



## Book Club Talking Points

*Created by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre and adapted with permission.*

**These questions have been designed to provide talking points for readers of all levels who have read or listened to the audiobook version of Ruta's Closet.**

The questions draw on themes that are present throughout the entirety of the text and assume the group has finished an initial reading. Location in the book, quotes, and details have been provided where necessary. The questions ask the readers to think deeply about the extremely complex nature of the memoir, the Holocaust, themselves, and their own contemporary world. For those readers working through a chapter at a time, more topic suggestions for specific chapters can be found online at [rutascloset.com](http://rutascloset.com) and listened to on the Ruta's Closet Podcast, which is available on all Podcast platforms.

Please note that the page numbers referred to below relate to the printed version of the book. If you have the eBook version then use the search function on your electronic reader to locate the points described below.

### **Perpetrator-Bystander-Victim-Rescuer**

When considering the role individuals took in the Holocaust, they are usually divided into four categories: victims, perpetrators, rescuers, and bystanders. In Ruta's closet we see Ruta as a victim, Förster and Schlöf as perpetrators, Ona and Antanas as rescuers, and the non-Jewish

neighbours who stood by while they were being persecuted, neither helping nor actively participating, as bystanders. Who do you think you may have been? Why?

Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel said: “The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference.” What does it mean to be ‘indifferent’ in the face of horrific events and what are the dangers of being indifferent?

Why did soldiers join the Nazi organizations such as the SS? Why did civilians in Germany vote for or support Hitler? Were they all virulently anti-Semitic? What else could have motivated them?

If you were a German soldier or non-Jewish Lithuanian, and Jewish houses were left sitting empty after the inhabitants were moved into the ghettos or taken by the firing squads, would you take the opportunity to move into their home or take their belongings? If it’s ‘legal,’ is it ethical? Why might the Lithuanians (civilians and LAF) have collaborated (or cooperated) with the Nazis?

In Chapter Five, we see an instance of Romualdas Koloksa handing over 47 children to the mobile killing squads. Whether or not he actually shot/physically killed them, Koloksa is responsible for sending them to their deaths. Why did individuals like Koloksa go unpunished? What about the individuals driving the car to the killing fields? Making the orders? Working at the camps? Where is the line drawn for guilt?

What are the social and ethical issues connected to hiding a child? What problems (mechanical, economical, emotional) could arise? Why might some people have chosen to hide a child while others refused?

In Chapter Fourteen we see Ona struggle with whether or not to hide Ruta. She believes that it is the right thing to do, but is concerned about Ruta’s appearance and accent. How did Nazi stereotyping play a role in which children survived, and how might this have affected the psychology of Jewish children and their concept of self in the future?

Are the people who refused to help hide Jewish children (bystanders or those who actively argued against it such as Zophia) inherently bad people? Are the people who did inherently good?

Many people often ask, “How could people let this happen?” While many people were aware of what was going on in ghettos, etc., many people still, such as Pranas, simply did not understand its extent and true impact. Although acting as a rescuer, in Chapter Twenty, Meyer suggests that Pranas “had no concept of what the Jews suffered in the last few years” because

“the occupation barely touched his simple life, living where he did”. Does this quote shock you? Do you think that something so horrific could

## **Anti-Semitism**

Chapter One, Meyer discusses the warning signs of what was to come that he experienced.

Why do you think he chose not to leave Lithuania earlier? Why might other Jews have chosen to not flee?

Wulf rejects several offers to be helped or taken away – why? What would you do in this situation? Do they seem to know the extent of what is happening to the Jews across Europe?

Chapter two discusses Anti-Semitism outside of Nazi Germany and in history – where did Anti-Semitism come from, and why do you think so many people believed in it?

Discuss the importance of the introduction to chapter seventeen, which discusses the thoughts and opinions of Lithuanians on Jews: “Throughout Lithuania, people normally celebrated this day of their nation’s independence, proclaimed back in 1918. In the privacy of their homes, they could now only remember the freedom they once enjoyed, for now independence was but a distant memory.

At first, many saw the invading Germans as an opportunity to regain that independence from the Russians. Others relished their arrival as a chance to seek vengeance on the Jews, who they were convinced formed the mainstay of the “Russian tyranny” (Chapter Seventeen). What does this tell you about Anti-Semitism in Europe outside of Nazi Germany?

Where and how does Anti-Semitism exist today?

Discuss the specific events included in the last chapter of Ruta’s Closet. How do these things continue to happen despite the Holocaust?

Have you seen or heard about acts of Anti-Semitism in your own community?

What other groups of peoples do you see as being stereotyped in today’s society (at home or abroad)? What are the dangers of this?

## **Ethical-Moral-Psychological**

What are the ethical implications of being part of the Judenrat? Imagine you are in the Judenrat. You have five minutes to hand over ten Jewish names to the Nazis. What is your criteria for who to choose and why?

Why did the Nazis task the Judenrat with doing their dirty work? Why did the Judenrat do what the Nazis told them to? What would you do if you were assigned to the Judenrat?

The order to disallow pregnancies and births inside the ghetto raises a larger question: in general, does the government have the right to make decisions regarding a woman's reproductive rights?

Was Wulf's decision to assist women with abortions, despite his feelings of personal guilt, an ethical choice in this context?

What would you do if faced with the decision between having an abortion of a planned pregnancy or yourself and your family possibly being killed? OR if you were part of the Judenrat in charge of handling the situation of the women, what would you do?

Discuss the many diseases that existed in the ghettos and concentration camps (evident in both chapter seventeen and eighteen with Misha). To what extent did natural causes contribute to the huge number of Jewish deaths during the Holocaust?

Is this simply a 'natural' issue, or are the Nazis and their collaborators guilty of preventing treatment and setting up unhygienic living situations that contributed to the diseases spreading?

After losing their children, many parents in the ghettos committed suicide. Are the Nazis guilty of these deaths?

Consider the ethics behind Wulf's decision to administer lethal injections to his patients before leaving the ghetto during its liquidation. He believes this is 'murder,' but his patients' families urge him to do so, fearing their death at the hands of the Nazis or Russians could be worse. Did Wulf make the right decision, or should he have stayed with his patients as long as he could?

In chapter fifteen, Father Byla and Father Kleiba take in Polina Toker. We also see Father Lapis helping Jews by forging baptismal and birth certificates. What role did the Christian church play in the Holocaust? Did they do all they could to recognize and help the Jews? Did the Christian beliefs of helping the poor outweigh long-standing religious anti-Semitism?

What psychological impacts would the life in the ghetto and hiding from the Nazis have had on children such as Ruta into their futures?

Consider Ruta's comment in Chapter Twenty-Three after hearing German being spoken outside her window in Poland: "Germans could not possibly have children of their own; they were so cruel that they killed children". What does this tell us about how Ruta understood about her experience and how it impacted her life and way of thinking into the future?

Reflect on the passage in Chapter Sixteen regarding Ruta's first experience with Christmas, and particularly the suggestion that Ruta, "was beginning to turn her back on her heritage: being

Jewish meant suffering”. We see this discussed again in chapter seventeen when Ruta’s mother brings the rosary beads to her window.

How did the Holocaust affect Judaism and Jewish culture not only externally, but also internally? Do you think the experience of abandoning their heritage happened to others? What were the implications of such a phenomena?

Teaching Ruta the ways of the Christian church undoubtedly helped her survive. However, what are the ethical implications of doing this to a Jewish child?

How do you think the Holocaust may have impacted the faith of Jews who experienced it? Think of the terms “liberation” and “liberator.” What do these words mean to you? Often, they carry very positive connotations and ideas. Do the Jews see the incoming Russians as liberators? Does their experience with the Russian ‘liberators’ follow the narrative that you have heard connected to liberators during the Holocaust in your past experience?

Discuss the many steps Meyer and the Krons had to take in order to flee Russia and Lithuania. Why was this task so difficult? Did the end of the Holocaust mean the end of the suffering of Jews?

Do you think the allies did everything they could or should have to stop the Holocaust? To what extent is it the responsibility of the world to stop acts of genocide and persecution?

Where does genocide continue to happen today? What can you do about it?

What new aspects of the Holocaust did you learn about through this biography? How did reading it impact you?

**Please send your observations and suggestions to [info@rutascloset.com](mailto:info@rutascloset.com).**

**Check back regularly to the website, [rutascloset.com](http://rutascloset.com), for updates and new information. The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre hosts a wealth of useful Holocaust information on its website at [vhec.org](http://vhec.org).**



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