

Plunder

A Discussion Guide

Introduction

Menachem Kaiser never knew his paternal grandfather, his namesake, a Polish Jew who had survived the Holocaust. But when Kaiser learns that his grandfather had spent decades trying to reclaim an apartment building in Sosnowiec, Poland, that had been owned by family before the Second World War, he decides to take up the cause, enlisting the help of an attorney known as “The Killer.” He has to navigate seemingly endless bureaucratic hurdles, as well as the moral complexity of confronting those who now live in the building.

Kaiser then learns of a heretofore unknown relative who had survived World War II: his grandfather’s first cousin, Abraham. Abraham kept a secret diary while working as a slave laborer on Nazi underground complexes. This book has become a sacred text among modern-day treasure hunters, and Abraham has become a near-mythological figure. On account of this family connection, Kaiser becomes a celebrity among the treasure hunters.

As Kaiser attempts to reclaim his family’s property, he delves into complex questions about legacy, inheritance, and reclamation and reflects on the fraught relationship between storytelling, truth, and myth in a narrative that sheds new light on the way that we think about history, origin stories, and our relationship to all those who came before us.

Questions and Discussion Points

1. What does Kaiser mean when he says that “to ask what Sosnowiec meant to my father is really to ask what Sosnowiec meant to my grandfather” (8)? When he first visits the Polish town, how does it compare to what he imagined? What does he say that he “felt most sharply standing there in front of [Małachowskiego 12]” (10), the building he believed to be owned by his grandfather?
2. What prompted Kaiser to take up his grandfather’s quest to reclaim the building he once owned? How does his family feel about this? In chapter 2, what “shameful, and shamefully ironic, decision” (31) does the author confess that he made in order to proceed with reclamation? Were you surprised by his choice? Why or why not?
3. Whose opinion does Kaiser realize he must consider even though he knows it could complicate his efforts to reclaim the family building, and how does he handle this? What “cowardly decision” does he admit to making in order to communicate with them (34)? How does this decision and his conversations with these people ultimately alter the trajectory of his quest? What shocks him about his conversation with Hanna in particular?
4. In chapter 5, who does Kaiser say was particularly enthusiastic about his efforts to reclaim his grandfather’s building? Alternatively, where did he encounter the most “ambivalence, skepticism, criticism” (71) and why? How does the author respond to accusations that what he is doing is appropriation and what conclusions does he come to as he considers this argument? How did this argument affect your own view of Kaiser’s mission? When it comes to reclamation what does Kaiser mean when he says that, for him, it is about “[t]he verb, not the noun” (80)?

5. Why was the author considered a celebrity among the treasure hunters meets? What story about him spreads even though it is not true? What happens when Kaiser tries to correct this and how might this example contribute to the larger dialogue about history and mythmaking that pervades the book?

6. What does Kaiser say that he learns quickly about the treasure hunters and what does he say is “the catchall term for what they’re after” (84)? Why does he think of exploring “as a *response*” (88) and what might it be a response to? How does Kaiser feel about the Nazi paraphernalia that the treasure hunters openly display in their homes and cars? What does he think it signifies to them? What questions and qualms does he have about the way that they approach the sites they explore, and what happens when he finally confronts them about this in Osówka?

7. What challenges and obstacles does the author encounter as he proceeds with the trial to certify the deaths of his relatives? What does his experience reveal about the justice system? How does his thinking about the process change after the decisions are made?

8. What is the para-history of Riese and how does Kaiser respond to it? What was “too prominent a feature of the [treasure-hunting community around Riese] to ignore” (113)? What does the author mean when he says that “conspiracy theories . . . are not beliefs; they are systems of beliefs” (114) and what are the implications of this? Why does Kaiser conclude that when it comes to dealing with these conspiracy theories, being sociological is the wrong approach? Do you agree with him? What questions does he say that we ultimately need to ask as we consider “[o]ur cultural obsession with the Nazis” (121), and why does he advise against mockery when it comes to even the most absurd conspiracy theories?

9. Explore the theme of legacy. How does Kaiser’s father’s confrontation with his son in chapter 9 impact the author’s thinking on this subject? Why does Kaiser say that his father thinks his obsession with reclamation is hypocritical? What message from his grandfather is being delivered via his father? How would you say that legacy is ultimately defined throughout the book? What role does sentimentalism play when it comes to legacy? What conclusions does Kaiser come to about inheritance, and what is most important in this area?

10. Why do you think Kaiser surrounded his discovery of the receipt of sale of Małachowskię 34, and his father’s own stories of their lost treasures, with the stories of so many other rumored and/or lost treasures in chapter 10?

11. At the start of the book, the author says that the story doesn’t have an antagonist, but how does his thinking about this evolve as he goes through the process of reclamation? In chapter 12, where does Kaiser believe that he had finally found his antagonist? Do you agree with him? If not, who or what is the antagonist of the story? Does the story have one?

12. What question does the author realize may be “at the heart of everything [he is] doing in Poland” (194) and how does this contribute to his decision to revisit the sites of the concentration camps where Abraham was imprisoned? What do you think Kaiser means by his belief that “if you take the concept of place seriously enough you will end up having to work within the spiritual” (195)?

13. Consider the motif of truth and storytelling in the book. What does Kaiser say is true about origin stories in chapter 12? What does he claim that these types of stories are intended to preserve, and what are their limitations? What is “the fiction of sentimentalism” (171) and how do these stories help expose it? What do the two varied publications of Abraham’s experiences, and the discovery of the story of Gertrud, reveal about this subject? As Kaiser reflects on his own storytelling choices, what observations does he make about the benefits and the distinctions of fiction and nonfiction? How do the different genres present the storyteller as hero or alternatively as witness? When it comes to his own story, which is Kaiser and why do you think that he ultimately chose a framework of nonfiction? Despite his choice, why do you think that he wanted readers to know how he might have written and concluded the story if he had worked within fiction?

14. When Kaiser’s trip to Abraham’s grave prompts him to consider the contrast of the popular story of Abraham versus the lost story of his grandfather, what question comes up for him about memory and myth? Does he ever answer this question? How would you answer it?

15. Revisit the “open-ended ending” of the book. How does the conclusion of the story compare to the one that Kaiser reveals he had originally envisioned when he began writing? Why does Kaiser say that the actual ending might be a “truer, more appropriate ending” (250) than one where things were finally and clearly decided, and how does this help him to clarify his vision of the book and its purpose? According to Kaiser, what is really at the heart of the story? What does he say that reclamation would be if he was telling “the most morally honest version of this story” (251)? How does the unexpected open-endedness of his story allow him to challenge and reimagine the genre of stories rooted in “memory-mission” (252)?

About the Author

Menachem Kaiser has published work with the *Atlantic*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *BOMB*, *Vogue*, *New York*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Tablet*, among others. He has a BA from Columbia University and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan. Kaiser was a Fulbright fellow to Lithuania. He resides in New York.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Alford, Kenneth D. *Nazi Plunder: Great Treasure Stories of World War II*

Chanel, Gerri. *Saving Mona Lisa: The Battle to Protect the Louvre and its Treasures from the Nazis*

De Waal, Edmund. *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*

Edsel, Robert M. *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*

Fishman, David E. *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis*

Goodman, Simon. *The Orpheus Clock: The Search for My Family’s Art Treasures Stolen by the*

Nazis

Lewis-Kraus, Gideon. *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful*

Nicholas, Lynn H. *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*

O'Connor, Anne-Marie. *The Lady in Gold: The Extraordinary Tale of Gustav Klimt's Masterpiece, Portrait of Adele Block-Bauer*

Ronald, Susan. *Hitler's Art Thief: Hildebrand Gurlitt, the Nazis, and the Looting of Europe's Treasures*

Rydell, Anders. *The Book Thieves: The Nazi Looting of Europe's Libraries and the Race to Return A Literary Inheritance*