contribute to the horror and tragedy? Was anti-Semitism worse in the army or was it a reflection of the beliefs in civilian America?

## **Chapter 19: After the War**

### **26. Don't talk about the horror**

*"Now you must start a new life. You are in America. The past is behind you," they told her, as Irene remembered it. "You mustn't speak about it. You have to forget." (page 287, location 4245)*

Is there any benefit to not talking about such horror? Wouldn't you want to forget it? If we had encouraged people to talk about it, what might be different? Do we encourage people not to talk about these things for their benefit or for the benefit of the listener?

## **Chapter 20: Beyond the Barbed Wire**

### **27. The failure of internment**

*[O'Rourke's] conclusion, preserved for posterity, was that the experiment of interning families of suspected nationalities—German, Japanese, Italians, and others—was a failure. (page 297, location 4373)*

What do you think O'Rourke believed the goals of internment to be? Why did he think Crystal City failed?

### **28. The fight against repatriation**

*The Department of Justice rejected O'Rourke's suggestion. "I am troubled by your recommendation of release," wrote Thomas N. Cooley, one of Clark's assistants. Cooley did not believe that Eppeler's wife's American citizenship was reason enough to justify their release. Eppeler and his wife were involuntarily deported to Germany. (page 301, location 4423)*

What did Cooley mean when he said he was “troubled” by O’Rourke’s recommendation? Why did the government continue to repatriate unwilling people after the war ended? Why was American citizenship not a factor? What are some of the reasons why people fought against repatriation?

## **Chapter 21: The Train from Crystal City**

### **29. Treatment of the Japanese vs. the Germans**

*The US Court of Appeals in Washington, DC, turned down Jacobs’s lawsuit on the grounds that the Japanese were detained on the basis of their race, while Germans were detained in smaller numbers based on potential security risks. (page 325, location 4769)*

Can you see any difference in the reasons why Japanese were interned compared to the reasons why Germans were interned? If the Japanese suffered from the racism rampant in the country, did that change the experience they went through? Should prejudice and bias be an issue in the government’s recognition of wrong-doing?

## **Afterword**

### **30. Right vs. Wrong**

*I realized then that the glory of nonfiction is that it allows for the telling of complex stories of real people, and what better place to look for the essence of humanity than in stories that blur the straight lines between right and wrong? (page 330, location 4878)*

What blurred the right and wrong for you in this book? When did you feel the need to defend something? When did you feel aghast at the actions taken? Can we judge Crystal City without comparing it to the concentration camps in Germany?

## **Questions that incorporate the entire book**

### **31. Women and the war**

What were the difficulties for women at this time? What problems did immigrant women suffer from? Why didn’t women report rapes?

### **32. Trading citizen for citizen**

Why was the government willing to trade some American citizens (i.e. children) for other American citizens? How did the government seem to decide whose life was worth more?

### **33. Returning to America**

Why did so many of the children return to the U.S. after the way the American government treated them? What kind of emotions exist for the land you grow up in?

### **34. Living as an immigrant in times of war**

Can someone be loyal to their home country, and live in the country they are at war with, and do no harm? What state of mind must someone be in to live in a country that's at war with your home country?

### **35. Euphemisms**

*More than six decades after the end of World War II, Sumi remains haunted by certain euphemisms: evacuation, which was in reality forced removal from her home; internment, which she experienced as prison. (page 313, location 4592)*

What is the difference between a concentration camp and an internment camp? What is the importance of the words used during war? How does the government justify its actions with what words it chooses?

### **36. Our world now**

How is the world during World War II different from ours? What happened to the people in this book that would seem unimaginable now?

### **Note on these questions**

These questions have been created by Wendy Wilkinson, President of the Houston Great Books. For more information on this nonprofit organization or to find book clubs in Houston that focus on discussion, please visit [www.HoustonGreatBooks.net](http://www.HoustonGreatBooks.net).