

# **The Cage Study Guide**

## **The Cage by Ruth Minsky Sender**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Cage Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1 through 13.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 15 through 24.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 25 through 48.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>



## Plot Summary

As the story opened, Riva Minska was talking with her daughter, Nancy. She said that her days were filled with sunshine but her nights were filled with nightmares. During the day she was safe, but at night she dreaded the images brought by sleep. Her daughter, Nancy, came to Riva and seemed sad. When Riva questioned her, she revealed that she regretted that she hadn't grandparents to care for her. Riva assured her daughter that the horror of the German slaughter of Jews couldn't happen again. She then thought back to 1939 when she was thirteen. Her life was happy with her mother and six siblings. Her mother, Nacha, decided to send the three older of the children out of the country. Nacha believed that the Germans would not harm women and children.

Over the coming months, the situation deteriorated. Riva and a cousin were on an errand to the post office one day when Germans gathered all the Jews they could find and forced them to run in circles. They then separated the men, deporting them and leaving the neighborhood in shambles. Riva's childhood friend joined the Nazi party and appeared one day at her door wearing the uniform, swearing he could help protect Riva but later standing by as the possessions of Riva's family were stripped away. Riva's youngest brother, Laibele, was soon ill with tuberculosis, and the rest of the family was forced to work. There was constant fear that the Germans would take Laibele away as had become the habit when dealing with the sick and the old. They hid Laibele from German searches, but one day the Germans took Nacha away, leaving the four children on their own.

Eventually the little family came to the attention of officials and they were to be split up and offered for adoption. Riva argued, but they knew they were powerless and waited for the inevitable. Instead, Riva was granted custody of her brothers in return for giving up the privileges of a child. Laibele eventually died of his disease and the family of four became a family of three. Riva barely escaped deportation through the efforts of a friend of the family.

Riva continued to resist the insistence of authorities to "volunteer" for deportation to labor camps but she and her brothers eventually realized that they have no food, no hope and no choice. They were taken first to Auschwitz and split up. Riva was later sent to Mittelsteine before being moved again. She survived by staying close to friends and expressing herself through her poetry. She was barely alive when the Russians arrived and liberated the camp.



# Chapter 1 through 13

## Chapter 1 through 13 Summary and Analysis

In the first chapter, Riva was talking with her daughter, Nancy. Riva said that there was sunshine on this particular morning and that she was "calm and happy." But she said that nightmares haunted her night times and that she dreaded going to sleep. Nancy said that she has seen the grandparents of a friend and that it made her sad because she doesn't have grandparents. She asked Riva why people allowed the Nazis to kill so many people and Riva admitted to herself that the same question echoes in her own mind. When Riva was obviously sad, Nancy sought to reassure her, saying that they have friends and neighbors and that it couldn't possibly happen here. Riva suddenly recalled the events of 1939.

In chapter two, Riva recalled a typical time in her childhood home in Lodz, Poland. Her mother was sewing and preparing for a Jewish holiday, Pesach. In the midst of this, the family's landlady, Mrs. Gruber appeared. She asked Riva's mother, Nacha, if she has ordered matzos for the holiday celebration and reminded her to make something for Mrs. Gruber's grandson, Harry. Harry was an only child and spent a great deal of time with Riva's family. Riva, at thirteen, had always known Mrs. Gruber. Though the Grubers were not Jewish, they spoke Yiddish, celebrated holidays and "share our lives."

Riva's mother was a widow and had been since before the birth of her seventh child. She had raised the children alone, ran a tailor factory and sent the children to private school. Riva listened as men gathered under a large oak tree in the yard discuss the world situation, the possibility of war and the Germans. Riva saw fear in their faces and heard it in their tones. Then there were screams from Harry who was being harassed by a group claiming he was a spy. Riva's mother rushed to Harry's defense, sending his accusers away.

In chapter three, the "Volksdeutsche" was formed. It was a "new breed of German" and Riva noted that those who joined begin wearing swastikas and joined the Nazis. Mrs. Gruber and Harry were among those who join this group. One day there was a pounding at the door and Harry was there in his Nazi uniform. By now Riva recognized the evil associated with the uniform and asked how he could possibly take that step. He said that "Germany is my fatherland," pledged that he would do anything for Germany but then said that he was now in a position to protect Riva and her family from persecution. When Riva's house was being raided by the Germans who took away everything, including the stove used to heat the apartment, Nacha pleaded with Mrs. Gruber to leave the stove, but Mrs. Gruber refused.

In chapter four, Riva and her cousin, a fifteen-year-old girl named Saba, who was Riva's best friend, were on their way to the post office. It was April of 1940 and the Jews were forced to wear a yellow star. Riva asked Saba if she was ashamed of the star, but Saba said those who were forcing them to wear the star should be ashamed. They went on



toward their destination but were soon caught up in an attack by Germans on all the Jews they could find. Saba and Riva were separated and Riva believed that she was probably about to die. She pulled the image of her mother to mind as the bravest person Riva knew. Riva saw a pregnant woman pushed down on the ground. When a man tried to help her he was attacked. A young boy attached himself to her, clinging to her hand for support and comfort. Riva saw a boy she knew, a deaf-mute named Abram, being harassed. He escaped but the group was pushed to run along various streets by the German soldiers. Riva realized they were running in circles and then were stopped at the railway station where the men were forced onto train cars and the women and children set free. There was frantic yelling from the men, hoping to get word to family members. When Riva reached her house, she found her mother waiting and saw the wife of one of the men forced aboard the train. Riva said the man was never seen again. She called the event the "Caravan of Horror."

In chapter five, a month had passed and the families, including Riva's, were living in a caged area known as the ghetto of Lodz. Riva was living with her mother and her three brothers, Motele, Laibele and Moishele. One day there was a march against the officials overseeing life in the ghetto. Riva said the people pleaded for work and food and that she, her mother and brothers were among the marchers. For a time, there were schools, a soup kitchen and a hospital but these amenities were soon eliminated. About this time, Riva's youngest brother, Laibele, who was thirteen, contracted tuberculosis. He was soon confined to bed. Riva and the other boys went to work every day, as did their mother, and she said that Laibele spent his days waiting for them to return home. Those who went to work got a daily ration of food and they all saved their rations to share with Laibele in the evenings.

Though there was no school, some of the children form "secret study groups." Riva was pushed to sew German uniforms, though she had trouble managing the needle. One day a young man died in the factory.

Chapter six begins in September of 1942. The people remaining in the ghetto were constantly afraid. Riva said many have been taken away by force or because they felt they had no choice. The people were urged to voluntarily leave and though there were horrible rumors of what happened to deportees, some gave in. There was propaganda circulated that there were hospitals for the sick and some believed it. The Germans took many of the sick away by force and Riva and her family feared that Laibele would be taken. When the Germans came to the door one day, they hid Laibele in a cellar. Riva urged Nacha to hide with him but she refused, saying that the Germans were less likely to search the house if she and the three remaining children put up a united front for inspection. The Germans took in Nacha's appearance, said she was sick and took her away. Riva and her brothers ran after their mother but were knocked away by the German guards. They returned to the house and Laibele knew from the look on their faces what had happened. Riva said that she, at sixteen, was mother of three.

In chapter seven, Riva took a job at home, braiding rugs, in order to be at home with Laibele during the days. One day Riva stepped out of bed and found that her legs wouldn't hold her up. She was soon very ill and all but bedridden. One day Motele and



Moishele arrived home after work with a present for Riva. They had traded bread for a tangerine on the black market, hoping that the citrusy fruit would make her well. Though Riva was upset that they'd traded so much bread, she couldn't be angry because the boys were depending on her and had done the only thing they know to do to help her get well. She insisted that they share it and they ate slowly to make it last.

In chapter eight, a neighbor named Moishe took Riva to a doctor, though the trip was arduous and dangerous. She still couldn't walk and he carried her to the office. They had a long wait but the doctor said Riva was suffering malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies and that there was nothing he could do. In chapter nine, Riva continued to lie in bed, working on rugs all day and talking with Laibele. They talked about what they would do if the war suddenly ended and Laibele said he would eat bread until he was no longer hungry. One day the boys arrived home with vitamins called Vigantol. They had traded again for them on the black market.

In chapter ten, a worker from the Child Welfare Department arrived and told Riva that the children couldn't live alone. The woman said that they would have to be taken in by other families and said there were plenty of families that had lost children and that they would be willing to take in Riva, Moishele and Motele. She said Laibele would have to be taken to a children's home. Riva and the boys objected but knew it was only a matter of time before the family was split up. Then they were summoned to the office and were told that Riva had received special permission to adopt her three younger brothers, though it meant she would be responsible for them and would give up any privileges of being a child. She agreed without question.

In chapter eleven, a young man named Shmulek arrived at Riva's house, searching for his family. He'd been released from a prison camp. In chapter twelve, Shmulek said that he'd been taken in by the promise that his family would receive extra food if he volunteered for deportation. Riva said he couldn't stay at her house because she still cared that people might talk. He stayed at the apartment of Henry, a neighbor. In chapter thirteen, police arrived looking for Shmulek and revealed that he was released by mistake. Riva said that the men searching for Shmulek said that five men were released and that the prison officials were demanding five back. They said that if they couldn't find Shmulek, someone else would have to go. Riva said that time passed and they eventually stopped searching for Shmulek. He found work cleaning outdoor toilets.

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There was an interesting series of foreshadowing in the first chapter. Nancy mentioned the Nazis and asked why the Nazis felt they should kill her grandparents. Riva answered that it was because the Nazis "were evil." She went on to say that it was "because we were Jews." While Riva sought to reassure Nancy and Nancy in turn reassured Riva, both were unsettled. Riva said that she could hear the voices of those she had trusted to save their people. This seemed to indicate that Riva's family would experience traitors, and this was the case. Riva related the story of a playmate who had joined Hitler's army, betraying Riva and her family. This set the tone for the book which was dark and somber overall though with an undercurrent of hope.



Riva believed it was unfair that Harry was accused of being a spy just because his family had German blood in its ancestry. She cited this as a form of prejudice, though she didn't use that word. She later realized that this same discrimination in reverse would cost the lives of millions of Jews.

It's interesting that Riva's older three siblings were sent away by her mother. Nacha made that decision because she knew that the Germans were advancing and she wanted them to be safe. Her thinking was that the Germans wouldn't harm women and children. What's wrong with her thinking is that she claimed to believe that she would be safe because she was a woman but one of the three older children she sent away was a daughter. It seemed that Nacha must have feared for her older daughter's safety if she chose to send her away and that she wasn't as certain that the German wouldn't bother women as she said.

The younger boys, Moishеле and Motele, were absolutely dependent on Riva. That was part of the reason they were so desperate to see her get well, but they were also loving and kind, and were willing to do whatever it took to help her heal. When they had the opportunity to trade for the vitamins, they did so. They willingly gave up some of their meager rations of food in order to obtain something they believed would make Riva's life better.



# Chapters 15 through 24

## Chapters 15 through 24 Summary and Analysis

In chapter fourteen, Laibele told Riva one day that he had been thinking about all the poems they learned as children about winter. He said that the poems had such happy sounds then but that he realized it was because they were snug and safe inside a warm, happy home. The weather was brutal and the children were very cold one night. Laibele suggested that they go to bed and cover up in an effort to get warm and all the children did as he says. However, Riva woke in the middle of the night to discover that someone was coming into the apartment. It was Motele, and he had served as a lookout while some men tore down an old building. In return for being the lookout, he was allowed to take home a large armload of the wood. Riva was worried because she knew the punishment would be horrible. Motele made her promise that she would never say where the wood came from and the younger two children knew that they shouldn't ask.

The wood was almost gone by the time the police arrived and searched for the wood. They found a small piece of wood under Laibele's mattress. Motele was forced to appear at the police station the following morning. Moishle went with him. That afternoon they returned. Motele was ordered to clean the outdoor toilets for two days but he was otherwise pardoned.

In chapter fifteen, the Jewish holiday of Pesach arrived. It was during this spring time that Laibele neared death. As he breathed his final breaths, Riva screamed at him, urging that he not leave her. A neighbor, Mrs. Avner, pulled Riva away, telling her that she had to allow Laibele to die in peace. Riva said that the wagon that picked up dead bodies arrived the following morning and Laibele's body was taken away. In chapter sixteen, a seventeen-year-old boy named Yulek Schwartz arrived at Riva's house and told her that he was sent by the Skif - an organization of a children's socialist movement. He was also alone with a younger sibling, a fourteen-year-old girl named Faygele. Riva had felt the need to write and began by writing letters to members of her family. Yulek encouraged her writing. In chapter seventeen, Riva and others in her building received orders to move. They were told that the building would be torn down to be used as firewood. This was especially poignant to Riva, because she had lived in this apartment all her life and her family roots were here. They cleared out everything they could take and Riva took time to look at the empty apartment before leaving it for the last time.

Their new home was a "one-room walk-in" that had been a grocery store. There was a large cellar and it had both a front and rear entrance. Moishle pushed Riva when she faltered, saying that they had to "get organized" and "keep going." It was Motele who said that they should use an area of the new living quarters to house a secret library. The library had been compiled by members of the Bund - an adult socialist movement. Riva noted that books had been banned - all books. But those who were living in the ghetto had managed to compile a reasonable library. The problem was that there is a





steady stream of people in and out of the library and it was time to move it from its location. The children agreed to have it in their new home, found some scraps of lumber for shelving and moved the three hundred books.

In chapter eighteen, Riva's house became a "busy place." She said that they would be in trouble if they were caught hiding someone, but there were many to help escape deportation. There were also many seeking to borrow and return library books. After Laibele's death, Riva took a job in a sewing factor. She was seen by the shop manager, David Berkenwald, who knew the work was too heavy for Riva and managed to get her moved to the cutting area. David knew her parents and had therefore done what he could to help Riva. Riva was soon ensconced in the group at the cutting factory and they were all very close. However, one day she arrived at the factory and found that everyone was very quiet and reserved toward her. She first imagined that she might have done something wrong and finally asked a woman. The woman revealed that Riva's name had been on the list of deportees. The woman said that David had taken Riva's name from the list and that he'd put someone else's name there in her place. Riva began to cry, but David said that he'd made the decision for several reasons. He said that she had given up the privileges of a child when she adopted her brothers, and that the deportee list had required teenagers. David said that her brothers would insist that they go with her and that he, by removing her name, was saving three lives. In chapter nineteen, Motele comforted Riva, telling her that David had been right in his assumption that Motele and Moishela would insist on going with Riva if she were deported. Motele told Riva that "life is cruel in the ghetto" but reminded her that it was their life and that they must go on. Riva repeated his words many times and realized that Motele was right. She said that they hadn't turned to stone, hadn't stopped feeling, and that they still had hopes and dreams. She also said that there was a limit to the suffering they can be expected to take, but that they hadn't reached that limit.

Meanwhile, Riva and Yulek grew closer, spending many evenings together and often reading poetry while holding hands. Riva didn't closely examine her feelings for Yulek but admitted that she might care about him as more than a friend.

Among the possessions Riva and the boys have was a very expensive and quality coat that belonged to an uncle. Moishela and Motele one day told Riva that they'd taken the coat to a tailor who was going to remake it into a suit for Riva. They said that she needed a decent suit and that they'd already made the arrangements. Riva said that the coat wasn't theirs to decide but gave in to the argument that their uncle would willingly buy another when he returns in order that Riva have clothes that she needed so badly. Riva still wanted to know how the boys paid for the labor and they said that they had made a trade for it. Riva immediately suspected that they might have traded their bread again but the boys said that they knew she wouldn't allow that so they'd taken another tactic. This time, they'd saved up bread the previous week and had traded it to the tailor prior to telling Riva about the trade. They said that they'd all done without enough bread to pay the cost and that Riva never even realized her rations were shorted. She thanked them for their kindness.



In chapter twenty, Yulek tells Riva that he was on the list of teenagers to be deported. He said that he planned to take Faygele with him because she was too frail to survive on her own. Yulek, like many others, held to the hope that perhaps the people who said life was better for the deportees are right. He cited the propaganda that indicated the need for skilled labor and said that as long as they needed him to work, he might be alright. He didn't seem confident. He asked Riva not to forget him and requested that she help him pack. When Riva went to his apartment, she found Faygele very frightened. Riva assured Faygele that she and Yulek would return and Yulek repeated those words to Riva as she left him for the last time.

In chapter twenty-one, four months passed after Yulek's departure. Riva didn't hear from him but wasn't surprised, saying that news no longer travels either in or out of the ghetto. The SS ghetto commander named Hans Biebow called all the workers out of the shop where Riva worked and told them that their skilled labor was desperately needed. He claimed to be their friends, said that he cared about them and that anyone who would volunteer for resettlement would be protected. He warned that the Russians were near and that the invaders would know that the Jews sewed military uniforms for the Germans, which made them also enemies of Russia. He said that he couldn't protect anyone who didn't willingly go to the railway for resettlement. Riva said that the people were confused after the speech. Many warned that it was a trick but others argued that there was no food, no work, no weapons and no place to hide. Riva couldn't decide who she should listen to. After awhile, Riva, Moishele and Motele stopped going to work like everyone else. They all wanted to be with their families when the Germans come for them in an effort to stay together as they were deported. She said that they used the youth movement to stay in touch with former neighbors and friends. They slept in preparation of hiding and rushed to the cellar so often that they had the movements down to an art, including pulling a rug over the trap door.

One night the Germans rushed in and tore the apartment apart but didn't find Riva, Motele and Moishele. They waited for a long time, suspecting a trap, but were finally called out of hiding by a neighbor. In chapter twenty-two, Motele said that most of the remaining families had decided they would volunteer for resettlement. He said that lack of food left most with no choice and that remaining in the ghetto meant certain death. He said that there was at least some hope in leaving. They packed up the house with what they could carry, choosing a few photos and agreeing with her brothers that nothing they left behind would likely survive. Toward that end, Motele also argued that she should take her writing, her letters and poetry. But Riva refused, saying that if the three of them didn't return, her letters could be the only way their mother and three older siblings could know what happened to them.

In chapter twenty-three, they spent the night prior to their departure talking, unable to sleep and wishing that something would happen to save them. Some neighbors arrived and they all planned to leave together, including a motherly lady named Mrs. Boruchowich. They met others with the same plan, including a man carrying a sewing machine. He said that perhaps he would be more valuable to the Germans if he had his own tools. In chapter twenty-four, they arrived at the railway station and discovered that they were to be loaded into cattle cars. They were crammed in tightly and Riva's group



struggled to remain together. The doors were slammed shut leaving only patches of light to shine through. Motele told Riva that they might be separated once they reach their destination and urged that if men and women are separated, she try to stay with their friends, Karola and Rifkele. Riva promised to do so. She described only a few details of the trip - including the odor of human excrement from the buckets that serve as bathrooms. The trip took three days and Riva described it as "three long, horrible days and three terrifying nights." Throughout the trip, many prayed and urged others to pray and hold to hope. Some declared those people crazy and lashed out. Others just cried. Then came the end of the journey and Riva said that they were suddenly surrounded by sounds of bustling people and loud music. Then there was a voice through a loudspeaker announcing that they had arrived at Auschwitz. Riva said that the living "crawl out" of the train cars and the dead were pulled out.

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Laibele seemed to look for the brighter side of things. When Riva couldn't stand on her own, he teased her about being drunk. He told her that she had to find her smile. At one point, he said that it might have been a good thing that they were orphans because he believed God took special care of the orphans of the world. One day when they were particularly cold, Laibele suggested that they sing in order to warm themselves. Riva agreed and they sang together, just the two of them but accompanied by the memories of all those who were no longer part of their lives. Riva said that Laibele was right and that it warmed them.

Yulek said that his father was taken away in the Horror Caravan of 1940. Riva realized that she was there at the moment Yulek's father was taken away. She didn't know him but thought that she might have seen him taken away. It's Yulek who first voiced the idea that they might not live through their ordeals and that Riva's letters and poetry may be the only thing that survived to tell the stories of their lives.

Riva was horrified that David had to choose someone else to go in her place and she realized that making that decision had visibly aged David. David remarked about the fact that he'd "played god." He said that Riva, as mother to her younger brothers, had to protect the children. Riva, however, couldn't decide whether to be relieved or guilty. This conflict of emotions continued throughout the story. This was a common thread among survivors, the guilt of surviving when so many others had died.

There were several points Riva made briefly, then moved on with the story without focusing on them. At one time she said that the Germans had used various propaganda and promises in an effort to gain the trust of the Jews. Riva said that it's so that they would go willingly to their deaths. But then she didn't return to this thought. It seemed that those who really believed they were being sent to prisons to die would try to escape but there continued to be statements of hope. It seemed that even though there were rumors about the extermination camps, even the Jews tried to avoid believing it. Another interesting point was when Riva heard the music at the railway platform. She said that she heard the music but then didn't explain it at all. Other writers have told

about the bands that played at the entrances of several of the death camps in an effort to help control the panic of those arriving.



# Chapters 25 through 48

## Chapters 25 through 48 Summary and Analysis

In chapter twenty-five, men and women were separated and Riva lost track of her brothers, but managed to stay with several girls she knew, including Karola and a girl named Rifkele Boruchowich. Riva wore glasses and she, like all others, put her glasses in a pile. They were then forced to undress, blasted with cold water, forced into the open air with no clothes and dressed in clothes that didn't fit. They were then shaved bald and Riva noted the piles of hair covering the floor of the room. They were then assigned to barracks and Rifkele found a woman named Tola who she knew.

In chapter twenty-six, Riva and the other women were treated horribly, often forced to stand outside for hours in all kinds of weather. One day a pot of hot soup was brought, but the women were so hungry that they were pushing to be first in line. The guards threw the soup over the women, burning many and leaving the women with nothing to eat until hours later. In chapter twenty-seven, the women were often ordered to stand outside for hours at a time and when a woman died, the other women dragged the dead woman's daughter out to stand. To have remained inside would have meant the girl would be punished.

In chapter twenty-eight, the question of the chimneys continued to haunt all of them. When the women heard bombing they were afraid, but a young woman named Doctor Ginzburg told them that the bombs were "music" because it meant someone was fighting against the Nazi army. In chapter twenty-nine, Riva was herded outside with the others and said that she can't believe it had been only a week since her arrival. She continued to search for her mother, though most tell her no one could have survived since Nacha was taken from home in 1942. When Riva was at her lowest point of despair, Rifkele comforted her.

In chapter thirty, Riva said that to simply give up and dying would be easy but that she wanted to live. She was moved to a different camp by train, this one called Mittelsteine. They were assigned numbers and told to forget their names and remember only their numbers. In chapter thirty-one, Riva frantically tried to remember her number, 55082. She was separated from Karola and Rifkele but found them later. She and the other girls were given wooden and canvas shoes as well as skirts, blouses and slippers. They were then marched out of the gate.

In chapter thirty-two they were being assigned to work details. Riva was initially chosen to run a drill, but the foreman decided she was too small for the job and she was sent to help carry buckets of dirt for a detail that was digging a tunnel. In chapter thirty-three, Riva met a young girl from Lodz named Rosa, who gave Riva a piece of brown paper to write on. Riva and Rosa next began to figure out how to get a pencil. In chapter thirty-four, two sisters were beaten for stealing potato peels from the garbage. In chapter thirty-five, Rosa stole a pencil for Riva, and though Riva was worried that her friend



would be somehow caught and punished, she was elated at the prospect of writing again. She wrote a poem and read it to those in her barracks. They were moved and said that she'd spoken for all of them.

In chapter thirty-six, some Sundays when the girls were not being punished for anything, Riva went to the various barracks to read her poetry. In chapter thirty-seven, Riva cut her finger on one of the buckets. This wasn't unusual but this time the cut refused to heal. There was a young woman from Budapest who had some medical training who was assigned as the camp "doctor", and she treated Riva, but the infection continued to spread. The doctor told a guard that Riva was vital to the morale of the camp because of her poetry and convinced the guard that Riva should be taken to a medical doctor. In chapter thirty-eight, Riva made the trip by train to a town, but even with the Nazi soldier guarding her, doctors turned her away. In chapter thirty-nine, a doctor agreed to see Riva, tended her wound, and Riva and the guard returned to the camp by train.

In chapter forty, Riva woke to discover that she'd been out for several days after the visit to the doctor and that the infection has spread more. Riva, the camp doctor and a guard return to the doctor who said that she might have to amputate. Riva told the camp doctor that she must not allow that at any cost. Riva pointed out that a one-handed person couldn't work and would be killed by the Nazis; therefore, she would rather die from the infection than to have the Nazis kill her.

In chapter forty-one, the camp doctor spent hours with Riva, teaching her to use her left hand as her right hand healed. In chapter forty-two, there was to be a performance over the Christmas holidays and the Jews put together an array of talent, including dancing and singing. Riva was asked to recite a poem and she did but passed out immediately following the recitation. Later, a guard brought her a notebook and said that Riva, through her poem, had reminded the guard of the softer side of life. She said that Riva's poem indicated that Riva still held to hopes and dreams and still missed her mother. The guard said that the poem reminded her of her own mother.

In chapter forty-three, the date is January 19, 1945. Riva returned to work having healed from the infection in her hand. But she was sent to the medical office where she was to be an assistant to a woman named Katia. In chapter forty-four, Katia was very kind to Riva and one day prepared a way for her to have a bath - a luxury Riva had not had for a long time. In chapter forty-five, the girls were all forced out of their barracks. They were told by the guards that the Russians were advancing but warned that in the moments before the Russians killed the Germans, the Germans would kill the Jews. They were moved to another camp called Grafenort.

In chapter forty-six, the girls were forced to dig ditches and Riva said that it was ironic that the Jews were being forced to dig ditches that would be used by the Nazi soldiers. Riva was reminded that it was her birthday, but a Nazi soldier poked her with his rifle and told her that it would be her final birthday. In chapter forty-seven, on May 5, the girls were forced up and noted that the Nazi guards were particularly agitated. They were driven out of the camp and into the woods and fully expected to die there. Then the



Nazis ran away and the Jews couldn't decide what to do. They finally returned to camp to wait and see what would happen and were there when the Russians arrived.

In chapter forty-eight, Nancy asked if it could happen again but Riva said that it could only happen again "If we forget the past." She said that she had returned to Lodz to find another family living in her house and all her possessions gone. She returned to the grave of her younger brother and eventually found her three older siblings.

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From the moment of her arrival at Auschwitz, Riva heard people talking about the chimneys and the smoke. She didn't elaborate other than to say there were rumors about people being burned there. Actually, these were crematoriums where the bodies of Jews were burned. In Riva's version of this story, the reader is left to decide the meaning of the chimneys and smoke and to determine the significance.

Riva's experience with being taken outside the camp to a doctor seems almost fantastic on the surface. The fact that Jews were being slaughtered on a regular basis makes it difficult to accept that the guards would go to any trouble for the life of a single prisoner. However, the young camp doctor seemed to have put the reason into words when she said that Riva, because of her poetry, was important to the morale of the camp. This was a huge part of the Nazi plan - keeping order and keeping resistance to a minimum. By keeping Riva healthy, the Nazis were providing a source of comfort to the other girls. This kind of comfort meant that the women were less likely to rise up in revolt. The Nazis depended heavily on the passivity of the Jews to keep the camps and their plans running.

The story of the two girls who were beaten over the potato peels was told in some detail. Riva said that the girls were caught and forced to admit to their "crime" in front of all the other women. Then one of the girls was forced to use the whip on her sister. The girl doing the whipping initially refused but her sister pleaded with her to take control of the punishment. The thought was that her sister would certainly not whip as hard as the guards, but the beating - though administered as lightly as the sister could manage - was brutal in the sheer number of lashes. By the time the punishment was over, the girl administering the beating had lost her mind. Riva described this kind of mental break on more than this occasion.

Riva noted that she and the other girls had fully expected that they had been taken from the camp into the woods to be executed. That might actually have been the case except that the Russians were, by this point, very near. The Nazis probably knew that and were fleeing for their lives. The Russian who arrived at the camp asked if they were Jews and they told him they were. He said that they were the first of the Jews to be found alive, that all in the other camps had been killed.



# Characters

## Riva Minska

Riva was a thirteen-year-old Jewish girl when her mother, fearing the advance of Germans against the Jews, sent Riva's three older siblings out of the country. Riva and her three younger siblings were kept in Germany because of her mother's expectations that the Germans would not harm women and children. Riva was soon caught up in the hatred against the Jews, forced to wear a yellow star to signify that she was a Jew, and was subjected to hatred and ridicule. She watched as people she'd believed to be friends turned against all Jews and her people were betrayed, starved, beaten and killed. Riva's mother was eventually taken away as well, leaving Riva with the three younger boys. Riva was told that she and the boys will be split up, but she recalled her mother's words to stay together and take care of each other. Riva was granted custody of her younger brothers, though it meant she gave up her rights as a child. Riva didn't hesitate to give up whatever privileges she had as a child and took on the role of mother at sixteen. This was typical of Riva's caring nature. She was a talented writer and it's this talent that helped ensure that she survives the months in captivity. She was taken to several concentration camps, including Auschwitz for a brief stay, and lost track of her brothers. She was still alive when the Russians arrived in their camp and liberated them. She eventually married, had children and grandchildren, but the nightmares of her ordeal remained, even as an adult.

## Laibele

Riva's younger brother, he contracted tuberculosis as a child and never recovered, dying at age thirteen. Laibele was very close to Riva because of his illness. He was a kind and loving child, a fact that Riva said was true of all three of her younger brothers. Laibele had a difficult time of it, more so than some of the others, because he was stuck at home early into his illness while his mother and the three remaining of his siblings were at work. Riva was moved by his patience and she noted that Laibele wanted nothing more than to have the comforting touch of his mother while he was sick. He was denied this a great deal of the time. By the time the Germans were taking many of the sick and old Jews away, Laibele was almost bedridden. Knowing that they would take him away, his mother and siblings hid him in a cellar and pulled a rug and table back over the opening. They then went outside to face the Germans who took Laibele's mother away. Riva noted that Laibele didn't have to be told that their mother had been taken away because he could read that news on their faces. Over the following months, he remained kind and generous and urged Riva to hope when she was at her lowest points.





## Nacha Minska

Riva's mother, she made the difficult decision to send her older three children away, hoping that they would be safe. She remained behind with the three younger children because she convinced herself that the Germans would not harm women and children. Nacha was a tailor by trade and had supported seven children alone, having lost her husband to an epidemic prior to the birth of her seventh child. She urged that Riva and the remaining children stay together as she was literally torn from their home.

## Motele

Riva's younger brother, he felt a responsibility for his family. He was so serious about this responsibility that he went out one night and stole some wood so that the children could keep warm for a few days. He was caught, but the judge took pity on him and admired his refusal to tell on the others involved. Motele's punishment was to clean latrines for two weeks. Motele was with Riva when she was taken to Auschwitz and was never heard from again.

## Moishele

Riva's younger brother, he was as caring and loving as the others. When Motele was caught stealing wood and ordered to appear before a judge, Moishele went with his brother for "moral support." This was typical of the attitudes of all the children. Moishele was with Riva when she was taken to Auschwitz and was never heard from again.

## Shmulek Nichtigal

The man who was taken away to a Nazi prison camp and then released by mistake. He came first to Riva but she didn't allow him to spend nights with them for fear that people would talk. He went to stay with Riva's friend, Henry, though there was a frantic search for him over the days after his release.

## Mrs. Gruber

The landlady at the home that Riva and her family had lived for years prior to the German program to kill the Jewish population. The woman, though not a Jew, had been very close to Nacha prior to the German harassment of the Jews but was among those who raided the Minska home and denounced the family, leaving them literally to freeze and starve.



## Harry Gruber

Grandson of Mrs. Gruber, he was the same age as Riva and the two were very close. As an only child, he spent a great deal of time with the Minska children. When Harry was attacked by a group of people and accused of being a German spy. Nacha stood up for him but he later joined the Nazi party and was sent to the German front.

## Yulek Schwartz

A seventeen-year-old who was sent by the Skif to offer help to Riva. He was responsible for his younger sister, Faygele, who was fourteen, and felt that responsibility as heavily as Riva. Yulek was eventually deported and, fearing Faygele's fate without him, took her with him.

## Katia

The doctor who operated the first aid station and who took Riva on to help roll bandages. She gave Riva a warm bath, the first she'd had in months. She was a Russian but said the Russians would consider her a traitor and that she would not be welcomed by the Russians.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The Horror Caravan of 1940**

A massive rounding up of Jews from the streets of Lodz.

### **Volksdeutsche**

An organization of people who declared their German ancestry, though it is faint or all but nonexistent. Mrs. Gruber and Harry were among those who joined.

### **Lodz, Poland**

Where Riva and her family lived prior to the German program against the Jews.

### **The Lodz Ghetto**

Where Riva and her family and many other Jewish families lived in hiding from the Nazis.

### **Vigantol**

A kind of vitamin that was smuggled into the ghetto and that Riva's brothers managed to get for her.

### **Child Welfare Department**

The organization that tried to split up Riva and her family but that eventually petitioned for Riva to be named legal adoptive parent of her three younger brothers.

### **The Skif**

A children's socialist movement, it operated underground and provided information, study opportunities and planning.

### **The Bund**

The adult socialist movement.



## **Auschwitz**

The prison camp where Riva, her brothers and others from her neighborhood were taken.

## **Mittlesteine**

The second camp Riva was taken to.

## **Number 55082**

The number assigned to Riva in Mittelsteine.

## **Grafenort**

Where Riva was when the Russians liberated the camp.



# Themes

## The Willingness to Sacrifice for Others

This was arguably the most important theme in the book because it was seen so often. While the various people in the story were anxious to survive, they were also very willing to help others whenever possible. This was seen in stark reality when Motele, Moishle and Laibele gave up rations of their bread in order to get what they felt was needed to help Riva get well. When they learned that she needed vitamins and better food, they managed to trade bread for a tangerine. Riva worried about their sacrifice and insisted that they all share the treat, but the bottom line is that the boys made the sacrifice in order to get something they hoped would help Riva. They made this same sacrifice when they had the opportunity to get vitamins for her and even made a similar sacrifice in order to ensure that Riva had a new suit. Riva also sacrificed in her willingness to give up whatever privileges she had as a child in order to formally adopt her younger brothers. Though the outward signs of this sacrifice are not really evident because children of this time were treated poorly, she readily agrees to take the responsibility for her brothers. This theme was repeated often, by the man who carried Riva to the doctor, by Riva and her brothers when they hid fellow Jews from the Nazis and by others who gave of themselves in an effort to make someone's life at least a little better.

## The Will to Survive

Survival was at the forefront of many aspects of the story. Riva told of her own desire to survive but also told about others who endured a great many hardships and brutal situations in order to survive. One example of this will to survive was seen in the sisters who were caught stealing. These girls were so anxious to survive that they stole - and apparently ate - potato peels from the kitchen trash. For this "crime" they were punished severely and they must have known this ahead of time. Riva and others did what they had to do in an effort to survive. This was seen as Riva and the other women emerged from the showers upon their arrival at Auschwitz. Riva noted that they were naked and that the situation was demeaning, but they did as they were told. They were afraid of punishment, but more than that, they were doing what they felt was necessary in order to survive. This will was seen in Riva's insistence that they not amputate her hand. She was told that the infection had spread dramatically and that amputation might be the only option for saving her life. Riva said that the Nazis would kill her if she had only one hand because she couldn't work. She made a doctor promise that Riva's hand would not be amputated. Riva made this decision not because she feared the loss of her hand but because she wanted desperately to survive and knew that losing a hand meant certain death.



## The Power of Propaganda

While the atrocities of the Nazis were an important part of the story, an even greater problem for Riva was how much of the Nazi propaganda was true. She noted that the workers at her shop were all called outside one day where they were urged to volunteer to be moved to a different location. There were promises of a better life for those who volunteered and Riva, along with everyone else, was faced with a life-and-death decision. Riva's family was barely subsisting on the food ration and Riva's health was quickly deteriorating. She was constantly trying to decide how much of this information was false and whether it would be better to go with the Nazis and hope that life would be better upon their arrival. Schmulek was an example of a person who believed the propaganda. He said that he'd been told that life would be better for his family if he did volunteer to go to the prison camps. He did but when he returned, his family had been deported. When Yulek was about to be forced to leave, he told Riva that he could only hope that life would be better if he gave in to the demands of the Nazis. This tendency toward propaganda was, ironically, what saved Riva's life in prison. When she was injured and in danger of dying from an infected cut on her hand, a doctor convinced the guards that Riva's poetry provided a soothing balm to the other women. The guards sought ways to keep the inmates calm and took Riva for medical attention because of their constant efforts of creating positive propaganda.



# Style

## Perspective

The story was written in first person entirely from the perspective of the author, Riva Minsky. Like all stories of first person, the reader must be aware that the author's perspective is subject to her personal objectives. Riva said that her three younger brothers were willing to give up anything in order to make life better for Riva and for their family. She told about their sacrifices and their insistence that she hold to her hope for a better future. She hardly mentions her own hardships or sacrifices at all. She told of taking a job braiding rugs so that she could stay home with her sick brother and of continuing that job when her health was so poor that she was bedridden. But she glossed over these sacrifices, focusing instead on the efforts of her brothers. It seems likely that this is because all three of her brothers died during this time. Laibele died of tuberculosis and the other two, Moishela and Motele, were taken to Auschwitz and never returned. It seems possible that Riva presented her brothers as better people than they were, simply because they all died. The tendency to remember others as they were is likely at work here. It could be that Riva did write the story as she remembered but that her memory was clouded. This may also be the case in the situations in which Riva told of her experiences in the prison camps. She didn't provide a great deal of detail about the horrors and it may be that she had blocked out some of the more horrific details.

## Tone

The story is filled with despair and horror but has an undercurrent of hope that filters the despair. This is tightly bound with the will to live exhibited by many of the people in the story but is also tied to the fact that they were all giving, caring people. For example, while Riva was telling the story of her increasing illness that caused her to be bedridden for a significant period of time, she explained that she continued to work, braiding rugs. When she was at her lowest, her brother cheered her up, once even suggesting that they sing together in order to lighten the mood. When her illness progressed, her brothers sacrificed food in order to get vitamins that they hoped would make her better. This loving attitude is presented as more important than the privations caused by inadequate diet. While the lack of food and other basic necessities were an important part of Riva's story, her writing focused more on the caring relationship she had with her brothers. The book is written in a very straight-forward manner and readers of the target audience should have no trouble following the story line. The action is presented in first-person and in present tense which may be distracting to some readers though most will find that it makes the story line easier to track.

## Structure

Description





## Quotes

"Here they are, the Jewish generation that was not to be, proud human being, the new link in an old chain."

Chap. 1, p. 3

"The discussions under the oak tree are loud and full of worry. Words like war and Hitler are part of the daily vocabulary."

Chap. 2, p. 9

"But we cannot let the Nazis destroy our minds. Some of us have formed secret study groups."

Chap. 5, p. 33

"How do you tell a sick child that he has no mother? How do you tell it to yourself?"

Chap. 6, p. 39

"But we need much more than laughter to make us well. It does not cure tuberculosis or put calcium back into my bones."

Chap. 9, p. 51

"Their school is the tailor-shop; their books, the sewing machine; their lesson, the making of German military uniforms. I look at their tired blue eyes and try to recall their smiles."

Chap. 11, p. 61

"You see, Riva, someday it will all end, and those letters will be very important. We may forget what has happened today but your letters will remember."

Chap. 17, p. 74

"If we are found hiding someone, we will be taken. But there is always hope that we will not be caught."

Chap. 18, p. 102

"The guards are getting very impatient. They are already bored with the game of loading Jews into the wagons."

Chap. 24, p. 141

"Some do not worry anymore: they are dead. Others, half-dead, do not care anymore. They lie motionless, waiting for the end to come and free them from this hell."

Chap. 27, p. 161

"We move, a procession of skeletons marching before the Nazi officers whose whim will decide who shall live, who shall die. Right: life; Left: death."

Chap. 29, p. 169



"The bombs do not mean liberation, the guards remind us daily. The day before we die, all of you will die first."  
Chap. 46, p. 253



## Topics for Discussion

Describe Riva's childhood. Describe her family. How did her life change after the Nazis begin persecuting the Jews?

List two times Riva was in contact with the Nazis. What was her reaction in each instance? How did she feel about the Nazis? How did she come to have these feelings?

What was the fate of Riva's mother? Of her brother Laibele? Of her brothers Moishele and Motele? How was the fate of each of these connected to Riva's fate? What was her reaction to the fate of each?

How did Riva come to be the adoptive mother of her three younger brothers? What impact did this have on Riva's deportation? What was her reaction to the plan to adopt her younger brothers? What was her reaction to the news regarding the change in her deportation orders?

How did Riva begin recording her thoughts on paper? List at least two people who commented on her writing. How did each feel about her writing? What did Yulek tell her about the historical significance of her writing? How does she continue her writing in prison? Why is her writing important there?

Describe Riva's arrival at the Nazi prison camp. Why did she go there? What was her life like once she was there? List the three camps where Riva was held. Where was she when she was released? How was she released?

Who was Yulek? Karola? Rifkele? Mrs. Boruchowich? David Berkenwald? Katia? How was each connected to Riva?