

BOOK CLUB KIT

"A story of one family's heartbreak and hope. Strong [and] resilient, Meissner's characters step off the page and into history."  
—LISA WINGATE, author of *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*

*The*  
**LAST YEAR**  
*of the*  
**WAR**



*a novel*

**SUSAN MEISSNER**

Author of *AS BRIGHT AS HEAVEN* and *SECRETS OF A CHARMED LIFE*



# DEAR READER,

On the highway to one of my favorite Sierra Nevada towns, Mammoth Lakes, is a signpost for a relic of a place that is more ghost town than anything else. The sign stands on a lonely stretch of open road in the high desert, and points to a handful of buildings set against distant mountains that are often snow-dusted, even in the early summer. I see that signpost for historic Manzanar every time I drive to Mammoth. I've thought of stopping to tour the place, but I never have, even though I've been making that trip since I was a teenager.

Manzanar was a WWII Japanese internment camp. What's left of that California landmark is a stark reminder of what can happen in a time of immense fear and distrust. But I've only ever viewed it from a distance.

I've long known what happened to Japanese Americans living on the West Coast when the US entered WWII, but until I read about a particular internment camp on the outskirts of Crystal City, Texas, I'd been unaware the same thing happened to a smaller number of German Americans. I also didn't know several thousand of these people were then repatriated to Germany in prisoner exchanges, and I didn't know many had American-born children who traveled to the war zone with them.

This novel is a story of what could have happened to a teenager born to German immigrant parents in the Midwest in the years before WWII. The experiences I imagined for this fictional character named Elise Sontag were similar in many ways to those of real children just like her and to their parents. This is a story to enlighten and perhaps even expose, but more than anything it is a book to invite conversation, which we book club people already greatly value.

If we're going to remember the lessons of WWII, and I believe we should, we need to know them and talk about them. And in doing so, I believe we can learn from them, which for me has always been what I love most about reading and writing historical fiction. As always, I look forward to hearing from you and your club members. And if you'd like for me to be a small part of your gathering via Skype or FaceTime or Google Hangouts, please visit my website (click the book clubs tab) for details on how to arrange that visit.

You are the reason I write,

**SUSAN MEISSNER**

# BEHIND THE BOOK

## THE US ENTERS THE WAR

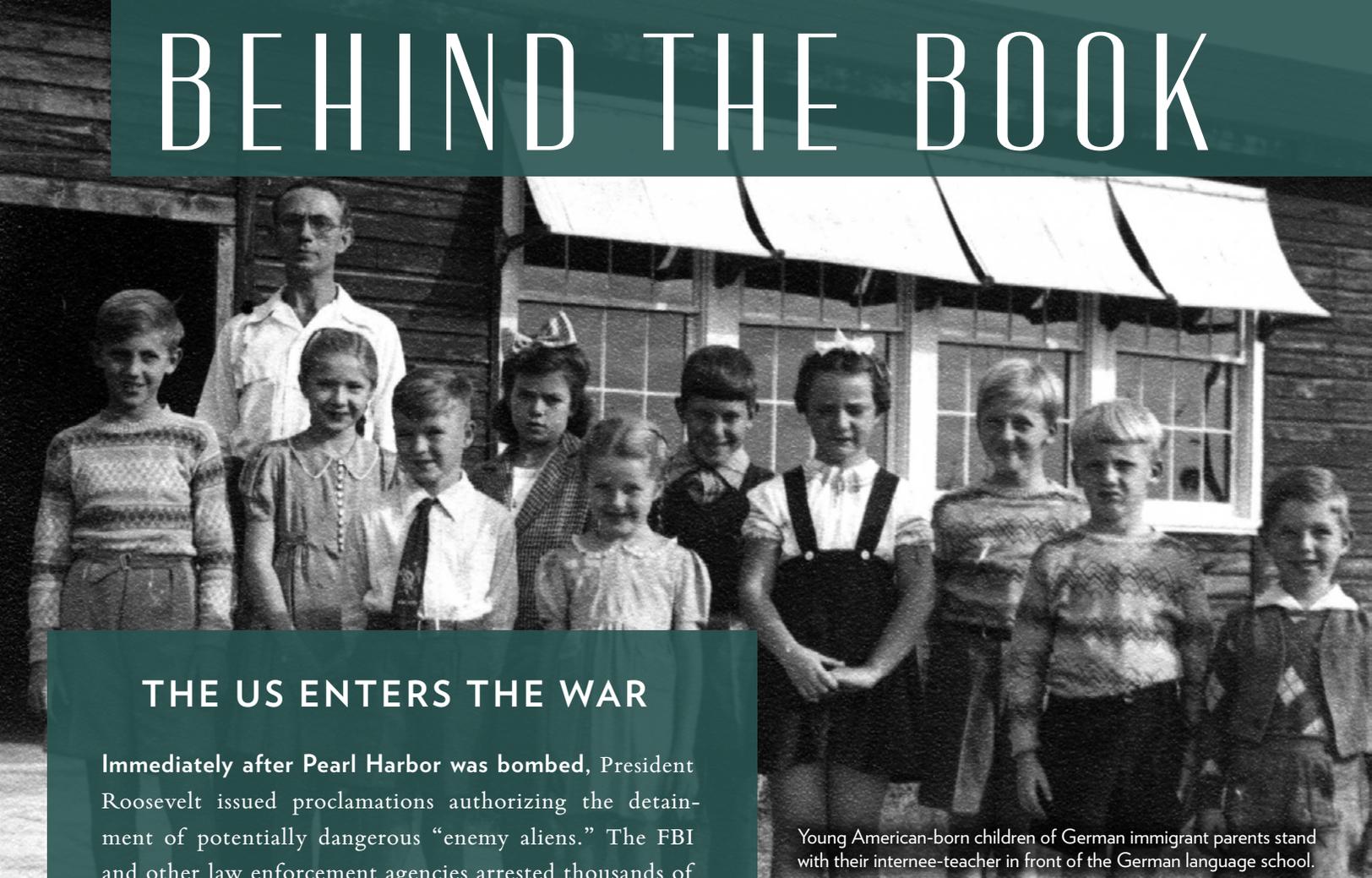
Immediately after Pearl Harbor was bombed, President Roosevelt issued proclamations authorizing the detainment of potentially dangerous “enemy aliens.” The FBI and other law enforcement agencies arrested thousands of suspects of primarily German, Japanese, and Italian ancestry who were living as legal residents in the United States.

The US offered to intern “potentially dangerous enemy aliens” living in Latin American countries in a measure that was deemed necessary to protect North and South America on a wider scale. More than a dozen Latin American countries deported roughly seven thousand people of German, Japanese, and Italian descent, along with some of their families, to the US to be interned.

During the years of the war, more than thirty thousand suspected enemy aliens and their families were interned for the duration of the war at camps and military facilities throughout the United States, including 16,849 Japanese, 10,905 Germans, and 3,278 Italians. Most were never convicted of a war crime.

“I am not in favor of Hitler or Nazism. I am a Democrat like my father. I consider myself a full-fledged American. I really don’t consider myself a German. I have applied for repatriation because I want to get my husband out of camp. I can’t go on this way.”

—Johanna Eiserloh, in her 1942 petition for repatriation



Young American-born children of German immigrant parents stand with their internee-teacher in front of the German language school.



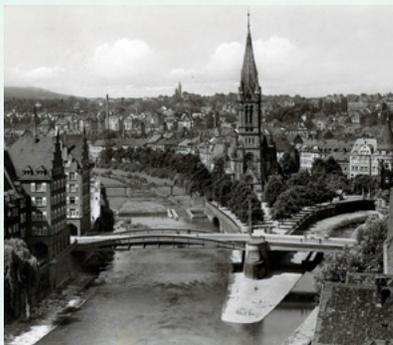
An aerial view of Crystal City Family Internment Camp circa 1945.



A view of some of the housing units in the background with the American high school in the foreground.



Children of internees being repatriated to Germany pose in front of the New York skyline as their ship begins its long journey.



Pforzheim – the city where Elise’s father, Otto, is from. Pictured here in 1940.

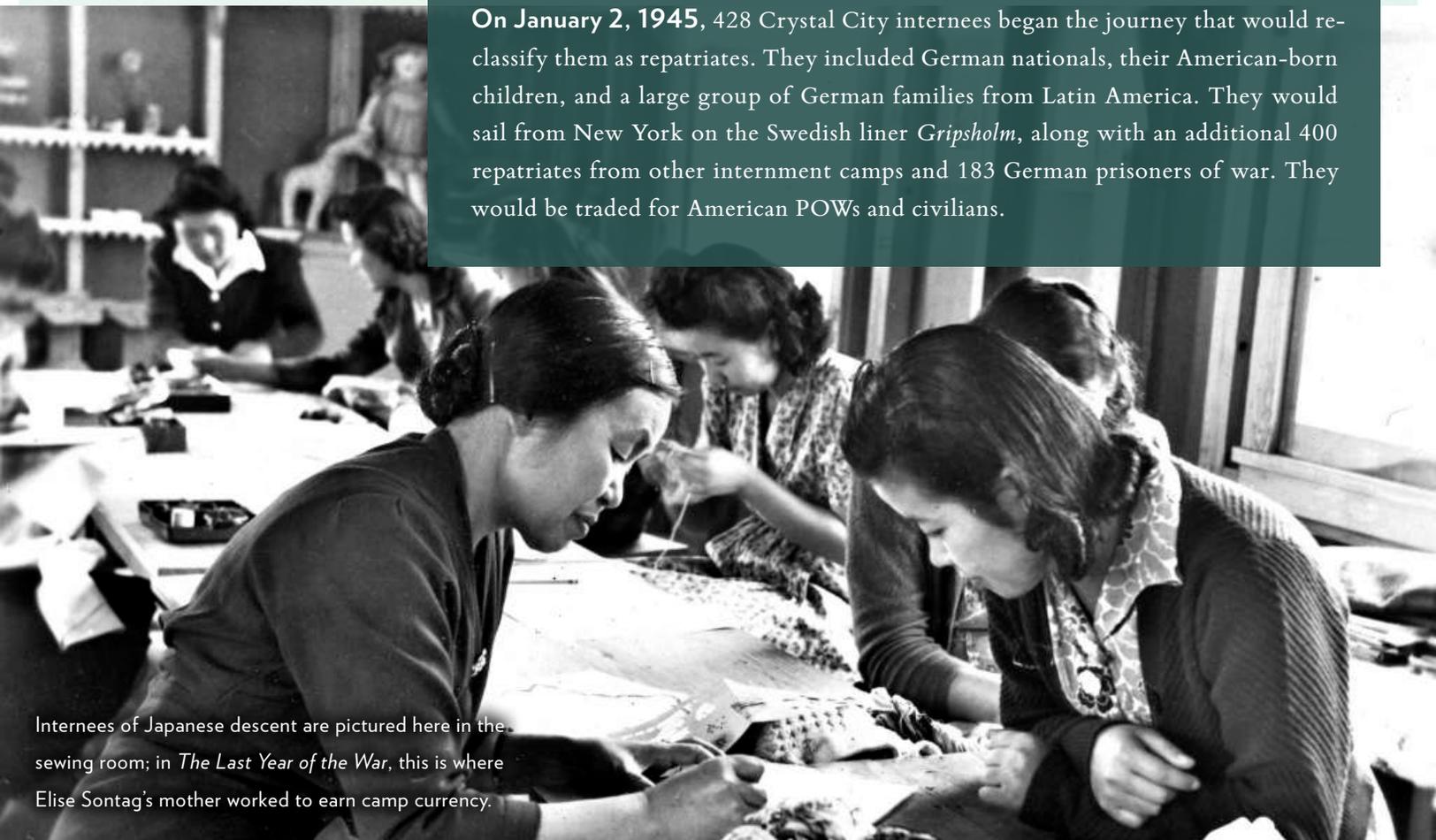
## LIFE AT CRYSTAL CITY

The **Crystal City Family Internment Camp**, located just thirty miles from the Mexican border, was surrounded by barbed wire fence and its internees surveilled via watchtowers and armed guards. Censors fluent in German and Japanese read incoming mail and removed any news related to the war. The penalty for attempting to escape the camp was death. During the six years the camp was operational, no one ever attempted it.

The **amount of food available to each internee**, as well as the allotted living space, the payment for work—all of the aspects of daily life at the camp—were arranged by the Geneva Convention and monitored by the International Red Cross. The Crystal City internees farmed the fields and ate its produce, built buildings and worked as teachers, barbers, tailors, nurses and doctors in the camp. They built a swimming pool. They were paid 10 cents an hour for any labor they performed and could earn a maximum of \$4 a week in camp currency.

There were **three K-12 schools in the camp**—American, Japanese and German. The American school was accredited by the Texas Board of Education and staffed by state-certified teachers. Classes were taught in English. In the Japanese and German schools, internees taught the children in their native languages. Some German parents enrolled their American-born children in the German school so that they could learn the language, as the subject of repatriation was ever on their minds. At the American high school, the football team played a volunteer squad of young male internees so that the students would have an opposing team to play.

On **January 2, 1945**, 428 Crystal City internees began the journey that would reclassify them as repatriates. They included German nationals, their American-born children, and a large group of German families from Latin America. They would sail from New York on the Swedish liner *Gripsholm*, along with an additional 400 repatriates from other internment camps and 183 German prisoners of war. They would be traded for American POWs and civilians.



Internees of Japanese descent are pictured here in the sewing room; in *The Last Year of the War*, this is where Elise Sontag’s mother worked to earn camp currency.

# MENU IDEAS *for your* BOOK CLUB



## JÄGERSCHNITZEL

BREADED PORK CUTLETS IN A MUSHROOM GRAVY

*“But then he announced the four of us would be going up to the camp market to purchase groceries for our kitchen. He couldn’t wait for Mommi’s Jägerschnitzel after six months of prison food.” —Chapter 9*

5 Tbsp butter, divided  
8 oz fresh mushrooms,  
your choice, sliced  
½ cup and 3 Tbsp all-  
purpose flour, divided  
14 oz beef broth  
2 Tbsp sherry  
Salt and pepper  
4 boneless pork chops  
2 large eggs, beaten  
¾ cup plain dry bread  
crumbs  
Cooking oil

**Make the gravy first.** Heat two tablespoons of butter in a skillet over medium-high heat and add the mushrooms. Cook the mushrooms until their moisture has evaporated. Remove and set aside. In same skillet, melt remaining butter, add 3 Tbsp flour and whisk until golden brown, about 3 minutes. Add broth slowly and whisk constantly until all is well blended. Return the mushrooms to the skillet, add sherry and simmer uncovered for about 15 minutes or until the gravy has thickened. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

**While the gravy gently simmers, prepare the schnitzel.** Place the chops between wax paper or plastic wrap and pound until ¼-inch thick. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Dip the chops in the ½ cup flour, then the beaten egg, and then the breadcrumbs. In fresh skillet, heat generous drizzle of cooking oil to medium-high and fry the chops about 4-5 minutes per side. Serve the schnitzel over spaetzle and top all with the mushroom gravy.



## SPAETZLE

THE GERMAN VERSION OF AN EGG DUMPLING



1 cup all-purpose flour  
½ tsp salt  
¼ tsp ground white pepper  
½ tsp ground nutmeg  
2 eggs  
¼ cup milk  
2 Tbsp butter  
Chopped parsley  
for garnish

Mix together flour, salt, white pepper, and nutmeg.

Beat eggs and add with the milk to the dry ingredients. Mix until smooth.

Press dough through a large holed sieve or metal grater or cookie press to form little cylinders. Heat a medium pot of water to a good simmer (not boiling). Drop a few at a time into the water. Cook 5 to 8 minutes. Drain well. Melt butter in a sauté pan. Sauté the cooked, drained spaetzle in melted butter on medium heat for a few minutes until lightly golden. Sprinkle with chopped fresh parsley. Serve.

1 egg  
 ¾ cup light brown sugar  
 ½ cup honey  
 ½ cup dark molasses  
 3 cups sifted  
 all-purpose flour  
 ½ tsp baking soda  
 1 ¼ tsp ground nutmeg  
 1 ¼ tsp ground cinnamon  
 ½ tsp ground cloves  
 ½ tsp powdered ginger  
 ½ cup chopped almonds  
 ½ cup chopped  
 candied orange peel  
 and lemon peel  
 1 egg white, beaten  
 Juice of 1 lemon  
 ½ tsp lemon zest  
 1 ½ cups powdered sugar

## LEBKUCHEN

A SPICED GERMAN TREAT OFTEN  
 MADE AT CHRISTMASTIME

*“He came home from the funeral with Opa’s  
 military medals in a velvet case and spicy-sweet  
 lebkuchen wrapped in shiny foil wrappers.”*

—Chapter 4



In a large bowl, beat egg, brown sugar and honey until smooth and then stir in the molasses. Combine the flour, baking soda, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and ginger; stir into the molasses mixture. Stir in the almonds and candied fruit peel. Cover or wrap dough and chill overnight.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F (200 degrees C). Grease baking sheets. On a lightly floured surface, roll the dough out to ¼-inch in thickness. Cut into 2-inch circles. Place cookies 1½ inches apart on baking sheets. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes in a preheated oven until firm. Brush the cookies with the lemon glaze (below) while still warm.

**Glaze:** In a small bowl, stir together egg white, lemon juice and lemon zest. Mix in the powdered sugar until smooth. Brush over cookies.



½ medium orange  
 ¾ cup water  
 ¼ cup turbinado or  
 granulated sugar  
 20 whole cloves  
 2 cinnamon sticks  
 2 whole star anise  
 1 bottle dry red wine

## GLÜHWEIN

TRADITIONALLY SERVED AT STALLS AT OUTDOOR  
 CHRISTMAS MARKETS TO KEEP PEOPLE WARM AS THEY SHOP

*“There was even wine to drink that internees had been allowed to make out  
 of raisins, apples, boiled sugar water...”* —Chapter 13

Remove the zest from the orange in wide strips with a peeler (avoid the pith). Juice the orange and set the juice and peels aside.

Combine water and sugar in a large saucepan and boil until the sugar has dissolved. Reduce heat and add the cloves, cinnamon, star anise, orange zest and orange juice. Simmer a few minutes, then reduce the heat and add the wine. Simmer on very low heat for 30 minutes up to a few hours.

Strain and serve in mugs. Garnish with the orange peel and star anise. Add a shot of rum, if desired.

# PFEFFERNÜSSE

SWEET AND PEPPERY MINI COOKIES THAT  
PAIR WONDERFULLY WITH COFFEE OR HOT CIDER

*“Mommi had told Chiyo the manju was delicious and that she’d send over  
some pfeffernüsse the next time she baked some.” —Chapter 12*

2 ¼ cups all-purpose flour  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon ground black  
pepper  
½ teaspoon crushed anise seed  
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
¼ teaspoon baking soda  
¼ teaspoon ground allspice  
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg  
1/8 teaspoon ground cloves  
½ cup unsalted butter, at room  
temperature  
¾ cup firmly packed light  
brown sugar  
¼ cup light molasses  
1 egg  
2 cups powdered sugar, for  
dusting (icing)

Sift together the flour, salt, pepper,  
anise seeds, cinnamon, baking soda,  
allspice, nutmeg and cloves.

In a large bowl, beat together on  
medium speed butter, brown sugar  
and molasses until light and fluffy,  
about 4 minutes. Beat in the egg. On  
a lower speed, beat in flour mixture.  
Cover and refrigerate for several hours.

Position a rack in the middle of an oven and preheat to 350 degrees F. Grease  
two baking sheets. Roll dough into balls 1½ inches in diameter. Place the  
balls on cookie sheets about 2 inches apart. Bake until the cookies are golden  
brown on the bottom and firm to the touch, about 14 minutes.

Let the cookies cool slightly on the sheets. Place powdered sugar in a sturdy  
paper bag, drop a few cookies into the bag, close the top securely, and shake  
gently to coat the warm cookies. Transfer to racks and cool completely.  
Repeat with the remaining cookies.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The Last Year of the War* is a work of historical fiction, but the internment camp at Crystal City was a real place where families just like Elise Sontag's were detained and then repatriated in prisoner exchanges. How do you feel about what happened during WWII to German Americans like Elise's family? Was such an action justifiable in a time of war? Why or why not?
2. What do you think it was like for Elise, going from milk shakes at the local diner in Davenport to living off bread crumbs to survive in Stuttgart after the war? What about her character do you think allowed her to cope with those changes?
3. Was Elise's father right to volunteer for Crystal City, knowing that by doing so he and his family might possibly be repatriated?
4. Elise's father said the only thing he could do to stand up against the Nazi regime was to make faulty fuses. Was he right? What would you have done?
5. Elise seemed changed by the experience in the alley with the two Frenchmen. How do you think it changed her, and why?
6. Elise, because of her German heritage, struggles in Chapter 22 to understand how the German military could have been so inhumanely cruel to the prisoners in the concentration camps. She

says to the reader, "I was beginning to understand that it was a person's choices that defined his or her identity and not the other way around." Do you agree that our choices say more about who we are than anything else? How does a person's nationality figure into his or her identity?

7. What does it mean to you to be a patriot? What do you think it meant to Elise? She tells the reader in Chapter 23, "The land of my childhood mattered to me, maybe because it was where my life began. I felt a part of that land somehow, just as Papa's heart was tied to the land of his birth. It was the land he loved, not so much the people, because people can change. People can be good and people can be monsters." Does the land of your childhood matter to you? Why or why not?
8. Has *The Last Year of the War* prompted you to consider the way in which you see people from other nations?
9. Was Ralph a good friend to Elise? Do you think he had his own reasons for marrying her? Did you like him as a person? Why or why not?
10. If you had been in Elise's position, would you have married Ralph? Did she make a wise choice or a foolish one?

11. Why do you think Elise wanted to return to America and stay with Hugh's family, even though they were difficult in some ways? Do you think she felt her own family was broken somehow by their experience? Do you think she needed to be needed?
12. What do you think were the reasons Mariko's friendship had such an impact on Elise? Can you relate? Did you have a friend like this growing up? How are we shaped by our friendships when we're young?
13. Do you think Elise would have ended up being a different person if she hadn't met Mariko? If so, how?
14. Mariko says from her deathbed that because of her, she and Elise were lost to each other. She laments that had she made different choices, she and Elise could have stayed friends. Elise assures Mariko that they did remain friends. Did they? Of Mariko, Elise tells the reader, "She remained in my heart and I in hers, all these years." What was Elise saying? Do you think it's possible to retain a friendship when you are parted from that friend?
15. Elise describes her Alzheimer's as a sticky-fingered houseguest named Agnes who is stealing from her. What is Agnes taking from Elise? How does this predicament tie into the rest of the story?

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

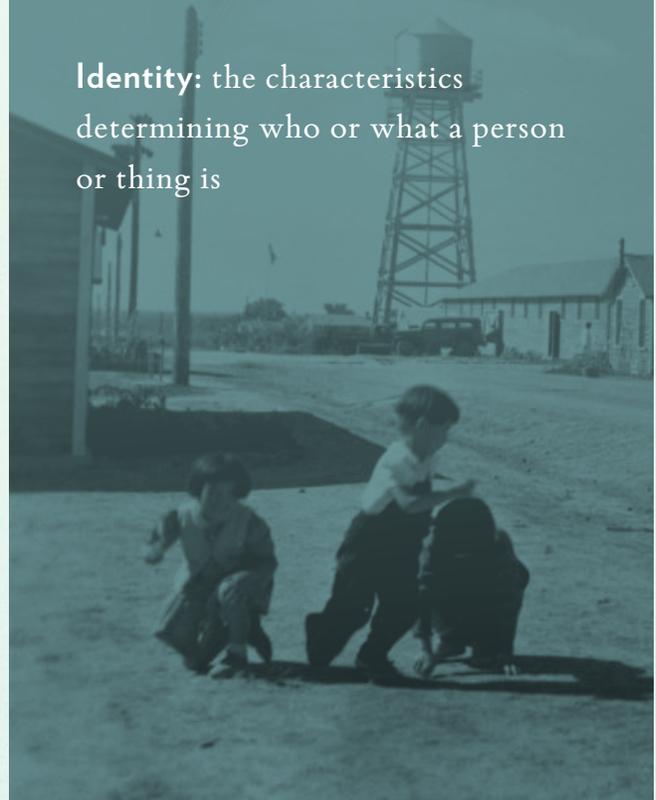
**Internment:** the state of being confined as a prisoner, especially for political or military reasons

**Repatriation:** the return of someone to their own country

**Enemy:** a person who is actively opposed or hostile to someone or something

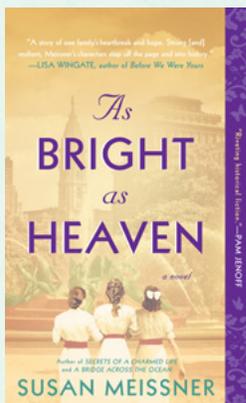
**Loyalty:** a strong feeling of support or allegiance

**Identity:** the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is



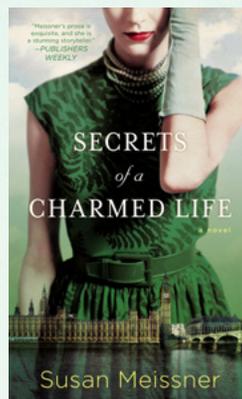
# MORE NOVELS FROM SUSAN MEISSNER

If you and your book club enjoyed *The Last Year of the War*, here are more engaging historical fiction titles by Susan for you to read and discuss:



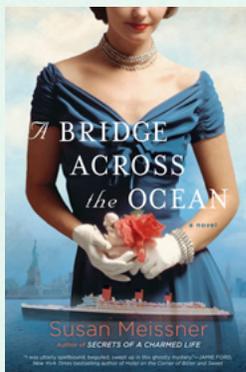
## As Bright as Heaven

A family is reborn through loss and love during the time of the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic.



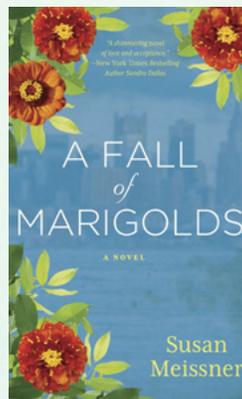
## Secrets of a Charmed Life

Two young sisters are separated by the chaos of war during the London Blitz.



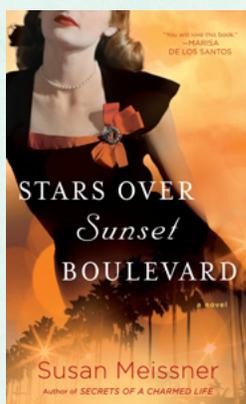
## A Bridge Across the Ocean

Secrets entangle the lives of war brides coming to America aboard the RMS *Queen Mary*.



## A Fall of Marigolds

A century-old scarf connects a widow and a 1911 Ellis Island nurse ten years after 9/11.



## Stars Over Sunset Boulevard

Studio secretaries working in Hollywood during its Golden Age discover the joy and heartbreak of true friendship.

## VISIT SUSAN MEISSNER ONLINE



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