

THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS

Discussion Starter – Innocence & Responsibility

One of the most memorable scenes in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* sees the two young boys, Bruno and Shmuel, sitting together separated by an electrified fence. Geographically they're seated just a few feet from one another, yet their situations are a million miles apart. Bruno's father is the commandant of the camp in which Shmuel is a prisoner, yet both of them seem unaware of what that really means.

In fact, neither of them understands anything of the gravity or consequences of Shmuel's situation. When his father goes missing, they assume he is innocently lost; when Bruno hears that his friend was brought in a cramped train carriage, he can't understand why he didn't choose the half-empty and luxurious transport which he arrived in himself.

They are just children caught up in the terrible schemes of men. Even as the commandant's son Bruno is innocent in the persecution of Shmuel and his people. Or is he?

In another scene, Shmuel is brought to Bruno's home to clean glasses. Seeing his hungry friend, Bruno hands him some food which Shmuel quickly stuffs into his mouth. Not quickly enough though; the mean soldier, Kotler has arrived to witness the Jewish boy with guilty crumbs around his mouth. When Shmuel claims that Bruno handed him food, the German boy denies ever having laid eyes on him. Like Peter denying Jesus, he has betrayed his friend when he needed him most.

Ask your group the following questions:

- What do these scenes tell us about the 'innocence' of youth?
- How innocent / responsible do you feel the following characters are for the terrible things that are happening on the other side of the fence?
 - a) Bruno, whose father is commandant
 - b) Father, who runs the camp
 - c) The soldiers, who answer to the commandant
 - d) Gretel, who puts up Nazi posters in her bedroom
 - e) The commandant's superior officers, who give the orders
 - f) "School" – the tutor and the books he chooses
- Now, try to put these characters in order from 'most responsible' to 'most innocent'. Explain your answer.
- How do you think these characters might answer the same question? Who do they believe to be guilty or innocent?

Read Isaiah 58 v6-12, then ask:

- What does this passage suggest about our attitude should be towards injustice?