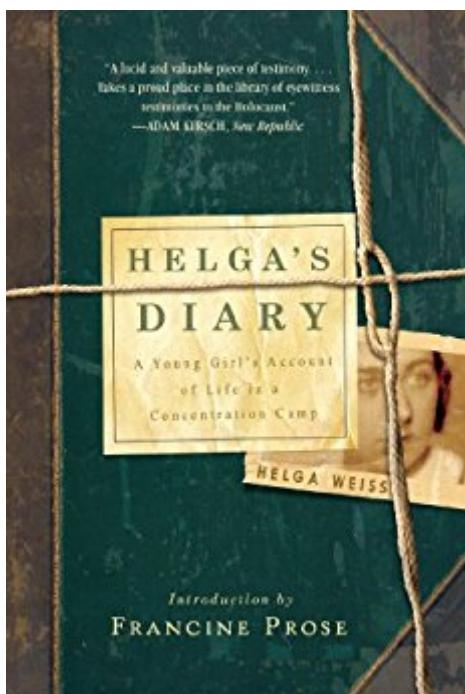


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Helga's Diary: A Young Girl's Account Of Life In A Concentration Camp: A Young Girl's Account Of Life In A Concentration Camp



Synopsis

"A sacred reminder of what so many millions suffered, and only a few survived." —Adam Kirsch, *New Republic* In 1939, Helga Weiss was a young Jewish schoolgirl in Prague. As she endured the first waves of the Nazi invasion, she began to document her experiences in a diary. During her internment at the concentration camp of Terezín, Helga's uncle hid her diary in a brick wall. Of the 15,000 children brought to Terezín and deported to Auschwitz, there were only one hundred survivors. Helga was one of them. Miraculously, she was able to recover her diary from its hiding place after the war. These pages reveal Helga's powerful story through her own words and illustrations. Includes a special interview with Helga by translator Neil Bermel.

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Customer Reviews

Enlightening, A child's view of Being Jewish in WW2....Holocaust life.....and she survived!!How terrible that was...NEVER AGAIN!And yet anti-semitism continues.

Let me start off by saying Helga is a personal friend of mine. she has visited with me, and I have been to Prague and Israel to visit with her. There are many diaries written by children during the Holocaust years. Helga's diary was not necessarily written to be printed. It was written to give credence to each and every day. Her art in itself tells the story. She as the child tells it from a child's perception. No child should need to go through the horrors that Helga Weiss Hoskova has lived to tell about. It was hidden by her Uncle when Helga was shipped to yet another concentration camp. when you read it, please share your reviews as well.

Having read only a small amount about Terezin, a ghetto/concentration camp where many Jews spent time during the war, I was intrigued to pick up this memoir of young Helga's internment. Written during the time she spent within its confines and saved by an uncle who escaped deportation, the diary details a daily life where families were separated, hunger abounded, and anxiety over what lay ahead were constant concerns. Yet Terezin was not the worst camp for Jews, and its inhabitants strove to make it as normal as possible, with plays, concerts, and worship. During her stay, Helga not only kept her diary, she drew detailed pictures of what she lived, and these are included within the book. With lots of footnotes included by the translator, Neil Bermel, we follow Helga during her years as an inmate of Terezin; the portion that describes what happens to she and her mother after they are deported to Auschwitz was added after the war. The entries are often choppy and the footnotes, while adding some illumination, can be distracting as the translator spends a lot of time pointing out what is wrong or has been changed. Despite its minor flaws, Helga's Diary serves as a poignant reminder that the echoes of the Holocaust continue to exist even today. Many thanks to the Historical Novel Society for this book.

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Helga Weiss enjoys a happy, well-nurtured childhood in Prague. Loved by family and many close friends, the decade of the 1930s is closing with promise and excitement. Then, in 1939, Nazi Germany invades Czechoslovakia and everything in Helga's world suddenly changes. Jewish children are forbidden from attending public schools. Their parents lose jobs, bank accounts and valuable property. They are forced from their homes into a decrepit ghetto, where many families must live together in squalor. As 1939 melts into 1940, rumors about prison camps "in the East" become rampant. Soon

word arrives that some of those camps are designed to mete out industrial death to Jews on a massive scale. Suddenly, their horrid ghetto seems like a good place to live. By this time, Helga has begun writing a diary. She feels that it might one day be important to capture the people, places and events along her journey into a living hell. In 1941, Helga and her parents are transported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt (also called "Terezin"). Helga's Diary provides a daily account of life in Terezin, Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps and death camps. In it, she describes their abject misery from slow starvation, rampant sickness, forced labor, the brutality of camp guards and the continual deaths of family and friends. The diary is a window upon the massive Nazi plan to rid Europe of every Jewish man, woman and child. Along with Helga, Nazi Germany deports 15,000 children to Terezin and later to Auschwitz. Only about 100 of them will survive. Helga is fifteen when she and her parents arrive at Terezin. Her writing largely reflects the unbound innocence, resiliency and enthusiasm of a young girl. The brutality that she experiences begins to temper her future posts. Instead of attending her Prague school and working on art projects or mathematics, Helga is suddenly forced into hard labor, welding airplane parts in German factories. Religious holidays and birthdays come and go, surrounded by only cruelty, pain and suffering. Despite the horrifying conditions, we still sense Helga's unbridled zest and enthusiasm for life, her enduring love for family, and her unbound anticipation for a rewarding future. Helga, like almost everyone else in her barracks suffers from typhus and starvation. There is almost no medical care for the prisoners, only vicious guards, endless slave labor, disease and starvation. Helga slips into a life-threatening illness for which there is no available treatment. It seems that Nazis only value Jews who are sufficiently healthy to work in the manufacturing plants that surround concentration camps. While typhus rages within the camp, Helga falls into a limbo between death and survival. The months and years pass by, while Helga manages to remain close to her mother, separated by buildings, but in the same horrid concentration camp. However, with men and women divided, Helga is separated from her dear father. The thought of losing him weighs heavily upon Helga's mind. After being deported from Terezin, Helga's father disappears, as did so many millions of other victims of Nazi brutality. To be sent to a Nazi gas chamber requires only the appearance of advanced age, infirmity, disease or rebelliousness. Even something as simple as wearing glasses becomes a ticket to the gas chamber. Only the strong survive, because they can perform the Nazis' rigorous forced-labor. Helga and her mother barely endure Auschwitz, despite rampant illness and the Nazis' desperate need to gas and burn hundreds of thousands of Jews as rapidly as possible. By 1944, it becomes apparent that Germany is losing the war. Surrounded by the allied armed forces, it's only a matter of time until the concentration camps are liberated. The Nazis decide to

cover up their massive genocide. Jews are forced to gas and burn people as quickly as possible. In Auschwitz, the crematoria chimneys belch acrid fire and smoke high into the air, like some horrid candle pushing the ashes of Jews into infinity. Helga and her mother are soon to be dispatched similarly. Before the Nazi SS can murder everyone at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Russian troops arrive upon their doorstep. Unable to complete their mission, the SS order prisoners on a massive death march, including Helga and her mother. Years of starvation and sickness have taken a vast toll. Helga and her mother are near death. It is uncertain whether they will die along the long march, or after they arrive at a new Nazi death camp in Germany or Austria. Helga's Diary is extremely well-written. Helga had little need to embellish her diary after the war because it was so accurate, evocative and informative. Fascinatingly, we see the development of her writing skills as she ages. While Helga's initial diary posts focus upon simple facts and places, as one might expect from a fifteen year-old, her entries years later reflect the work of a woman whose writing skills have developed into excellent prose. Her detailed and eloquent description of the final death march rivals the writing of any skilled adult. Helga's uncle, also imprisoned at Terezin, takes possession of the diary after Helga and her parents are deported to Auschwitz. He works in the Terezin records department. Before Helga is sent to Auschwitz, she tells her uncle about the diary. He hides the diary inside of a brick wall until the war ends. Miraculously, he is then able to find it and return it to her. If this reviewer has any disappointment with Helga's Diary, it is the absent culture of Theresienstadt. Europe's most well-known Jewish artists, physicians, professors, inventors, politicians and musicians are sent to Theresienstadt. Nazi leadership understands that the world might one day question where these prominent people had gone and how they are being treated. So, Nazi Germany created Theresienstadt as a "show camp." In the end, almost all of those prominent Jews are murdered. The ruse fails. Yet, this reader had hoped to learn more about the Theresienstadt Jewish schools, orchestras, bands, concerts, lectures and all manner of the arts established by Jews within Theresienstadt to make their children less afraid. Perhaps Helga was not part of this social and educational aspect of Theresienstadt. Nazi Germany manufactured films and documentaries inside the camp meant to show the world how well they treat their famous Jews. To this extent, a ruse was accomplished with the Red Cross, in which the healthiest young Jews are forced to pose as happy, fun-loving people, thanks to Nazi generosity. Embarrassingly, The Red Cross falls for this subterfuge, hook line and sinker. Helga's Diary is significantly enhanced by illustrations, drawings, maps, diagrams and pictures liberally sprinkled throughout the well-written text. Visual learners are bound to enjoy this added sensory flavor of Helga's account. This fine book is topped off with a very interesting interview of the author at the conclusion. After the war, Helga

enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, where she later became an artist. To this day, she lives in the house in Prague where she was born. Reviewer Charles S. Weinblatt is the author of Jacob's Courage: A Holocaust Love Story (Mazo Publishers 2007).

For anyone interested in the holocaust, this is a must read. Helga was more fortunate than most as she remained with her mom during their imprisonment. Even as a child she was very insightful and a good communicator. Her art in the book shows a high level of talent for a young child. If you desire to know more about this period of history, you should read this book. I have read many books on the holocaust, but I had never heard of the Terezin camp. It seemed to be one of the better ones.

Helga really gives the reader the feeling of being there with her experiencing the sounds, smells and even the suffering she and her family and friends went through. I feel like everyone should read this book to appreciate all those went through during those terrible times in history.

I finally finished the book I couldn't read very much at one setting. It is so hard to imagine. Through the eyes of a child one can still wonder what went on that she did not remember. It was a story that I will never forget.

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