

Upon the Head of the Goat: A Childhood in Hungary 1939–1944 and Grace in the Wilderness: After the Liberation 1945–1948

by Aranka Siegal

The Holocaust is not merely a story of destruction and loss . . . It is a remarkable story of the human spirit and the life that flourished before the Holocaust, struggled during its darkest hours, and ultimately prevailed as survivors rebuilt their lives.

--United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

In her two memoirs -- *Upon the Head of the Goat: A Childhood in Hungary 1939–1944* and *Grace in the Wilderness: After the Liberation 1945–1948* -- Aranka Siegal makes the truth of this statement personal. The books are an eyewitness account of the events of the war against the Jews in Hungary, and they offer today's young readers much to ponder and talk about. This guide is meant to help direct some of the conversation.

About *Upon the Head of the Goat*

"At the outbreak of World War II, 9-year-old Piri is visiting her grandmother in the Ukrainian countryside and is unable to return to her family in the Hungarian town of Beregszász. Aranka Siegal, the Piri of the narrative, finally comes home the following year but finds her life forever changed: her father is serving on the Russian front, and her mother's attempt to secure passage to America for her children fails . . . Rise Davidowitz maintains her family's traditional customs and tries to hold her family together until she and Iboya, Piri, Sandor and Joli are taken . . . to Auschwitz in 1944 . . . A sensitive portrait of a remarkable young girl and her family." -- Starred, *School Library Journal*

Discussion Questions for *Upon the Head of the Goat*

1. When we study the Holocaust, much of the focus is on the atrocities in the concentration camps and the numbers of people murdered. Less is said about the lives of the people before the invasion of the Germans. In *Goat*, Aranka Siegal tells us about her life before the war. Discuss the ways her life was the same as yours.
2. Tradition for the Davidowitz family and for most Jews is an essential part of their identity.

Piri: I had once asked Mother about the neat little ball of dough she always saved from her Friday baking and tucked inside a flowered tin box for the following Friday. She had answered, "I brought this tin box with me from Komjaty when I first moved to Beregszász. My mother gave me a ball of her growing yeast to take with me. She got her original ball of dough from her mother. This way the bread we bake stays the same for generations."

"Are you going to give me a ball of the dough when I get married?" I asked.

"Of course," she had answered. [pp. 141–42]

What does the ball of dough represent? If you were going to start a tradition for your family, what would you pass down?

3. In 1939, the Davidowitz family is living side by side with its Hungarian neighbors in Beregszász. When they visit Babi, Piri's grandmother, in Komjaty for the Passover seder, Babi advises Piri's mother: "Rise, you are fooling yourself. You are living among goyim and you think they are your friends. I just hope you never have to depend on them. They are neighborly, but there is a big difference between neighbors and your own. Only your own can feel your pain." [p. 30]

Is Babi being cynical, or is what she is saying correct? When things changed for the Jews, how did the Hungarian neighbors act? What parallels can you find in American history?

4. The day before the Davidowitz family is hauled off to the ghetto, Piri gives Ica Molnar her most valuable possession, her phonograph. Ica's eyes plead, "I did not mean to cause you harm." [pp. 147-48]

What harm does this refer to? Was it something that she did, or something she didn't do? Ica is about fourteen years old. Should we overlook Ica's actions or inactions because she is still a child, or should we hold her to the same standards as those for adults?

5. Talk about anti-Semitism as it became systemized in Hungary -- from not allowing the children to go to school, to requiring Jews to wear the Star of David, finally to deportation. How did it affect the Davidowitz family and their Jewish and Gentile neighbors? How did the Davidowitz family cope with each stage?

6. In the spring of 1944, Hungarian police come for Piri and her family. They refer to a census list to make sure every family member is accounted for. As each name is called, it is crossed off with a thick black line. Discuss the symbolism of this act.

7. Many Jews in the ghetto were taken there without being allowed to bring any possessions or had their possessions seized from them upon arrival. Iboya offered to help a woman with no provisions get blankets for her and her child. "You will have a mitzvah," the woman blessed her. [p. 155]

A mitzvah is an act of pure goodness, big or small, done with no expectation of reward or thanks. You don't have to be Jewish to perform a mitzvah. Have you ever been on the receiving end of a mitzvah? Have you ever done something that would be called a mitzvah?

8. Talk about the different people in Goat. Who is the most interesting? Which one has the most vitality? Which character is most like you or your friends?

9. Piri felt sorry for Judi. She [Judi] had been misled by her liberal upbringing to believe that she did not have to live by restricting rules. She had been taught she was a Hungarian, but now found out she was a Jew. Her false security was crumbling and she had no identity to hold on to. [p. 206]

Is this a necessary pitfall of assimilation? Does assimilation have to strip you of your ethnic or religious identity?

10. Government inspectors came to the Davidowitz home and confiscated Ladybeard, the family's goat and only source of milk for the children. Piri asks her mother what they would do with Ladybeard. Mother responds, "Send her into the wilderness with their sins, I suppose." [p. 100]

Mother's answer is a reference to the Bible, Leviticus 16, and the origin of the term "scapegoat." How were the Jews of Europe like Ladybeard? Why did the Germans and their sympathizers make them scapegoats? Do we still blame the troubles of society on groups of people, making them scapegoats for our own shortcomings? Explain.

About *Grace in the Wilderness*

"Fourteen-year-old Piri Davidowitz . . . has managed to survive the death camps and, miraculously, remain with her older sister Iboya, although the rest of their large family has apparently perished. Sick with typhoid, dysentery and malnutrition, Piri spends her first month of freedom in a Red Cross hospital, then is sent with Iboya to Sweden, where they live for the next three years. In Sweden, Piri flourishes . . . gradually learning to live with the memories of the nightmare she experienced at such an early age . . . Piri's story stands as an eloquent testament to the resiliency of the human spirit." --Starred, *Kirkus Reviews*

Discussion Questions for *Grace in the Wilderness*

1. In April 1945, one year after the Germans imprisoned the Davidowitz family, the British liberated Piri and Iboya from the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. When the British soldiers arrived to liberate the camp, Piri took note of their reaction to what they were seeing. What was their reaction? How did it affect Piri?

2. After their camp is liberated, Piri is acutely aware of some very simple things -- everyday things that we take for granted. We were served mounds of white bread that had a crunchy crust with a fluffy center, red jam, and large pitchers of real milk. It was the first time that we could eat as much as we wanted . . . The Red Cross lady encouraged us to go out. "Take large breaths of sea air. It is a gorgeous day." [pp. 22-23]

What things do you think you would most appreciate in this situation? Why?

3. When the war ends, survivors share one hope: that they will find members of their family and be reunited. The intensity of that hope is clear throughout *Grace*. Talk about Iboya's and Piri's responses, first to the telegram and then to the letter from Etu. How did the others at the school react? How did Iboya and Piri respond to the letter from their relatives in America? Why is family so important?

4. Piri tells us about writing a composition for Froken Snyder's class: I pretended to be the sun, watching all the creatures of the universe below. I let my fantasy run free. [p. 43] Piri gets an A on her composition and a lot of encouragement from Froken Snyder and Herr Weinberg.

How does Piri respond to this attention? Have teachers recognized your talents? How important is that recognition to you? Do you feel that one teacher's influence can play a part in decisions you make about your future?

5. The loneliness I tried to keep at a distance suddenly enveloped me. With all the talk about new beginnings in America, Palestine, and Sweden, deep within me I still held fast to the conviction that I'd be going home. [p. 67]

After the camp is liberated, Piri finds herself in a series of new "homes," finally in a new family, the Rantzows. What do you think home means to her after so many displacements and so much moving? What does home mean to you?

6. After Iboya spends a summer working on a farm, Piri remarks: She looked healthy and full of vitality, as beautiful as she used to be before the war. As a matter of fact, the whole group looked revitalized. The fresh air and hard work seemed to have chased away the ghosts from their recent past and given them back their youth. [p. 66]

Do you agree with Piri's assessment? Do you think it is possible for these young people to get past the horrors of their experiences in the camps? Do you think they can be truly happy? Can they have their youth back?

7. On several occasions, Piri wonders about the purpose of her life and that of other survivors. She questions values, decisions, and plans in this light. Iboya tells her, "Now it is up to us to do something worthwhile with our lives, something to count for having been spared." [p. 67]

Piri asks David, "So you survived the camps just to go off and be killed fighting the British? It doesn't make sense." [p. 60]

Piri also wonders about her own identity as a Jew: What did I survive for if I did not remain a Jew? [p. 165]

We all tackle questions like these throughout our lives, but they are somehow more urgent and poignant in the case of Piri's life. Talk about your own process for making choices for your life: the questions you ask yourself; the values you weigh. How is it like Piri's decision-making, and how is it different?

8. Piri has several boyfriends and a number of flirtations after her liberation -- David and Erik are the most serious among them. What do these young men have in common that attracts her? How are they different from each other? Why do you think she "falls in love" so easily?

9. In trying to decide whether she should leave Sweden and go to America, Piri asks several people for advice. Iboya insists that the Rantzows and Erik are "strangers" and that Piri does not belong with them. And Dr. Abrahamson counsels her: "It is very noble of you to feel loyalty to the Rantzows; they deserve a lot of credit, but they have their own children. Erik, too, will get over it . . . He belongs with his own kind." [p. 175]

If you were Piri's friend, what advice would you offer? Do you believe she could make her home in Sweden, or do you feel that she would be better off starting a new life in America? Why?

10. Piri tells us that she survived the Holocaust because she had her sister Iboya with her. Almost no one survived alone, but they did in pairs or groups. [p. 85]

Her sister thinks differently: "Listen, Piri, I know you tell everyone that you survived only because of my looking after you. Well nobody could deny that each of us survived by taking strength from the other. However, I also need to tell you that, in your case, personality had a lot to do with it. You have a way of getting along with people. You capture their sympathy and win them over." [p. 110]

After reading *Goat and Grace*, you know Piri very well. Why do you think she survived?

Discussion Questions Relating to Both Books

1. Compare Piri's character in both books. Other than that she is older in the second book, how has she changed? What aspects of her character and personality have remained the same?

2. In a family, each person has a role, a place that is his or her own. What was Piri's role in the Davidowitz family? What is her role in the Rantzow family?

3. Zionism is an idea that pervades both books. Babi once told Piri, "A Jew always hopes." [Goat, p. 13] What hope did Zionism provide to Jews during the Holocaust and after?

4. At the end of *Grace*, Piri and Fritz, a young man she has met on the ship to the United States, debate:

Fritz: "The reason I'm taking up law is to defend the rights of individuals. Every man is important; just one man alone can change the course of history for the whole world. Like Hitler, for instance. If it was not for him, there would not have been a Second World War, and you would not be here today searching for a new life."

Piri: "He did not accomplish it single-handedly. He had many helpers."

Fritz: "No, it was Hitler with his sick brain who masterminded this chapter of history . . . The other people's involvement was just a chain reaction. They were forced into it."

Piri: "You mean that, as a lawyer, you would plead the accomplices' innocence?"

Fritz: "They were drawn into it by the climate of life that Hitler created. He set up the laws and made it dangerous not to cooperate. The men he drafted into the army were not killers. They were upstanding citizens with honorable professions, churchgoers with families . . ." [Grace, pp. 219–20]

This debate continues to this day. Where do you stand? Do you hold the citizens of Germany, Hungary, Poland, and the other European countries that obeyed Hitler's orders culpable for the Holocaust? Is the statement "I was only following orders" a justification for their actions?

5. Over the past one hundred years, Beregszász, the city in which Aranka Siegal grew up, has been occupied and ruled by four different countries at five different times. Research the political history of her hometown. Here are some Web sites you can visit to help you:

<http://www.edwardvictor.com/Beregovo.htm>

<http://flagspot.net/flags/ua-zk-bh.html>

An Interview with Aranka Siegal

Why is the main character named Piri and not Aranka?

I wasn't sure where the book would go and I wasn't ready to reveal my past to my friends and my children.

I changed only two names -- my sister Violet's, to Iboya, and mine -- and mine was not really fiction. Babi, my grandmother, called me by an endearment of my Yiddish name, Pearl -- Pirilla -- and the children in her village heard it as Piri, so I was called by that name in my grandmother's village.

In the photograph on the cover of *Goat*, you seem to be looking out into the distance. Do you remember what you were looking at?

This is one of the few family photographs that survived the war, and I like it because it shows an average family -- not a family shunned by society or one outside the law. I think I was just shielding my eyes from the sun. Some people have said it was a prophecy -- that I'm looking into the future. But I think I'm simply a little girl shielding my eyes from the sun.

There are letters from Etu and your American relatives in *Grace*. Are they the actual letters or recollections?

Violet and I received letters from our sister and from relatives in America after we arrived in Sweden, and they were very precious to us. For the book, I translated them, and I tried to be as close to what they said as I could be.

In *Grace*, you quote a letter from Etu in which she tells you not to return home to Beregszász. "It is no longer our house." [p. 74] In all these years since the war, have you returned to your childhood home? Have you gone back to Sweden?

No, I never went back. Etu had a horrific experience when she went back. There were strangers living in our home, and they wouldn't let her in. She had to call on a neighbor to act as a witness, to say that it was her home. The inside of our home was destroyed; the doors had been used for firewood. The whole city was completely different. The only thing she salvaged was the photograph that appears on the cover

of Goat and a couple of others. After the war, Violet and I realized that the Hungarian people were our enemies -- they had cooperated with Hitler. Their brutality and cruelty were unexpected.

I did go back to Sweden -- I dedicated Grace to the people of Sweden. The Swedish family I lived with gave me a second chance to become part of a family. I did go back to visit them. I still have two brothers left -- I call them brothers and they refer to me as "little sister" -- that's how much we feel like family.

On page 213 of Grace, you wrote, "I had always been an optimist, but I was starting to believe that everything was transitory. I made a vow that in the future I would not hold back my affection from people I cared about. I had never stopped regretting my failure to use those final hours in the freight car to tell Mother how very much I loved her." How well have you lived up to this promise you made to yourself?

I have definitely kept my promise about showing my feelings of affection and love. I've learned to be careful about not hurting anybody's feelings -- I try to be deservedly complimentary by finding something good in everyone I meet. I tell people how much they mean to me. I don't hold back hugs and kisses. It's important to show affection.

In this post-9/11 world, we are all victims of terror. We are afraid of things we hear about, things we imagine. Many young people suffer sleepless nights or nightmares. Before the ghetto, did you feel terror? How did the feelings change while you were in the ghetto and in the camps, and later, after the liberation?

At age nine the fear had started. I overheard from Babi that Jews in Poland were being rounded up and taken to nobody-knew-where, and I heard the name Hitler. Then, when I was able to return to my home in Beregszász, everything had changed. My father was in the army. The city was warlike, people were uneasy; they were not as open or as friendly as before.

The next trauma was that I could no longer go to school. I was humiliated in front of my Christian friends by the schoolteacher, who said that Jewish children were no longer permitted to go to school. Walking home, I knew that I was innocent of any wrongdoing, but I felt like an outcast. I was grateful to find my mother in our warm kitchen waiting to comfort me.

When we were taken from our home and put into the ghetto, in the open barracks of the brick factory with dirt floors to sleep on, with hardly any food or water, and an exposed latrine, I didn't think things could get any worse. But upon our arrival at Auschwitz, Violet and I were separated from Mother and my little brother and sister. That was the scariest of all. In Auschwitz we lived in constant fear of the selections, never knowing whether we would be chosen for work or the gas chamber -- and watching the endless billowing of smoke and flames from the chimneys! That's where I suffered my worst nightmares.

The most painful part of it was that nobody cared. Nobody did anything to stop the trains. It made us lose faith in humanity and in God.

9/11 was different -- there was unity and we showed that we cared. The world did learn. Everybody was sympathetic to the victims and their families, and we now have tribunals to try crimes against humanity.

My mission, in telling my story, is so that if a child sees prejudice in the classroom, she steps in and asks, "What if that were you?"

My feelings after the liberation are described in *Grace* -- it was not elation. I came to realize that I had been in total denial that my mother had been taken to the crematorium. This was my only hope for survival: that we would go home. That foolish dream kept me going. If I had really known and accepted that my home and my family were gone, I would have perished like my friend Judi. Liberation brought the truth. When the camp was first liberated, I saw the men from the men's camp come looking for their mothers, wives, and sisters -- and they looked worse than we did! I saw one couple reunite, and the woman was upset that the man didn't recognize her, but she said, "It's all right, as long as we are together." With liberation came the realization that life would never be the same again. It took a long time to become a teenager again. I had to learn to live again, to trust again. It was not a happy ending.

When you talk to young people about your experiences, how do you convey to them the enormity of the Holocaust?

It's impossible -- nobody could do it justice. The one who came closest was Viktor Frankl -- he was a psychiatrist who experienced Auschwitz. He saw things through professional eyes and could analyze what was happening. He wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, which has become one of my favorite books. It has helped me sort things out. It's a profound book for mature readers.

Upon the Head of the Goat

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