

Upon the Head of the Goat: A Childhood in Hungary 1939-1944 Study Guide

Upon the Head of the Goat: A Childhood in Hungary 1939-1944 by Aranka Siegal

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Plot Summary

Upon the Head of the Goat is an autobiographical Holocaust narrative following the author, Aranka Siegal, and her family in Hungary as they slowly became consumed by World War II and the anti-Semitism of the invading German army.

The story starts with Piri on her grandmother Babi's farm in Komjaty, a rural region of the Ukraine. Ukrainians and Hungarians were engaged in a civil war, and the border was closed. Piri and Babi had to wait anxious months before Piri could join her family in Beregszasz, Hungary.

Once in Beregszasz, the family dealt with the loss of Piri's uncle, Lajos, and Piri's father, who were both off to war. Poland had been captured by the Germans, and the Germans were pushing toward Hungary. The family tried to engage in their normal routines, including school and celebration of Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah and Passover, but their lives were already being impacted severely by World War II.

Anti-Semitism spread throughout the town, and soon the family had to stay indoors most hours, or dress as peasants around town to avoid suspicion. Piri visited a meeting of the Zionist Club, of which her Aunt Lujza was a member. This club was formed to help Jewish refugees of countries affected by the war. Piri herself, as well as her older sister Iboya, helped smuggle Jewish refugees within the town.

Food shortages became a problem, and food was severely rationed. The family had to rely on smuggled supplies, and they also kept a goat in the house illegally in order to have crucial milk for the youngest children. In a touching scene, housing officials came to the house and forced the family to give up the goat.

The family was most directly impacted when men came and took away sister Lilli, her husband Lajos, and their child Manci from the home, claiming that Lajos had spoken ill of Hungary. Piri's mother made a desperate trip to Poland to try to rescue baby Manci, but she arrived too late, and the child had already been shipped off to a German concentration camp. The three were never heard from again. Meanwhile, Piri's father was captured and held in a Russian prison camp. And Lujza, fearing capture because of her rebel activities, threw herself in front of a passing train.

Piri's mother heroically did everything she could to keep their young family alive. But the Germans eventually invaded the town, and they were carted off to a brick factory converted into a Jewish ghetto. They spent some time in the ghetto, surviving squalid and inhumane living conditions, until they were finally carted off to a concentration camp via train, all while never truly knowing the horror that awaited them. Piri and her sister would escape by being assigned to a munitions factory to work, and the rest of the family was presumed murdered in the Holocaust.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

1: Piri (in reality, author Aranka Siegal) is the narrator. In 1939, Piri's mother sent her from Beregszasz to Komjaty to spend time with her grandmother on the farm. Grandpa had recently died, and all five sisters in the family spent time on the farm so Grandma, called Babi, would not be alone.

Piri was on the farm during a battle between the Hungarian army and Ukrainian rebels. They heard gunshots on the nearby border. The next morning, Piri wandered to a river and discovered three dead bodies of soldiers floating in the river. Piri was frightened and went to her grandmother, who cooked her a nice snack.

On a day soon after, Piri encountered a mounted Hungarian policeman on the road, which was a rare sight. The man, named Farenc, was lost and Piri pointed him in the right direction. In gratitude, Farenc swooped Piri up onto his saddle and gave her a ride back to Babi's house. Farenc revealed to Babi that the road to Beregszasz was closed, and that Piri might be stuck in Komjaty for quite some time until the violence ended.

2: Some weeks later, Farenc came back to the farm. He saw Piri's older sister, Rozsi, and both fell for each other at first sight. Piri fetched water from a neighbor's well for Farenc to water his horse. Babi was very distrustful of all Hungarians, and especially policemen, so she did not approve of Rozsi's friendliness, or especially Piri's friendliness. Piri didn't understand why Babi had such distrust, and Babi informed her that the Hungarians persecuted her people, the Ukrainians, in the past because of their Jewish religion. In Piri's hometown of Beregszasz, she befriended people of all backgrounds and religions, so discriminating on the basis of religion was a foreign concept to her.

Babi further informed Piri that a madman who hated Jews was on the loose in Poland: Adolf Hitler. Piri feared him, but was relieved that he was so far away. Piri wished to know more about this man. One day, she snuck away with Babi's newspaper and read a story about Jews being rounded up and used for slave labor, the beginnings of the Holocaust. But Piri did not understand the enormity of what was going on.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

3: Trains between Beregszasz and Komjaty had stopped traveling, and Piri was essentially cut off from her mother, father, and the rest of her family. One day, a messenger came with a letter from mother. Father, an officer in the army, had been demoted due to German policy, and Piri's brother-in-law Lajos had been drafted into the army. So, the Germans had already made their presence clear in Beregszasz.

Babi wanted to get a letter back across the border, so she asked Rozsi to ask the Hungarian policeman Ferenc to act as a messenger. Rozsi was nervous about asking, but since Ferenc was attracted to her, he eagerly agreed to ferry the message.

Babi prepared for a Rosh Hashanah feast as always, despite the impossibility of any other family members coming to her home. Babi did a lot of praying and reading of the Bible during this time. Meanwhile, Piri started school with her schoolmate, Molcha. She knew Hungarian, unlike many of the Ukrainian schoolchildren, and so she became a favorite with her teacher. Piri was excited to tell Babi of the favor her teacher showed her, but Babi was not impressed, deriding Piri as a "Hungarian translator."

4: Babi got a letter stating that Mother and Father were going to come for the Passover holiday. Babi was overjoyed, and had the girls catch chickens in the yard for the big feast. Some time later, the family had a joyous reunion. Mother looked pale and different, and later Piri learned that she was pregnant. Rozsi gave many kisses to baby brother Sandor, and there were other family members: Lilli, Lajos, Iboya, and Manci. Piri received a glass globe as a gift.

Father tried to keep the mood jovial, but it was clear the impending war was weighing on the adults heavily. Father was demoted in rank because he was Czech, and Hungarians distrusted Czechs. And brother-in-law Lajos was dressed in a Hungarian uniform, which caused the Ukrainian neighbors who visited to treat him with disdain. They had a large Passover feast with many people.

Privately, Babi begged Mother to send the children off to America, since Babi felt they had no future there. But Mother couldn't bear the thought of splitting the family up. Babi next appealed to Father, but Father felt Babi was being foolish and the war would be over very soon. In the end, it was decided that Rozsi would come back with Mother and Father to help raise Sandor, and Piri would stay behind with Babi. They had a teary goodbye.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

5: Ferenc visited, and Piri told him of Babi's desire for the children to go to America. Ferenc thought this was a good idea, and that Babi should move in with Piri's mother in Beregszasz. With a touch of sadness, Ferenc next told Piri that he was to be transferred, and so he would not be coming around any more.

Joli, Piri's new baby sister, was born on June 10. After a few weeks, Rozsi returned to the farm. Soon, it would be Piri's turn to leave Babi and Molcha in Komjaty, and she felt reluctant to leave the farm to return to her family in Beregszasz. On the day of Piri's departure, she felt ill and could hardly eat anything. She shared a teary goodbye with Babi, and then Rozsi walked Piri to the train station. Rozsi stayed behind in Komjaty for some time so Babi would not be alone. Piri left for Beregszasz with a heavy heart.

6: Piri arrived in Beregszasz and was greeted happily by her family. She got to meet and hold Joli for the first time. Mother took Piri home and fed her. The meal was different from the meal Piri was used to in Komjaty. Mother next took her to the basin and gave her a good scrubbing, because Piri had arrived quite filthy from her farm life. Mother expressed concern over Rozsi's social life when Piri revealed Rozsi rarely spoke to anyone except Babi. Piri learned from her older, grown sister Lilli that Lilli and her husband Lajos still had their apartment, but that they stayed over at the family home quite often. Piri quickly adjusted to life with her family in Beregszasz.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

7: The next months passed somewhat uneventfully. Father and Lajos were still off to war, and the family worried about them. Rozsi wrote several letters back home to let Mother know she was all right. Piri attended school, and marveled in watching Joli grow before her eyes. Hanukkah was a somewhat sad time for the family, since the men still were off to war; Mother tried to go through the motions and light a few days' worth of candles for Hanukkah, but she abandoned it. Piri was disappointed that Christmas carolers did not stop at their home like they did in previous years, indicative of increasing anti-Semitism.

One day, Piri and Iboya passed by the synagogue, and young men armed with sticks called them "Dumb Jew bitches" and start to chase after them. Piri and Iboya ran for their lives from the anti-Semites and were able to get home. They relayed their escape to Mother, who became very worried. Tucked in for bed that night, Piri overheard Mother talking to Lilli, and confessing she should have heeded Babi's warning and sent the children to America. Mother would inquire as to whether it was too late to send the children away.

8: Mother returned home, having failed to secure her children visas for America, despite receiving a good deal of money from Babi, who sold a piece of her land. Mother was distraught, and Piri rarely saw her that way.

Changes came at school in 1941, with the schoolchildren practicing military drills rather than playing at recess. Mother and Lilli received letters from Father and Lajos, and were elated. Around this time, a woman Mother's age named Mrs. Gerber visited, along with her two young children, Judi and Pali. Mrs. Gerber's husband was in the same battalion as Father, and Mrs. Gerber and Mother struck up a friendship as they shared news. Piri visited Mrs. Gerber's home and became fast friends with Judi, who was around her age. Mother lamented that her eldest daughter, Etu, was refusing to come home from attending university in Budapest, but Mrs. Gerber figured it was safest there for her. Mother was nostalgic for Budapest, having studied theater there in her younger days.

At the end of the chapter, Hungary joined with Germany to invade Russia. Hitler enforced a general draft, and most able-bodied men were away at war.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

9: By September 1941, Piri started fifth grade. Children were still practicing military drills, and Lilli figured pessimistically that they were training to eventually join the army. Mother got word from Father that his battalion would be coming through Beregszasz in early October, and so the family prepared a great feast.

However, after days of waiting at the train station, Mother and Mrs. Gerber returned discouraged and disappointed. That night, a rap on the door startled everyone. It was Father, who had sneaked away from his barracks in order to see his family. Father met Joli for the first time and hugged the rest of his family. He said that his battalion would likely be going to the Russian front, but that he and Lajos were well and they hoped to be home soon. The family had a final teary goodbye as Father stole back into the night.

10: It began to be very unhealthy to be a Jew in Beregszasz, and increasingly the family had to keep a low profile. One day, a desperate woman approached Piri on the street and, in Yiddish, begged for help. Piri took her to Mother, who fed her and took care of the woman's baby. The woman was from Slovakia, and Hitler had begun depriving Jews of their homes there, deporting them to places unknown. Piri took the woman to Mrs. Silverman's house, who Piri learned operated a kind of secret halfway house for Jewish refugees.

Since the border was completely closed by this point, the family got food and information about Babi and Rozsi from a young man named Shimi Stern, who smuggled rations and other items over the border between families. Piri recalled meeting Shimi at the train station often, and he would surreptitiously drop a basket on the ground for Piri to take, pretending not to know her. One time, Shimi got arrested for smuggling, but he was let out a few days afterward. Shimi smuggled precious flour rations in his sport coat and gave them to the family.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

11: Iboya spent time away from home volunteering for the Red Cross, but Piri learned sometimes Iboya was actually attending illegal "Zionist Club" meetings with their aunt Lujza. Piri and Iboya lied to their mother in order to attend one of these meetings, which was filled with Jews in their twenties discussing plans to transport and shelter Jewish refugees.

Lilli decided to abandon her apartment and live full-time in the family home. Meanwhile, Mother traveled to a distant farmer named Mr. Baltar in order to buy a goat, as milk was impossible to obtain and her youngest children needed milk. Mr. Baltar delivered a goat, and the family had to keep it out of sight as owning a goat was illegal. They named the goat Ladybeard, and everyone grew to like the goat. At the end of the chapter, the family learned that America was entering the war.

12: Piri arrived home to find Mother extremely upset. Lilli had been taken away, along with Lilli's child Mancsi. Police had brought Lajos to the home in handcuffs. Mother was inconsolable and had to be tended to by a family friend, Dr. Feher. Mother had tried to convince Lilli to leave Mancsi behind, but Lilli would not. Lajos was accused of being a disloyal Hungarian.

Soon after, Mother left the city to personally tell Lajos' family of his fate. Piri and Iboya ran the household in the meantime. Mother returned home okay, but she became increasingly suspicious and paranoid of any neighbors, including the mailman.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary and Analysis

13: Mother received an urgent telegram from Lajos' parents. She went to the telephone office to receive a call; home telephones were quite rare in this time and region. Mother revealed to Piri that Lajos contacted his parents, told them Mancie was sick with whooping cough, and urged Mother to come pick Mancie up. Mother made it her mission to get enough funds to go pick up Mancie. She begged the family doctor, Dr. Feher, for money, and he gave her money along with medicine for Mancie. Mother also had to wait for a couple of Lujza's Zionist Club friends to forge a passport for her.

Mother risked her life in Poland to try to find Mancie, but she was too late, and Lilli and Lajos had already been transported away by freight train. Lilli and Lajos had been hiding in a home, but it was revealed they were Jewish, and the homeowners did not let them stay any longer. Mother blamed herself for not leaving sooner. Some weeks later, the family heard word that Lilli, Lajos and Mancie were spotted being packed onto a train, and this gave Mother hope that the child was still alive.

14: The family received word that Father was being held in a Russian prison camp. Meanwhile, the Germans expelled all Jews from the schools, and Jewish teachers set up a makeshift school in the local synagogue, which Piri, Judi, and other children attended. It was there that Piri met her first crush, a boy named Gari Weiss. Piri would spend the school days writing him notes but then tearing them up. The family experienced heartbreak when Ladybeard the goat was taken away by rude members of the housing bureau.

Judi fancied herself and her family as "modern Jews" who were secular and progressive and were not stuck in the old ways, like Piri's grandmother, Babi. Judi and Piri thought about issues in very different ways. One day at school, Piri started to menstruate for the first time, becoming a young woman.

Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

15: Iboya complained about having to attend school, preferring to work. Mr. Schwartz gave her an opportunity to work at his fish shop as a cashier, and Iboya eagerly agreed. But Iboya often returned from work exhausted and secretive, and Piri was mad at her for being so secretive. After awhile, Iboya confessed to Mother that Mr. Schwartz was a smuggler of Jewish refugees, and she had to help him smuggle and avoid policemen. Mother had a talk with Mr. Schwartz about putting her daughter in danger, but Mr. Schwartz assured Mother he would take care of Iboya.

Aunt Lujza was a frequent visitor to the house during this time, and she confessed her frustration at the receding influence and resources of the Zionist Club. The family soon learned with great sadness that Hungary had gone the way of Poland and other countries, and had instituted strict anti-Semite laws. These included having to wear a yellow Star of David on one's clothing, and an oppressive curfew from 3 pm until 10 am.

16: Uncle Sanyi came to the door in the middle of the night, frantic. Lujza had died. Sanyi explained that her supervisor at work had falsely accused her of lying. Figuring her days were numbered as a Zionist Club leader, Lujza had leaped in front of a passing train. Sanyi and his father had to identify the body. Mother consoled Sanyi and let him stay the night.

By Passover in the Spring, food was extremely scarce, and the Germans were closing in on their location. Sanyi's family was escaping with fake passports claiming they were Christians. But Piri's family could not escape because the children had no passports. The Germans took over Budapest and the Hungarian parliament, and invasion was inevitable. Mother had the children stay inside all day, and she made Piri and Iboya dress like filthy beggars so any German soldiers would not try to rape them. Only Mother was allowed to leave the house, and even then she had to wear the disguise of a peasant.

Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary and Analysis

17: Mother returned from buying matzo for Passover. Germans had invaded the town and were thick in the temple courtyard. Soldiers ordered Mother to take them to the "Juden Bureau," the Jewish leaders. She was forced to ride with them in the car to the Bureau. The Germans gave the Jewish leader, Mr. Hirsch, an ultimatum: twenty thousand pengos, the currency at the time, for the life of the religious leaders the Germans had trapped in the temple. Mother gave up the rest of her meager belongings as part of the ransom money.

Mother had Piri travel to Mrs. Gerber's, dressed as a peasant, to deliver some food for Passover. On the way, Piri learned that German soldiers had raped Dr. Feher's mother and daughter, and that he had shot himself to death in grief. Piri arrived at Mrs. Gerber's house. Mrs. Gerber gave her a gift in return. The family held a pathetic Passover dinner.

18: The next day, Mr. Hirsch knocked on the door and told Mother that Dr. Feher was dead, a fact Piri withheld from her, and Mother was greatly upset. Mother left to go help bury Dr. Feher. The Germans were ready to shoot the kidnapped men in the temple, and Mr. Hirsch held an auction to try to raise the ransom money.

The next day, a great procession of wagons passed by the family home. Jews were being transported from the surrounding countryside to the trains that would take them to the "ghetto," a nearby brick factory converted into living space. Piri and the rest of the family spent the day giving water and delivering whatever they could to the sick and exhausted prisoners as they passed by. They got word in the form of a letter that Babi and Rozsi were taken to the ghetto. The family knew it was only a matter of time before the Germans knocked on their door and they joined the rest at the ghetto.



Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary and Analysis

19: The Germans finally came to the yard of the family, and ordered them to leave. Iboya was away getting supplies, and Piri took off on a frantic run around town to find her. Finally, the family was reunited and were escorted by wagon to the brick factory.

The conditions there were squalid, with an open and degrading latrine, and open sheds with hard dirt floors for housing. Mother overcame her shock to try to convince people to do something useful like hang sheets for privacy and find out about water. The assigned leader for the space, Mr. Shuster, tried to discourage Mother from her ambitious plans, because it would anger the Germans.

Piri and Iboya went with the youth group of the Juden Bureau to the provision center. It was clear that the Germans were hoarding everything for themselves and giving out hardly anything to the Jews. They managed to make the provisions officer give them a raggedy blanket. Mother continued to argue for basic rights for the Jews to Mr. Shuster. All anyone knew was that they were to be transported to Germany in a few days.

20: Piri recognized Gari Weiss, the boy she had had a crush on. He, like Iboya, was a member of the youth group of the Juden Bureau. Piri reunited with him and struck up a friendship with another youth group boy, Henri. Soon after, the Gerbers arrived in camp, and were reunited with the family. Piri visited a sick old woman to whom she gave water in the infirmary, and the woman was very grateful.

Piri, Judi Gerber, Gari, and Henri formed a foursome who went many places together. This included Gari's residence. Gari was fortunate in that his family was able to stay in the maid's home of their residence which had been on factory grounds. The four spent much time in the maid's home talking and listening to records. It soon became clear that Judi was forming a romance with Gari, and Piri was forming a romance with Henri. Piri experienced her first kiss one day.

Mother soon gave up trying to convince the Germans to offer the Jews more rights; she simply tried to take care of her family. This included heating water for her children to take baths, which was against the rules. But Mother successfully convinced a policeman to let her briefly heat water. Mother cut all the children's hair so it would be easier to maintain.



Chapters 21 and 22

Chapters 21 and 22 Summary and Analysis

21: Life continued in the ghetto. Piri continued to grow close with Henri. A young man named Shafar came, who knew Iboya from her time visiting the Zionist Club. Shafar was a rarity, because he was an able-bodied man in his twenties. Most people in the ghetto were women and children, or old men.

One day, Gari pulled Piri and Judi aside and told them that the men were planning some sort of uprising, and that several guns and even dynamite had been smuggled in. Piri became very concerned for their safety. Some thought any resistance would be futile, but the men could not simply stand by while their families died. The rumor was that Germany and the labor camps (in reality, concentration camps) were much worse than the ghetto, but no one could be sure.

Mr. Schwartz the fishmonger arrived, and the family had a happy reunion with him. The family celebrated Iboya's sixteenth birthday, and she was given a new shawl as well as a ring from Shafar. Piri and others went to the Weiss household to listen to records and dance, which was about the last recreational activity they had left to enjoy.

22: One day, Mr. Shuster came and told the family that the train to get everyone was finally coming, and that they would be transported to Germany. Families were terrified they would be separated. Judi began to argue with Mr. Shuster, saying that they should put up resistance. Mr. Shuster said that any resistance would be worthless and would probably only end in more suffering. Mr. Shuster explained that the Jews were the world's scapegoats, and he told the story of the origin of the term 'scapegoat' in the Bible, where the sins of Israel were placed upon the head of a goat and the goat was cast out into the wilderness.

The next day, after preparations and goodbyes, the train arrived. They were expecting passenger cars, but they were greeted with freight cars used for transporting cattle. They were literally herded onto the cars and packed together tightly. Piri recalled one of the soldiers mentioning Auschwitz. No one knew what that meant, but the reader knows all too well that they are being transported to the infamous concentration camp and likely death.

According to a brief afterword, the family arrived at Auschwitz on May 9, 1944. Iboya and Piri were separated from the others to work in a munitions factory, and they never saw them again. Iboya and Piri were the only family members, other than eldest sister Etu, to survive.



Characters

Piri

Piri is nine years old when the narrative begins. She is a member of a loving Jewish family living in Hungary. Her father is a soldier, and she has many sisters and one brother. As is to be expected, she is innocent of many the things that are concerning the adults about the coming war, and her family tries to shield her as best they can from the truth of the German war machine and the spreading of anti-Semitic sentiment. Nonetheless, Piri has a sense of dread and foreboding in regards to the changing moods of the adults around her and, of course, it eventually becomes impossible for the adults to shield Piri from the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust.

As a middle child, Piri is tasked with taking care of the younger children and with helping around the house with domestic chores. She also goes to school, although eventually she must attend a Jewish-only school, given the rampant and increasing anti-Semitism.

Piri endures it all with a certain childlike optimism and resiliency, and even in the darker moments her story is more a report than an emotional chronicle. Through the story, Piri becomes a woman, both physically and due to a romance with a boy named Henri in the ghetto.

Mother

Piri's mother is a housewife with several young children. She is living in Beregszasz at the start of the book. Her biggest goal is to keep the family safe and together, and she emerges as the leader of the family until the bitter end. Her goal is made increasingly difficult and finally impossible by the time the family is herded into freight trains to be taken to concentration camps.

Because Piri's soldier father is ordered to the Russian front—and eventually captured—Mother is forced to shoulder the burden of the family's continued existence. She maintains a brave front, but on the inside it is clear she is extremely scared. Despite this fear and uncertainty, she behaves heroically, and the author (as Piri) clearly has nothing but positive memories of her mother's unswerving courage.

Unfortunately, Mother is devoured with regret and the "what if" scenarios along the way. In a touching scene, Mother relates the regrets she has about certain actions, such as not insisting on taking grandson Mancsi with her when Lilli and Lajos were arrested. She draws a comparison between life and the stage, since in her youth Mother was a theater actress. Unlike the stage, Mother contends, life has no do-overs, no ability to say a flubbed line over again.

Mother emerges as the book's most sympathetic and tragic figure, given her heroism despite adversity and the very human regret with which she must contend.



Father

Piri's father fights for the army and is ordered to the Russian front. He is captured by the Russians and transferred to a Russian prison camp, where he presumably dies.

Babi

Babi is Piri's beloved grandmother. She lives on a farm in Komjaty. She is set in her conventional, conservative ways, and she imparts wisdom to Piri about the reality of human nature and their Jewish identity.

Lajos

Lajos is a young soldier and the brother-in-law of Piri. He is taken away by officials for allegedly speaking ill of Hungary, and is transferred to a concentration camp along with wife Lilli and baby Mancsi.

Lujza

Lujza is Piri's aunt. She is involved in illegal activities with the Zionist Club. When her supervisor fires her, Lujza fears she is caught and she throws herself in front of a train rather than face arrest or execution.

Mr. Shuster

Mr. Shuster is the appointed leader of Piri's section of the ghetto. A sad and defeated man, he believes the Jews should just follow the orders of the Germans without question, for any resistance would only worsen their plight.

Iboya

Iboya is Piri's sister. She is employed by Mr. Schwartz, and eventually she helps him smuggle Jewish refugees. Later, she becomes involved with the youth group of the Juden Bureau, trying her best to give aid and supplies to Jews.

Judi

Judi is Piri's good friend, and child of Mrs. Gerber. Judi has a modern, progressive way of thinking about the world and about her Jewish identity, which clashes with Piri's more conservative viewpoint.

Henri

Henri is a junior member of the Juden Bureau youth group. He befriends and eventually romances Piri in the brick factory ghetto.



Objects/Places

Beregszasz

Beregszasz was a large Hungarian city where Piri's family lived. As the war went on, the city increasingly became hostile to Jews until the Germans finally arrived and sacked it.

Komjaty

Komjaty was characterized as a rural farming community. Babi lived here on the family farm. Because of hostilities between Hungarians and Ukrainians, the border between Beregszasz and Komjaty was temporarily blocked.

Ladybeard

Ladybeard was the name given to the goat the family adopted for its milk. Housing officials came one day to take the goat away, causing the family much distress.

The Ghetto

The local brick factory was converted into a ghetto, a temporary living quarters for the captured Jews prior to being shipped to concentration camps. Piri and her family endured several weeks in the ghetto's terrible living conditions.

Glass Globe

Piri received a glass globe as a gift upon her return from Komjaty to Beregszasz. For her, it became a symbol of the love of her family, and of better times.

School

Piri attended school, but it increasingly came under the influence of Hitler and the Germans, such that military drills rather than traditional lessons were being taught.

Zionist Club

Piri's aunt Lujza was a leader in the local Zionist Club, a secret organization intended to aid in the egress of Jewish refugees from hostile lands. Piri helped many Jewish refugees to a Zionist Club home.

Pengos

Pengos was the currency in use at the time. The Germans kidnapped several Jewish elders and demanded twenty thousand pengos in exchange for their lives.

Juden Bureau

The Juden Bureau was made up of the appointed leaders in the Jewish community in Beregszasz. The Germans initially negotiated with them — a negotiation which amounted to blackmail and extortion — in an attempt to locate and round up all the Jews in the town.

Auschwitz

At the end of the book, Piri's family and many others were transported to Auschwitz. While this name resonates for the reader as one of the most well-known concentration camps, the Jews in the ghetto were ignorant of what went on there and the fate that was in store for them.



Themes

The Nature of Ignorance

It is telling that Siegal begins her book with herself (as Piri) stranded in the rural farmland of Komjaty with Babi. As a child experiencing World War II, and with adults attempting to shelter her from the horrible truth, Piri is indeed isolated and disengaged from the world events causing so much turmoil. Much of *Upon the Head of the Goat* is filtered through Piri's perspective.

Because she is not allowed to listen to the war news on the radio or join in the adult conversations, Piri spends much of her time with her schoolmates or her brothers and sisters. However, Piri does eavesdrop on conversations, and she does get a sense—albeit a confused one—of the goings-on in Europe. In fact, Piri's chief emotion throughout much of the narrative is confusion. Adults are only partially successful in sheltering Piri from the reality of the war, and so she receives often contradictory or incomplete information. Piri's innate curiosity always pushes her to learn more and put more of the pieces of the puzzle together, but her lack of knowledge and experience provides an obstacle to true enlightenment.

By the end of the book, Piri learns important lessons about the depth of depravity human beings are capable of, as she is forcibly marched into a filthy ghetto, sexually assaulted, and then transported like cattle into a freight train. But even in the end, Piri is ignorant of the horror of the concentration camps, and this is ignorance she shares with all the Jewish adults.

Regret

The book's most poignant character is Mother, who must find the strength to shoulder the burden of keeping her entire family of young children safe, sheltered, and nourished. Throughout, she displays remarkable courage and cool. Though she is extremely upset on the inside, she knows that her children need to see her strong.

However, in a private moment she shares with Mrs. Gerber, which Piri overhears, Mother expresses extraordinary regret over the choices she has made. These include not insisting on keeping Mancsi when Lilli and Lajos were shipped off to concentration camps, and not sending her children to America when she had the chance. Mother compares her situation to the life of a theater actress she enjoyed as a younger woman. As an actress, she could always rehearse so that the actual performance was flawless. In life, there are no rehearsals, and we must live with the choices we make in emotional and hasty moments.

The lesson for the reader is to take life as it comes, and to realize that life is not a performance where we have infinite rehearsals and do-overs. The reader should not

succumb to the regret Mother expresses, for it is illogical to wish for do-overs in life. All we can be is present in the moment.

Hanging on to Normalcy

Throughout the family's harrowing ordeal, it is remarkable to note the steps the family takes to maintain some sense of normalcy through regular activities. It becomes clear that the pursuit of these normal, everyday activities is essential to the sanity of everyone involved, to retain some sort of calm within the storm of world war.

One of these essential activities is the observance of Jewish holidays, such as Hanukkah and Passover. Despite the lack of available foodstuffs, Mother makes it a point to create some sort of feast for the celebration of Passover, which spiritually renews the family. In the case of Hanukkah, it is clear when Mother gives up after several days of lighting the candles—due to her despair at Father not being home—that this gesture affects and discourages her children. The Jewish religion becomes both a source of pride and a source of comfort for Piri and her family. There is even a streak of defiance within the celebration of these Jewish holidays. The family knows that many in the town and around Europe hate them for their Jewish heritage, and so celebrating this Jewish heritage despite this hatred gives them strength.

Mother also feels it is important for Piri to be with children her own age, and so she spends a lot of time at school (at least in the beginning, when school is still open) and at Mrs. Gerber's house, where she strikes up a friendship with Judi.



Style

Perspective

Upon the Head of the Goat is written in first person, from the perspective of Piri, a nickname for author Aranka Siegal herself. As a nine-year-old witnessing the events of war and the horrors of anti-Semitism, Piri maintains a childlike innocence and ignorance throughout the proceedings. She has little idea how much hatred much of the world has for Jews; in her world, everyone is alike, and religion or cultural heritage doesn't matter much. She also has no idea how large the German war machine is growing, and how close it is to her doorstep until it is too late.

Piri's ignorance was partially based on a lack of information coming from the war front, partially because of the adults in her life shielding her from the truth, and partially because everyone, adults included, tragically underestimated the danger the Germans posed. Perhaps demonstrative of the innate optimism of human nature, Hungarians felt that the concentration camps were being set up simply to house and care for war refugees. They had no idea that Hitler was executing a "Final Solution" to rid the world of Jews.

Piri importantly grows up during the narrative, and so part of the interest of the book is as a coming of age tale. Faced with the horrors of war, Piri grows up much too quickly as she witnesses death and the very worst humankind has to offer, including being sexually abused by a German officer.

Tone

Despite the awfulness of Piri's situation, the author writes with a measured detachment. This is perhaps a combination of an intentional journalistic objectivity—to make a record of events without emotion or personal investment "getting in the way" of the telling—and also the fact that the author is writing many decades after the events, and so she has achieved a certain perspective (time heals all wounds).

Siegal rarely strays from the "in the moment" immediacy of young Piri experiencing events as a child her age might have experienced them. Thus, there is little opportunity to offer commentary as the adult Siegal, about the impact of the Holocaust or the grief at losing many members of her family. However, there are a couple of important exceptions. Adult Siegal takes time to extol the virtues of her beloved grandmother Babi's wisdom, and she often quotes Babi concerning Jewish identity or other issues. Secondly, Siegal makes it a point to remark upon the heroism and sacrifice of her mother, who emerges as a truly courageous and also tragic figure in the narrative. With these two people—Babi, Mother—Siegal's tone and approach changes, letting the reader know the profound impact these women had on Siegal's life.



Another interesting moment is the tail end of the book, when Piri and her family are shoved tight into freight trains (they had expected passenger trains), but not before Piri is fondled by a German officer. Siegal ends the story quite abruptly, and here what is not spoken about (being separated from her family and enduring life in the concentration camp) speaks volumes. It is as if, despite Siegal's admirable courage in writing about the disintegration of her family, the actual concentration camp narrative is too much to bear or put on paper.

Structure

Upon the Head of the Goat is the autobiographical narrative of author Aranka Siegal's childhood in Hungary. Siegal uses the name Piri for her own character in the book. The book proceeds in chronological order, beginning in 1939 with Piri, then nine years old, having a country vacation in rural Komjaty. At that time, World War II was just beginning to affect the lives of Hungarians, but more immediate is a border war between Hungarians and Czechs.

The book ends with Piri and her family being shepherded onto a freight train bound for Auschwitz, the German concentration camp. In an unnerving bit of dramatic irony, the reader having any familiarity with World War II realizes the implications of being shipped to Auschwitz, but Piri and her family are ignorant of the doom that awaits them. A very brief Afterword explains that only Piri and Iboya were spared from death in the concentration camp. There is a sense that the actual events of the concentration camp are too horrible to relay, and so the narrative cuts off at that point.

Each of twenty-two chapters is generally divided according to either significant events, or because time was elided for the sake of dramatic interest.



Quotes

"I saw two more soldiers in the river before I turned my back. These bodies, in the middle of the river, were being thrown from rock to rock. The bodies all had one thing in common; they were all missing hats and boots. Thinking of my stepfather, whom I had so often seen in his officer's uniform, and of my baby brother, Sandor, who would grow up to wear one, I started running again and did not stop until I reached Babi's warm kitchen." (Chapter 1, page 6)

"Somewhere in my heart I had known that my Christian friends were different from me; that I lived in their world, not they in mine; that laws came from their world, not mine; that school closed for Christmas and Easter, not Hanukkah and Passover. I had accepted these rules without thinking much about them, just as I accepted having to wash my face and brush my hair." (Chapter 2, page 14)

"I tried to say goodbye, but the words would not come out. I kissed [Babi's] wrinkled face, hoping that she would understand. Rozsi picked up the large suitcase and one of the baskets. I picked up the remaining two, thankful for the excuse to turn away from Babi and start moving." (Chapter 5, page 40)

"We stopped turning on the radio because they had suspended newscasts, playing only sermons and Christmas carols. Mother tried to go through the rituals of Hanukkah and lit the candles the first few nights, giving us the customary treats. But, without Father, we could not sing the traditional songs and we gave up lighting the candles and playing dreidel games before the holiday was over." (Chapter 7, pages 49-50)

"Slowly Mother turned back from the gate. Her cheeks were wet with tears, but she spoke to us firmly, telling us all to go to bed. She picked up Joli, who was still repeating, 'Daddy, Daddy,' and carried her off, not turning around toward us again. Startled by her abruptness, we all went back to bed." (Chapter 8, pages 62-63)

"I wondered what Babi would think of this scene. I was pretty sure that she would disapprove. 'Jews should behave like Jews,' she would say, 'without fear or hostility.' The Jews in this non-swaying, smoke-filled room had, I felt, much fear and hostility in them." (Chapter 10, page 73)

"Iboya and I prepared ourselves to manage without Mother for the next two days. The children made few demands for attention; on the contrary, they were subdued. They seemed to have understood that a radical change had taken place in our home." (Chapter 12, page 84)

"In April 1942, after months of probing and letter writing, Mother and Mrs. Gerber received letters telling them that Father's troop was in a Russian prison camp. However, no word came from either of the men. Mrs. Gerber and Mother spent more and more time trying to cheer each other up, using any excuse for a break in their worried existence." (Chapter 14, page 98)



"'She was a brave girl,' Mother repeated over and over. I kept picturing Lujza standing in her pony coat alone in the cold night waiting for that train. And then the harsh metallic sound filling her ears just before. I had to agree with Mother. Lujza was a brave girl." (Chapter 16, page 117)

"The same day, Mr. Hirsch came to tell Mother the deportation orders. Eichmann had divided Hungary into six zones, and the first to be evacuated would be our area and the surrounding villages. My mind leaped to thoughts of Babi and Rozsi, and I didn't hear anything else that he said. After he left, we did our chores and ate our sparse meal. A word from any one of us and we would have started to cry. It was enough just to be close to one another." (Chapter 18, page 139)

"[If] we were given a preview of life's moments of crisis, a chance to think instead of having to act in haste, we would not have to go through life blaming ourselves for not having acted properly. That is the big difference between life and the theater. Rehearsals." (Chapter 20, page 174)

"Iboya, Judi, and I were just walking back from our turns at the latrine when we heard the clacking sound of the train approaching the brick factory. I heard it with all of my being—not as a sound, but as a total experience—and was filled with terror. A tremor shook my body." (Chapter 22, page 211)



Topics for Discussion

What was the Zionist Club? What did they attempt to do?

Describe the cultural differences and tension between the Ukrainians and Hungarians at the start of the book.

How does Piri draw strength and inspiration from Babi and her wisdom? What specific pieces of wisdom from Babi does Piri discuss?

Describe the circumstances of Lujza's death.

Explain the meaning of the book's title, Upon the Head of a Goat, and how it relates to Jews and the Holocaust.

Could Mother have done anything differently to better the family's outcome? How does regret factor in to Mother's tragic story?

Why is Lajos taken away by policemen?