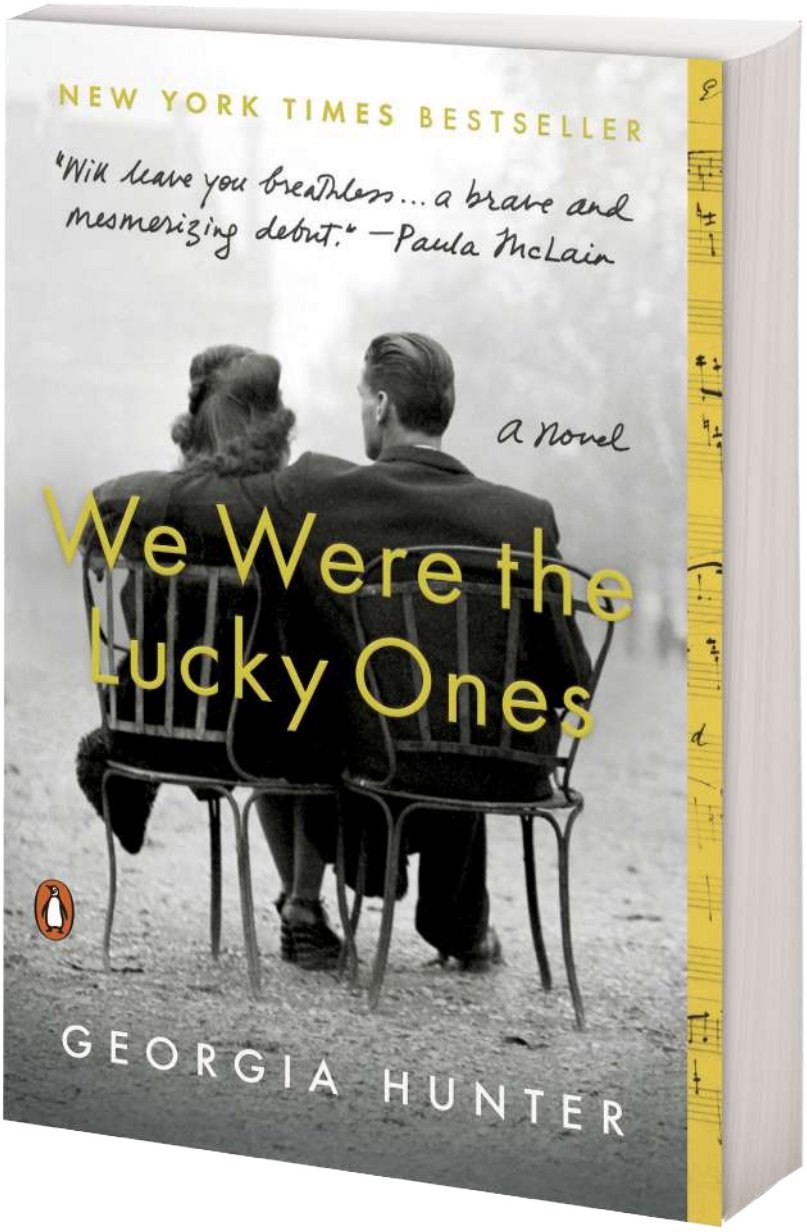
We Were the Lucky Ones



Online Book Club Kit

Inside this kit are materials to help enrich your book club meeting, including additional resources and a Q&A with author Georgia Hunter

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Author's Note

When I was growing up, my grandfather Eddy (the Addy Kurc of my story) was, for all I could tell, American through and through. He was a successful businessman. His English, to my ear, was perfect. He lived in a big, modern house up the road from ours, with floor-to-ceiling picture windows, a porch over the garage, and a Ford in the driveway. I thought little of the fact that the only children's songs he ever taught me were in French, that ketchup (*a chemical product*, as he called it) was strictly banned from his pantry, or that he'd made half of the things in his home himself (the contraption that dangled his soap by a magnet over the bathroom sink to keep it dry; the clay busts of his children in the stairwell; the cedar sauna in his basement; the living room drapes, woven on a handmade loom). I found it curious when he'd say things like "Don't parachute on your peas" at the dinner table (What did that even mean?), and mildly annoying when he'd pretend not to hear me if I answered one of his questions with a "yeah" or "uh-huh"—"Yes" was the only answer that met his grammatical standards. Looking back, I suppose others might have labeled these habits as unusual. But I, an only child with a single living grandfather, knew nothing different. Just as I was deaf to the slight inflection my mother now tells me he carried in his English diction, I was blind to his quirks. I loved my Papa dearly; he simply was who he was.

Of course, there were things about my grandfather that impressed me greatly. His music, to start. I'd never met a person as devoted to his art. His shelves overflowed with 33-rpm records, alphabetically arranged by composer, and with books and books of repertory for the piano. There was always music playing in his home—jazz, blues, classical, sometimes an album of his own. Often I would arrive to find him at the keys of his Steinway, a no. 2 pencil tucked behind his ear as he plotted melodies for a new composition, which he'd practice and tweak and practice some more until he was happy with it. Every now and then he would ask me to sit beside him as he played, and my heart would race as I'd watch him closely, waiting for the subtle nod that meant it was time to flip to the next page of his sheet music. "Merci, Georgie," he'd say as we reached the end of the piece, and I'd beam up at him, proud to have been helpful. On most days, once my grandfather was finished with his own work, he would ask if I'd like a lesson, and I would always say yes—not because I shared his affinity for the piano (I was never very good at it), but because I knew how happy it made him to teach me. He'd pull a beginner's book from the shelf and I would rest my fingers tentatively on the keys, feeling the warmth of his thigh against mine, and I would try my hardest not to make any mistakes as he walked me patiently through a few bars of Haydn's *Surprise* symphony. I wanted badly to impress him.

Along with my grandfather's musical prowess, I was also in awe of his ability to speak seven languages, which I attributed to the fact that he had offices around the world and family in Brazil and in France, although the only relative of his generation that I knew by name was Halina, a sister with whom he was especially close. She visited a few times, from São Paulo, and occasionally a cousin my age would come from Paris to stay with us for a few weeks in the summertime to learn English. Everyone in his family, it seemed, had to speak at least two languages.

What I *didn't* know about my grandfather when I was a kid was that he was born in Poland, in a town once home to over 30,000 Jews; that his birth name wasn't actually Eddy (as he later renamed himself) but Adolph, though growing up, everyone called him Addy. I had no idea he

was the middle of five children, or that he spent nearly a decade of his life not knowing whether his family had survived the war, or whether they'd perished in concentration camps, or been among the thousands executed in the ghettos of Poland.

My grandfather didn't keep these truths from me intentionally—they were simply pieces of a former life he'd chosen to leave behind. In America, he had reinvented himself, devoting his considerable energy and creativity entirely to the present and future. He was not one to dwell on the past, and I never thought to ask him about it.

My grandfather died of Parksinson's disease in 1993, when I was fourteen. A year later, a high school English teacher assigned our class an "I-Search" project intended to teach us research skills while we dug up pieces of our ancestral pasts. With my grandfather's memory so fresh, I decided to sit down for an interview with my grandmother, Caroline, his wife of nearly fifty years, to learn more about his story.

It was during this interview that I first learned of Radom. At the time I had no concept of how significant this place once was to my grandfather, or how important it would become to me—so much so that in twenty years, I would be drawn to visit the city, to walk the cobblestone streets, imagining what it might have been like to grow up there. My grandmother pointed to Radom on a map, and I wondered aloud if, after the war, my grandfather ever returned to his old hometown. *No*, my grandmother said. *Eddy never had any interest in going back*. She went on to explain that Eddy was lucky enough to be living in France when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939 and that he was the only member of his family to escape from Europe at the start of the war. She told me he was once engaged to a Czech woman he met aboard a ship called the *Alsina*; that she herself first laid eyes on him in Rio de Janeiro, at a party on Leme Beach; that their first child, Kathleen, was born in Rio just a few days before he reunited with his family—parents and siblings, aunts and uncles and cousins he hadn't seen or heard from for nearly a decade. Somehow, they'd all miraculously survived a war that annihilated over 90 percent of Poland's Jews and (I would later discover) all but about 300 of the 30,000 Jews from Radom.

Once his family was settled in Brazil, my grandmother explained, she and my grandfather moved to the United States, where my mother Isabelle and my uncle Tim were born. My grandfather didn't waste any time in changing his name from Adolph Kurc (pronounced "Koortz" in Polish) to Eddy Courts, or in taking the oath of American citizenship. *It was a new chapter for him*, my grandmother said. When I asked if he maintained any of his customs from the Old World, she nodded. *He barely spoke of his Jewish upbringing, and no one knew he was born in Poland—but he had his ways about him*. Just as the piano was an integral part of his own upbringing, my grandfather insisted that his children practice an instrument every day. Conversation at the dinner table had to be in French. He made espresso long before most of his neighbors had ever heard of it, and he loved bartering with the open-air vendors at Boston's Haymarket Square (from which he would often return with a paper-wrapped beef tongue, insisting it was a delicacy). The only candy he allowed in the house was dark chocolate, brought back from his travels to Switzerland.

My interview with my grandmother left my head spinning. It was as if a veil had been lifted, and I could see my grandfather clearly for the first time. Those oddities, those traits that I'd chalked up as quirks—many of them, I realized, could be attributed to his European roots. The interview also sparked an array of questions. *What happened to his parents? His siblings? How did they survive the war?* I pressed my grandmother for details, but she was able to share only a few sparse facts about her in-laws. *I met his family after the war*, she said. *They hardly spoke of their*

experiences. At home, I asked my mother to tell me all that she knew. *Did Papa ever talk to you about growing up in Radom? Did he tell you about the war?* I asked. The answer was always no.

And then in the summer of 2000, a few weeks after I'd graduated from college, my mother offered to host a Kurc family gathering at our house on Martha's Vineyard. She and her cousins agreed—they didn't see each other nearly enough, and many of their children had never even met. It was time for a reunion. As soon as the idea was seeded, the cousins (there are ten in all) began arranging their travel, and when July rolled around, family flew in from Miami, Oakland, Seattle, and Chicago, and from as far away as Rio de Janeiro, Paris, and Tel Aviv. With children and spouses included, we numbered thirty-two in total.

Each night of our reunion, my mother's generation, along with my grandmother, would gather on the back porch after dinner and talk. Most nights I'd hang out with my cousins, draped over the living room sofas, comparing hobbies and tastes in music and movies. (How was it that my Brazilian and French cousins knew American pop culture better than I did?) On the last evening, however, I wandered outside, settled down on a picnic bench next to my aunt Kath, and listened.

My mother's cousins conversed with a sense of ease, despite their distinctly different upbringings and native tongues and the fact that many hadn't seen each other in decades. There was laughter, a song—a Polish lullaby Anna and Ricardo recalled from their childhoods, taught to them by their grandparents, they said—a joke, more laughter, a toast to my grandmother, the lone representative of my grandfather's generation. Languages often alternated midsentence between English, French, and Portuguese; it was all I could do to keep up. But I managed, and when conversation shifted to my grandfather and then to the war, I leaned in.

My grandmother's eyes brightened as she recounted meeting my grandfather for the first time in Rio. *It took me years to learn Portuguese*, she said. *Eddy learned English in weeks*. She spoke of how obsessed my grandfather was with American idioms and how she didn't have the heart to correct him when he botched one in conversation. My aunt Kath shook her head as she recalled my grandfather's habit of showering in his undergarments—a means of bathing and laundering his clothes simultaneously when he was on the road; *he would do just about anything*, she said, *in the name of efficiency*. My uncle Tim remembered how my grandfather would embarrass him by striking up conversations—everyone from waiters to passersby on the street. *He could talk to anyone*, he said, and the others laughed, nodded, and from the way their eyes shined I could tell how adored my grandfather was by his nieces and nephews.

I laughed along with the others, wishing I'd known my grandfather as a young man, but my smile quickly faded when a Brazilian cousin, Józef, began telling stories of his father—my grandfather's older brother. Genek and his wife Herta, I learned, had been exiled during the war to a Siberian gulag. Goose bumps sprung to my arms as Józef told of how he was born in the barracks, in the thick of winter, how it was so cold his eyes would freeze shut at night and his mother would use the warmth of her breast milk each morning to coax them open.

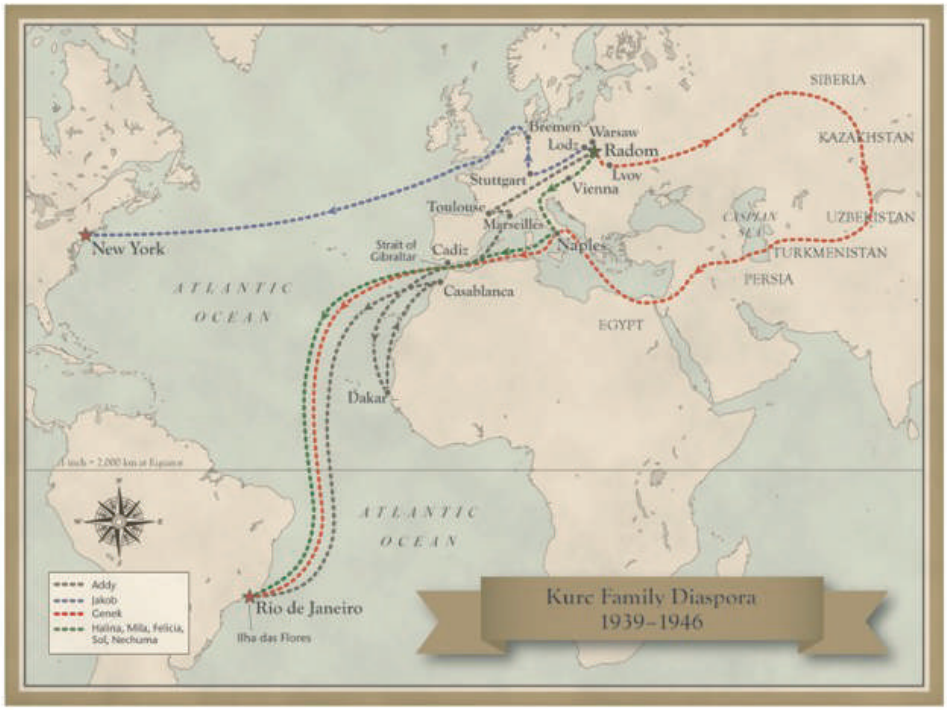
Hearing this, it was all I could do not to shout, *She what?* But as shocking as the revelation was, others soon followed, each somehow as astounding as the last. There was the story of Halina's hike over the Austrian Alps—while pregnant; of a forbidden wedding in a blacked-out house; of false IDs and a last-ditch attempt to disguise a circumcision; of a daring breakout from a ghetto; of a harrowing escape from a killing field. My first thought was, *Why am I just learning these things now?* And then: *Someone needs to write these stories down*.

At the time, I had no idea that *someone* would be me. I didn't go to bed that night thinking I should write a book about my family history. I was twenty-one, with a freshly minted degree under my arm, focused on finding a job, an apartment, my place in the "real world." Nearly a decade would pass before I'd set off for Europe with a digital voice recorder and an empty notebook to begin interviewing relatives about the family's experiences during the war. What I fell asleep with that evening was a stirring sensation in my gut. I was inspired. Intrigued. I had a boatload of questions, and I craved answers.

I have no idea what time it was when we all finally meandered back to our rooms from the porch—I just recall that it was Felicia, one of my mother's cousins, who was the last to speak. She was a bit older, and more reserved than the others, I'd noticed. While her cousins were gregarious and uninhibited, Felicia was serious, guarded. When she spoke, there was sadness in her eyes. I'd learned that night that she was just shy of a year old at the start of the war, nearly seven at its end. Her memory was still sharp, it seemed, but sharing her experiences made her uneasy. It would be years before I would gently uncover her story, but I remember thinking that night that whatever memories she harbored must have been painful.

"Our family," Felicia said in her thick French accent, her tone sober, "we shouldn't have survived. Not so many of us, at least." She paused, listening to the breeze rattling the leaves in the scrub oak trees beside the house. The rest of us were silent. I held my breath, waiting for her to go on, to offer up some sort of explanation. Felicia sighed and brought a hand to the place on her neck where her skin was still pockmarked, I would later learn, by a near-fatal case of scurvy she'd contracted during the war. "It's a miracle in many ways," she finally said, looking out toward the tree line. "We were the lucky ones."

These words would stay with me until the burn to understand how, exactly, my relatives could have defied such odds finally overcame me and I couldn't help but start digging for answers. *We Were the Lucky Ones* is the story of my family's survival.



April 10, 1939
The Kurc family's gathers for Passover, as Addy tries to get home from France

September 1, 1939
Germany invades Poland

September 7, 1939
Jakob and Genek are conscripted into the army and sent to Lvov

September 17, 1939
The Soviet Union invades Poland

September 27, 1939
Poland falls and is divided by the Soviets and Germans

October 27, 1939
Nechuma, Sol, Mila, and Felicia are forced out of their Radom apartment and into the Jewish ghetto, whose doors are sealed 6 months later

June 20, 1940
Genek and his wife Herta are shipped to Siberia along with over 1 million other Poles

October 3, 1940
France, now divided, abolishes the civil rights of its Jewish citizens

January 15, 1941
Granted an illicit visa, Addy boards a boat out of France; it takes him 7 months to reach the shores of Brazil

March 17, 1941
Genek and Herta's son, Józef, is born in the barracks of their Siberian labor camp

June 22–30, 1941
When Germany attacks the Soviet Union, massacres take place by both powers, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Jews

July 18, 1941
Using a fake ID, Halina gets her husband out of a work camp by posing as his German wife

September 1941
After the Soviets grant amnesty to Poles detained in work camps, Genek and his family make their way to Palestine. Genek joins Anders's new Polish Army

April 1942
Mila and Felicia make a daring escape from the ghetto in Radom Mila and Felicia make a daring escape from the ghetto in Radom

August 5, 1942
Jakob and Bella escape from the work camp factory in Radom

August 15, 1942
Halina bribes a guard to release her parents from the Walowa ghetto and finds them a hiding place with a family in the Polish countryside

February 1943
Mila leaves Felicia in a convent in hopes that her daughter will avoid being captured and killed

August 4–17, 1942
Radom's ghettos are liquidated and some 28,000 Jews are either murdered or deported to Treblinka

February 1943
Genek is reunited with Mila's husband at a Polish Army camp in Tel Aviv

May 8, 1945
Germany surrenders and Allied victory is proclaimed in Europe

July 1945
The Kurc family remaining in Poland crosses the Austrian Alps on foot—led by a now pregnant Halina—to reunite with Selim, Genek, and his family in Italy

June 30, 1946
The Kurc family reunites with Addy in Brazil while Jakob and Bella begin a new life in America

Where Are They Now?

It comes as no surprise that at war's end, the Kurcs had no interest in returning to Poland. Below is a brief explanation of where the family decided to settle once they made it safely to the shores of the Americas. 'Home' became Brazil, the United States, and later France. The siblings kept in close contact, mostly by letter, and visited each other whenever they could, often for Passover.

Mila and Selim remained in Rio de Janeiro, where **Felicia** attended medical school. Upon graduating, she met a Frenchman and a few years later moved to Paris to start a family. After Selim passed away, Mila followed her daughter to France. Today, Mila's grandson lives in her old home in the Sixteenth Arrondissement, just blocks from Felicia and her husband, Louis, whose elegant apartment looks out on the Eifel Tower. Mila kept in close touch with the nun who took Felicia in during the war. In 1985, thanks to Mila's nomination, Sister Zygmunta was honored posthumously as a Righteous Among the Nations.

Halina and Adam put down roots in São Paulo, where Ricardo's sister Anna was born in 1948. They shared a house with **Nechuma and Sol**, and **Genek and Herta** lived close by with their two sons, Józef and Michel. To repay Herr Den for saving her life during the war, Halina sent regular checks to him in Vienna. She and Adam never told their firstborn of his real birthday; Ricardo was in his forties and living in Miami when he discovered that he was born on Italian soil and not in Brazil as his birth certificate indicated.

In the States, **Jakob and Maryla** landed in Skokie, Illinois, where Victor's younger brother, Gary, was born and where Jakob (Jack, to his American friends and relatives) kept up his career in photography. They remained close with **Addy** (who changed his name to Eddy) and **Caroline**, who settled in 1947 in Massachusetts, where Kathleen's sister (Georgia's mother), Isabelle, and their brother, Timothy, were born. Eddy travelled often to visit the family in Illinois, Brazil, and France, and continued to make music; he produced a number of recordings, both popular and classical, composing up until his death.

As of 2017, Nechuma and Sol's grandchildren, along with their spouses and progeny, number more than one hundred. Among them are pianists, violinists, cellists, and flautists; engineers, architects, lawyers, doctors, and bankers; carpenters, motorcyclists, lawmakers, and photographers; naval officers, event planners, restaurateurs, DJs, teachers, entrepreneurs, and writers. They are scattered throughout Brazil, the United States, France, Switzerland, and Israel, but still make an effort to come together every few years. Their most recent gathering was in February of 2017, when over twenty Kurc descendants gathered in New York City to celebrate the launch of *We Were the Lucky Ones*.

A conversation with Georgia Hunter, author of *We Were the Lucky Ones*

At the beginning of your novel, it says that this story is "based on true events." What is the real story behind *We Were the Lucky Ones*?

The story that unfolds in WWTLO *is* the real story! Every significant movement, incarceration, brush with death, and escape described in the book actually happened. Growing up, I didn't know that I came from a family of Holocaust survivors. These were truths that I learned shortly after my grandfather died in '93, when I was fourteen. The following year, my high school English teacher assigned my class a project to practice our research skills by digging up bits of our ancestral pasts. Realizing how little I knew about my grandfather's life, I sat down with my grandmother for an interview. I left bowled over by the stories she shared.

Later, in the summer of 2000 (just after I'd graduated from college), I was reintroduced to my family's story, this time at a Kurc family reunion on Martha's Vineyard, hosted by my mother. Listening to my mother's cousins reminisce after dinner one night, I discovered that my grandfather's World War II survival was just one small chapter of a much greater narrative—a remarkable family saga, one unlike any I'd ever heard before. I left that reunion awestruck once again, and inspired to learn more.

The idea of researching and writing *We Were the Lucky Ones* percolated for years. In January of 2008 I finally picked up a binder filled with family photos and letters and found myself staring at the program for my grandfather's memorial service; at the top was a drawing of my grandfather in the place he loved most, at the keys of his Steinway; at the bottom was a date: January 17, 1993. I looked at my watch. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. The service had taken place fifteen years before, to the exact day, and even minute! I decided that it was a sign—perhaps one from my grandfather—that as daunting as it felt to commit to capturing my family's story, I couldn't procrastinate any longer. It was time, finally, for me to begin.

Oral history is an incredibly important part of Holocaust research and awareness initiatives. How much of *We Were the Lucky Ones* is based on stories passed down to you?

I agree wholeheartedly. With every passing year, there are fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors around to share their experiences, making it more important now than ever to record their stories. I think about this often as I watch my son grow up, knowing that by the time he learns about the Second World War, it will feel to him like ancient history. There is no better way to preserve the events of the Holocaust than by collecting first-hand narratives. It's been my goal with *We Were the Lucky Ones* not only to share my family's unique story, but also to play a part in keeping that chapter of history alive, and relevant.

I was determined at the start of my research to record as many oral histories as I could. I began by interviewing living relatives and close acquaintances (such as my great-aunt Felicia, who nearly seven years old at war's end, and Eliska, my grandfather's ex-fiancée), and then turned my attention to the Kurc siblings' children—second-generation survivors—who shared with me the astonishing wartime stories that their parents had passed down to them.

I was also very fortunate to have access to the priceless first-hand accounts of what Halina, Felicia, and Maryla (who goes by Bella in the book) went through to survive, courtesy of the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive. I relied heavily on the extensive details in these VHS recordings in the telling of my story.

What other resources did you use to track down your family's story?

Along with recording oral histories, I conducted research at several museums (including the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum in D.C., the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, and the Sikorski Museum in London), and I've spent countless hours with translators, decoding old letters and penning inquiries to archives, ministries, magistrates, and other organizations around the world in hopes of obtaining relevant records. I hit the jackpot with the Hoover Institution at Stanford, where I found a nine-page, hand-written account of my great-uncle Genek's, explaining why he'd been arrested and shipped to a labor camp in Siberia (information he never shared with his family), and with the U.K. Ministry of Defense, where I found military records for Genek and Selim,including awards for their service with Anders's Army that they never collected and that I was able to arrange to have sent to their children.

I've made a significant effort, too, to immerse myself in the works and expertise of authors, historians, and survivors who have helped immensely to add depth and understanding to my family's story. I read numerous accounts written by Jews from Radom, for example, and by Poles who were exiled to Siberia, and I befriended Fabio Koifman, the author of a book about the Brazilian ambassador to France who, against Vichy orders, quietly issued hundreds of visas to Jews trying to escape France at the start of the war (my grandfather, I learned, was one of them)—Mr. Koifman not only answered my many questions, but visited the Brazilian National Archives on my behalf, where he set aside dozens of pertinent Kurc family records for me.

From my research, I developed an exhaustive timeline that tracked each of the five Kurc siblings, their significant others, their children, and their parents throughout the war. This color-coded document, which includes both personal details (such as the documentation my grandfather acquired in order to leave France in '41 and the date of his brother's clandestine wedding in Lvov) and historical truths (events such as Nazi invasions and details such as the names of the ships that brought my relatives to Brazil at the end of the war), served as the "bones" of my book. Now and then when I stumbled across a gap, I allowed myself the creative license to fill it in—but only if I could answer yes with confidence to the question, *Is it feasible that this could have happened?*

Did you travel to any of the places you write about?

Yes! I traveled for interviews, as well as to experience through my own eyes the most relevant destinations in my family's journey.

My research began with a trip to France in 2008, which was especially meaningful as Paris is where Felicia, the only surviving relative with in-depth first-hand memories of the war, lives. I traveled to Italy, Brazil, and across the States to interview second-generation Kurcs. In 2011 I flew to North Carolina to sit down with my grandfather's ex-fiancée, Eliska, the Czech woman he met on the *Alsina*, one of the last refugee ships to leave Europe. Her memories were incredibly sharp and I was amazed at how, at eighty-eight, her eyes still sparkled at the sound of my grandfather's name.

During the summer of 2015 my husband and I drove 700 miles through Poland and Austria, wandering through many of the cities mentioned in the book, and retracing my family's exodus southward at the end of the war. We spent a full day walking the streets of the family's hometown, Radom, with a local historian, which was not only extraordinarily moving, but also helpful in understanding what "home" meant to my relatives before their worlds were turned upside down. The following August, my husband and I returned to Europe (with our four-year-old son this time) to travel another 500 plus miles from northeastern Italy down the coast of the Adriatic to Bari, once again following in the Kurc family's footsteps. I'll never forget standing with my boys on a platform at the Bari train station where, after six years of not knowing if they'd ever see each other again, my grandfather's brother, sisters, niece, and parents reunited.

What made you decide to write this story as a novel? What was most important to you to get right?

I thought hard about writing my book as narrative non-fiction. Thanks to my research, the significant events of my family's past—which to me were the most important aspects of the story to capture and convey—were there. I found, however, that I wanted the Kurcs' journey to feel immersive and visceral, for my readers to imagine for themselves what it meant to be Jewish and on the run in WWII—and to do that I needed to include the colorful details that would add more depth and emotion to my story.

I wasn't explicitly told, for example, that the family dined on special occasions at Wierzbicki's Restaurant in Radom, Poland (the town where they were from), but through my research, I learned that Wierzbicki's was, in fact, a restaurant that the city's middle class would have visited on birthdays or anniversaries. Knowing how immersed and assimilated my family was, I thought it plausible that Mr. Wierzbicki (the owner) may have personally greeted my great-grandparents at the door, as I describe in the first chapter. I felt that this type of detail, although not confirmed factually, would enrich the reader's experience by offering a deeper grasp of the characters' personalities and motivations.

I wasn't around to experience the Kurcs' remarkable saga myself, but it was the "unbelievability" and statistical improbability of their story that drove me to unearth and record it. By allowing myself to step into the hearts and minds of my relatives—to imagine, for example, the thoughts that must have run through Mila's head as she and her daughter attempted to escape the ghetto in broad daylight, the heartbreak that Bella must have endured upon losing her sister and parents, the torture that must have shadowed my grandfather for the seven years he spent not knowing whether his family was dead or alive—I have tried to make my characters more real, and have brought my story, I hope, closer to the truth.

The Addy in *We Were the Lucky Ones* was a composer. Was your grandfather also a composer? Do any of the songs Addy wrote in the novel exist in real life?

Yes and yes! My grandfather's first hit was, in fact, *List* ("The Letter"). It was written for voice and piano and performed by the young Vera Gran. You can listen to the piece on my website. My grandfather claimed that when *List* was released in Poland, he heard it aired several times a day on the radio. The bit in my book about the soldiers in his squadron whistling its tune during Addy's short stint in a Polish column of the French army is also true. (My grandfather spoke little of the hardships of the war, but, according to his children, was always happy to recall his lifelong relationship to music.)

My grandfather played the piano and composed all of his life but became quite serious at retirement, when he devoted much of his time to writing music, working with lyricists and arrangers, and scouting out some of the best instrumental and vocal talents around to perform both his classical and popular works. A highlight was a performance of his *Violin Sonata in F Minor* at the prestigious Wigmore Hall in London, as well as at other venues around the world. His recordings are among my most valued possessions.

The book's title, *We Were the Lucky Ones*, hints at the characters' fates even before one starts the book. What made you decide to use that as the title?

My book's title was inspired by a comment my great aunt Felicia made at our family reunion. She and her cousins had spent the evening reminiscing about their parents (whose personalities would later come to life in my novel) and about their near-death experiences during the war. Felicia was almost seven years old when the war finally ended. She described the Kurc family's survival as "miraculous," and I remember waiting eagerly for some sort of explanation to follow. But Felicia wasn't interested at the time in elaborating, and I had enough sense not to pry. As the night came to an end, Felicia simply shook her head and said solemnly, "We were the lucky ones." Her words would stay with me until the burn to understand how my relatives could have defied such odds finally overcame me, and I couldn't help but start digging for answers.

We Were the Lucky Ones is a title that hints at the characters' fates, yes, but I like that it gives my readers a sense of hope—a sense that the family, at least some of it, may come out all right in the end.

Reader's Guide

Introduction

An extraordinary, propulsive novel based on the untold true story of a family of Polish Jews who are separated at the start of the Second World War, determined to survive—and to reunite.

It is the spring of 1939 and three generations of the Kurc family are doing their best to live normal lives, even as the shadow of war grows closer. The talk around the family Seder table is of new babies and budding romance, not of the increasing hardships threatening Jews in their hometown of Radom, Poland. But soon the horrors overtaking Europe will become inescapable and the Kurcs will be flung to the far corners of the world, each desperately trying to navigate his or her own path to safety.

As one sibling is forced into exile, another attempts to flee the continent, while others struggle to escape certain death, either by working grueling hours on empty stomachs in the factories of the ghetto or by hiding as gentiles in plain sight. Driven by an unwavering will to survive and by the fear that they may never see one another again, the Kurcs must rely on hope, ingenuity, and inner strength to persevere.

A novel of breathtaking sweep and scope that spans five continents and six years and transports readers from the jazz clubs of Paris to Kraków's most brutal prison to the ports of Northern Africa and the farthest reaches of the Siberian gulag, *We Were the Lucky Ones* demonstrates how, in the face of the twentieth century's darkest moment, the human spirit can find a way to survive, and even triumph.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

ABOUT THE STORY:

1. The Kurc family was assimilated into Polish life before the war. What are some examples of that assimilation, and how do you think that helped or hindered the family's chances of survival?

2. Who was your favorite character, and why?

3. Which scene did you find most harrowing? Most comforting?

4. Addy meets Eliska en route to Brazil. Did you find it strange that he would fall in love despite the circumstances? In what ways do you think Eliska and Addy's feelings for one another would have been similar or different had they met under more normal circumstances?

5. Jakob has been the love of Bella's life since she was a teenager, and yet not even he can comfort her when Bella of the deaths of her sister and parents. In the end, though, Bella turns the corner and is able to let Jakob back into her life, and being with him helps her to heal. Have you ever had a relationship with a friend or partner that was either damaged or strengthened by sharing a tough experience?

6. Halina is the most rebellious of the five Kurc siblings and follows only one set of rules—her own. In what ways do you think Halina's personality affects the family's fate throughout the war?

7. When Poland falls in September 1939, Germany takes over the west and Russia the east. Genek, who finds himself on the eastern side, refuses to accept Soviet citizenship, thereby labeling himself a resistor. Why do you think Genek felt so strongly about holding onto the nationality of his home country, despite the fact that, technically, it no longer existed? Would you have done the same? What does your national identity mean to you?

8. Although the author does not deliberately draw parallels to other major events in history or to today's current events, some readers have commented on what they see as shared circumstances. What similarities, if any, did you notice?

9. What are some messages in the book that you feel would be valuable to pass along to future generations?

10. There are several examples in the book of strangers who put their lives at risk to help the Kurcs, such as the Górskis, who take Sol and Nechuma into hiding; the Mother Superior, who allows Felicia into her convent; and Herr Den, who vouches for Halina's Aryan identity. What would you have done had you been in these characters' shoes? What motivates people to put themselves on the line—despite the deadly risks of getting caught—to help people in need?

ABOUT THE WRITING AND THE READING EXPERIENCE:

1. The author did not know about her family's Holocaust past, or even realize she was one-quarter Jewish, until she was fifteen years old. Why do you think this was the case? How do you think this delayed awareness of her past impacted her approach to writing *We Were the Lucky Ones*?

2. The book is written from multiple perspectives. What was your experience in trying to follow the different narratives of the scattered family members? Did you use any particular strategies to keep track?

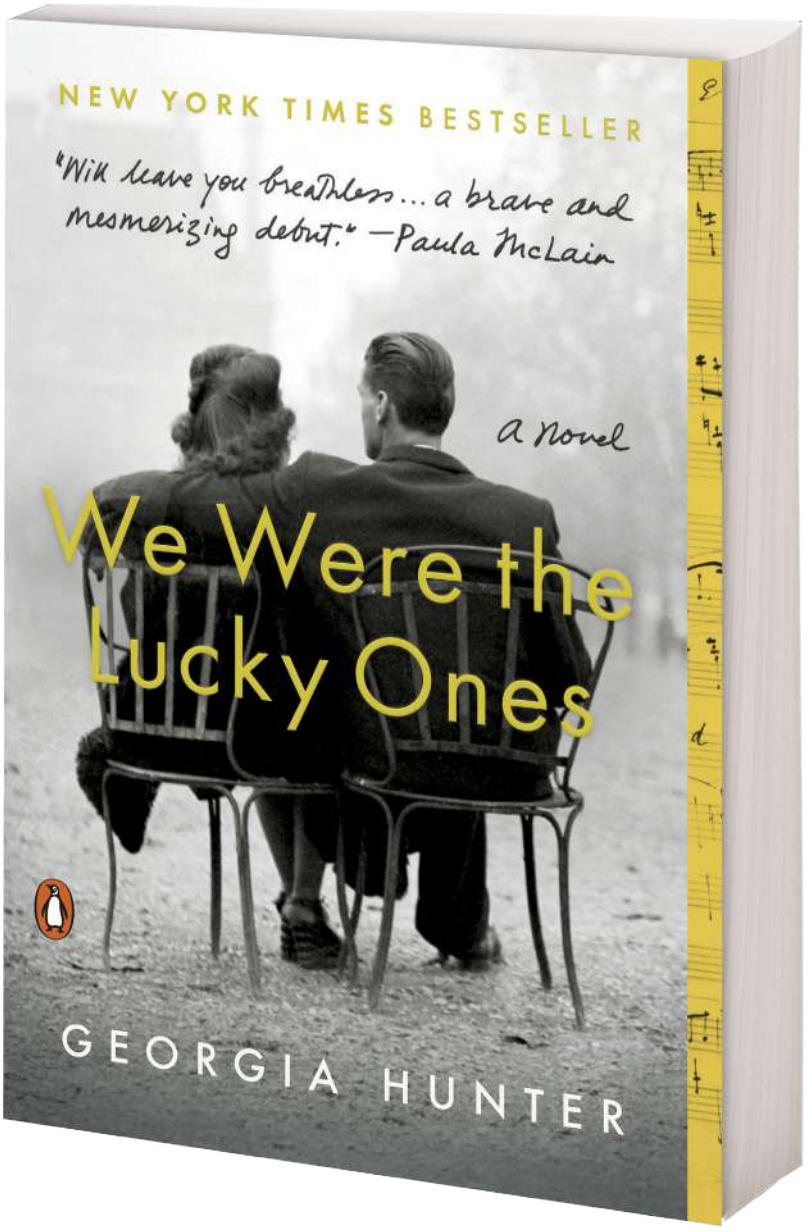
3. Why do you think the author, having amassed a thorough factual history of the family's saga, chose to write *We Were the Lucky Ones* as historical fiction rather than nonfiction?

4. The author chose to provide historical context through factual snippets inserted between some of the chapters, rather than through the eyes of the characters. How did these historical interludes affect your experience as a reader?

5. Most historical fiction is written in the past tense. Why do you think the author chose to write this story in the present tense? What impact, if any, did this have on your reading experience?

About this Author

When Georgia Hunter was fifteen years old, she learned that she came from a family of Holocaust survivors. *We Were the Lucky Ones* was born of her quest to uncover her family's staggering history. Hunter's website, georgiahunterauthor.com, offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the extensive research this project has entailed. She lives in Connecticut with her husband and their two sons.



For more information about Georgia's family story,
her research for *We Were the Lucky Ones*, and more, please visit
www.georgiahunterauthor.com