



The Boys in the Light

by Nina Willner

Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:

The Boys in the Light by Nina Willner

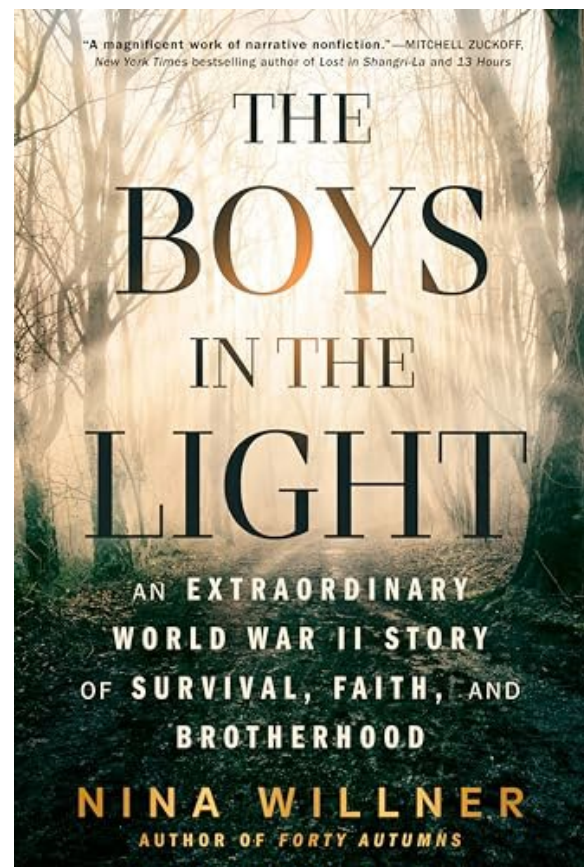
Included in the Kit:

Book summary

The Boys in the Light follows the parallel journeys of Company D and Eddie Willner, the author's father, as they are caught up on two sides of World War II.

At sixteen, Eddie Willner was among the millions of European Jews rounded up by Hitler's Nazis. He was forced into slave labor alongside his father and his best friend, Mike, and spent the next three years of his life surviving the death camps, including Auschwitz. Meanwhile, in the United States, boys only a few years older than Eddie were joining the army and heading toward their own precarious futures. Once farmers, factory workers, and coal miners, they were suddenly untested soldiers, thrust into the brutal conflicts of WWII.

A company of 3rd Armored Division tankers, led by 23-year-old Elmer Hovland, quickly became battle-hardened and weary, constantly questioning whether the war was worth it. They got their answer when two emaciated boys stepped out of the woods with their tattooed arms raised. This extraordinary true story is a testament to survival against all odds; the strength of the bonds forged during war and the resilience of the human spirit.



(Source: <https://ninawillner.com/the-boys-in-the-light>)



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Meet the Author

Nina Willner is the award-winning author of two critically acclaimed nonfiction books. *The Boys in the Light* (Dutton/Penguin Random House 2025) was named Amazon's #3 best Book of 2025 – Top Nonfiction, and Best History Book of the Year, received Kirkus starred review, and won a 2026 Christopher Award. Willner's first book *Forty Autumns* (HarperCollins Wm Morrow 2016) was named a "Top 15 Nonfiction Book of 2016" by The CS Monitor. Prior to her writing career, Nina was a US Army intelligence officer who led sensitive missions behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. After a career in intelligence, Nina lived in Moscow, Minsk, Prague, Ottawa and Istanbul promoting human rights, women's and children's causes and the rule of law of the US government, nonprofits and a variety of charities. After years living abroad, she now writes narrative nonfiction full time from her home in Washington DC.



(Source: <https://ninawillner.com/about>)



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Discussion Questions

1. Willner begins the book with, “It always starts with innocence.” What do you think she meant by this?
2. Who were ‘the boys in the light?’ What does the theme of “light” represent in this story?
3. What was special about the role Siegfried played for Eddie and Mike in the camps?
4. Contrast the role Christianity played in the story – between Elmer’s faith and the Nazi’s appropriation of religion.
5. How did Eddie and Mike’s unbreakable friendship help lead to their survival?
6. If you could sit with one of the characters for a quiet evening of discussion, who would it be and why?
7. A hallmark of victory for the US and its allies was initiative, unity and teamwork. What is meant by “Yankee ingenuity,” “cowboy mentality,” and “prairie farm toughness,” and how did it help the Americans win the war?
8. The American tankers were largely young, inexperienced kids who had inferior tank and were battling German soldiers who had far more experience, better tanks and better weapons like the Panzerfaust. Fear gripped many American GIs from the start. What held them together?
9. For Elmer, teamwork, faith, competence, and compassion were important, and his troops loved him for it. What traits do you think make a good leader?
10. What are the lessons of “the Greatest Generation?” What did they teach us? Do you have a relative for fought in WWII? Before reading this book, did you understand their contribution to the war effort?
11. The Boys in the Light is ultimately a story of the triumph of good over evil and being “on the right side of history. How did defeating Hitler and being perceived by the world as “the good guys” benefit America in the decades that followed WWII?
12. After finishing the final page, what message did you walk away with that you would want to share with a friend?

(Source: <https://bookclubs.com/discussion-guides/the-boys-in-the-light>)

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Recipes

Cholent with Eggs and Kishke

Ingredients:

- 1 cup dried beans: lima, pinto, red (not kidney), or a mixture
- 2 ½ pounds large red potatoes, peeled and halved
- 2 yellow onions, chopped
- 2 ½ pounds beef stew meat or brisket, cut into chunks
- 2 beef marrow bones
- 1 kishke (optional)
- ½ cup pearl barley or coarse grain kasha
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled
- ½ teaspoon ground pepper
- 6 eggs (optional)
- 4 cups low sodium chicken broth
- 1 cup of water
- 1 tablespoon + 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 ½ teaspoons paprika
- 1 ½ teaspoons ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper



Directions:

Place the beans into the bottom of a large pot and cover with several inches of water. Boil for 5 minutes then remove the pot from the heat. Let soak for 1 hour, then drain and rinse well.

In a large slow cooker place the potatoes in a single layer on the bottom then sprinkle the onions on top. Place the beef in a single layer on top of the onions and add the marrow bones. Add kishke, if using

Rinse beans, barley, and kasha well, then spread them evenly over the meat. Tuck the garlic cloves into the meat, spacing them evenly and sprinkle with black pepper. If using eggs, rinse the shells thoroughly and place them into the pot.



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Pour the broth into a large bowl and whisk in the salt, paprika, turmeric, cumin, and cayenne. Pour the season liquid over the cholent, adding additional water – about 1 cup – just until the beans and meat are barely covered.

Cover the slow cooker and cook on low for 16-18 hours, checking occasionally and adding water if the mixture appears dry. When the meat is tender and cooking is complete, switch the cooker to “warm” until ready to serve. Peel eggs (if using) before serving.

(Source: <https://www.jewishfoodsociety.org/recipes/cholent-with-eggs-and-kishke>)

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Recipes Continuation

Compote

Ingredients:

- 3 cups pitted dried prunes
- 3 cups pitted dried apricots
- 3 cups dried peaches
- 1 cup dried pears
- 1 cup dried apple rings
- 1 cup raisins/cranberries
- 1 or 2 lemon slices
- ½ cup packed light brown sugar
- ½ cup orange juice
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup
- ½ cup sweet wine, or to taste
- ½ cup water
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Pinch cloves



Directions:

Combine the dried fruit and lemon slice in a 6-quart pot and place over medium heat. Add brown sugar, orange juice, maple syrup, wine, water and spices and bring to a low boil.

Cover, reduce the heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Set aside to cool; the fruit will swell as it cools. Store in airtight containers and refrigerate or enjoy warm (fantastic over ice cream!)

(Source: https://sugarpunrun.com/wprm_print/easy-buckeye-recipe/)