

Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Many survivors say that luck was the reason they survived. How much of Sala's experiences were the result of luck, good or bad? How much was due to her own choices?
2. The people who wrote letters to Sala had little or no understanding of what was happening in the war, whether Germany was winning or losing. Their subject was everyday life. What do we learn about history when we see events unfolding this way? How does it compare to other ways of understanding the past? How well do the letters author convey the era in which the events take place? What has most shaped your understanding of World War II: personal experience, popular films such as *Schindler's List*, newsreel footage, academic or historical texts?
3. After the Nazi invasion of Poland, the Jews were immediately faced with the question of how to respond to the Nazi demands for money, property, and labor. Moses Merin became head of the Jewish government in Sosnowiec, sending thousands of Jews to labor camps and even more to Auschwitz. Conditions for the Jews of Sosnowiec under his rule were, however, far better than in other parts of Poland. What would have influenced someone to become a collaborator? What factors would have encouraged someone to join the resistance? How do you judge Merin's actions?
4. Some people find it comforting or cathartic to talk about the past, even when the events are extremely painful. Sala made the opposite decision. She hid the past from her family, and only presented her letters when she feared that she would not recover from surgery. How did Sala's refusal to reveal her past influence her children's sense of themselves and their place in the world? What do you think about how family secrets affect the lives of those who hold the secrets, as well as those who eventually encounter the truth? How has your knowledge—or lack thereof—about your family background shaped your own self-image?
5. Religion is ever present in *Sala's Gift*, especially in Raizel's letters, where she frequently admonishes her sister to "remember God." How did you feel about Raizel's sometimes harsh reminders to behave in accordance with their family traditions? In what ways does faith

protect and nurture Sala during the war? Some survivors found it difficult to return to traditional religious practices after the war; Sala did not. How does her experience, and Raizel's strict interpretation of Judaism, shape Ann's religious beliefs?

6. Ala Gertner was a woman of contradictions: modern in her frank sexuality and rejection of narrow roles for women, but also tender and compassionate to Sala and young women at Auschwitz. What would Ala have thought about women's choices today? Knowing that she had worked closely with Merin's government, were you surprised by her decision to risk her own life to join the resistance at Auschwitz?

7. The Pachta family embraced Sala as if she was a family member, sending money to her family, even a doll for Sala's young niece. When Sala encountered their son in an S.S. uniform, she assumed that she was about to be killed. Yet the Pachta family and their son managed to act with simple human compassion. How and why did they overcome the fear and hatred of Jews, when so many other Germans did not? What constitutes a stereotype? How is a stereotype different from discrimination?

8. Ann Kirschner decided to make her mother's letters and diary public. What do you think of her decision, and how she portrayed her mother? Is the use of personal family papers always justified in the name of history? How would the book have been different if it had been written by someone other than Sala's daughter?