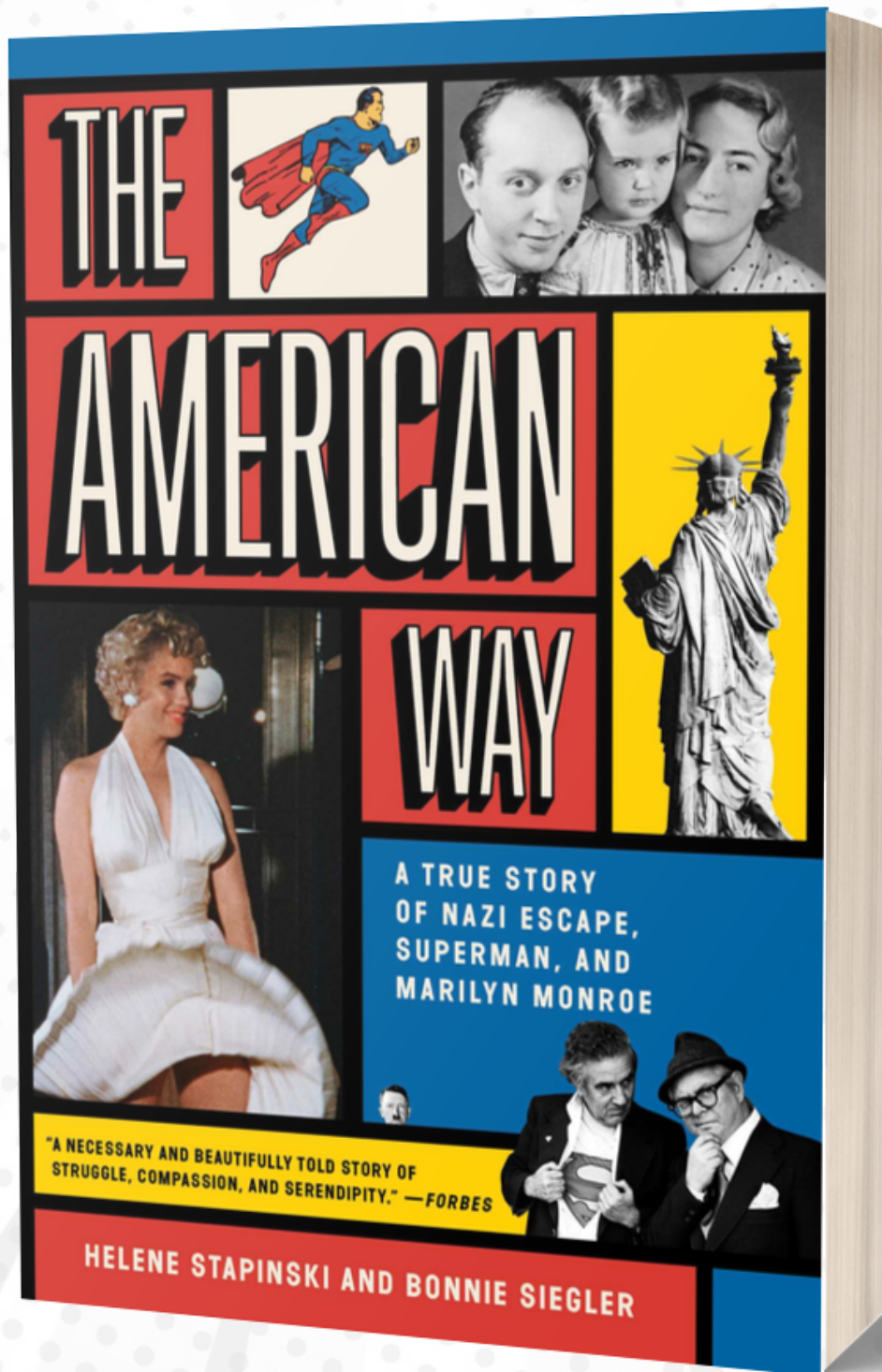


# THE AMERICAN WAY



## BOOK CLUB KIT

**HELENE STAPINSKI** is the nationally bestselling author of three memoirs: *Five-Finger Discount*, *Murder in Matera*, and *Baby Plays Around*. She writes regularly for *The New York Times*; her work has also appeared in *The Washington Post*, *New York* magazine, *Travel & Leisure*, and dozens of other publications. She teaches at New York University and lives in Brooklyn.



**BONNIE SIEGLER** is the founder and creative director of award-winning, multi-disciplinary graphic design studio Eight and a Half. The author of *Dear Client*, a guide for people who work with creatives, and *Signs of Resistance*, a visual history of protest in America, she taught design in the graduate schools of Yale University and the School of Visual Arts for many years. She lives in Connecticut.

## A CONVERSATION WITH HELENE STAPINSKI AND BONNIE SIEGLER

**Bonnie, it was family lore that your grandfather, Jules Schulback, captured footage of Marilyn Monroe filming *The Seven Year Itch* in New York. Can you describe what you and your family thought of his story initially, and what happened when you discovered his film reel?**

We believed him, because he would never make something like that up and he was always filming everyday moments. But though we heard a lot about it, we had never seen it. He was evicted from his apartment when he was 93 years old and when we were moving him, we found the footage loose in a plastic grocery store bag. Because he shot on Kodachrome, the film looks as vibrant today as it did in 1954. When we realized what we had found we were ecstatic. I called my grandfather to tell him “We found Marilyn!” His reply: “Of course you did.”

### **Helene, how did you become involved in sharing Bonnie and Jules' story?**

Bonnie had found Jules' film of Marilyn Monroe and wanted someone to write about him in a story in the *New York Times* – not just the movie footage but about his escape from Nazi Germany. We had a mutual friend who put us in touch and we immediately hit it off. The book grew out of that NYTimes story I did on Jules and Marilyn, which ran in January 2017 and was one of the most read stories in the paper.

### **Your book documents the connections not only between Jules, Marilyn, and Harry Donenfeld, but also director Billy Wilder, Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and other notable figures. What was your research process like to connect all these people and their stories together?**

We got the idea for the book right before the pandemic, so we basically spent those two years researching, just diving in and talking to each other about 50 times a day either on Zoom or over the phone. Bonnie did a lot of the family archival research and came up with incredible material. For instance, no one in her family had ever known what had happened to her great-grandparents. Bonnie found that during the book research and so we included that in the plot. We did interviews with all her relatives on Zoom and in person. Bonnie tracked down Harry's family and we met and interviewed them. We read dozens of books (Bonnie would send Helene "book reports"), spoke to comics experts and historians, watched all of Billy Wilder's and Marilyn's movies and spent a lot of time speaking to Holocaust archivists.

It was a deep dive on many topics, but as you research, you find the connections between people. They make themselves known to you. For example, Helene came across an early photo of Marilyn dressed in the magazines she appeared on the cover of – and most of them were Harry's magazines. There were photos of Jules' wife and daughter at Wannsee Lake. When we went to Berlin we visited Wannsee and realized its significance – as the place where the Final Solution to kill all of Europe's Jews was planned out. It was also featured in Billy Wilder's first hit, *People on Sunday*. We found that Jules used Clark Gable to escape Nazi Germany but Clark was also in Marilyn's last film, and was also the namesake for Clark Kent. If you do enough research and are paying enough attention, the connections reveal themselves. It was Helene's job to keep track of them and make a narrative out of them. In non-



fiction you're looking for those real-life coincidences and connections. That's what makes the story sing.

**Superman's motto is "truth, justice, and the American way." What do you think each person in the book would say is the American Way, and why?**

Jules would probably be the optimist and say the American Way is freedom and a chance to make a new life. He experienced terrible tragedy in his life but always looked on the bright side and paid any good luck forward. Jerry and Joe would say it means screwing over your fellow man. They were bullied their whole lives and wound up penniless even though they created the world's first superhero – which is still raking in millions at the box office. Harry would say it's the opportunity to make a buck. He was a truly self-made man, pulling himself out of the ghetto on the Lower East Side. But the world was his for the taking – and so he took it! For Wilder, the American Way was escaping Hitler and becoming a huge success in the movie business. For Marilyn, it's a bit more complicated. The American Way at first was becoming a great success, proving that anyone, even a kid from an orphanage, can make it big. But the American way of treating women – pigeonholing her and treating her like an idiot when she was anything but – would be her downfall. We always say she needed a wife to take care of her. But that wasn't a possibility in the 1950s. Instead she had husbands who wanted to be taken care of. Men as caretakers were not part of the American Way back then. They're still not easy to find!

**What do you think is Jules' legacy?**

Love. And he always loved those around him, not just family, or friends, but strangers. Jules always did the right thing, which meant paying his good fortune forward.

**What do you both hope readers will take away from reading *The American Way*?**

First of all, we wanted to show people how easy it was for a society to slide into authoritarianism and where it can lead – mass murder. We wanted people to learn about the Holocaust and about anti-Semitism. Showing one family's story illustrates how it all happened. How it wasn't just one evil man – Hitler – but how regular people contributed to the horror each and every day. We hope they realize that we are all connected and so we must love one another, especially those that are different. We have to stop hating each other.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When we meet Jules Schulback, he's a young man in love, beginning his career in the city he loves. He's still filled with the same exuberance as an old man living on the Upper East Side. How did Jules maintain his vitality and playfulness over the course of his life, in spite of life's trials and the terrible atrocities committed against his family?
2. The authors paint a vivid picture of Harry Donenfeld: newsboy, teenage gangster, bootlegger, and successful printer and comic book publisher. "He was not just a mensch, but a macher—a mover and shaker taking charge and getting things done." (Pg. 47) How do you weigh the tactics Harry used to get ahead in life with the generosity he showed towards Jules and his family?
3. The book traces Marilyn Monroe's journey from struggling actress Norma Jeane to movie star and global icon. As her fame grows, so does her unhappiness and anxiety. How does the public persona of Marilyn Monroe prevent her from building the life and career she desires?
4. There are varying reactions among Jules' family and friends to the rapid rise of the Nazi Party and its antisemitic policies. Why did some, including Edith's parents and Golda and Simon, believe money or God would diminish Hitler's influence? What fears did Hitler prey upon that led to Germans turning against their Jewish neighbors and friends?
5. Discuss the evolution of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman character from super villain to Earth's savior. How did Jerry and Joe draw from their own experiences to create the iconic superhero?
6. Superman's motto is "truth, justice, and the American way." What is the American way? Based on the lives of the people in this book, does it always lead to prosperity?
7. Discuss the symbols that appear throughout the book: Metropolis, the stone boys above the school entrance on Grosse Hamburger Strasse, Clark Gable, the car Superman lifts above his head. How do these symbols connect the characters over the years, and how does their meaning change over time?

8. In the early Superman comics, the hero fought “the good fight in Jerry’s socially conscious plotlines—fighting corporate evil, political corruption, and gangsters.” (Pg 128) Why do you think it was important to Jerry, Joe, and Harry for Superman to address the social and political struggles of the time? How do you think these plotlines contributed to the comic’s success?

9. The book is filled with the heroics of everyday people, including Jules, Ushi, and even Harry. How do you think about their bravery and generosity in light of Jerry Siegel’s comment about Superman: “he represents what the plain ordinary, crushed-by-reality person would like to be but can only be in his wistful daydreams, because we are what we are”?

10. Jules believed that “[s]tories...are what bind us together not just as Jews, but as humans...[i]f you dug down deep enough, your story was intertwined with every other person’s story.” (Pg 317) If we’re all a part of each other’s stories, what do we owe each other? How were each of the character’s responsible to and for the people they crossed paths with?

11. Reflect on your own family and the stories you share. What stands out to you when you think about your family lore? Is there anything you would want to ask your relatives (or wished you had asked)?

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## ***Media***

- Article: [The Lost Footage of Marilyn Monroe](#)
- Excerpt: [He Escaped the Nazis and, One Night in New York, Found Marilyn Monroe](#)
- Interview: [ABC News](#)
- Interview: [House of Mystery Radio](#)
- Interview: [How the publisher of Superman comics saved Jews from Nazi Germany.](#)

## ***Reviews***

- [The New York Times](#)
- [The Washington Post](#)
- [Jerusalem Post](#)
- [Jewish Book Council](#)
- [Publisher's Weekly](#)
- [Kirkus](#)
- [Library Journal](#)
- [Booklist](#)

If you decide to adopt *The American Way* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at [marketing@simonandschuster.com](mailto:marketing@simonandschuster.com) or post on social media using the hashtags **#SimonBooks** and **#TheAmericanWay**.

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