

Rena's Promise - STUDY GUIDE:

1. In the beginning of memoir, the co-author puts herself into the story. Her voice, and narrative flips back and forth between present time and the past then eventually disappears as Rena's voice takes over. Why do you think the author uses this technique?

2. The narrative voice, for both co-authors, is written present tense. How does writing about Auschwitz in present tense change your perspective on the events you are reading about?

3. Occasionally, the text uses footnotes to give a sense of history, time and place, outside of the first person narrative. How does this effect your impression of the events and how they are all framed by time and Rena's perspective? What does say about the writing of memoir and history?

(Group Exercise: referring to page 151. Have your reading group or class line up and march outside—no one should be allowed coats, etc., make it abrupt—before exiting the building make sure they understand that any giggling, talking, etc., is punishable by “death”. Simulate “Roll Call” conditions by ordering them to line up in rows of five, five wide, five deep (you can make it smaller if the group has just a few people in it). Have them stand for five minutes at full attention, and remind them how many hours every day Rena stood just like this, no matter what the weather. Then order them to line up for a mock selection. Using a stop watch, or counting “one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand” give them each three seconds to stand in front of you before giving them the thumbs up sign allowing them to enter the building. Allow time to process this experience through writing and discussion.)

4. Men's and women's experiences in the Holocaust varied—what can you attribute to that fact? What would have caused these discrepancies. What do the footnotes say about this information?

5. If you could pick out one theme for Rena's story, what would it be? What were the key factors that kept Rena and Danka alive through Auschwitz, and what made them different from those who were not so lucky? Were they different, or were they simply lucky?

6. What compelled Rena to act so selflessly when it came to taking care of and providing for her sister? Was she acting out of the goodness of her heart, or out of necessity?

7. Danka also helped Rena, and saved her life during the death march, how did their relationship help both to survive?

8. How does Rena's story change your attitude towards a particular religion or race? Does it make you want to be more open minded and accepting of different cultures and religions?

*After 9/11 Rena expressed concern for American-Muslims. She was worried that people would hurt them like the Jews were hurt in Europe. “To hate is to let Hitler win.”

EXERCISES:

1. Pick one scene that you feel particularly strongly about and rewrite it from the perspective of one of the other people in the story—you cannot write it from Rena's perspective because you already know what she is thinking. Write the scene so you get to know who this person is, what they were thinking, and what motivated them to do what they did.

2. Imagine what a potato peel tastes like from Rena's description and write down your perceptions. Then take a potato peel and eat it—how does it really taste?

3. Get together some stale bread, mustard, weak tea (no sugar), a potato peel, some watered down potato soup (cold and with no seasoning), and/or some macaroni and the water you cooked the noodles in and sit down and eat. Give time to each portion of food, to taste and consider what it was like to eat almost nothing but that bread for three years and forty-one days. How does the noodle broth really taste?

To hear this vivacious and amazing woman talk about her ordeal, please e-mail me directly. RENA AT SALEM COLLEGE is an 80 minute talk from 1996 at Salem College in Winston-Salem, NC. The tape includes a reading from the book, her story, and Q&A with the audience. It is \$25.00 (including postage for US mailings).