

Daniel's Story Study Guide

Daniel's Story by Carol Matas

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Plot Summary

Daniel's Story is a story of death and survival, of desperation and hope, evil and love. The story is told from Daniel's point of view as he experiences the atrocities of the holocaust for Jews in central Europe. When the story opens, he is 14 years old, riding on a train and looking at pictures in his photo album. Daniel uses a photograph album to spark his memory of events from when he was six years old until the day he and his family are loaded onto the train bound for the Lodz ghetto.

After spending two and a half years in the ghetto, Daniel is again riding on a train, this time to Auschwitz labor/death camp and he has a few pictures with him that tell the story of his time in the ghetto. He took pictures of people to try and earn money; he met other youth who tried to find places for people who were being transported out to hide, and they tried to survive. Disease, starvation, cold and fear are daily, even hourly, concerns for Daniel, his family and friends. He watches as families are separated, babies are killed and old people are left to freeze to death. Just as he shows signs of despair, something - his sister's violin playing, or being involved with the Youth Group - gives him new hope for survival.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, Daniel and his father are separated from his mother and sister, and the horrors of the camp are described. From being shaved and disinfected to watching other prisoners being shot point blank for no reason, Daniel continues to push through with his desire to live and be reunited with Rosa. His father is his constant companion and they are able to see Erika, Daniel's sister for brief moments on their way to the work barracks. He is recruited by a friend from the Lodz Youth Group to join the resistance group. He will take pictures of the crematoriums and the body pits. The pictures will be smuggled out to show the allied forces what is really happening in the camp. Daniel feels good to be involved with the resistance effort. As the allied troops move closer to the camp, the selections and killings increase and finally Daniel and his father are transported out of the camp, once again they are on a train headed for Buchenwald, the pictures of Auschwitz are now only in his head.

Once at Buchenwald, Daniel experiences again the shaving and disinfection, but this time there is a brief respite in the torture. They are forced into quarantine for three weeks where they are not allowed to work with the regular camp population. They are also given, for the first time, some warm clothes. But then the work starts. The lack of food and torture continues, although this is not strictly a killing camp but more of a work camp. Daniel's job is to help a photographer. He will take pictures of Nazi officers and their families. It is while doing his job that he meets one particular officer who is attentive and loving toward his wife and two daughters who later shoots a young boy in the leg for not sweeping the walkway correctly. The officer eventually kills the boy as Daniel looks on. Daniel finds solace in his father's company but cannot understand how his father's religious convictions are strengthened through these experiences while his own are faltering.



Daniel is so upset by the murder of the child, that he unconsciously tells his photographer friend that he used to work for the resistance while in Auschwitz. He is recruited, along with his father to help with the resistance at Buchenwald. They have a radio and know that the allies are approaching.

When the time comes, Daniel and his father are given guns and are stationed by a gate. They shoot two guards. One is killed but the other is not, and while Daniel wants to shoot him, his father tells him no, to do that would be to stoop to their level of evil and he will not be like they are. Daniel lets him live. They spend a few weeks at the camp and are careful after the allies arrive not to eat too much too fast and get sick.

Daniel rides the train one last time. This time he is in a seat, not a freight car and some pictures are in his hand, while others are in his head. He reviews those events of Buchenwald while looking forward to meeting Rosa at his old apartment in Lodz as they had promised. When he gets to Lodz, things have changed so at first he has a difficult time finding his way around. Once he gets into the ghetto area, he knows where he is and approaches the street he lived on. There in front of his apartment is Rosa. She comes to meet him, and they both have changed in their looks so they hardly recognize each other. But, their love has not changed. Rosa tells Daniel of his sister: she made it out of the camp; she was determined to be liberated, but was so weak and ill, Rosa was with her when she died.

Daniel and Rosa are together. He feels lucky to be with her after all the horror he lived through and they vow to remember, to never forget lest they be defenseless again, against such evil.

Chapter 1

Summary

14-year-old Daniel is sitting on a train with his parents feeling shell-shocked. He doesn't know where they are going, and he really doesn't understand the full implication of why they are going. He opens a picture album that he has brought with him. The album begins eight years ago with pictures of his family celebrating his sixth birthday. Daniel introduces his family; they are a lively, happy bunch.

The next picture is one of his father's store. Written across the window is the word "Jew" and he remembers being scared by a "brown shirt" with a gun who said his father's store was being boycotted. Uncle Peter explains to him the Nazi's ideas of curing Germany's problems and Daniel admits to being quick to forget about the political troubles of the times, and now, he's traveling, being sent away with his family.

Analysis

Daniel is a young teen who is caught up in social events that he doesn't understand. As a matter of fact, nobody seems to understand what is happening. Daniel, his family, friends and neighbors are forced onto this train to somewhere; they only know it's not good. Daniel's picture album brings some normalcy back into his life as he remembers the beginnings of the troubles. Daniel is a typical example and symbolic of a whole race of people who were victimized by the Nazi regime. Most people did not know where they were being sent or what was going to happen to them. All they really knew was the "why" of their situation: they were Jews and were persecuted because of it.

Vocabulary

Boycott, defiantly, demolished, dignity, disoriented, incident, merchandise, methodically, mutual, protested, rucksack, shambles, sternly.



Chapter 2

Summary

Daniel continues looking through the pictures and years pass. The next one is a 1936-37 class picture, his last year of public school. Many of his Jewish classmates are not in this picture because they have already been either forced to leave the public school or have left voluntarily. Daniel remembers that he kicked his teacher after being humiliated in front of the class, and then went to the Jewish school. Daniel outlines other changes in his life and the life of the Jewish community and there is constant talk of leaving the country. Daniel retells a nightmare he had one night after watching a propaganda newsreel: his mother comforted him then, but the nightmare of their lives continues.

Analysis

Matas uses a dream/nightmare sequence from when Daniel was 10 years old to predict/foreshadow events now. Then he had a nightmare, now, when he is 14 years old and looking back at those pictures, he is living a nightmare. There is a sense of irony here that his mother wants him to stay in the public school, and be persecuted, rather than attend the Jewish school where he will be accepted. By including this conflict, Matas is showing another example of the Nazi suppression of the Jewish people.

Vocabulary

Bribed, convince, devastated, disperse, eventually, excuses, expresses, forbidding, inferiority, momentum, newsreel, vermin, virtually, voluntarily



Chapter 3

Summary

Daniel's mother can't look more than briefly at his photo album; it contains nothing but horrible memories. Daniel doesn't want to argue with her, but he does want to try to make sense of the situation. He contemplates a picture he took with Uncle Peter's camera on November 11th, 1939, the morning after Kristallnacht. He took pictures of their Jewish identification cards and ration cards and people looting his father's store. He learns about power and abuse when he wears a Hitler Youth uniform that his Oma gave him and he is forced to take pictures of four Jewish men being harassed in the public square. He decides that he would rather be himself, a Jew, than an imposter.

Analysis

Daniel thinks it's ironic that an adult would be afraid of him - a kid with a camera, when he approaches people and offers to take their pictures in order to make some money. Kids should be afraid of adults not the other way around. This is one more example of the fear that everyone felt during this time in history. Nobody trusted. Matas also uses the gift of a Hitler Youth uniform to give Daniel a brief idea of how it feels to be able to walk through the streets without fear, as well as, to understand how someone wearing that uniform feels: the power and control they have. That Daniel decides he doesn't like it, and would rather be himself says he has a good sense of self and a high moral character.

Vocabulary

Aryan, astonished, avenge, bar mitzvahs, confronted, console, discouraged, elite, Kristallnacht, looting, pact, quota, taunted, visas.



Chapter 4

Summary

Continuing to remember, Daniel tells of a package coming in the mail from Dachau. When they open it, Daniel is confused that the box holds only ashes. Then he understands: Uncle Peter is dead and the Nazis have sent them this. The whole family is devastated and Daniel can no longer imagine a future. His mother continues to try to find a way for their family to leave the country. As summer passes, Daniel begins to feel ready for school to start. Now they are forced to wear a yellow star imprinted with "Jew" on their clothing. A month later they are being deported so they are crowded together to wait for the trains. They are body searched, humiliated and Daniel feels helpless. Even though he is afraid as the train makes its first stop at the ghetto in Lodz, Poland, Daniel is determined to continue to defy the Nazis and take pictures.

Analysis

At this point, Daniel's story through pictures is brought up to date. He is on the train looking out the window, traveling away from Frankfurt. He remembers how it started slowly and how gradually things worsened. Daniel believes that by taking pictures of the atrocities he witnesses, he is defying the abusive powers and he will continue doing so. Daniel is showing his determination in spite of his fear of an impossible situation.

Vocabulary

Companion, consulate, deported, expectation, ghetto, parcel, petty, slums, trudge, wasteland, withdrawn.



Chapter 5

Summary

It is three years later, August 1944; Daniel, at 17, is once again on a train. This time he is packed with 100 other people in a closed freight car. He has pictures that help him remember his time in Lodz and recalls the stench, filth, cold and starvation of their arrival.

Soon the dying starts: first a cousin, then an uncle. Notices for deportation arrive and they say good-bye to more family members. Oma Rachel gets sick and goes to the hospital, but then the hospital is evacuated. Daniel can't find Oma. He sees old people trying to run, babies being thrown out of windows and everywhere people screaming and crying. Even though Oma has escaped, the Nazis come for her the next day.

Two days later an evacuation announcement is made for all children and elderly people. The family decides to try and save Erika and Friedrich by hiding them in the closet. When the family is lined up in the courtyard, Daniel and his parents are spared, but the two nieces are sent to the trucks. Auntie Leah refuses to be parted from them and all three are shot. When they return to the apartment Daniel finds that Erika and Friedrich are still ok.

Analysis

So begins Section Two: Pictures of Lodz in a flashback format. Daniel is telling of atrocities that nobody, much less a child, should have to experience. He recalls the events of his family, his grandparents being taken away, his cousins and aunt being shot in front of him with a tone that says he is both defeated, helpless to do anything about it, but also a hidden strength that makes one believe that he will be able get through anything. Matas does not use overly graphic language or extensively draw out the scenes; there is no need to. The scenes speak for themselves.

Vocabulary

Convince, defiance, deprived, dignity, dreaded, exempt, frugal, Gestapo, habitable, prudently resistance, sanitation, slum, stench, supplement, throngs, transports, triumph.



Chapter 6

Summary

Daniel introduces Rosa. She is in a picture dated December, 1942 when Daniel was 15 years old. He met Rosa when Erika brings her home to visit. Daniel is sitting in only his underwear as his clothing is being deloused, and his family reacts to his embarrassment with great hilarity. This is the first time he has heard laughter in months. He attends a youth meeting with Erika and Friedrich where they meet several other young people and discuss what they can do to keep the ghetto from falling into chaos. Part of their discussion revolves around the central principle of hope. Rosa gets angry and says that hope is for the enemy, and they should fight, instead. If they die, at least they die with pride. Daniel tries to argue, but is once again embarrassed. He realizes he is falling in love.

Analysis

When Daniel and Erika attend the youth meeting there is a feeling of hope: hope in this group of young people with courage and strength. There is hope that they will find support for each other within the group; hope that they will live to see the end of the war, and for Daniel, hope that Rosa will continue to notice him. It also is a testament to Daniel's character and will to survive that he is able to look at Rosa through the eyes of love during this tumultuous time.

Vocabulary

Beriberi, chaos, dominance, glorious, humiliates, intense, proficient, prolongs, respond, scurvy, squalor, vying, witty, Yiddish.

Chapter 7

Summary

Here is a picture of Erika playing her violin. She is the youngest in the Lodz orchestra. There is a picture of Daniel on his 16th birthday with his arm around Rosa. He recalls that the youth group continues to meet and makes plans for the next deportation. They want to find places for people to hide. Rosa tells Daniel about two children whose father steals their rations. She wants to help them by breaking into their apartment and stealing the father's rations. They do just that, and then Daniel and Friedrich find a neighbor dead in his apartment and take all the furniture to burn so as to keep warm. Daniel's mother is constantly sick that winter. Eventually, the Nazi's insist everyone turn in their musical instruments. Father, knowing how to nurture the soul lies and says Erika's violin was lost. They hide it in the closet with the radio.

Analysis

The taking of Erika's violin is one more example of the insidious evil of the Nazi regime. This instrument was the last vestige of emotional sustenance Daniel's family had, and now it was to be taken away. Daniel is showing signs of deceit that are oppositional to his innocent character when he finds a neighbor dead and instead of calling the authorities, steals furniture to burn as firewood. While this act helps sustain his family through the winter, he is forced into this fraudulent type of behavior by his life-situation.

Vocabulary

Accuse, agriculture, avengers, camaraderie, composed, fetched, greedy, harvesting, nurture rations, smuggle, sustain, transferred.



Chapter 8

Summary

May 1944 - owning a camera is illegal, so there's only a quick shot of Rosa and Erika in front of the sewing factory which reminds Daniel of how Rosa decided to stop eating the soup for lunches at her factory as there was nothing in it - the vegetables were being stolen out before the workers got it. When she and others are fired for refusing the soup, Daniel organizes a group to take their soup over to the sewing factory to show solidarity. Erika also organizes a hunger strike until Rosa and the others are rehired. Rosa is rehired and a committee is formed to supervise the kitchen workers and food. Rosa is sure Hitler will lose the war but predicts that he will take all the Jews out of Europe first. She asks Daniel to go into hiding if he is called out for transport. Daniel refuses stating he will go with his family if needed. In June, D-day, they listen on the radio as the allied forces enter France. Soon Daniel's family gets the transport notice, and father decides they will go. Mother and Erika will not get better in the ghetto, and maybe they will go to a better place, but Daniel and Friedrich will stay and hide in the basement of the bakery. Their last conversation with Erika she tells them that they must focus on love and humanity and a new life in Palestine.

Analysis

Daniel and his friends continue to act out of both desperation and ingenuity which shows again, the great lengths to which people will go in order to survive. Daniel's family is such an integral part of his personality; it is easy to see that he is torn between leaving with his family and hiding as directed by his father. The fact that he stays behind shows, again, his strength of character and respect for his father's wishes. Erika, in spite of her illness and probable death from it, still maintains the conviction of the good of mankind and will not allow the Nazi's evil to infiltrate her thinking. Erika is the embodiment of hope and goodwill when she admonishes Daniel and Rosa to survive, have children and make the world a better place.

Vocabulary

Apprenticeship, corruption, curse, despair, dignity, ecstatic, eloquent, humanity, invasion, liberate, objected, predicted, solidarity.

Chapter 9

Summary

Daniel and Rosa say goodbye to each other as they separate and go into hiding. She will leave a note in his apartment when this is all over, so he will be able to find her. He and Friedrich wait until after dark and then leave the apartment, one at a time, to hide. When it is Daniel's turn, he is caught and taken to the transport. When the train finally stops, he disembarks and is able to find his parents and sister. They are separated first by gender then by health. He and his father are both sent into a barracks and forced to strip; they are shaved, disinfected, and then given striped uniforms to wear. Daniel describes the smell from the chimneys as horrible, and Father, who is no longer recognizable, tells him that Mother and Erika must be dead. Father also explains that the furnaces are crematoriums for human bodies. Daniel can only hope that his mother and sister survived the selection as he and his father are loaded with 10 other people onto a bunk and the lights are extinguished.

Analysis

Daniel's strong family values are shown by the fact that he does not seem bothered by the fact that he was put on the transport and couldn't go into hiding. He is anxious to find his family and when he does, he tells his father that together they will be stronger.

Vocabulary

Barracks bravely, captured, corridor defeat, disappointment, disinfectant, enclosure, hustled, overwhelming, resolved, tiers.



Chapter 10

Summary

Daniel and his father are again on a train after spending just three months in Auschwitz. It is the middle of December and the Allies are advancing so the Germans evacuated the camp. Daniel contemplates why the Nazi's are afraid of having any survivors: if they were doing the right thing in eradicating the Jews they shouldn't be punished, so did they know they were doing wrong all along and did it anyway? His determination to live becomes stronger. He will remember - even without his pictures. At the camp, they are forced to march four miles to the work camp, Monowitz. On the way Daniel notices Erika playing her violin with a group of other musicians as they march past. He figures out a way to get a note to her and on their march back to the barracks he throws an oily rag on which he has written "D & F alive" at her. He doesn't know if she gets it, but father sees her and is relieved that she has survived.

Analysis

Here begins Section Three: Pictures of Auschwitz. On the train, traveling to who knows where, Daniel recalls the events of the three months he spent at Auschwitz. The importance of family is reinforced when Daniel and his father see her alive, and he feels a renewed hope to keep on living. For the first time, Daniel is looking forward and feeling hopeful.

Vocabulary

Belching, brutal, chaotic, confused, convinced, deluded, determined, disgusting, dismantling, fury, inspire, kapo, loot, memorable, mocked, quarantine, terrified, thrived, witness.



Chapter 11

Summary

The pictures are now in Daniel's mind's eye as he retells his experiences. The first is his sister smiling as she plays violin. She now knows that her brother and father are alive. The next is one worse than a nightmare. He sees the dead bodies of people who were gassed but could not be cremated; instead they are thrown into massive burial pits. Adam, a boy from the Lodz youth group joins his work group and tells him that the Russians are close, don't give up. Adam also recruits Daniel to join the resistance movement in the camp. He will be given a camera and will take pictures of the burial pits, the crematoriums and the stores of supplies. They will smuggle these pictures out of the camp and get them to the Russians as proof of the atrocities inside the camp. Daniel and his father are put on the special work detail and Daniel was able to take several pictures and return the camera to the kapo without being discovered.

Analysis

Daniel is seeing visions of atrocities that he says he will never forget, and he doesn't need a camera to help him remember. It is ironic then, that the resistance movement of the camp recruits him to take pictures of things that he would rather forget. He feels hope in that he may be instrumental in saving lives by taking these pictures, but on the other hand, he feels a sudden and horrible urge to jump into the pit with the other burning bodies and end it all. The strength of family is all that stops him when his father says he will follow him into the pit if he jumps.

Vocabulary

Anxiety, bartered, convincingly crematoria, defied, departure, despair, relentlessly, savagely transport.



Chapter 12

Summary

Daniel watches as his friend Adam creates his own death. He is afraid that the captured rebels will turn him in so instead of being captured he steals a guard's gun and shoots him. The other guards shoot Adam. Daniel manages to get another note to Erika and they meet at the fence between the yards for a brief conversation. Erika knows she won't survive the next selection, she is so weak, and the next day she is not playing her violin as Daniel and Father march by. Later, when Daniel contracts typhus, Father barter with the guards to let him stay in the barracks. In his delirium he envisions his mother encouraging him. Father tells him that his mother's spirit was with him, that's what pulled him through. Daniel contemplates his father's newfound spiritual beliefs and again thinks of Rosa and her love. He feels a renewal to survive in his own spirit. Near the end of November they are evacuated and forced to march because the Russians are coming and the Nazi's want no evidence left. Finally, they are loaded onto another train and for days they travel. After being stripped of all possessions, shaved and disinfected, Daniel and his father are, thankfully, given some warm clothes and Daniel learns that he is now at Buchenwald.

Analysis

Daniel's horrific experiences continue: he sees his friend choose a violent death; his sister, Erika, disappears; and Daniel contracts typhus. With such horror it is amazing that the human spirit can, with such little encouragement, be sparked into hopefulness. All Daniel needs is a conversation with his father, or a thought of Rosa and he is encouraged. Even though Daniel questions his own faith, it is his father's comments, remembering his mother's love and his love for Rosa that renews his own faith and his will to live.

Vocabulary

Attract, bartering, bribed, brisk, brutal, defeated, delirium, emaciated, gallows, instill, massacre, rebels, revenge, sabotaged, squalor, tortured.



Chapter 13

Summary

Here begins the Section Four: Pictures of Buchenwald. Daniel is in a seat on a train with pictures, some in his hand, others in his head. He is liberated and going back to Lodz to find Rosa, but first he must remember his time in Buchenwald. They were given soup and put in quarantine for three weeks. Not such a terrible time. But the main barracks were rough, he describes the contrast between the barracks and the gardens the Nazi's had created. Daniel worked in the photography studio; taking photos of guards and families. There he meets Karl and learns that Buchenwald, while a horrible work camp, is not a killing center like Auschwitz/Birkenau. On his way to get more developing chemicals he witnesses the killing of a young boy by a guard who had recently had his picture taken with his family. He had seemed like such a loving father Daniel cannot understand how he can also be so brutal. Daniel was so affected by this incident he told Karl about the horror and that he had been part of the resistance at Auschwitz. Karl tells Daniel and his father to be outside the barracks that night to be taken to the resistance group here.

Analysis

Even though there seems to be a brighter feeling to his life at Buchenwald - a time to rest, warm jacket and shirt, slightly better food, the horror never ends, and Daniel continues to witness unbelievable atrocities. He feels revitalized at the thought of being able to help with the resistance at Buchenwald. The opposing imagery of the guards' garden as compared to the camp also gives a quick glimpse of a better world "out there," but the irony is that the evil ones, the Nazis, are the ones who can enjoy the garden and the victims continue to be tortured.

Vocabulary

Communist, content, distraught, ornate, pampered, paradise, resistance, squalor.



Chapter 14

Summary

Daniel is now 18 years old. As part of the resistance, Daniel and his father help dismantle a gas chamber. He listens to Karl's radio one evening and learns that the Allies are very close. Daniel fears the Nazis will shoot him just before being liberated. He continues with his "job" until March when the Allies are getting closer and they want no more pictures. Daniel continues undercover. April 2nd: he photographs rows of prisoners being marched out of the camp. He wants to fight now. April 4th: they hold a Passover celebration and renew hope. April 6th; 8,000 more are marched out. They finally decide now is the time to organize the rebellion. Daniel and Father are assigned a spot near the gate and with the first explosion, they shoot the guards. In the exchange, father is shot in the arm. One guard is still alive and Daniel, at the direction of his father, wraps the bullet wound. He would have preferred to let the guard die. They return to the main camp and find that now the prisoners have control. The SS were either captured or ran off. Daniel takes one last trip to see the guard who shot the boy sweeping the sidewalk. He puts a gun up to the guard's head, but he doesn't shoot, he says, instead, that he'll be at the trial. Daniel walks away, back to his father feeling immense relief at being alive and free.

Analysis

Daniel gives a "snapshot" view of all the suffering at Buchenwald, and he needs to say no more than that. Imagination is a key component in the telling of Daniel's story: a person shot for a missing button, beatings for failing to salute, people tied to their beds and fed nothing but salt water, children wandering around, victims of horrible experiments. None of these need to be described in full detail and the fact that Daniel repeats several times that this was not a killing camp, does nothing to relieve the horror of what that camp really is. Daniel finds the chance to visit the guard who beat the little boy, but was so nice to his own children; he pretends to threaten the little girl and receives no reaction from the guard. He asks, "a life for a life?" then he points the gun at the guard's head. And the man showed fear in his eyes. Daniel did not pull the trigger - he was above that - but told him he would see him at his trial. The irony lies in the fact that Daniel does not feel good about himself for letting the guard live. Instead, he is ashamed at his inability to just leave it alone. He is not proud of his ability to maintain his self-control and rise above the brutal situation he has been forced into. He believes his actions will never be understood for what they were and that the Nazis will never believe that they were wrong for doing what they did.

Vocabulary

Chaotic, dismantle, evacuation, lavishness, liberation, luxury, massacre opulence, prospect rebellion, reassured, specter, triumph.

Chapter 15

Summary

Daniel has a picture of a smiling American soldier. They spend the night in the hospital where Father gets his bullet wound cleaned and they eat sparingly. He goes along with Father's suggestion to eat only a little of the rich food. The next morning, the realization of freedom hits Daniel hard, and he yells for pure joy, hugging those around him. He leaves father briefly and walks out of the camp through the gates. Then he gets his camera and takes pictures of everything, not only the smiling American soldiers who bring them food, but also the walking skeletons who will not survive even though they are now free. His goal is to return to Lodz and try to find Rosa. They also wanted to find Erika and Friedrich. On the trip to Lodz they stop in a small Polish town where Daniel and Peter briefly disembark from the train. They are accosted by four poles that beat them. Daniel "plays dead" but Peter continues to fight until nearly killed. Daniel pulls out his gun and shoots one of the attackers. Peter is seriously injured and is operated on for several hours. He is in a coma and they vow to try and find his family.

Analysis

Even though the prisoners at Buchenwald have been liberated, there is little happiness. Daniel's brief "jumping for joy" is overshadowed by the dreary conditions and continual dying at the camp. They cannot escape the racist attitudes and must continue to fight even after being freed. This seems a sad prediction for future times.

Vocabulary

Anguish, atrocities, civilians condoned, corpses, endured, executions, gauze, grieve, hideous, ingenuity, mankind, militia, resolved, slump.



Chapter 16

Summary

After the surgery, Peter is in bad shape. Just before he dies, Daniel tells him he will find his family and will go to Palestine for him. Father will stay with Peter's body and arrange a proper funeral and sends Daniel off to find Rosa. He finds her sitting on a chair in front of his old apartment. She notices him and runs to him. They kiss and say I love you, both so happy to have found each other again. They want to talk, but that would only bring up the pain again. They review what they know of family members: Rosa was with Erika when she died, and Friedrich is alive and living with Rosa's family. They wonder how they, as a people, will survive with so many gone, but they are determined. They will name their children after those who are gone and dedicate their lives to making sure this can never happen again.

Analysis

The torture continues even after Daniel is liberated. He worries about ever finding his sister. He is beaten and Peter killed at the hands of still-racist poles. He finds his sister is dead. So, even though this book has a "happy ending" in that Daniel lives, it doesn't seem happy. Daniel and Rosa are starting to create a new life, a world, with nothing but memories of horror. Only their will to survive and love will allow them to continue past the atrocities placed upon their lives.

Vocabulary

Bestial, brutal, cling, compiled, defenseless, dehydrated, gingerly, infirmary, liberated, precious, reluctant, waif.



Characters

Daniel

At the opening of the book, Daniel is a 14-year-old Jewish boy who lives with his family in Frankfurt, Germany. He tells his life story within a 4-½ year span, from the time he is deported to Lodz in October 1941 until Buchenwald camp is liberated in April of 1945.

Mother, Ruth

Ruth is loyal to her family and works hard to care for them. She is deported to Lodz and later dies in Auschwitz.

Father, Joseph

Daniel's constant companion. Daniel continually defers to his father, asks him questions and respects his answers. Joseph is the head of the family and is much respected.

Erika

Erika is Daniel's younger sister. She is an avid violinist and is the youngest person in the Lodz orchestra. She also composes her own songs which are "happy tunes." She has had enough sadness already. She also admonishes her brother and Rosa to not let the evil thinking of the Nazi's infiltrate their psyche, rather they need to survive, have children and go on to make the world a better place.

Auntie Leah

Mother's older sister, a bossy woman who lets her own children run wild. She dies in front of Daniel when she refuses to be separated from her children.

Oma Miriam

Father's mother from an old folks' home. Made and gave Daniel a Hitler Youth uniform so Daniel could walk around Frankfurt with freedom. Commits suicide by taking saved sleeping pills and leaves a note that she is afraid and doesn't want to suffer or see her family suffer.



SS

Seen humiliating and harassing Jewish men in the town's square. They are the camp guards, responsible for killing, maiming and torturing millions of prisoners.

Gestapo

Throw children into trucks, shoot Auntie Leah and cousins in the head, responsible for all sorts of atrocities.

Rosa

A native of Lodz, Poland. Daniel meets her when his family is transported to the ghetto. Her smile is her act of defiance. She is part of a youth group, and she doesn't believe that "hope" is enough; she wants to grab the guns, fight and die with dignity. She and Daniel fall in love and will marry.

Adam

A friend from the Lodz youth group who starts working at the same factory as Daniel and recruits him to take pictures to smuggle out of the camp for the resistance. He believes this will give the allied forces proof of the atrocities that are taking place in the camp.

Peter

A friend from Lodz. Peter meets Daniel during the forced march out of Auschwitz. Daniel supported him physically on the walk and they became friends. Peter lasted longer in Lodz because of his blonde hair and blue eyes. He lives through the atrocities of the camps just to be beaten when they stop briefly in a small town on their way back to Lodz.

Karl

An older inmate at Buchenwald, he is a political prisoner, who runs the photo studio. Daniel becomes his assistant. Daniel tells him about his extra-curricular photography work when he was at Auschwitz and Karl recruits him for resistance work at Buchenwald.



Objects/Places

Frankfurt, Germany

Daniel and his family lived here before being forced to move to the Lodz ghetto in Poland.

Trains

Trains carry Daniel away from his home in Frankfurt, from the Lodz ghetto to Auschwitz, from Auschwitz to Buchenwald and again from Buchenwald back to Lodz. Daniel and the others are loaded into the trains as if they are cattle.

Picture album

The picture album holds memories of his family and happy times. Later the album is replaced by just a few pictures which are replaced by memories of incidents.

Camera

Daniel received a camera from Auntie Leah when Uncle Peter went to the camp. He takes pictures of people with it and tries to sell them the pictures to make money. Daniel used it to take pictures of Jews being harassed in the public square while in Auschwitz, and used his photography skills to get a job while in Buchenwald.

Nazi Youth Uniform

Made by his grandmother so he could have the freedom to go where he wanted to go about town. Daniel felt the uniform gave him a feeling of power, respect, and freedom.

Lodz, Poland

Daniel's first stop after leaving Frankfurt, Germany. In the Lodz ghetto he experiences untold horrors and meets Rosa. He returns here after being liberated from Buchenwald to find her again.

Radio

Illegal and hidden in a cupboard behind the bed. They listen to the news when they can. Father keeps it because he knows how necessary hope is for survival.



Closet

Erika and Friedrich are hidden here and saved from transportation out of the ghetto. The radio and Erika's violin are also hidden in the closet.

Palestine

The youth group dreams of going here and creating a community if they survive. This is a place of the future; a place to go and begin again, making the world a better place.

Violin

Erika composes happy, hopeful music as a contrast to all the sadness surrounding them. She also plays in the Lodz orchestra and later is able to see Daniel and her father for brief moments as she plays while they march to their factory to work.

Soup

That of survival, only a few vegetables, but it also is the impetus for a workers strike at the factory and allows other workers to show solidarity by sharing their noon rations.

Auschwitz

A death camp. Daniel sees and experiences the most horrendous conditions and situations while here. This place also represents separation, selection, stripping, shaving and scorn.

"Canada"

This is a storage area of the barracks at Auschwitz, so called, because it contains all the extra stuff including cameras.

Burn pits

The bodies of prisoners are thrown into massive pits and buried because the crematoriums cannot keep up. Daniel must take pictures of these pits full of bodies and he realizes that these are not just bodies, but murdered people. He will never forget this fiery pit, it is worse than a nightmare image.

Buchenwald

The camp Daniel is sent to as the Russian's advance. Here they are at least given warm clothes and although they are shaved, disinfected and given little food, they are able to rest some in quarantine and not go to work immediately. While there is a crematorium, it is not strictly a killing camp. Daniel works in the photo studio while here.

Guns

Daniel sees people get shot for trying to be with their families, for losing a button off their shirt, for trying to escape the camps. Guns are objects of death and fear. When Daniel finally gets one as part of the resistance unit at Buchenwald, he feels ready for action and if he must die, then he will die knowing that he tried. Daniel carries a gun with him out of the camp and uses it when he and Peter are getting beaten up during a stop over at a small Polish town on their way back to Lodz.



Themes

Man's Inhumanity to Man

Any book about the holocaust includes examples and descriptions of man's inhumanity to man, and Daniel's Story is no different. While Matas does not use overly graphic description, the events speak for themselves. The events described in this book are at a minimum, astonishing. The reader is taken into a world where people are tied up and publicly humiliated, children are forced to harass and ridicule, people are crowded and pushed and starved and beaten and killed.

That people are killed is horrible but it is understandable, after all, this is a war-era. What is impossible to understand, however, is the way people are killed. They are thrown out windows, tortured, burned, chased, they are stripped of all dignity and life before they died, but an even more insidious horror, is the fact that men did this. Human beings, not an uncontrolled natural disaster, hurricane or earthquake, not some sort of alien monster, but these atrocities were imposed upon human beings by other human beings.

Therein lies the horror, and while this is a difficult book to read, it is one that must be read so this can never happen again. Society must, for all generations, be made aware of this horrible era in human history so as never to forget the depths to which man descended and to never therein descend again.

Family

Daniel knows the value of family and early on introduces all his aunts and uncles and cousins and the wonderful times they had when they all got together. He learns even more about the value of family when he is hauled to the work camp and finally gets to see Erika and realizes that she is alive. She, too, changes her outlook when she sees her brother and father.

Family becomes even more important when as Daniel views the burning body pits he is overcome with such despair of the human race that he loses all hope of ever being rescued, and even if he is rescued, he still can't see any hope for the future, so he contemplates jumping into the pit with those murdered people. The only thing that prevents him from jumping is his father. His father says that if Daniel jumps, he will jump too. Daniel will not be responsible for his father's death.

It's all about family: when they are liberated they think about where to go to try and find Erika and Rosa. When Peter is nearly killed on their way back to Lodz and he has to have surgery, all they think about is trying to find his family - if he has any family still alive.



Giving hope for the future and connection to the past, family is probably the most influential factor that keeps Daniel alive.

Man's Ability to Adapt

After everything Daniel has lived through and the fact that he is not stark raving mad demonstrates the malleability of the human spirit. Daniel does have several supports to help him through including his family, which includes his past and their history together. The pictures that Daniel takes and carries with him are representative of this support system. He also relies on his faith in God, although this support is severely tested. But, probably the most important support he has is a view for the future, hope that is motivated by love. The love he feels for Rosa.

Another example of man's ability to adapt is seen in Daniel's little sister, Erika, when she is separated from her family, starved, and afraid, yet she is able to rally and smile when she sees her brother and father are still alive and on their way to the work camp.

Hope

The central principle that kept people going in the ghetto was hope. Daniel says that hope is what kept them all in that struggle when it would have been easier to give up. Daniel's father knows that hope is as important as food in keeping his family going when he traded noodles for a radio so the family could listen to the news reports.

Hope continues through all the horrors to which Daniel is subjected, and in light of Daniel's family getting their transport notice to leave Lodz, the Polish ghetto, Daniel comments that the whole human race is worthless and should be destroyed. Erika adamantly disagrees and says that's the way the Nazi's think - she has hope - hope for a future in Palestine with children and the chance to make the world a better place.

Daniel even sees hope upon arrival at Auschwitz when people are separated and selected, stripped, shaved and beaten and the situation seems hopeless. He continues with a hopeful feeling even when they're on the train heading for their next stop. He remembers the starvation, cold, work, cramped barracks, but then, in his mind's eye, Daniel sees his sister playing in the forced band. Then, he feels hopeful and happy: she is alive.

While the characters find hope in the situation, there is little hope for the reader. The events of history are well known and the residual effects of this era are still felt, but there is a slight feeling of relief when Daniel is on a seat on a train instead of a boxcar, and he says several times that Buchenwald is not a killing camp.

There is hope that he is alive and the atrocities will be over in spite of one more look back at what happened at Buchenwald. There are other hints of hope from this camp when they are given warm showers and a jacket as well as a shirt and they are allowed



three weeks of quarantine during which time they do not have to work. These incidents add up to the possibility of hope for survival.

In the end when Daniel and Rosa walk away, there is another feeling of hope for them, to create a future that is a better place than what they have just lived through.

Dignity

How can an individual maintain his or her dignity in a situation of utter humiliation and scorn? Several people say that they will die fighting, maintain their dignity, rather than be taken away. Adam, a friend from the youth group, illustrates this thought when he chooses his way of death. He fears being captured, so steals a gun off the hip of a guard and shoots him point blank. He is, in turn, shot by other guards.

Daniel provides another view of maintaining his dignity when he takes a gun to the home of the SS officer who killed the young boy in front of him. While he threatens both the officer's daughter, and the officer, he cannot lower himself to murder a defenseless man. He doesn't feel like he maintained his dignity. As a matter of fact, he feels ashamed of himself for even threatening the man but the reader will see that Daniel did the noble and "right" thing by walking away.

Racism

The whole premise of the book and the events of the holocaust is racism, segregation, and discrimination, but it was even more shocking to see that even after the liberation of the camps, they were still harassed and beaten on the train platform. None of the people observing the incident tried to stop the fight or advocated for Daniel and Peter. This makes a depressing statement in looking at man's ability to accept others and their differences. That continues even today.

Style

Point of View

Daniel's Story is written from a limited first person point of view of Daniel, the title character. As the book opens he is 14 years old but tells of pictures and events from when he was about six years old.

Daniel is a photographer who tells the story through the pictures in his album and in his mind's eye. He is a fairly static character. Even though he ages four years his maturation is not obvious in his behavior or view of life. In the end, when he looks at himself in the mirror, he asks, "Who is this tall, gaunt boy with the large blue eyes?" He is 18 years old and does not consider himself to be a man. This could be a logical result of living through the events he lived through. Seeing what he saw would alter anyone's perspective, but it also demonstrates that this book is not about Daniel. Daniel is only the catalyst for a story about the whole human race and the atrocities of an era that should never be forgotten or repeated.

Seeing the events through Daniel's camera lens, and photographs gives a certain distance to the events. The distance created by using this somewhat detached, objective format is actually helpful in reading this story, because to read of these events with a more personally involved narrator would create unbelievable anguish in the reader.

Setting

The actual setting of the book is a train, or several trains. Daniel is always riding on a train telling of the events he had experienced in a looking back mode. But the reader gets very little description of the train, a freight car, an open box car, a comfortable, padded seat, that's all. But the train is not important. The train is only the means of transportation that while taking Daniel physically forward in time, takes the reader backwards through time with Daniel's pictures and memory of past events.

Each train trip and memory brings about another setting, from Frankfurt to the ghetto to Auschwitz to Buchenwald and back to the ghetto. Each place is dark, dreary, filled with violence and death. The sun doesn't shine much in Daniel's world, and while there are glimpses of green and growth, even in the end, Daniel returns to the ghetto that housed past horrors and continues to include hatred and exclusion.

Language and Meaning

Taken from the first person point of view of a 14 year old boy, the language is intended to be that of a 14 year old boy. Matas does a lot of things in this book. There is the fact that Daniel is German, but the book is written in English, so there is implied translation.



Also, since the voice is that of a young teenage boy, Matas must cross genders to give authentic voice to the main character. This can be difficult to do.

While Matas does not get overly graphic in descriptions of the atrocities placed upon the characters in the story, the events are disturbing. Children and young people being thrown out of windows, others being shot in the head while family members look on, the imagery is very disturbing by itself, so graphic description is not necessary, and Daniel's narration of events through memory and telling of pictures lends a distance to the events that helps to lessen the horror of what he lived through.

Structure

Daniel's Story is historical fiction. There are 131 pages of content divided into four sections. Each section is between three and five chapters and is based on the pictures he took or the memories he collected, during the time he spent at each place.

There is a map of Daniel's travels at the beginning of the book, with a timeline of events and a glossary of terms at the end. The first section, "Pictures of Frankfurt" includes pictures and memories of Daniel's childhood. He introduces his family and brings the events up to the time of his train trip to the first stop at the ghetto in Lodz, Poland.

The second section is "Pictures of Lodz" where Daniel is again on a train with only a few pictures of his experiences in the Polish ghetto. Again, the narration is telling of the events while he lived in the ghetto.

By the third section, "Pictures of Auschwitz" Daniel has no pictures with him. He has them only in his mind, but again, the story of life in the work/death camp is told through Daniel's memories.

And finally, in the fourth section, "Pictures of Buchenwald" Daniel has a few pictures in his hand, but even more in his head. He tells both of past events and briefly finishes his tale with prospects for the future with Rosa.

Each chapter starts out with "now" he's traveling on a train. Then it goes into the memory of where he's been and what happened. Then the story is brought back to the present. Using the present tense gives an immediacy of affect and looking at pictures is a logical way to get into the "memory" mode. This is an effective way to tell this story; because the reader sees how the events of the past affect Daniel now- he has opinions of those events – perspective - that wouldn't be as noticeable had the book been written in straight chronological order.

The tone of this book is straightforward and realistic. Matas does not get overly graphic or "emotional" with the telling of events. She doesn't have to; the events speak for themselves. The SS guards are not identified so the reader does not get a feeling of hatred toward any of them; instead there is a feeling of believability along with the horror.

That the book ends with Daniel stating that mankind cannot forget these events because "we shall have to learn to stop these evils before they gain power and it is too late." The reader is not left with a sense of victory. It is an admonition to never let this happen again. The fact that these events were all within man's control makes the telling all the more horrendous and man's responsibility to never let it happen again, all the more important.



Quotes

I feel the need to look at my pictures, pictures of my life. Perhaps they can help me understand how I came to be on this train, who I am, and what has happened. (Chapter 1)

Oh God help us, what is happening? (Chapter 2)

Thank God she didn't live to see us thrown out of our homes and out of our country. And right now that's all I can thank God for. (Chapter 3)

...slowly all our rights were taken away until we were nothing but bodies being shipped out. (Chapter 4)

But suddenly everything was wrong, upside down. It seemed more normal to die than to live. (Chapter 5)

Erika had expressed the central principle that kept the ghetto going, kept us all in that struggle when it would have been easier to give up. That principle was hope. (Chapter 6)

Why should I write sad pieces, she said. "We're sad enough already. (Chapter 7)

Why have we fought so hard to survive all these years? So we could go to our deaths in despair? We must live, and when this is all over, we must work to make the world a better place. (Chapter 8)

Together we'll be stronger. (Chapter 9)

I am more determined than ever to live. I will live and I will bear witness against them. I will remember. (Chapter 10)

I have seen more pain than I can deal with, don't ask anything of me, I cannot give it. (Chapter 11)

Why should this experience, which should make any sane person not believe in God, do the opposite to him? (Chapter 12)

...it was not a killing center...nevertheless men died quickly there from the terrible conditions. (Chapter 13)

We are not like them. If they've made us into them, they've succeeded. (Chapter 14)

Now it seems that our bodies grow stronger, the pain flows through us and over us and sometimes we are nothing but pain. (Chapter 15)



...I will tell my story. Because if we forget, we will once again be defenseless against evil... then we too could become that way. And so we shall have to learn to stop these evils before they gain power and it is too late. (Chapter 16)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Daniel says the whole human race is a failure - why? Do you agree or disagree? Why does Erika disagree so wholeheartedly? What does Erika say they should do instead? How does she propose they do that? Do you agree or disagree?

Topic 2

There are people who say the world should never forget the atrocities of the holocaust, this book is helping to keep those memories alive. Why should this time in world history never be forgotten?

Topic 3

Why does Erika say, "You must choose love. Always choose love"?

Topic 4

Where is the hope? Upon arrival at Auschwitz when people are separated from families, then selected for death or work, then stripped and shaved and beaten with no humanity or dignity left to them, where is the hope? Can you imagine those circumstances and how you would feel/react?

Topic 5

On his way in an open train again after only three months in Auschwitz, Daniel is more determined than ever to survive - why? He seems to have lost all hope while being starved and forced to work, what does he see that renews his hope and will to live? What would be your motivation to live?

Topic 6

Discuss why you think Daniel thought about jumping into the burning body pit - was that cowardice or bravery? He did not jump in because his father would have jumped in after him - discuss the importance of family throughout the whole book.

Topic 7

Do you think atrocities of this magnitude could happen again?



Topic 8

How do you feel about the Nazi officer who can be a wonderful father one moment and a murderer of a young child the next? Is this a realistic portrayal of human nature?

Topic 9

Why did the Polish thugs beat up Daniel and Peter? Daniel says they (bigots) still hate them (Jews). Why are they still hated?

Topic 10

Does that still hold true today? What examples of racism or discrimination do we see today?

Topic 11

Why did no one from the train help Daniel and Peter? How is this behavior similar to current bullying situations? What would you do if you had seen them being beaten?

Topic 12

Do you step in and stop bullying situations now?

Topic 13

Why must we remember the Holocaust? Do we remember? How can we stop oppression today?

Topic 14

Looking at the events in Daniel's life with 21st century and post 9/11 eyes, does it seem strange to be suspicious of a kid with a camera?