



**THE MERMAID AND THE MESSERSCHMITT:
War Through a Woman's Eyes, 1939-1940**
by Rulka Langer

READING GROUP GUIDE

In The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt, written in 1942, the author Rulka Langer (1906-1993) chronicles her experience as a civilian, career woman, and mother of two small children during the first six months of World War II.

1. The book opens with scenes from an idyllic family gathering. Fairly quickly, however, signs of war appear. Discuss the various attitudes held by the author's family members regarding the threat of a German invasion. Is it possible that people who live in beleaguered lands such as Poland grow inured to rumors of conflict?
2. In less than four weeks, the world around Rulka Langer goes from confident normalcy to shattered ruins, and from freedom to rule by a hostile enemy. How does this experience affect her? How does it affect other characters in the book?
3. The author is from a fairly privileged background. How does that fact affect her experience during the siege and occupation? Discuss her family's relationships with their servants.
4. In what ways have societal norms and cultural values reflected in *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* changed since the time period chronicled in the book? Are such changes rooted in Langer's social class or in the general norms and values of that time period?
5. What role does her Catholic faith play in Langer's experience? In the experience of other characters in the book?
6. How are the Jews in the author's Warsaw community affected by the Nazi German invasion? Describe Langer's feelings about anti-Semitism as expressed to the German soldier she encounters on a train.
7. We learn in the Epilogue written by her son George that his paternal grandfather, Langer's father-in-law, was Jewish. Yet the author does not mention this fact in the book. Why do you think she omitted it?

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8. What internal personal resources did Langer draw on to cope with the devastating changes she faced? What external resources? How did being a modern “career woman” shape her response to the German occupation?
9. Have you or anyone you know actually lived through a similar experience? If so, how did you or they cope?
10. The author is surprised to learn that her mild-mannered hairdresser is a heroic patriot. According to Langer, what does war teach us about ourselves and others? In what way are those who face death forever changed?
11. If this had happened in your own country, would you have made the same choice as Langer to leave when the chance arose, or would you have stayed? What issues would arise for you in making such a decision?
12. While reading about the measures the author took to provide for her children and elderly mother during the occupation, did you wonder how you might confront deprivation brought about by an enemy attack or natural disaster?
13. Why was it so important for Americans to read Rulka Langer’s book when it was originally published in 1942?
14. Did reading *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* change your perceptions about the experience of the Polish people during World War II, and if so, in what ways?

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