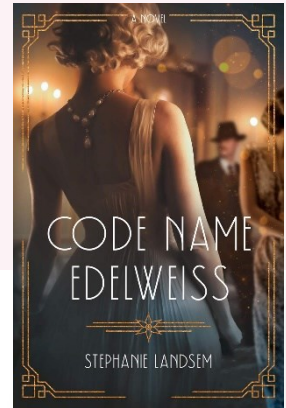




# LEADER'S GUIDE

## CODE NAME EDELWEISS BY STEPHANIE LANDSEM



"If not us, who? If not now, when? It must be us, and it must be now. I would fight this war. I would not be silent!"

**LIESL WEISS**

### THEMES

Prejudice

History

Espionage

Morality

Fear

Rejection

Motherhood

### HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Infidelity

Antisemitism

Marriage Breakdown

Racism and Oppression

Murder

### CHARACTERS

*Leon Lewis* is a Jewish lawyer gathering a group of amateur spies – including women – to spy on the New Friends of Germany. With authorities scoffing at his warnings and Nazi propaganda turning the German Americans against the Jews, Leon takes matters into his own hands, using his incredible intellect to foil Hitler's attempted takeover of Hollywood.

*Liesel Weiss* is a struggling single mother fighting feelings of failure and rejection after her husband's disappearance. When pushed to make the tough decision to take a job as a spy or remain unemployed, love for her family motivates her to take the job, despite her emotional apathy towards the plight of the Jewish people in danger. As hatred and violence are revealed, Liesl realizes she's braver than she imagined and cannot sit idly by while others suffer. Her intelligence and quick thinking promote her from amateur spy to Nazi plot saboteur – and her heart follows as her capacity to care for others outside of her immediate family expands.

*Wilhelm Otto (Agent Thirteen)* is secretly employed as a spy, posing as a Hitlerite to infiltrate the New Friends of Germany. He secretly relays information to Leon Lewis to expose evidence of an upcoming Nazi attack on the Jewish people. Despite Wilhelm having enough funds to retire quietly, his deep need to help and make things right in the world convicts him to keep sacrificing and living his double life.

*Georg Gyssling* is the German vice-consul to Los Angeles and has influence and control over the content of films produced in Hollywood.

*Hermann Schwinn* is the leader of the Friends of New Germany and a Nazi party member. He is handsome and charismatic, yet his morals are almost non-existent. He is entitled, hates the Jewish community and is misogynistic.

*Thekla Schwin* is Hermann's wife. She is suspicious of Liesl, and her initial friendly and welcoming personality alters quickly as her unfaithful husband pays Liesl unwanted attention.

*Franz Ferenz* is Liesl's younger brother. He was recruited by the Friends of New Germany to be a part of the Silver Shirts, and his hatred for the Jewish community grows throughout the story.

## STORYLINE

"Code Name Edelweiss is based on a true story, unknown until recent years: How a lone Jewish lawyer and a handful of amateur spies discovered and foiled Adolf Hitler's plan to take over Hollywood. My aim in Code Name Edelweiss and in all my fiction is not to document a historical event but to write a compelling story about how a character reacts to this event, how it affects her life, and how she is changed by what she encounters. One of my favourite quotes about fiction is this: 'A story doesn't have to be true to tell the truth.' This is what I hope you gain from Liesl and Wilhelm's story: the truth about courage, conviction, and love that both encompasses and transcends the historical record" – Stephanie Landsem

Code Name Edelweiss is a riveting historical fiction story that immerses readers into the 1930s drama and plots by the Hitlerites to infiltrate Hollywood. These Nazi groups spread antisemitic propaganda, hate and discord through German American groups in LA, intending to seize control of Hollywood.

Liesl Weiss is a single mother struggling to provide for her family. She's heard rumblings of a 'Mad Dog' dictator in Europe, but her concern for her family consumes and guides her. As unemployment is through the roof after the Great Depression, she would do anything to make ends meet. After losing her job at the MGM, Liesl finds herself at Leon Lewis' office asking for a secretary job. Unknown to Liesl, Leon is a spymaster. Because of Liesl's German heritage and unique skills - being a German American and able to translate manuscripts between English and German - Leon offers her an undercover job infiltrating the Friends of New Germany.

Liesl is not the only spy working for Leon; Agent 13 has also infiltrated the Friends of New Germany. As he hears murmurs and whispers of an upcoming plan, 'The Attack', he must work tirelessly to put all of the pieces together and derail the wicked scheme.

As Liesl and Wilhelm discover one another's secret identities, the Nazi propaganda has reached a bit too close to home for Liesl as Franz is discovered to be serving as a Silver Shirt. Franz's involvement in an attack on their Jewish neighbours goes terribly wrong, and Liesl's children are caught in the fire and taken in critical condition to the hospital. As Franz feels deep remorse for his actions, Wilhelm convicts him of the wickedness of the Friends of New Germany, and Franz reveals plans for 'The Attack', which are to occur the following day at the MGM and a Jewish Synagog.

Liesl and Wilhelm work against the clock to foil the plans. Wilhelm manages to convince some of the Silver Shirts of their expendability to the Nazis, stopping the synagog shooting, while Liesl, at MGM, prevents the death of a Hollywood producer intent on making an anti-Nazi film. As Liesl is reunited with her family, her eyes have been opened to the terror of the Nazi regime, and she knows she can and must do whatever it takes to protect those she loves and others who are at risk of harm.

The story is left open for the possibility of a second book.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Much of Stephanie's novel is based on actual events and historical people fictionalised. Were you aware of the story before reading the book? What did you find most intriguing about these events?

### TALKING POINTS

Much of Stephanie's novel is based on actual events and historical people fictionalised:

- The Friends of New Germany, the Aryan Bookstore, and other anti-Semitic organizations existed.
- Fascism grew phenomenally in the early 1930s all over America, supported by Nazis overseas and American organizations such as the KKK.
- Jewish ownership of Hollywood and 'Mad Dog of Europe Movie' are factual.
- The fake arrest of Sylvia Comfort inspired the post office arrest scene devised to solidify her position of trust within the Nazi organization.
- Leon Lewis and his operatives prevented the violent attacks, which never succeeded beyond the planning stages.
- The Great Depression was a worldwide economic downturn that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939.
- The 1918 influenza pandemic was the most severe in recent history.

2

Q. Discuss Liesl's journey from being apathetic to actively sabotaging the schemes of the Friends of New Germany. What was the crucial moment for her radical transformation?

### TALKING POINTS

Initially, Liesl was apathetic to the plight of the Jews. This wasn't from deliberate ignorance, but she was so consumed with the stress of providing for her family that she was emotionally unable to carry another's burden. It wasn't until she was involved and realised her brother was being led astray that she became convicted to act.

Liesl's turning point was when she said, "I could no longer remain on the sidelines... I must join a side."

- "If not us, who? If not now, when? It must be us, and it must be now. I would fight this war. I would not be silent!" (Liesl)
- "Somebody needed to tell those kids the real enemies weren't the Jews or the Catholics or Negroes, like the Klan and the National Socialists wanted them to believe. The real enemies were poverty and injustice and ignorance—and hate. It wasn't too late to set them straight. Give them a second chance. Didn't everybody deserve that? He hoped so, for their sake and his own." (Wilhelm).

3

Q. When Liesl decides to remain silent against the prejudice directed towards Miriams, she loses the "friend of her heart" and wishes she had spoken up sooner. Can you relate to Liesl's situation?

### TALKING POINTS

There are many reasons why we don't speak up when we should, but most often, it's because of our 'fear of man', our concern with what others may think of us, or what others might do to us if we speak up. Sometimes the consequences are small, such as a nasty look or a harmful word; other times, it could cost us our lives. Until we prioritise the 'fear of God' (being concerned only with what God thinks), we will be caught in a cycle of worrying more about what others will think or do.

# 4

Q. At what stage in the novel did you realise who Agent 13 was? Discuss the tension Wilhelm Otto lived in while undercover in the Friends of New Germany.

## TALKING POINTS

Wilhelm lived a double life. In real life, he was deeply concerned with justice and seeking to liberate the oppressed and captive – the captive being the young silver shirts who were being brainwashed by Nazi propaganda. In his secret life, he had an authoritarian air about him and had to lie and mislead the Nazi German Americans. Wilhelm separated the two by channelling his hurt and regret into his spy personality. Some of the tensions he encountered were:

- Wilhelm felt responsible for leading the silver shirt boys astray, having been a 'role model' to them while undercover.
- Wilhelm needed to diffuse the attack at the Jewish synagog without blowing his cover.
- Wilhelm had to decide whether or not to trust Franz with his secret.

# 5

Q. Throughout the story, Liesl struggles with thoughts and feelings of being a failure as a mother. Can you relate? How did the stress and shame of her husband leaving her impact her motherhood journey?

## TALKING POINTS

Liesl feels a deep sense of abandonment and rejection after she's told her husband has left her, and these feelings lead her to begin questioning everything she is doing as a mother and provider. It isn't until she finds out the truth – that her husband was killed – that she can gain confidence once more.

We can all struggle with rejection and big questions about whether we're doing enough for our families, and sometimes these questions aren't easily resolved or do not go away. As Christians, we can find peace knowing:

- God's mercies are new each day. If we have failed today, tomorrow is another day to begin again.
- Hard is not bad, and just because we're enduring hardship doesn't mean God has abandoned us or that we are outside His will for us.
- The Holy Spirit equips us and strengthens us to fulfil our responsibilities and calling as friends, wives and mothers.
- Despite our feelings, if we're secure in Christ, we are never forsaken or alone. We may feel lonely or struggle to sense that God is close, but while our feelings can mislead us, God's word does not, and God promises to remain with us.

# 6

Q. Discuss some of the espionage methods used by spymaster Leon Lewis. Why was Leon's strategy of internal sabotage between Nazi members so successful?

## TALKING POINTS

A united front against a 'common enemy' is a crucial war and covert operations strategy. When:

- Individuals begin to doubt one, creating distrust and secrecy.
- Individuals start looking out for their own needs instead of the group as a whole.
- Miscommunication results.

# 7

Q. Leon asks Wilhelm if he'd "rather put his faith in God or humanity?". Why is it hard for Wilhelm to put his trust in God? How can it be hard for us?

## TALKING POINTS

As Christians, we know putting our trust in God above people is the right thing to do. But sometimes, this can be hard if we feel like God has let us down, ignored our prayers or punished us.

Wilhelm feels that God did not answer his prayers:

- Wilhelm grieves the loss of his mother and sister, who died during the influenza pandemic, and he wonders why God didn't protect them.
- Wilhelm is mad at God for allowing his brutal father to live while his kind mother and sister died.
- Overall, he feels these things were unfair and didn't understand how to trust alongside his questions and doubt.

Wilhelm decides that despite not understanding God's ways, he has seen the wickedness of man and would rather trust a Holy God.

# 8

Q. Do you agree with Leon's thoughts that "fear can be faced and if it's confronted people can change"? How did fear affect Fritz and other young Silver Shirts?

## TALKING POINTS

Fritz and many of the Silver Shirts were coerced into service for the Friends of New Germany without knowing how dispensable they were:

- The boys and young men were given a purpose and a common goal to work towards.
- They experienced comradeship after feeling ostracized by the American population after WWI.
- Influenced and brainwashed by the Nazi propaganda, many young men got in too deep too quickly. By the time they realised they didn't want to kill Jewish people, it was too late to back out.

# 9

Q. At some stage in their life, every human has asked, "Why does God allow evil." How does Wilhelm answer this question? Do you agree with him?

## TALKING POINTS

Stephanie's story highlights faith, courage and other virtues amidst hardship and provides comfort and hope when things feel dark.

- "He [Wilhelm] guessed that God did stop them, but not with fire and brimstone, or smiting like Wilhelm would have done.... He used people. Good people like Leon Lewis, not so good people like himself. He gave them what they needed to work with and let them at it. Wilhelm sure would prefer the brimstone, but maybe that's why God was God, and he wasn't."

# 10

Q. "Love is a great and terrible risk. But it was worth it." Discuss the risks taken in love throughout the story. Why is it worth the risk to love others well, even if it's a sacrifice for us?

## TALKING POINTS

The risks the characters take, including emotional and physical, are often pivotal growth moments that aid in developing virtues such as courage, faith, and hope. These moments cultivate a Christ-like love and sacrifice for others within their lives, thereby fulfilling God's command to love God and love others. This makes the risk worth it.

- Wilhelm's intervention to prevent the shooting at the Jewish synagog could have ended in his death.
- Liesl could have been imprisoned for her involvement in sabotaging the MGM shooting.
- Miriam's forgiveness of Liesl redeems their friendship. However, as imperfect people, we're not guaranteed that we won't be hurt again; friendship always involves risk.
- Leon Lewis strove to uncover the Friends of New Germany plot despite the risk to his safety. He cared so profoundly for his Jewish brothers and sisters that he risked his life and personally funded the spies.



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