Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. How would you classify *The Invisible Wall*? A social history exposing the evils of religious prejudice and bigotry in a certain time and place? A story of star-crossed lovers? A young boy's coming of age?

2. Are the Jews in *The Invisible Wall* guilty of prejudice against the anti-Semites surrounding them? Can an oppressed group be held to a similar standard of moral or ethical behavior as its oppressors?

3. What lessons does *The Invisible Wall* have to teach about religious co-existence post-9/11, both here in America and in the world at large?

4. How might *The Invisible Wall* be different if it were taking place today and, instead of Jews and Christians, the street was divided between Jews and Muslims? Sunnis and Shiites? Blacks and whites? Republicans and Democrats?

5. In the accompanying interview, Harry Bernstein states that "wars always bring people face-to-face with reality, causing all the false barriers to disappear." Do you agree or disagree?

6. Despite all that divides them, there is a level of everyday mutual dependence linking the Jews and Christians of Bernstein's street?gaps in *The Invisible Wall*, so to speak. What examples of this mutual dependence can you think of, and do they work to dismantle the wall or to reinforce it?

7. Do you think that the source of the antagonism and distrust between Jews and Christians in *The Invisible Wall* is really religious, or are there other, less visible but perhaps more important factors at work? What might they be?

8. By encouraging Lily to improve herself through education, is her mother sowing the seeds that ultimately lead to Lily's dissatisfaction with the boundaries of Judaism and her involvement with her Christian neighbor, Arthur?

9. Religious prejudice is just one of *The Invisible Wall* dividing the street and society described by Bernstein. What are some of the others, and how do these various divisions affect people on both sides of the street?

10. Why do you think Lily's father prevents her from going to the grammar school after she's won the scholarship?
11. What does America represent to the Bernstein family?

12. Even though *The Invisible Wall* is a memoir, it often reads like a fairy tale. Do you think the author has deliberately given his story a fairy-tale shape, and if so, why? What are some of the fairy tale elements in the book, and do they ring true to you?

13. Do you think Bernstein has forgiven his father? Do you think his father deserves to be forgiven?

14. Does the rabbi's son, Max, betray his father and his faith by going to Russia to fight in the revolution?

15. At one point, Rabbi Orlov tells Lily, "You and I don't agree on a great many things, yet we have one thing in common that would eventually have overcome all our differences. We are both Jews." What do you think of this statement? What does Lily believe?

16. Arthur expresses a very different point of view: "We're not very different from one another, not different at all, in fact. We're all just people with the same needs, the same desires, the same feelings. It's a lie about us being different." Do you agree or disagree, and why?

**Author Bio:**

Ninety-eight-year-old Harry Bernstein emigrated to the United States with his family after World War I. He has written all his life but started writing *The Invisible Wall* only after the death of his wife, Ruby. He has been published in "My Turn" in *Newsweek*. His second memoir, *The Dream*, was published by Ballantine Books in April 2008. Bernstein lives in Brick, New Jersey, where he is working on a third book.