

*A Reading & Discussion Guide to:*

**Ursula's Prism**

**The Holocaust Through**

**A Child's Eyes -**

**A Survivor's Story**

**by**

**Anna Block**

## URSULA'S PRISM—READERS' GUIDE

### OVERVIEW

Writers of *Historical Fiction* tell stories that are set in a particular time and place in history. While some of the characters are fictional, the events surrounding them are true. When learning about history from the point of view of a person living through it, the reader experiences events personally. What might otherwise be a list of dry statistics now comes alive, allowing the reader to absorb the human benefits and costs of history on an intimate level. Whether being bullied on the street, or a casualty of Genocide, the reader experiences the roles of victim, perpetrator and bystander through the eyes, emotions and actions of the characters.

As Maureen McNeil, Director of the Anne Frank Center, USA, tells us in her Introduction to *Ursula's Prism*: "Stories of children suffering during the Holocaust are difficult to read, yet they often inspire the human spirit to take action." In fictionalizing her mother's childhood memories of surviving the Holocaust, author Anna Block has created a story that will inspire readers to learn and understand the thoughts and actions that created the Holocaust. Hopefully readers will also come to understand the thoughts and actions that must be taken to prevent it from happening again.

Gihon River Press publisher, Steve Feuer, is committed to providing readers of all levels with educational and inspiring books and Readers' Guides about the Holocaust. His other publications include:

**SILENCE NOT, A LOVE STORY**

A Play by  
Cynthia Cooper

Set in pre-WWI Germany, this play is based on the lives of idealist young Jewish woman, Gisa Peiper, and rebellious Catholic artisan, Paul Konopka, who become involved in the life-threatening Nazi Resistance movement. Gisa and Paul's powerful love story plays out against backdrop of the Holocaust, showing that courage and love can transcend even the unspeakable dangers and horror of the Holocaust.

For more information, comments or questions, please contact Publisher Steve Feuer at:

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### **PRE-READING QUESTIONS**

1. What do you already know about World War II?
2. What do you already know about the Holocaust?
3. Have you ever known anyone who was directly or indirectly affected by the Holocaust?
4. Are you aware of any genocides (the elimination of an entire group or race of people) that are taking place in the world today?
5. What do you think is the meaning of George Santayana's (1863-1952) famous quote:  
*"Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it"?*
6. What is "historical fiction," and what purpose does it serve?
7. Why is it important to resist all forms of hate?
8. Tell about a time in your life when you were a perpetrator, victim or bystander. What did you do? What would you do differently now?
9. In what ways do the actions of a schoolyard bully, victim and bystanders represent the events of the Holocaust? Are there similar situations today?
10. Explain the meaning of Edmund Burke's famous quote, and relate it to events in both the Holocaust and contemporary life:  
*"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."*

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. Does compassion “dwell within each of us”?
2. What are the “Prism’s Principles”?
3. Do you have “principles” that guide your thoughts and actions?

### **Chapter 1**

1. Start a Character List, adding details about each as the story unfolds.
2. What qualities do the characters display that might determine their fate?
3. Why had Fred been sending money to his parents in Switzerland?
4. Why did Fred tell Anna that she didn’t have to worry about her parents?
5. How does Ursula’s mother use the necklace to teach important life lessons?
6. What story/fable do remember from your childhood that included important life lessons?

### **Chapter 2**

1. How do the actions of Hilda and Ursula show the differences in their personalities?
2. Before the war, what forms of Nazi oppression did the Swartz family experience?
3. How did music and dancing contrast with the horror that was developing around the Swartz family?
4. Why did Ursula choose to wear the green dress?

### **Chapter 3**

1. How does Ursula’s imagination distract her from the horror of her situation?

2. What examples can you find of Ursula's power of observation?
3. Imagine a time when you were in a frightening situation. What details can you remember?

#### **Chapter 4**

1. Why do you think Poppa's watch is so significant?
2. How does Hilda react to the officer who looked her over?
3. How did the Nazis use psychology to calm the frightened Jews?
4. Why did Ursula give the necklace to her mother and say, "I thought you might need to see things in a different way."?

#### **Chapter 5**

1. In what way is Ludwig now becoming a leader in his family?
2. When the Nazi breaks Ludwig's nose, he is forced to give up on saving his sister Sophus. Have you ever experienced a time when you had no choice but to give up something that was profoundly important to you?
3. Why do you think the Nazis let the Gypsy woman keep her Tarot cards?
4. In what ways do the children adjust to the realities of the concentration camp?
5. What adjustments have you had to make to negative events in your life?

#### **Chapter 6**

1. How do Hilda's actions shock Ursula and Ludwig?
2. Describe Lise and tell how she irritates Ursula.
3. Tell about a time when you realized that a person's irritating actions were the result of their own inability to cope with reality.
4. How did Petr manage to stay alive?

## **Chapter 7**

1. Why did Karl help the children?
2. Have you ever taken a risk to help someone else?
3. In the midst of the horrors that the children endure, they also experience the unexpected kindness of strangers. Tell about a time when you either received or provided an unexpected kindness.
4. What would be an appropriate way to thank someone whose actions save your life?

## **Chapter 8**

1. Ludwig's memory of maps he had studied in school helped him determine which way to travel. Do you have memories of maps that would help you if you were lost?
2. Why did Ludwig have mixed feelings about his yellow Star of David?
3. In what ways do Kurt and Ludwig show their survival skills/ leadership?
4. What kinds of things did the children take from vacant houses? What else do you think they should have taken?
5. What is the significance of Kurt's number tattoo?

## **Chapter 9**

1. What does Ludwig think are Kurt's survival skills?
2. In what way might Kurt be a danger to the others?
3. What does Ludwig think are the strengths and weaknesses of the others?
4. How do their circumstances affect their behavior?
5. What do Petr and Nikki have in common?
6. Why do the children trust Ludwig?
7. What do they do to prepare ahead? How does being prepared help the children to survive?

## **Chapter 10**

1. Why did Kurt and Ludwig decide to go into the house together?
2. Why do Mathilda and Leonard take the children in?
3. What did Ursula think about Mathilda's smile?
4. Why does Leonard say he doesn't need the back-pack anymore?
5. Compare and contrast Mathilda and Leonard's attitudes toward the children.
6. How does Kurt's opinion of Mathilda differ from that of Ludwig and Ursula?
7. What does Kurt do before the children leave Mathilda and Leonard's farm?

## **Chapter 11**

1. In what way might Petr's action endanger the children?
2. What purpose might the abandoned hut have originally served?
3. In what ways is Kurt being resourceful?
4. What is Ludwig's attitude about sitting and doing nothing?
5. In what ways is Lise's attitude deteriorating?
6. Why is Ludwig ashamed of himself?

## **Chapter 12**

1. How does the necklace help keep Ursula and Ludwig's spirits up?
2. Why must the children leave the hut?
3. In what way does Lise's thoughtlessness affect the others?
4. How does Ludwig's attitude change after Lise's death?
5. Why does Ludwig say that Hilda can "go to hell"?
6. How has hunger become the children's most dangerous enemy?
7. How are the children rescued?

### **Postscript**

1. What happened to each of the children?
2. What artifact do you have from an ancestor?
3. If you were to leave an artifact for a descendent, what would it be?
4. What lessons have you learned from Ursula's story?
5. Throughout the story, the children demonstrate a variety of survival strategies. If you were suddenly thrown into a similar situation, what personality qualities, skills, and physical abilities do you possess that would increase the possibility of your survival?

### **ACTIVITIES**

1. Choose a character from the story and write that person a letter expressing your feelings about his or her experiences.
2. Write a letter from Ursula to her parents telling them of her life since the last time she saw them.
3. Create and enact a scene from the story.
4. Create a diorama of a scene from the story.
5. Draw or create two back-packs. Fill one with artifacts from the story. Fill the other with objects that you would take if you were in a similar situation today.
6. Write a poem or song based on the events of the story
7. Contact your local Jewish Community Center and ask if they have any programs featuring Holocaust Survivors that you might attend.
8. Research Child Survivors of the Holocaust. In what ways did their childhood experiences affect the rest of their lives?
9. If you were Ursula or Ludwig, what would you want to say to the Gypsy woman?
10. Write a thank-you letter to someone who has helped you.
11. Which of the Prism's lessons do you think helped Ursula the most?
12. What lessons have you learned from this story?
13. Which of the Prism's lessons is the most important to you?

14. Now that you have read the play, create your own list of principles to live by. What object would you use to demonstrate these principles?
15. What questions do you have about *Ursula's Prism*?

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This Readers' Guide was created by:  
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