

# Children's Picture Book Portrayals of Women in Holocaust Concentration Camps

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Research and analysis into the female experience – victim, perpetrator, collaborator, rescuer – during the Holocaust was widely overlooked as a specific field of study in Holocaust history until the early 1980s. Female testimony existed and general questions had been asked in Holocaust scholarship but in-depth analysis about specific ways in which being female impacted on the Holocaust experience had widely been left untouched. A significant shift was made with efforts by scholars Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz who hosted a conference in 1983 specifically on the topic of women in the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> While generating support for a gendered study of the Holocaust and what Myrna Goldenberg termed, “Different horrors, same hell,” there continued (and continues) to be opposition to this gendered approach of study.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, female protagonists in the genre of Holocaust literature have long been the norm. Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic* and *Briar Rose* both feature female protagonists as their storytellers as does Lowis Lowry's *Number the Stars*, Laura E. Williams' *Behind the Bedroom Wall* and Monica Hesse's *Girl in the Blue Coat* – just to name a few. This trend has continued in more recent titles like Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (the protagonist is female with death as narrator), Loïc Dauvillier's graphic novel *Hidden: A Child's Story of the Holocaust* and Susan Goldman Rubin's *Irena Sendler and the Children of the Warsaw Ghetto*. Female protagonists are featured in young adult novels, graphic novels or picture books; there is no exception to this trend.

This article will provide a brief history of the Holocaust told through children's literature, including challenges and concerns offered by scholars along with the analysis of the portrayal of women in four picture books that feature female protagonists in concentration camps. These four books are: *Let the Celebrations Begin! A Story of Hope for the Liberation* written by Margaret Wild and illustrated by Julie Vivas, published in 1991; *Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen* as told to Michelle R. McCann by Luba Tryszynska-Frederick and illustrated by Ann Marshall, published in 2003; *Fania's Heart* written by Anne Renaud and illustrated by Richard Rudnicki, published in 2018; and *The Promise* written by Pnina Bat Zvi and Margie Wolfe, illustrated by Isabelle Cardinal and published in 2018.

From the very early days of children's literature, stories tended “... to have child protagonists and themes that relate to growing up and becoming increasingly independent.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Chappine. “Women in the Holocaust: Week 1 Introduction.” Online lecture, HGS 703: Women in the Holocaust, Gratz College, May 1, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Rittner, “Are Women Human?” in *Rape: Weapon of War and Genocide*, Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds. (Minnesota: Paragon House, 2012), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Shelley Stagg Peterson and Larry Swartz, *Good Books Matter*. Markham: Pembroke Publishers Limited (2008), 7.

Stories had a moral or lesson that the reader could take away from the story and, in picture book format, had images to support the messages. This theme in picture books, as Virginia Walter and Susan March assert, has long been associated with young children.<sup>4</sup> However, as time progressed and the face of picture books shifted and adapted to reflect the current and prominent social issues alongside technological advancements in society, a newer trend emerged: picture books being “written with older children in mind, developing themes or topics that are appropriate for children even into early adolescence.”<sup>5</sup> The definition of a picture book or a children’s book has become more complicated over the last couple of decades as the genre expanded into telling stories of trauma – or as Kenneth Kidd, using early researcher Lawrence Langer’s terminology refers, ‘literature of atrocity.’<sup>6</sup> “...Picture books can help students learn more about the world around them . . . provide the interest, images, and readability that students may need to engage with the content material . . . [and] focus on a single topic and explore it in depth.”<sup>7</sup> These sophisticated picture books that address events like the Holocaust can deal with sensitive issues in a manner that provides both historical context in addition to a means of connecting with the human element of history. Readers not only interpret the text and images that they encounter in a picture book, they are also challenged to interpret the author’s message.<sup>8</sup> However, not all picture books that address ‘literature of atrocity’ are created equal. Eric Kimmel asserted in 1977, long before the Holocaust became a prominent topic in the genre of children’s literature, that the “weight” of responsibility for the “juvenile writer” hangs heavy as the author is “torn between his duty toward his subject and his responsibility toward his craft: not to be too violent, too accusing, too depressing.”<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, these issues highlight some of the reasons there has been concern expressed by scholars about the limitations in using picture books to tell the history of the Holocaust.

In 2000, Elizabeth Baer delved into the history of atrocity in children’s literature in a ‘post-Holocaust’ world. She discussed how “children’s literature has a long tradition of wrestling with the question of presenting evil to children,” from the Puritans to the early American colonists to the Victorians.<sup>10</sup> The struggle of good versus evil and right versus wrong have long been woven into the literature that children are exposed to at an early age. However, the Holocaust doesn’t fit as neatly into these black and white categories. This ‘literature of atrocity’ is dark and difficult and often ends with catastrophic results that are either too difficult to comprehend or could result in trauma for the child. Baer identifies two schools of thought regarding the purpose/intent of Holocaust literature:

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia A. Walter and Susan F. March, “Juvenile Picture Books About the Holocaust: Extending the Definitions of Children’s Literature” in *Publishing Research Quarterly*, Vol. 9, Issue 3 (1993), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley Stagg Peterson and Larry Swartz, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth B. Kidd, “A” is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the “Children’s Literature of Atrocity” in *Children’s Literature*, Vol. 33 (2005), 121.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Webb Billman, “Aren’t these books for Little Kids?” in *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2002), 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Kimmel, “Confronting the Ovens: The Holocaust and Juvenile Fiction” in *The Horn Book*, February 16, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Roberts Baer, “A New Algorithm I Evil: Children’s Literature in a Post-Holocaust World” in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Vol.24, No. 3 (2000), 379.

1. Those who believe that Holocaust literature should be self-reflective. The literature should “. . . teach the student about him or herself . . . it should be about hate, the hate that is within all of us, and the hateful acts of which we are all capable.”<sup>11</sup> This belief is supported by scholar Edward T. Sullivan.
2. Those who believe that Holocaust literature needs to stick to the facts. The literature should “. . . instruct and make meaning” about the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> This belief is supported by scholar Lawrence Langer.

Baer is guided by Langer’s belief system, issuing her own framework for assessment in the effectiveness of Holocaust pictures books. According to Baer the book must:

1. “. . . grapple directly with the evil of the Holocaust . . .
2. . . . present the Holocaust in its proper context of complexity . . .
3. . . . must convey . . . a warning about the dangers of racism and anti-Semitism, and of complacency . . . and
4. . . . should give the reader a framework for response.”<sup>13</sup>

Similar to Elizabeth Baer, Geoffrey Short addresses his concerns with the use of Holocaust literature in the classroom. His exposure to Holocaust education has been through the practical implementation of Holocaust education in UK schools. “I have become aware of a number of significant issues that are often overlooked or badly mishandled in the classroom . . . relevant literature cannot be relied upon to remedy these defects.”<sup>14</sup> Supporting Langer’s beliefs identified in Baer’s article, Short feels that Holocaust literature in any form should:

- Address anti-Semitism directly
- Teach against stereotypes (ie. Jews as rich, Jews as religious, Jews as a race of people)
- Introduce economic conditions at the end of World War I
- Teach the concept of a scapegoat
- Avoid teaching about Jewish people as the eternal victim<sup>15</sup>

Short’s message is that the “benefits of historical [Holocaust] literature cannot be guaranteed. Some books recommended as relevant to the topic can obscure, distort, and deny the truth as easily as they can shed light on it.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, caution in approaching ‘literature of atrocity’ is necessary.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 384.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 384 – 385.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Short, “Learning Through Literature: Historical Fiction, Autobiography, and the Holocaust” in *Children’s Literature in Education*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1997), 180.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 182 – 186.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 188.

Following in Baer's and Short's cautionary approach to Holocaust literature is S. Lillian Kremer. Using work by Hamida Bosmajian and Adrienne Kertzer, Kremer identifies the complexities of writing Holocaust literature. The main concern she asserts, using Bosmajian and Kertzer to support her claim, is the ". . . lack of Holocaust knowledge readers derive from these books."<sup>17</sup> Holocaust literature's "heroic gestures and resistance" alongside the "mandatory happy ending" that is synonymous with children's literature, according to Bosmajian and cited by Kremer, contradicts the realities of 1933 to 1945 and erases pertinent Holocaust history.<sup>18</sup> As Kremer reports, both Bosmajian and Kertzer believe that ". . . a way must be found to tell children that Auschwitz did happen in a manner articulating the complexities of the Holocaust and communicating an awareness of the difference between narrative, memory, and experiential truths."<sup>19</sup> Their request is for "better" children's literature.

Kenneth Kidd assesses the rise in Holocaust literature – or "literature of trauma" – alongside the rise of psychoanalysis, asserting that the two fields have been "mutually enabling."<sup>20</sup> While there are differences between the two fields, one of the binding qualities between trauma – and the analysis of trauma – and Holocaust literature is they are both more personal than political.<sup>21</sup> This idea supports Linda Webb Billman's research mentioned earlier stating that picture books have a means of connecting the reader to personal stories, offering a more in-depth connection to the content aside from just covering statistics. Kidd also looks at picture books as being impactful because there is a "shock value" that can arise out of telling Holocaust stories through this medium – a medium that is presumed to be innocent because it is written for children.<sup>22</sup> Kidd uses this idea of 'innocence' as an example of a realistic theme in Holocaust literature: innocence, especially the innocence of a child – or the presumed innocence of a woman – could be (was) used as a defense under Nazi rule.

Rather than focusing on the effectiveness of the genre, Jocelyn Van Tuyl looks at common themes in the 'waves' in Holocaust literature beginning in the 1970s. Her research focuses specifically on the use of toys – particularly dolls – and the messaging that is both implicit and explicit, and unsettling, in their depictions. In Holocaust literature, these works are ". . . opposite of fantastic tales in which toys come to life, these works depict an equally incomprehensible realm where children come to death."<sup>23</sup> The reader comes to understand that while toys represent the future and conditioning, with dolls particularly for young girls according to Van Tuyl, the toy has the future and the child does not. Van Tuyl identifies that toys represent the past, the present and the future – the remembered, the longed for and the regained.<sup>24</sup> Van Tuyl asserts that, "Literary doll play encourages reader identification with dolls and everything they symbolize; through this identification, doll play manipulates readers – that is, makes them

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<sup>17</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, "Children's Literature and the Holocaust" in *Children's Literature*, Vol. 32 (2004), 252.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 256 – 257.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 262.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth B. Kidd, "'A' is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the Children's Literature of Atrocity" in *Children's Literature*, Vol. 33 (2005), 122.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Jocelyn Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature: From Identification to Manipulation," in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2015), 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 28.

feel and learn.”<sup>25</sup> Van Tuyl seems to align with a combination of Edward Sullivan’s and Lawrence Langer’s school of thought that Baer presented in her research – she believes in the importance of Holocaust literature teaching self-reflection alongside historical fact.

The four picture books selected for this analysis range in publication dates from 1991 to 2018. Three of the stories are non-fiction, based on real events from the Holocaust, while one story is fictional but based on a headline that the author read about an event in one of the camps following liberation. One of the picture books is set in present day and revisits life in the camps through the memory of the protagonist while three of the stories are set in a concentration camp. Each of the four stories has a female protagonist and are written by female authors.

*Let the Celebrations Begin! A Story of Hope for the Liberation* published in 1991 is a fictional story written by Margaret Wild and illustrated by Julie Vivas. The story is based on an article Wild read about Polish women in Bergen Belsen making stuffed toys for the first party held for children following liberation. Protagonist Miriam, in response to the rumors that the war is coming to an end, wants to make stuffed animals for the surviving children of the camp. She has her own memories of life before the camp but her two best friends, Sarah and four year old David “think this [the concentration camp] is their home.”<sup>26</sup> Implications are that Miriam is not that much older than Sarah or David for that matter, but old enough to have memories of ‘before.’ Miriam’s formation of a friendship with Sarah aligns with Lenore Weitzman’s claim that a coping strategy for women was the formation of a “Camp Sister.” Research indicates that this forming of a “Camp Sister” was more common amongst women than men and provided a motivation for survival: sharing food rations, protecting against assaults and holding up your ‘sister’ during roll call, amongst other of life’s necessities in camp.<sup>27</sup> These relationships had a way of inspiring hope as one had someone to live for, you didn’t want to let your ‘sister’ down. Julie Vivas’ illustrations of the women in the barrack further support this idea of sisterhood. The characters are seen leaning in towards each other and often touching each other’s arms, visually showing a supportive and inclusive relationship between the women.

Miriam’s efforts to make the toys also aligns with a second coping mechanism identified by Weitzman and echoed by Myrna Goldenberg, and that is the “continued use of their homemaking skills.”<sup>28</sup> Making toys became something to focus on, something that was ‘normal’ and from life ‘before’ the camp; goals were set to acquire materials in some way in order to create these toys. The women in Miriam’s barrack complied, even ‘Old Jacoba’ who initially scoffed at the idea and reprimanded Miriam for not focusing on their starvation: “It is food we need, not your foolish toys.”<sup>29</sup> The women’s collective effort to make the toys – gathering buttons and other odds and ends, cutting pieces of material off of their already shredded clothing – is another indication of the sisterhood amongst the women in Miriam’s barracks.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Wild, 1991.

<sup>27</sup> Lenore Weitzman, “Women in the Holocaust” from *The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Wild, 1991.

The toys in Wild's story, however, do not hold the significance identified by Jocelyn Van Tuyl in her analysis of toys in Holocaust literature. While Miriam's toys are a representation of "the past, present and future - the remembered (Miriam's memories), the longed for (Sarah and David's questions about toys and what they are) and the regained (new toys made for the children in preparation for liberation),"<sup>30</sup> both the toys and the children in this story have a future; whereas traditionally, Van Tuyl identified, the toys in literature have a future while the children in Holocaust literature do not - keeping with the reality of Holocaust history.

Alongside toys, food was very much a part of Miriam's dialogue in the story. She compared David's thin legs to that of a chicken – although a chicken's legs, she stated, were fatter. Miriam spoke of her desire, once liberated, to gobble up every ounce of food she could find and make sure that David "had second helpings, third helpings, fourth helpings of everything."<sup>31</sup> This discussion of food has also been identified by numerous researchers, including Myrna Goldenberg, as a coping mechanism in the ghettos and camps, particularly amongst women.<sup>32</sup>

While Wild's portrayal of her fictional character Miriam follows many of the findings by researchers that are unique to the female experience in the Holocaust, the story itself wildly fails in meeting the criteria laid out by Elizabeth Baer and Geoffrey Short with regards to how responsible Holocaust literature should teach about this time period. Baer identifies *Let the Celebrations Begin!* as failing in every aspect of her established criteria. The story, according to Baer is unrealistic, too upbeat and, alongside the illustrations, is misleading. "It should not be used in any responsible Holocaust education setting."<sup>33</sup> For Baer, a piece of Holocaust literature must instruct the reader about the history of the Holocaust. While text in the story does use terms such as: guards, soldiers, liberator, camp, guns, and tanks, there is no context to the significance of these words. Wild is relying on the reader to use their prior knowledge to assign meaning and significance to the terms. A quote from a survivor at the end of *Let the Celebrations Begin!* mentions "Germans, British and barracks" and then a page discussing the publication journey of the story is where "Belsen and Auschwitz" are mentioned. This section also discusses how the initial use of Polish names in the story were changed to make the names more "Jewish" – also a first mention. The back pages of the book contain a note from the author and a note from the illustrator. The first mention of the word "Holocaust" is the last word used in the author's note at the end of the book.

The bright, colorful illustrations do include the familiar image of the multi-tiered bunks in the barracks; however, the color adds to the contradictions of the reality of a story like this in the setting of a concentration camp. Although this argument must be placed in context. As researchers, we are used to seeing images from this time period in black and white (with the exception of a limited number of colorized photos). The imposition of darkness and lack of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors" in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 335.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 387.

color could very much be reflected in the time and distance that we have from this time period, therefore our discomfort with vibrant color to tell a story of the Holocaust.

If we review Margaret Wild's story according to Geoffrey Short's criteria, the story: does not address antisemitism – directly or indirectly; it does not teach against stereotypes; it does not introduce economic conditions at the end of World War I that assisted in setting the stage for the Holocaust and World War II; nor does the story teach the concept of a scapegoat. The story does avoid representing “Jews as eternal victims;” however, one could read the entire story and not make any connection to the Jewish people. While Baer encourages complete avoidance of using this book, it is in circulation therefore the book is being used. It is imperative that this story is not a stand-alone story in a Holocaust unit. A great deal of support is required to ensure that it contributes to a young reader's understanding about the Holocaust rather than falsely skewing this history.

*Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen* as told to Michelle R. McCann by Luba Tryszynska-Frederick and illustrated by Ann Marshall was published in 2003. It is the true story of Luba, a Jewish nurse originally deported to Auschwitz and then selected out for transfer to Bergen-Belsen. Luba, tattoo number 32967, had her son Isaac ripped out of her arms upon arrival at Auschwitz and was struggling with her own survival and will to live. One night, lying in the barracks in Bergen-Belsen, she hears a faint cry outside. Discouraged by her bunkmates to investigate, Luba goes outside anyway in the dead of winter. She finds fifty-four orphaned children left by Nazi guards in a field to freeze to death. Luba brings the children into the barracks, again with opposition from her fellow female barrack-mates, and they become her children to save.

Ann Marshall's dark hues used in the illustrations of the story provide a subtle but important mood to the darkness and danger of the times. Luba's face is the clearest face throughout the story, identifying her as the protagonist and illustrating her emotional struggles throughout the story.

Luba did not form the close sisterhood with bunkmates as Miriam had in *Let the Celebrations Begin!*. However, Luba created a surrogate family for herself through these fifty-four children. This surrogate family meant “companionship” and as Myrna Goldenberg asserts, a “mental or emotional advantage” because of the nurturing role of caring for the children.<sup>34</sup> Luba's body language in the illustrations throughout the book indicate a protective and supportive stance, either holding hands, standing close to the children or having her arms wrapped protectively around them. While Luba fulfills the *traditional* female role in this story, there is an exception to be made: she is Jewish, she is a prisoner in a concentration camp and she is going against the wishes of her fellow female prisoners in her barrack – who are all breaking the assumed traditional female role by not wanting to protect these children. As Lawrence Langer identifies, “fear is a powerful deterrent to community spirit.”<sup>35</sup> While all of these factors break from the traditional female role, within the field of gender studies in the Holocaust, Luba

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<sup>34</sup> Myrna Goldenberg, “Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism: Women's Holocaust Narratives,” in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 548 (1996), 88.

<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Langer, “Gendered Suffering” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 359.

and her bunkmates illustrate the varied, *real* responses demonstrated by women – through research in written and oral testimony - in these circumstances.

Luba's challenge throughout the story is a preoccupation with obtaining food – not just for herself, but for all fifty-four children. This theme of food and the preoccupation with food, both hunger and obtaining food, is another theme that has shown to be consistent in the memoirs of female survivors.<sup>36</sup> Luba has to risk her personal safety by not only smuggling food past guards in the camp, but by having to reach out to fellow prisoners who are ranked 'higher' than her in the camp, imprisoned as both political prisoners as well as criminals from pre-war days. As a Jewish prisoner, Luba faces the possibility of being reported on and receiving a harsher sentence – ultimately death – for taking this risk, simply because she is Jewish. She cautiously approaches each of these situations, using what arguably could be called her feminine wiles to get the food that she needs. Dalia Ofer states that, "At times, being a woman had its advantages. Women did not hesitate, for example, to play on men's gallantry, or to appear poor and unhappy in order to receive sympathy."<sup>37</sup> For example, when visiting the butcher to ask for meat for her children, Luba played on the older man's sentimentality for family, "Ah well, I thought you were a grandfather...but I must have been mistaken. A grandfather would never let someone else's grandchildren go hungry."<sup>38</sup> Luba successfully acquires a sausage for her children.

Luba's visit to the cook is extremely difficult for her as the cook is a former German criminal now a prisoner in Bergen-Belsen whose dislike for Jewish prisoners is compared to the Nazi guards. The visit is also unique as it is nuanced with a rare, subtle glimpse into the very sensitive world of sexual assault. As Luba asks for extra soup for her children, the cook pinches her cheek – the illustration portrays an uncomfortable feeling as a result of the closeness of Luba with the cook and the uncertainty painted in her eyes coupled with the text: "Luba wanted to slap his hand away from her face, but instead she smiled and hid the pot insider her magical coat."<sup>39</sup> The message is subtle, and without the historical context of females being sexually assaulted in camps, the message would be missed. However, the fact that Michelle McCann included this portion of the story in the book speaks volumes, in my opinion, to the authenticity that she is trying to portray in Luba's story.

While McCann's *Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen* may not meet all of the criteria laid out by Elizabeth Baer and Geoffrey Short, her story certainly checks many of the boxes. The story begins with an author's note identifying the real story behind the picture book alongside the fifty-four names of the children that Luba met in Bergen-Belsen. The language throughout the book addresses terminology from the time period and is supported with an epilogue, brief history of World War II and the Holocaust, a map, a photograph of a liberated Bergen-Belsen barrack and a bibliography for further reading. Antisemitism is not addressed directly in the text of the story, however, the complexity of the history alongside an effort to grapple with the evil of the Holocaust certainly comes through, with Luba saving these fifty-four children while having her own child ripped from her arms as just one example. *Luba* also provides the reader with Baer's

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<sup>36</sup> Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors," 335.

<sup>37</sup> Dalia Ofer, "Gender in Ghetto Diaries and Testimonies" in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 155.

<sup>38</sup> Michelle McCann, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

suggested framework for response: doing “something” matters. Luba’s story is truly one that indicates for the reader that her actions had a lasting impact, but she didn’t take action *because of* the lasting impact. She took action because she cared and could do something. The message to young readers is that we can all do something to help others despite our circumstances – whether it’s sharing food, comforting someone who is sad, playing games with someone who is left out; every action we take means something and has a lasting impact.

One critique of the story, that lends itself to Lillian Kremer’s concern about picture books and their traditional happy endings not fitting with the Holocaust subject matter, is that while Luba finds fifty-four children to save in Bergen-Belsen that day, but only fifty-two survive to be liberated. The way in which the two children die or when this happens are not mentioned, simply glossed over that fifty-two of the fifty-four children survived. While difficult to address, one and a half million children were murdered in the Holocaust, a fact that cannot be denied in studying this history.

*Fania’s Heart* was written by Anne Renaud and illustrated by Richard Rudnicki (by chance, the only male illustrator of these four books). Published in 2018, this story is based on the real story of Fania Fainer. The story begins with Sorale finding a small book shaped like a heart, wrapped in purple cloth with the letter *F* embroidered on the cover. Sorale shares with the reader that her mother has always had secrets, including the “tattooed number on her arm . . . why she had no sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, or uncles . . . no grandparents.”<sup>40</sup> On this particular day Sorale’s mother Fania decides to share the secret of the little book. Fania takes Sorale and the reader back to her time as a prisoner in Auschwitz, revealing how the book, actually a birthday card crafted and given to Fania by her closest friends she made while interned in Auschwitz, became her lifeline to survival – a reminder of love and hope in the world.

The illustrations in *Fania’s Heart* are bright and colorful in the initial present day setting of the story, however, as Fania begins to tell her story the illustrations remain bright but with a dark undertone that resonates with the setting of the story. Rudnicki uses infamous images that are synonymous with the Holocaust including a portion of the ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ (Work will set you free) sign that stands above the Auschwitz I entrance to the camp, the image of the multi-tiered bunks, the barbed wire fencing with guard towers and the striped uniforms.

Fania’s story is truly an illustration of the power of Lenore Weitzman’s concept of the “Camp Sister” that was identified earlier in Margaret Wild’s book and the importance of a surrogate family that Myrna Goldenberg wrote about in her research and was discussed earlier in the story of *Luba*. This coping mechanism that has been identified by numerous researchers as instrumental for women in their survival during the Holocaust is the foundation of this story. Fania identifies her “Camp Sisters” very early in the story, “This heart was made by brave young women who were like sisters to me. We came from different countries . . . Though we spoke different languages . . . we managed to understand each other.”<sup>41</sup> The illustrations reinforce this idea of sisterhood, featuring Fania and her “Camp Sisters looking out for each other (in one illustration the marching line of women has the woman in front looking back as a guard is

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<sup>40</sup> Anne Renaud, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

meting out a punishment – See Fig. 1), linking arms, placing hands on each other’s arms and shoulders in a protective and supportive manner.

Additional coping mechanisms that have been identified by researchers as unique to women also arise in this story including the focus on food and food imagery, also discussed in the analysis of Margaret Wild’s book. Fania recalled her mother’s chicken and told Sorale that “food was our favorite topic of conversation.”<sup>42</sup>

A unique feature of *Fania’s Heart* is the identification of the gifted heart as an act of resistance. Women, in this story, take the lead on this act of resistance. Fania shares with her daughter that the glue to hold the book together was made from bread and water, precious rations that could mean the difference between life and death in the camp. The piece of cloth on the cover of the birthday card was cut from Fania’s best friend Zlatka’s blouse – her prized possession. The words inside the heart were all written in different languages, but managed to convey the feelings of love and hope to Fania regardless of whether she understood the language or not. “If the guards had found it [the heart], my friends would have been beaten or killed. They put their lives in danger by making this birthday card for me.”<sup>43</sup> This image of the female as courageous and brave breaks earlier models of women found in literature that included women as “ancillary roles...helpless victims.”<sup>44</sup> Fania and her friends take the lead in their own story. The idea of resistance is not over-romanticized though as the heart-shaped birthday card comes at a time when Fania is feeling down – with her approaching twentieth birthday she is feeling old because, “People did not live to be old” in Auschwitz.”<sup>45</sup> Fear of pending death is a part of Fania’s story.

Similar to *Luba*, *Fania’s Heart*, in my opinion, checks off a number of the integral aspects of a ‘good’ piece of Holocaust literature for children. Renaud uses language appropriate to the time period and addresses the dehumanization process when describing Fania’s enrollment in the camp, particularly losing her name and identity to a number. The vastness of the Holocaust is addressed in that Fania had friends she identified from “Poland, Czechoslovakia, France, Belgium.”<sup>46</sup> Renaud addresses forced labor with the women working in a munitions factory and living off of miniscule rations that barely kept them alive. She also addresses the constant terror felt by the prisoners by having Fania reveal these thoughts and emotions to her daughter Sorale through the telling of her story. Renaud also includes an *Author’s Note* at the end of the story, showing a photograph of Fania’s gift that is now on display at the Montreal Holocaust Museum along with a photograph of the real Fania. The reader is also left with a very clear framework for response: “My friends wanted to prove that despite all that was inflicted upon us, we could still treat each other with humanity. Their words saved me.”<sup>47</sup> Words matter. Reaching out and supporting friends matters. Standing up and speaking out matters. These

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, “Women in the Holocaust: Representation of Gendered Suffering and Coping Strategies in American Fiction,” in *Experience and Expression: Women, Nazis, and the Holocaust*, Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 261.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Renaud, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

simple concepts are manageable for young readers and important messages for young people as they grow into their adolescent years.

Where the story is lacking, if we continue to follow Elizabeth Baer's and Geoffrey Short's criteria, is the direct instruction regarding the lead-up to the Holocaust: the economic conditions that contributed to Hitler's rise to power and the virulent and persistent antisemitism that existed in Europe prior to the Holocaust. The reader knows that Fania is in Auschwitz because she is Jewish, but the reader is missing the direct link from Fania's circumstances to the consequence of antisemitism left unchecked. *Fania's Heart*, similar to *Luba*, has a happy ending in the sense that Fania has survived but leaves out any reference to what happened to her friends that gave her such a precious gift. Once again, death and murder that are synonymous with places like Auschwitz are not addressed in a direct manner.

*The Promise* written by Pnina Bat Zvi and Margie Wolfe, illustrated by Isabelle Cardinal was published in 2018. The story is based on the real events of the authors' mothers, stories that had been shared for many years at the family kitchen table. On the night of their parents' arrest, Toby is given a tin of shoe paste that is hiding three gold coins. Her father asks Toby to promise to hold onto the three gold coins, to use them only when necessary and to stay with her sister Rachel (who had been forced by the Nazis to work on the night of her parent's arrest). Imprisoned in Auschwitz, these gold coins are put to use when Rachel becomes sick. The girls have seen how anyone that becomes sick simply disappears. When Rachel cannot make it to work one day due to illness, Toby returns to the barrack to find her sister gone. Toby learns of a nearby barrack where the sick prisoners are taken before their final disappearance. Bribing the prisoner-guard of this barrack with the three gold coins, Toby makes her way into the barrack to rescue her sister Rachel and they return together to Barrack 25 for forced labor the next day. This daring rescue saves Rachel's life and enables the girls to keep their promise to their father.

Isabelle Cardinal's illustrations are a unique display of digital collage that she has fashioned as her own style over the past seventeen years as an illustrator. Using different textures, photographs from past eras and drawings, she creates a heaviness in the illustrations that is fitting for the setting of Auschwitz and much darker than the other picture books featured in this article. The dark undertones and muted colors are consistent throughout the telling of Toby and Rachel's story. Cardinal also uses images that are synonymous with Auschwitz including the 'Arbeit Macht Frei' sign (although not the arched sign that stands above the gates of Auschwitz I, despite Auschwitz being the setting of the story) and images of the barracks and barking German shepherds used by the guards.

The pattern that has been seen in the portrayal of women in the previous three stories continues in *The Promise*, with a focus on the coping mechanism of the "Camp Sister" and/or surrogate family, with the exception in this story that the two main protagonists are sisters by birth. However, as members of Barrack 25, there is sisterhood built between the actual sisters and their fellow inmates. Amongst the many examples is when Toby makes the decision to visit the Barrack where Rachel is being held as a sick prisoner. Toby's barrack-mates express concern for her safety, but realizing her determination, give her helpful information in finding

her sister and lend her an extra scarf to assist in their ‘escape.’<sup>48</sup> In the *Epilogue* it is stated that “They remained forever friends with those girls from Barrack 25 who also survived.”<sup>49</sup>

The story itself does represent an example of resistance as Toby rescues Rachel from what is certain death, but the means of how the resistance is enacted breaks from the pattern of the other stories in this essay as the act of resistance is against the guards in Auschwitz. While Luba and Fania in their stories demonstrate their resistance by smuggling items past the guards (food and the heart-shaped birthday card respectively), Rachel and Toby outright defy the orders of the camp by moving Rachel back to Barrack 25 without the consent of the guards. The consequence to this act of resistance is having to explain Rachel’s presence in Barrack 25 the following morning to the guards that run roll call. Here lies the danger in presenting this story to young readers: the misconception that standing up to guards in concentration camps resulted in saving lives. Now to be fair, the guards did punish Toby with a whipping on her bare back with the dog’s leash and, “The scars on Toby’s back remained for a long time.”<sup>50</sup> And of course, it must be mentioned that there were always exceptions to rules under the Nazi régime; however, presenting this story as a stand-alone story, or a story without guidance and contextualizing this history could, as Geoffrey Short and Elizabeth Baer warn, misconstrue Holocaust history and question the “lack of fighting back” by other prisoners in the camps.

Similar to the other picture books, *The Promise* does not address Baer’s and Short’s recommendations to include pre-Holocaust history nor does it directly address antisemitism, racism and complacency. The story does not teach against stereotypes nor does it teach to stereotypes. Some may argue the passing of gold coins from father to daughter may perpetuate a stereotype but in the context of the story it was about being able to use the few coins as a means of survival, certainly not indicating that Rachel and Toby came from a wealthy family (which would align with the stereotype). *The Promise* is the only picture book included in this study that has characters feature a Jewish symbol. Rachel and Toby’s father wears a kippah in the scene where father asks Toby to make the promise to stay together (See Fig. 2). The Star of David can be seen in *Fania’s Heart* but it is the yellow star that marked Fania and her bunkmates as prisoners – victims. While the Star of David is a symbol of Judaism, the yellow star is the mark of victimhood, a symbol that could fall into Short’s criteria to avoid teaching the “Jew as an eternal victim.”<sup>51</sup>

The development of the Holocaust as a theme in children’s literature is a trend that has become quite prominent since the early 2000s, particularly with the picture book genre. With the early introduction of the Holocaust theme, scholars cautioned readers about the dangers of this platform in teaching young readers about the Holocaust. Scholars Elizabeth Baer and Geoffrey Short, building on previous work by scholars such as Lawrence Langer and Edward T. Sullivan, both identified criteria that they felt exemplified “good” Holocaust literature.

The study of the female experience in the Holocaust is a relatively new field, yet literature for young people has long featured female protagonists. The four stories featured in

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<sup>48</sup> Pnina Bat Zvi and Margie Wolfe, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey Short, 182 – 186.

this article, *Let the Celebrations Begin!: A Story of Hope for the Liberation*, *Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen*, *Fania's Heart* and *The Promise*, all feature female protagonists who exemplify coping skills that have been identified by scholars as common and unique to women. All four of the books depicted surrogate families that were formed in the women's barracks of the concentration camp system. Miriam, Luba, Fania, Toby and Rachel all relied on support from members of their barracks to provide them with the hope that they needed to get through the day. While their surrogate families took on different forms (from strangers to children to actual siblings), the importance of this coping mechanism was highlighted by each of the protagonists either through text, in the illustrations or a combination of both. Food talk was another coping mechanism that scholars have identified as unique amongst the female experience and this was evident in the women in the picture book stories as well. Miriam and Fania both identified memories of food as part of their Holocaust experience while Luba was on a quest for food to feed her fifty-four children so they wouldn't starve.

While 1991's *Let the Celebrations Begin!* has been seen as a weak story with regards to historical fact – in fact Baer suggests not using it at all - the titles that were published in 2003 onward continue to strengthen in the information that is shared through both text and illustration. *Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen*, *Fania's Heart* and *The Promise* all contain unique pieces of Holocaust history. They address the starvation and terror in the camps alongside the courage and resistance that was demonstrated by some prisoners. Topic-specific language is used in the texts and images synonymous with the Holocaust can be found in all four of the titles (including the 'Arbeit Macht Frei' sign that stands above Auschwitz I, the multi-tiered barracks, the striped uniforms and the barbed wire with guard towers). While none of the stories checked off every single criteria box issued by Baer and Short, they presented solid, strong histories through the story telling.

All of the stories ended with a 'happy ending' of sorts – a caution issued by S. Lillian Kremer – making the teaching of the Holocaust through this medium a challenge. In reality, not all endings to Holocaust stories are happy. The lack of information shared about the two children of Luba's fifty-four that died is problematic. Approximately 1.5 million children were murdered in the Holocaust. This is the reality. However, do children today need to receive all of the information at once? I would argue no. The Holocaust is a complex history filled with nuanced language, laws that were dependent on the region, time, place and often who was carrying out the order. Gender played a role in the experience and adds another layer of complexity to the history. Buildings on concentration camp grounds are continuing to be discovered and with the release of documentation that has been filed away for years, new information is bound to arise in years to come as scholars begin to sift through and make sense of the paperwork that was not destroyed by the Nazis as the war came to an end. I feel picture books should have the goal of piquing interest in the topic of the Holocaust for young children and encouraging further reading as they grow. Written accurately and authentically, picture books can be an open door to early exposure to this history, ensuring that the memory of the Holocaust is not forgotten and building interest for later years when critical and thoughtful discussions can lead to breaking the cycle of violence and someday, maybe someday, stopping genocide before it happens.

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First the men, and then the women and children, were hustled in the nude along a narrow fenced-in pathway nicknamed by the SS as the Himmelstrasse (road to Heaven). At the end of the path was a bathhouse with tiled shower rooms. As soon as the people were all crammed inside, the main door was slammed shut, creating an air-tight seal. Prisoners at the electric fence of Dachau concentration camp cheer American soldiers in Dachau, Germany in an undated photo. Some of them wear the striped blue and white prison garb. They decorated their huts with flags of all nations which they had made secretly as they heard the guns of the 42nd Rainbow Division getting louder and louder on the approach to Dachau.