



## **Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz**

*Rena Kornreich Gelissen*

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## **Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz** Rena Kornreich Gelissen

Sent to Auschwitz on the first Jewish transport, Rena Kornreich survived the Nazi death camps for over three years. While there she was reunited with her sister Danka. Each day became a struggle to fulfill the promise Rena made to her mother when the family was forced to split apart--a promise to take care of her sister. One of the few Holocaust memoirs about the lives of women in the camps, *Rena's Promise* is a compelling story of the fleeting human connections that fostered determination and made survival a possibility. From the bonds between mothers, daughters, and sisters, to the links between prisoners, and even prisoners and guards, *Rena's Promise* reminds us of the humanity and hope that survives inordinate inhumanity.

## **Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz Details**

Date : Published 1996 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (first published October 30th 1995)

ISBN :

Author : Rena Kornreich Gelissen

Format : Hardcover 271 pages

Genre : World War II, Holocaust, Nonfiction, History, Autobiography, Memoir, War, Biography

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## **From Reader Review Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz for online ebook**

### **Kelly says**

Rena's Promise is a story of the human constitution pushed to its capacity. The story captures the normalcy of Rena's life before the German invasion of Poland in 1939, and then follows her life in first-person through the concentration camp she endured until freedom arrived in 1943. Within the camp, Rena Kornreich illustrates how many lived hanging by a thread; that if you simply willed yourself to die, you would. But Rena retained a fervor for life, largely in part by her sister, Danka, who arrived at the camp shortly after her. She was determined to protect her sister and held onto the vision of presenting Danka to their parents once it was all over.

The account also illustrates human cruelty in its extreme. A constant fear looms overhead of the victims; not just a fear of death, but a fear that they will be subject to merciless torment or experimentation. One of the wonders of this book is how Rena recalls such specific details, recapping her interactions, her sights, and her survival strategies. We learn how she managed to remain sane with her head buried in mud while a skull beside her is crushed, to her everyday tasks such as creasing her pants as a way to cling to a sense of tidiness. After reading this, I never again want to complain about my daily discomforts--they seem ridiculously petty when compared to a perspective like this.

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### **JaVone Bentley says**

A captivating and heartwrenching story of courage, selflessness, hope, and survival. This book was eye opening and humbling as Rena shared her tale of survival in Auschwitz while trying to remain humane and trying to keep her promise to her sister. Although it takes place during the Holocaust, this memoir does not put a lot of focus on the evils during the time. Rena's will to survive, her selflessness, and her strength during such a tumultuous time were admirable. The story telling was great and at times I had to remind myself that this was her reality for 3 years. There are a few pictures of Rena and Danka included as well. Two thumbs up

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### **Lizvette says**

One of the best Holocaust's stories I have read. Well written. Impressive! All the situations these sisters experienced and the courage they showed to avoid separation. Very happy they survived. I would love to read a second book on how they adjusted to a "normal" life.

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### **Heather Macadam says**

This is a new edition that addresses some of the issues in the print edition by rewriting the beginning of the book, where I meet Rena. I was never happy with that section and was not a professional writer when I wrote

it. So my voice has been upgraded - I hope! Nothing of Rena's voice has been changed, though several stories that we cut have been added for the digital edition, which give the reader more insight to Rena and Danka. The epilogue has also been expanded to include my favorite scene--Rena's first bath in 3 years and 41 days.

Readers of the print edition, who are adding this to their digital library, will be most interested in finding out who the SS woman who sicked the dog on the girl was--we now know. There are also a few new footnotes in the new edition.

If you are a fan of Rena's Promise you can now find us on Facebook, where I blog with both reviews and thoughts on human rights. The family also gets posting from fans on our Facebook page and you can see photographs of Rena and Danka and their families both on FB and on our website: [www.renaspromise.com](http://www.renaspromise.com)

Where we are working on "changing the world one word at a time" and keeping the promise. Shalom, hdm

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### **Shari Larsen says**

This is the true story of Rena Kornreich. She was among the first 998 women transported to Auschwitz in March 1942. Soon after she got there, she was reunited with her younger sister Danka, and made a promise that she would take care of Danka and someday, bring her back home.

They spent 3 years and 41 days in the camps, struggling to survive, and narrowly escaping death several times. Throughout it all, Rena maintained a spirit of love, for her in her words, "To hate is to let Hitler win."

This was not an easy book to read, and by that, I mean it was at times harrowing and heartbreaking, but Rena's will to survive and her courage are amazing. I believe that stories like Rena's need to be told and listened too, to honor all who survived, and also died, during the Holocaust. The story was beautifully written, and just a few pages into the preface of the book, I knew that Rena was a very special woman indeed.

I won a free copy of this book from Library Thing.

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### **Tuesday says**

I picked this book up for my Kindle when it was free several weeks ago, and as I look back through some of my recent reads, I realize I've been on a Holocaust/WW II themed binge - three books in less than two months. I can't seem to devour enough. I've read true accounts, translations, and even a fictional story have graced my hands, heart, and mind recently.

Rena's Promise is a book that I want need must go back and read again, but I am afraid that I still won't be able to grasp the full impact of the message and story. But then again, can anyone?

While dark, terrifying, chilling and disturbing in more ways than one is supposed to understand, Rena's Promise is a beautiful story - one that must be told. It is the story of Rena and her sister Danka and it centers on their time spent as prisoners in Auschwitz. Wait, wait, wait! Did I just write beautiful and then follow that up in the very next sentence with the word Auschwitz? I know, I know, there is no way that anything associated with Auschwitz could be considered beautiful.

Rena was.

Rena was a child full of life and happiness. She loved her family more than anything, and during World War II when the Jews were being sent away and punished, she thought that giving herself up to the Nazi's and spending time in a work camp would be enough to save her parents and family from horrible fates. Rena was willing to sacrifice her freedom so that her family would not suffer a similar destiny. What Rena did not know was that she was walking into a seemingly never-ending nightmare of epic proportions, and that she would need to be her sister's guiding light, strength, and protector, and even then getting out alive was a distant hope that faded faster than a bomb falling from the Polish sky.

Rena's Promise takes the reader through Rena and Danka's time leading up to, during and after Auschwitz. The descriptions and accounts of what took place in Auschwitz were difficult to comprehend at times, but the one feeling that I felt while reading her story was the feeling of cold. I could not seem to get warm enough while reading Rena's Promise. I put on socks and piled under blankets, but the cold crept through my body and stayed there until the one night that Rena and her friends made homemade soup. The author helped me feel warmth in a story that was always cold through the most evocative descriptions of things that so many of us take for granted. I am so aware that the cold I was feeling was nowhere near the frigidness that Rena and Danka felt every every day or that the warmth I felt from that little sliver of happiness could never equal a tiny fraction the powerful happiness and warmth they felt that day.

While to some readers the descriptions may seem redundant, but the way in which they are represented can only give us as readers the tiniest kernel of understanding and comprehension as to the gruesome tragedy that so many had to suffer at the hand of Nazi Germany.

Rena's Promise is a memoir of survival. It tells of hope and never giving up, no matter the magnitude of the conditions in which one is faced with. It gave me, as a reader, joy knowing that Rena survived to tell this horrific account, and that she was able to live a fulfilling and beautiful life. Rena's Promise gave me hope that there can be even the smallest amount of happiness and the echo of laughter can be felt and remembered in the darkest of days.

Rena was a beautiful woman.

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## **Noelle says**

Wow. I got chills when I finished this book and really thought about what I just read. It's truly unbelievable how brave Rena was and how beautiful the love her and her sister shared. Her and Danka got through hell together because they had each other.

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## Crystal says

It is beautifully written and a remarkable story. One might be inclined to discount it, expecting a tragic misery memoir. But this story is in the vein of Victor Frankl; it's a story about how we survive, about how family and memory can lend individuals in the direst of circumstances the most incredible strength. Rena Kornreich was among the first transport of women to Auschwitz and she is also one of the few women from that first transport who survived to see the camp liberated. Sometimes the story is so remarkable and the writing so fluid and captivating that it reads like fiction. But the story is all too true, and through Rena's story we get a panoramic view of what it was like for the women victims and survivors of Nazi Germany and Auschwitz. I HIGHLY recommend, and I'm not usually a fan of memoir.

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## Quinn Barrett says

Wise Bear Books Reviews Rena's Promise by Rena Kornreich Gelissen and Heather Dune Macadam -- 5 Paws!

Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz, co-authored by Rena Kornreich Gelissen and Heather Dune Macadam, is a life-changing story not just for the women who lived to share the horrors of their experience, but for anyone who reads this personal account of the most heinous genocide of the 20th century. Many books have been written about the holocaust, Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps, and each story has its own personal perspective of the inhumanities European Jews were forced to endure during World War II. What makes Rena's story unique is she was one of the first admitted into Auschwitz's gates during the initial gatherings of Jews. In fact, as number 716 she was on the first transport, yet managed to live to tell her story, albeit much later in life.

The process of creating Rena's story is an interesting side note as well. Rena and writer Heather Dune Macadam's collaboration came about as a chance meeting. A friend-of-a-friend type referral is the basis for their first introduction. Macadam does a superb job of painting their tentative encounter. There is an easy conversational style to the author's writing that some might feel crosses literary lines, but we found this approach created an authentic observational technique as if we as readers are sitting in the room personally involved in their discussion.

There's a profound emotion in this book and not just because of its sensitive subject matter. There is a depth of connection between the writing partners, the Kornreich sisters, and many of the women who have the shared experience of bearing the burden of their memories.

Rena's Promise begins with a good background story about Rena and her family's happy life prior to Rena's decision to comply with the Nazi's edict for Jews to surrender themselves to the nearest occupation camp for labor. Her preemptive move was at first shocking, but makes sense as we come to understand that the Nazis' atrocities were closely guarded secrets initially. Rumors circulated, but little to no proof existed till much later in the war. There's a lot you'll learn about the Holocaust by reading Rena's Promise that isn't taught in school or written in history books.

There is a redundant quality to the author's storytelling, but this isn't a criticism. The daily 4:00 a.m. wake up call of "Raus! Raus!" meaning "Go! Go!" was the only means of separating the drudgery of one day to the next. It's an unconventional yet effective section break in the story telling which also helps to keep the story

moving for readers. By the end of the book it feels like a victorious battle cry, especially as momentum in the war shifts and the Jewish prisoners dare to hope for freedom from their captors.

The defining quality of Rena, her sister Danka, and all these women who survived is courage. Despite the constant traumas and heartbreak, Rena and Danka will each other to survive; the fact that they endure feels triumphant to us as readers, although it's not likely Rena would describe her and her sister's ultimate liberation from hell in such lofty terms. You see, the scars of their experiences can never be erased—hence the decision to partner with Macadam in the cathartic telling of her personal first-hand knowledge.

The joint authors don't hold back. These are not easy remembrances to relate or to read, and yet they are essential to the collective consciousness of the human race. Readers have a tremendous opportunity to learn, remember, and share books of such import.

It's hard to imagine an all-knowing, loving God exists while reading Rena's Promise as we see Rena struggle with her faith, but it's also equally hard to believe that Rena and Danka could have survived such base depravity without some divine intervention. Applying a label to an unknown deity isn't relevant to a book like Rena's Promise, but there is clearly something transcendent, even magical in the story of these two sisters.

Rena's Promise is a well-written, thoughtful story that flows well and is a surprisingly fast read considering the intensity of the subject matter. How Rena managed to maintain any level of gratitude or compassion for her tormentors' physical, mental, and emotional abuse is miraculous. Probably the greatest teaching of her story is that it embodies a quintessential teaching of forgiveness, which is that it's not so much an act as an attitude.

This book was reviewed as part of the Wise Bear Digital Book Awards competition. Entry fees associated with the contest are administrative in nature and do not influence our honest, unbiased book reviews.

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## **Lyla says**

I've only read 3 books thus far about Holocaust survivors and of those three this one seems to touch me the most. It's amazing how Rena was able to almost out-think her captors at the most difficult and deadliest moments. Her inner strength, devotion to her sister, and unwillingness to being selfish with whatever she happened to receive speaks volumes about how she was brought up and the compassionate person her mother must have been.

This story angered me, turned me cold, brought tears to my eyes and broke my heart...but knowing that she survived made the emotional roller coaster worth it.

(view spoiler)

I still can't believe it's all real...because in my heart, I still can't believe people are capable of having that much hate in their hearts to be able to do such things.

After reading this, you can't help but to be humbled and reflect on what's really important in this lifetime. I, for one, am happy that she had a good life after the war...as well as the few friends she had that I grew attached to while reading.

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## **LeighAnne says**

It took me a little while to get into this book. I felt disconnected by the author's style of jumping back and forth between her telling what Rena told her and Rena's own memories. I now see why she did it, though. She was letting us get to know Rena before being thrust into the horror of her life in WWII.

INCREDIBLE book. I am so sorry to hear that Rena passed away a few years ago. I would love to have met her. I am definitely going to look up the youtube videos there are of her. Beautiful, beautiful person. The details she remembered for so long and the clarity and accuracy with which they were told was astounding. How did she make it through all that and come out on the other end the vivacious person she apparently was? What an inspiration to the rest of us.

I picked up the book at a Borders that was closing. Such a blessing in disguise!

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## **Viktoria Jean says**

This book is a touching recount of the war in the eyes of two growing young women. Among the first 999 Jewish girls on the first transport brought into Auschwitz on March 26, 1942, was twenty-one year old Rena Kornreich-the seven hundred and sixteenth woman in that infamous death camp, Auschwitz. Two days later, she recognized her sister Danka among thousand other freshly shaved heads in Auschwitz where, together, they spent the next three years of their young lives as slaves to the Third Reich. From then on, she made a promise, to herself and to her parents [whom she will never see again], that she will survive this thing and return triumphant, with her sister, home. This story tells of the three painful years they spent in living hell, praying fervently that they would one day be liberated. Rena, being the elder sister, took great care of Danka during their captivity, time and time again giving up her meager portion of bread to get medicine when weak Danka was ill, and doing whatever it took to ensure a place for both her and her sister to be together during the many 'selections' and all these while holding on to her promise.

Life in Auschwitz-Birkenau was hard; Rena had seen enough of war in occupied Poland, where she was from, to know a little of what to expect from the Nazis. Yet, she was still unable to fathom their cruelty. Rena quotes certain incidences which gave me goose bumps. There was once the kapos released dogs on a Jew who was too weak to carry on her task, and she died when the dogs bit her on her neck, still screaming all the way back to their block quarters. It was a scene that witnesses will never forget, and as I pictured that scene, it will stay etched in my mind forever. How can the Nazis enforce such cruelty? Don't they have a conscience? Do they even have a heart? The conditions in the concentration camps were also horrible, what with no bunk beds, only shelves; three tiers high to make do as beds. The floor was basically covered in dirt and there was a sour smell of human odor. They were treated like non-living things, as if it is alright for them to suffer. Aren't Jews humans too?

The hard times that have passed may have been part of history but the memories will never fade. As I read this book, I cannot help reflecting on myself. How I would flinch at the slightest bit of dust and grumble should I not be happy about certain ideals in my life, and how I expect everything to be nothing short of perfection. I get upset when things do not go my way, and bothered when people reprimand me. Should I have been living in Rena's shoes, I would have just given up on my sister, given up on myself. This book inspired me to go further, think deeper into my own life and reflect on how things have been going my way, yet still moaning that this and that has yet reached perfection. Though this blind chase of perfection is not a bad thing, I realized that sometimes you just have to take things the way they are, and live with it instead of trying to change things. Rena did not try to escape, nor did she constantly grumble about life. This gave

herself, as well as her sister, the courage to move out of the darkness. For those who grumble constantly hold no hope for themselves, only fear in the deepest pits of their hearts. Only with hope, could Rena and her sister survive. I have learnt a lot from this novel. Much as I love reading about their account, I cannot help wishing that all those who lost their lives in Rena's story could have lived their life differently, happily, less painfully. Life had been so unfair to them, and death, what I think must be the saddest thing in life, was in fact a form of liberation for them. Their short twisted lives would never end the way it was meant to be. I cannot help thinking: Hey some of them could have been doctors saving lives, famous lawyers ending trials, people who would do great things! And now they would never be able to do those things ever again.

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## **Heather Macadam says**

"The most important book of the modern age!"

Neal Lavon, Voice of America

A poignant and important act of remembrance." —Sir Martin Gilbert, author of *The Holocaust: A Human Tragedy*, and Churchill.

"An extraordinary book, vividly written and generously told. You will not easily forget Rena Kornreich and her sister Danka. Nor should you. Harrowing as it often is *Rena's Promise* is less a tragedy than a love story. By turns soul-wrneching, inspiring and heartbreaking, this is a tale that should live long beyond the wonderful woman who inspired it."

—Alexandra Fuller , author of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*

"*Rena's Promise* went with us on the Zen Peacemakers' first pilgrimage to Auschwitz in 1996. On our first night together, one of our monks shared a simple message of love from Rena to us. Her message changed our lives." —Peter Matthiessen, author of *The Snow Leopard* and *In Paradise*

"Through her actions during and after the Shoah, Rena Kornreich Gelissen ensured that out of the darkest night, the light of the survivors and their memory remained. Faced with destruction, she and the Jewish people survived." —Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

"Without resorting to unnecessary pathos, Heather Dune Macadam awakens in us both interest and often profound shock."

—Dr. Piotr Setkiewicz, Head of Research, Panstowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau

"The story of Rena Kornreich Gelissen, brought to life again by her writing partner Heather Dune Macadam, shows how a remarkable woman—one of the earliest transported to Auschwitz—resisted the Holocaust and gave life-affirming testimony of lasting value. This book is a gift, one to be received with awe and gratitude."

—Dr. John K. Roth , Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Claremont McKenna College

"The most historically accurate book ever written of the first transport of women into Auschwitz--the only book ever written by a survivor of that transport, who survived 3 years and 41 days in the camps."

Irena Strezlecka,

Director of the Museum of Women at Auschwitz

On March 26, 1942, the first transport of women arrived in Auschwitz. Among the 999 young Jewish women was Rena Kornreich, the 716th woman numbered in camp. A few days later, her sister Danka arrives and so begins a trial of love and courage that will last 3 years and 41 days, from the beginning Auschwitz death camp to the end of the war. Rena's Promise stands out from other memoirs in mere length of time she spent in the camps. No other survivor from the first transport has ever written about her experience and what it meant to survive for so long as a peasant and a hard laborer who spent 10-12 hours a day making bricks, pushing lorries, sifting sand, performing cartwheels....

From her escape from Dr. Mengele's experiment detail to her surreal meetings with SS woman Irma Grese, Rena tells a dynamic tale of courage and compassion that reminds us of the resiliency of the human spirit, and the power of people to help one another in unimaginable circumstances, be they Gentile or Jew, German or Pole, kapo or prisoner.

Used at Brown University in the Psychology Dept and in Holocaust programs at the college and secondary school levels.

Recommended for Holocaust collections by the Library Journal.

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### **Donna says**

How one woman, Rena, survived as well as encouraged others, especially her sister Danka, to never give up hope! A TRUE HERO AND ANGEL! I wept with rage and laughed with joy on her unbearable and relentless first person account of the atrocities she endured! To believe that the whole world didn't know about what was happening is to say there is no humanity! History will only tell if and when it could or won't happen once again! I will never forget Rena Kornreich.

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### **Holly says**

This is an absolutely astonishing story of survival, love for family, and integrity even when surrounded by oppression. I finished reading this book the day before I paid my respects at Auschwitz, so it held a special place in my heart and mind while I was there. I'm sure it will continue to do so forever more. But you don't have to go to Auschwitz to appreciate this wonderful memoir of a truly horrifying period in recent history. It shines a light not only on the brutality of the Nazis, but also on the kindness of others even under terrifying circumstances. HIGHLY HIGHLY HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

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### **Kolleen says**

I love books about the Holocaust, both fiction and nonfiction. So as I began this book, I was surprised to find that I found it to be somehow detached and non-emotional (if anything about this subject could somehow ever be that way, but I can't help how my mind works). What I was reading seemed to be relayed in the form of facts rather than feelings. However, that all changed very quickly, and I am ashamed to say that I ever felt this way at all.

Rena gives her account of living, and surviving, in Auschwitz for three years. What keeps her hope alive is the fact that her sister is there with her and needs to make sure that she lives. There were so many heartbreaking moments in the book, like when the mothers were brought in to bring the girls hope, only to be exterminated, and when they marched the children through the camps to the gas chambers. Here is an excerpt from the book that will stick with me forever:

*"I am standing there just like a ghost. Their little angelic faces, the white knuckles of their hands haunt me. I fight back my tears, my rage. My heart screams, Stop! Stop this madness! They are babies! God? I rarely say God anymore, but seeing their faces reflected in my heart I must try to pray one last time: Won't you strike just one of these monsters down? Smite just one SS for these children, your children. Never mind my suffering. Never mind the things I've heard about people being burned and gassed. Never mind about me. What about these sweet children? For them, show them you are our God and kill just one of these Nazis. They fade in the distance, nearing the gas chambers. My heart screams for them to stop. Hasse (an SS) stands before us in full Aryan superiority. I know from the moment I hear her voice that religion will never be the same. Her lips pull back into a grimace, which I am sure is meant to be a smile. Her words are harsh, like machine-gun fire, they shoot us down: 'Where is your God now?'."*

As heartbreaking as this account is, there is also hope in it. Rena was helped by many people's selfless acts in the prison, ranging from prisoners to prison guards. And Rena herself was the most selfless of all. Please read this. Don't ever forget.

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### **Judy Perry says**

An unbelievable story of resilience and survival. Every time I read a book about the Holocaust, it reminds me of how precious life is and how hatred can rule a nation. It's important to read accounts such as these so we never forget and do what we can to never let it happen again.

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### **Heather Dune says**

I wrote this book with Rena and though Rena died a few years ago, am busy continuing her message of love to all people. If you are a fan of Rena's Promise, you can now find her on YOUTUBE. I have digitized her first public appearance and if you have never heard her speak or seen her, it is an experience you won't want to miss. She was such a bundle of energy, so animated and sweet and funny and REAL. People forget that Holocaust survivors are real people, who laugh and cry like we all do. Thank you for your support and sharing her message. "The heart is only so big, so I don't hate.... To hate is to let Hitler win."

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### **Dyuti says**

*"A promise is beauty kept secure  
The exquisiteness of knowing what is to come..."*

The book Rena's Promise is one such story of a promise made, and a promise kept, by a young girl to her

mother, to always, and at any cost, to protect her younger sister. Unfortunately, fate had a cruel way of testing her: for the sisters were Jewish, living in the Polish country-side during the height of antisemitism in Europe -- the 1940's.

Written decades after her experiences at the labour camp along with her sister in Auschwitz, the novel is a *gem of a work*. It is a story of courage, of hope, and the strength of human spirit. On one hand, it stuns us with the horrors of the atrocities which a group of people can commit against another, and on the other hand, it shows us that even during those times of difficulties, there were some who did not let the kindness in their hearts die.

The edition which I read contained lovely pictures of the actual characters of the memoirs and it just made my heart heavy to see their smiling faces and later read what fate had in store for them. As Rena wrote, *"Our lives have become one long line moving slowly from one horror to another"*. Maybe that is where the beauty of life lies: that we never know our future has in store for us.

However, there were times when I felt that Rena's selfless sacrifices were a little *too good*. Her younger sister Danka seemed a bit opportunistic in that respect, and her attitude kind of angered me. Maybe it wasn't her fault that she was not born a 'survivor' as her elder sister, but it just seemed unfair to me that it was a give and take relationship.

Anyways, I would HIGHLY RECOMMEND this book to anyone who, like me, is interested in the Holocaust, and also to those who believe in the ultimate triumph of the indomitable will to survive, which can never be extinguished.

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### **Kelli Oliver George says**

In general, I am obsessed with World War II and I have read a TON of Holocaust accounts. Quite frankly, I will never, ever read enough of these accounts because they all deserve to be heard.....to be honored. I read this book in the span of 3 days on my phone. Yes, my PHONE. (Kindle App? WORD). From the beginning, I was completely taken with Rena's account of her experience in the camps and that of her undying promise to her sister, Danka. I finished the book this afternoon, on a weird, record-breaking, SNOWY day in May in Kansas. At the end of the book, it is mentioned that Rena's husband makes a big deal of her liberation day and buys her flowers every year. Her Liberation Day. That day? May 2nd.

Today.

None of you are judging me for bursting into such tears that my kids were all "All you okay, Mama?". Right? No judging?

And THAT? Is the power of reading, my friends.

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