

Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story Study Guide

Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story by Lila Perl

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Plot Summary

Four Perfect Pebbles is the memoir of Marion Blumenthal Lazan's experience as a child during the Holocaust. When Hitler rose to power, this young Jewish family, Marion, her father Walter, her mother Ruth and her brother Albert were stuck in Nazi Germany despite trying to escape. No one expected Hitler to rise to power in the 1920s but as his political message of Germany economic recovery and anti-Semitism caught on, they became concerned. When Hitler became Chancellor, discrimination against Jews began in earnest and the Blumenthals' family store was quickly boycotted, forcing Walter to sell his products to customers in the countryside. As the situation worsened, the Blumenthals wanted to leave Germany, but they could not abandon Marion's grandparents until they died. Thus the Blumenthals stayed in Germany until it was nearly too late to escape. They applied for visas to enter the United States but they were not granted permission to travel in time to save them.

The family eventually made it to Holland where they lived in a refugee camp for a few years but when Holland was occupied by the Nazis, life quickly worsened. Their refugee camp turned into a transit camp that sent Jews and other minority groups to the death camps, including Westerbork in Holland. Eventually they were forced into the Bergen-Belsen death camp in Germany where they lived for two years, struggling to survive disease, starvation and murder. While the family remained alive, they were deeply traumatized. As Germany started to lose World War II, the Blumenthals were moved further in Germany and more and more Jews were killed. They were placed on a "death train" for two weeks before they were liberated by the Russians. Afterwards, they lived in the East German city of Trobitz, where they lived off of abandoned food and shelter. Confined there for several months due to a typhus epidemic, a third of the population of Jews died, along with Walter, Marion's father. Soon thereafter the remaining Blumenthals were released.

Marion, Albert and Ruth returned to Holland where they waited for three years to acquire permission to emigrate to the United States. Moving several times in New York City, a Jewish organization responsible for Holocaust refugees sent them to Peoria, Illinois where Ruth, Albert and Marion gradually got on their feet emotionally and financially. In the end, they flourished, Albert and Marion married and Marion ended up with three children and five grandchildren. When the book was finished, Ruth was still alive and Marion had been speaking about her experiences during the Holocaust for fifteen years. The book was written by Marion with the help of writer Lila Perl. In the epilogue, they report that both Marion and Albert were able to return to their former homes in Germany and visit their father's grave.



Chapter 1, Four Perfect Pebbles

Chapter 1, Four Perfect Pebbles Summary and Analysis

The chapter opens as little Marion awakes in her mother's arms in their wooden barrack at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Western Germany. She was immediately cold due to the freezing German winter. Women gasped, moaned, cried and coughed as they awoke. Each day some prisoners could not awaken, as some died in the night. Their bodies were taken away and burned or buried. New prisoners took their place. Marion was nine years old and couldn't decide whether the freezing weather or hunger was worse, though the hunger eventually disappeared as her appetite adjusted. Eventually the Kapos (privileged prisoners who served as guards) cried for everyone to come out for roll call. Their rooms would be inspected and if one failed to meet inspection, she could lose her bread ration for that day.

Roll call was held twice a day. Some prisoners tried to escape but few succeeded as the camp was surrounded by electric barbed wire fence. At roll call, Marion and her mother would get to see her brother, Albert, and her father for a few brief moments, as they lived in the mens' barrack. In Westerbork, the Dutch camp where they lived before, they had been housed together. They were still 'lucky' in Bergen-Belsen as they could wear their own clothes though with the yellow Star of David on their chest. Roll call was finished after an hour and the family came together to embrace quickly. Papa pushed rations he traded for cigarettes into Mama's hands. Albert was also resourceful, making crafts to get extra rations. Marion had brought three little pebbles to show Albert. She had found three 'perfect pebbles' that were identical. She wanted to find a fourth, to represent her whole family. Albert was skeptical but Marion was determined.



Chapter 2, A Small Town in Germany

Chapter 2, A Small Town in Germany Summary and Analysis

The Blumenthal family lived in Hoya, Germany halfway between Hanover and Bremen. When Marion's mother was twenty she took a long train ride across northern Germany to find her future and ended up there. Marion's mother, Ruth Moses, took a job at a shoe store in Hoya. Two weeks afterwards, working in the Blumenthal family business, the Blumenthal's son Walter proposed marriage. They were married in December 1931 when Ruth was twenty-three and Walter was thirty-five. Albert was born in 1932 and Marion in 1934. Marion remembers her grandparents Lini and Max Blumenthal (Oma and Opa to her) well, as they lived on the floor below Marion's family. When Marion was a baby, her mother remembers, the family would talk about the story, the events of the day and mostly about Hitler.

By the early 1930s, Hitler had been around for ten years and everyone thought he and his Nazi party were a joke. But by 1930 his party had exploded in size, becoming the largest party in Germany by 1932. The Nazis came to power due to poor economic conditions in Germany following World War I and by the worldwide economic depression in 1929. Hitler said he had the solution and promised to restore German's honor, territory and wealth and blamed "enemies within" like the Jews for Germany's problems.

In 1933, on January 30th, Hitler was made chancellor of Germany and on April 1st he ordered a nationwide boycott of all Jewish-owned businesses. Mama said they were surprised, particularly as Walter's parents had been there since 1894 and gave good service and Walter had fought for Germany in World War I. Walter began selling to people in the countryside and wanted to leave Germany but Oma and Opa were old and thought Hitler wouldn't last. But by 1934, Hitler became fuhrer. And German schoolchildren were now being propagandized into supporting him and anti-Semitism. Hitler made anti-Semitism part of German law on September 15th, 1935. Around the same time Germany's economy started to improve and Hitler wanted Germany to be free of Jews. Not everyone agreed with Hitler's policy but few stood up against him. Dachau, the first concentration camp, was opened in 1933 run by the SS. Jews and Hitler's critics were sent there at first. Mama said the Blumenthals stayed for Oma and Opa. By the end of 1937, a quarter of Germany's Jews had fled.

In 1938, however, Oma and Opa died within three weeks of one another. Four months after they died, the store and its goods were sold for a fraction of their value and the Blumenthals moved to Hanover to work on the papers for immigrating to the United States, which could take two years. In the 1920s, the United States had tightened its admissions policy during the 1920s. It kept its doors shut in the 1930s. Only 27,000 immigrants from Germany and Austria were allowed a year. Getting on the quota list required an affidavit from someone living in the United States. The Blumenthals had

their affidavit. On September 13th, they were placed on the quota list. They only needed a visa, though it would take a year. It wasn't clear that they could survive Hitler for that long.



Chapter 3, Get Dressed and Come with Us

Chapter 3, Get Dressed and Come with Us Summary and Analysis

In November 1938, the visa had not come and organized gangs of Nazis were terrorizing Germany and had destroyed the main synagogues of Nurnberg and Munich. Laws against the Jews continued and on November 8th, the Blumenthals were warned that there would be trouble. Polish Jews were being deported from Germany. 18000 Polish Jews in Germany were packed into trains and dumped just short of the Polish border, all their possessions seized. A young man, so angered by the deportation of his father, bought a pistol and shot a German officer.

On November 9th, a friend, Mr. Dannenberg, warned Walter to get rid of his service revolver from World War I. Jews were to be searched and if the Gestapo found Walter with a weapon (which Jews were barred from possessing by law), it would be bad for him and his family. So they disposed of the gun.

When the German officer died, Hitler called for severe new anti-Jewish measures and Nazis started marching in Hanover. Between 4 and 5 am, the Nazis demolished the Central Synagogue of Hanover. Then the Gestapo came, asked for Walter by name and then told him to get dressed and come with them. Only Jewish men were being seized at the time.

Violence against Jews continued until November 10th. Eight thousand Jewish-owned shops had their windows smashed and were looted. While much more was destroyed, this event earned that night the name Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass. Ninety-one Jews died in street violence alone and thirty thousand Jewish men were taken to concentration camps. Many men from Hanover were taken to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Ruth took their immigration documents to Gestapo Headquarters to secure Walter's release, as the documents still had force of law. Ruth was told that Walter would be released, though he was not released for a week and a half. Walter sent word that he was ok mid-way through. Finally Walter got home safely.

On November 12th, Hitler levied a one billion mark fine on the Jews for damage caused by their presence which was really aimed at draining off their wealth and preventing them from making insurance claims for destroyed property. The Blumenthals got a permit to leave for Holland since Walter's youngest sister married a Dutch citizen. By December they had packed all their things to store in Rotterdam, where they planned to sail for the United States. The goods they were taking out of Germany, however, were inspected by a special customs agency set up to confiscate items of value of Jews leaving the country. Many of their valuables were stolen. But in January 1939, the family

boarded the train for Holland. They were glad to leave Germany and hoped to be safe until they left for the United States, though they were very scared.



Chapter 4, Escape to Holland

Chapter 4, Escape to Holland Summary and Analysis

The Blumenthals arrived in Rotterdam with almost nothing, like many other German refugees who left Germany in the late 1930s. At first, they were shifted from refugee center to refugee center. Marion was frightened by all the other children. But after three months they moved to Gouda, Holland, to a camp for Jewish refugee children. The work was hard, Ruth said, but they lived as a family and Marion wasn't afraid. During this time, Hitler attacked and conquered Czechoslovakia on March 15th, 1939 and then declared war on Poland on September 1st, 1939. Two days later Great Britain and France declared war and World War II began. The Dutch wondered how long their neutrality would be respected. In the fall of 1939 a permanent Jewish refugee camp called Westerbork was formed and the Blumenthals moved there in December. It was not an awful situation for them as they had a room with a sink, a hot plate and communal meals in a dining hall, among other things. And at least, in January 1940, they received their American Visa. In two months they would leave for the United States.

Soon the Blumenthals fell into a routine. It seemed normal to Marion, who could remember no other life. She made friends with other refugee children and enjoyed playing games. At first food was plentiful. When spring came, however, the huge demand to leave Europe led their trip to American to be postponed to 1940. On April 10th, Hitler invaded Denmark and Norway. And on May 10th, they invaded Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. On May 14th, Rotterdam was bombed. The Blumenthals realized that they had been caught in a trap. No more ocean liners would take refugees to American from Rotterdam. The Blumenthals were stuck in Westerbork.

Westerbork changed more slowly than expected. First long wooden barracks were built and the camp became more crowded. The Blumenthals remained in their little home. The Nazis then started to impoverish and isolate the Dutch Jews. In 1941 all Jewish property was confiscated and Jewish children could only attend Jewish-run schools. In 1942 all Jews in Holland were forced to wear the yellow star. In July of that year, German Jewish boys and girls in Holland were called to "work camps" in Eastern Europe.

The big change at Westerbork occurred on July 1st when the Germans took over. Watchtowers were built and barbed-wire fence erected. Daily roll calls began. Westerbork was now the Police Supervised Transit Camp. For the next two years and a few months, Westerbork became a deportation center from which many tens of thousands of Jews were sent to Germany's worst concentration camps. Most died in gas chambers. The Blumenthals knew little of Auschwitz in the summer of 1942 but reports of Jews begin gassed in Poland got out into the news. The reports were so horrifying most of the world refused to believe it.



In Mid-July transports started to leave Westerbork and the camp became more crowded. None knew their fate. The Blumenthals had to share a room with the Hamburgers. Walter hoped to secure immigration to Palestine with the British, as they thought they might be eligible due to family living there. On January 30th, 1944, they got permission to leave for Celle so they started to pack.



Chapter 5, The Greatest Disappointment

Chapter 5, The Greatest Disappointment Summary and Analysis

Quickly the Blumenthals realized that they would not be going to Palestine. Instead, they were taken to Bergen-Belsen to the Sternlager or Star Camp where Palestine exchange Jews were held. Polish Jews were held in the same camp, to be sent to the gas chambers. Even the worst times in Westerbork were heaven next to Bergen-Belsen, which was hell. They were cold, hungry and degraded surviving only on the hope of going to Palestine. In May 1944 they discovered they were not on the list to be transported to Palestine. When Walter protested, an SS officer hit Walter in the neck and back.

Soon thereafter, the Blumenthals lost all hope. But later they learned that only 221 of the 1100 Jews sent to Bergen-Belsen for the exchange survived. The Blumenthals' existence became aimless. Marion focused on finding her four perfect pebbles. Ruth kept her job in the kitchen. Walter used cigarettes to buy rations. There were many horrors, such as the fear that Bergen-Belsen would get gas chambers. But while they did not, they did have a crematorium and those who died of natural causes were burned. Marion could always remember the smell of burning flesh.

Starting on D-Day in 1944, the war started to turn against the Germans. The Russians closed in from the East. But the worst was yet to come at Bergen-Belsen. To hide the evidence of Auschwitz and the other death camps, the SS started to pull its prisoners into Germany. Bergen-Belsen would receive a large influx. Food became extremely scarce. There was not enough water for basic necessities. The cold was terrible. The best they could do was prevent frostbite and pick lice from their clothes. By early 1945 the food at Bergen-Belsen was mostly cabbage-flavored water and moldy bread. The SS still focused on stopping escape and the death toll mounted. Death surrounded them. Those who could function desired food most of all.

In April 1945, Ruth smuggled food into the barrack. They sometimes cooked there and one day when the SS came to do a surprise inspection Marion spilled boiling soup on her leg, scalding her. She did not utter a sound. Medical treatment was unavailable but the war would be over soon. It was unclear whether Josef Kramer, the camp commandant and "Beast of Belsen" would surrender the camp or exterminate everyone. For the 8000 prisoners, their fate was in doubt. On April 9th, 1945, they were put on a long train of cattle cars. Marion's leg was now infected and she could not walk. They didn't know Auschwitz was freed by the Russians. Six days later, on April 15th, the British liberated Bergen-Belsen. Kramer gave it up without a struggle. He was later hanged by a British military court. The thousands of prisoners were free and cared for but the Blumenthals weren't with them.



Chapter 6, On the Death Train

Chapter 6, On the Death Train Summary and Analysis

Marion was carried by her father the three or four miles to the railroad station at Belsen. Albert took as many belongings and food as he could. They were among the last 2500 evacuees from Belsen, the others of which had either been liberated by the Russians or Americans or the last group which was killed. The Blumenthals wondered what would become of them, knowing that they were evidence of atrocities the Nazis wanted to hide. The prisoners were sent into the boxcars but they were not forced to stay in prison cells, as there was nowhere for them to run to.

After the night they were still in Bergen. The train hadn't moved and all that happened that day was that additional prisoners were placed on the train. The train then went fifteen miles north of Berge and the SS guards took them out. The prisoners had to bring out their dead who died from typhus and bury them with pickaxes and shovels given to them by the SS. Almost everyone had dysentery, however. Some had pleurisy and tuberculosis. And other wounds like Marion's had not healed. By April 15th, they had only traveled fifty miles northeast of Bergen. The Nazis attached a white flag to the train so the Allies would not bomb it. A few days later the train cross the Elbe in the zone between the Allies and the Russians. They were headed to Berlin. So many had died of Typhus, there was finally room in the cars. After a week the train got to Berlin, though due to damage it took two days to cross the city. Everyone could see the war was coming to an end.

After Berlin, the train continued to the Polish border. But one morning the doors were opened by men who were not the SS. These were Russian soldiers and took their watches. They then led away the SS guards who had not escaped. After two weeks on the death train they were free.



Chapter 7, Freedom and Sorrow

Chapter 7, Freedom and Sorrow Summary and Analysis

The death train was liberated near the small town of Trobitz in East Germany. The Russians had no supplies for them so they encouraged the former prisoners to go to Trobitz, which was deserted, and look for food and shelter. When they arrived, the starving former prisoners gorged themselves on the food they found. Some died from overeating. Marion was ten at this time and weighed only thirty-five pounds. The Blumenthals made their home in the farmhouse they first came upon. The Russians tried to help them and her infection was treated at a nearby Russian Army field hospital with penicillin. Her wound healed but the nightmares never disappeared.

Germany surrendered on May 7th, 1945 but the rejoicing was met with concern in Trobitz as the Russians confined them to their town for two months while the typhus took its course. Walter was already sick when he contracted typhus and it killed him. Ruth, Albert and Marion were numb with pain as they had survived the Nazis but now freedom was mixed with sorrow. Ruth also contracted typhus but recovered slowly. Walter died on June 7th, 1945 and was buried in a shallow grave.

A day after Walter died, the Russians announced that the quarantine was over. Ruth, Albert and Marion would return to Holland as refugees.



Chapter 8, Holland Again

Chapter 8, Holland Again Summary and Analysis

Ruth, Albert and Marion returned to Holland, making their way to Amsterdam where Walter's cousins, Tante Gerda and Uncle Ernst de Levie lived. Marion's wound was treated and finally healed. Walter's cousins' family had managed to conceal their identity during the war. Amsterdam, despite having suffered in the war, seemed luxurious to them. And Ingrid, Tante and Ernst's daughter, seemed beautiful to Marion. Marion was self-conscious as she was still underweight, her head shaven to kill lice and who, due to weak eye muscles, was slightly cross-eyed.

However, the Blumenthals could not stay long. They were quickly transferred to a former Jewish convalescent home as a temporary shelter. Accommodations were simple but life was without fear and uncertainty. Hunger was gone. They could all bathe and Albert was Bar Mitzvahed. Ruth considered taking the family to Palestine, as many Jews were immigrating there but there were plans to create a Jewish state there. Ruth sent Albert and Marion to school to learn Hebrew and the Orthodox religion. Marion also began her secular education. They had to move to the small town of Bussum, an hour's train ride south of Amsterdam. Ruth remained in Amsterdam, having moved in with Walter's sister Rosi. She was studying to become a beautician. At this time, Ernst had Marion's eye condition treated, though she initially panicked and ran back to the train to Bussum. The surgery was rescheduled and she recovered.

Ruth got her beautician's certification and found a job but she could only see Marion and Albert once a week. Their teachers, the Birnbaums, became like second parents. Marion was desperate to see her mother though; only the extreme power of self-repression she learned in Bergen-Belsen kept her from becoming hysterical. At that time, they were informed that only a children's transport could come to take Marion and Albert to Palestine. Ruth couldn't go with them and since she didn't want to risk their lives on an unsafe journey alone, Ruth decided to look into immigrating to the United States. It was much easier to get papers this time and their record for paying for passage still existed. It was April 1948 and they were excited. The ten-day voyage was the most luxurious they had ever known. If this was to be life in American, they were ready for it.

The evening before they arrived in America, they watched their entry into the New York Harbor and saw the Status of Liberty. Marion choked up with tears and couldn't speak. They landed April 23rd, 1948, three years to the day since they were freed from the death train by the Russians.



Chapter 9, America, at Last, Epilogue

Chapter 9, America, at Last, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

When they arrived in New York City, they went to Tante Clara's small, clean apartment in Washington Heights, Manhattan. Marion remembered being in a state of awe as the tall buildings, bustling streets and loud subways. She quickly befriended her cousin Helga. Marion's first consumer pleasure in the U.S. was the abundance of chewing gum.

The Blumenthals could not stay with Tante Clara. The HIAS or Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, found them a temporary residence hotel in Manhattan. They lived in one room and Albert and Marion indulged in American food. Marion put went from thirty-five pounds in 1945 to one hundred and thirty-five pounds in 1948. While they were enjoying themselves, Ruth knew no English, had no job skills and feared for their future. HIAS found them a permanent place to live in a home offered by the Jewish Community Council in Peoria, Illinois, which they had never heard of. But they had no choice; otherwise they would lose HIAS sponsorship.

In June 1948, Ruth, Marion and Albert arrived in Peoria to share a rundown apartment with two other families. But each of them got a job, Ruth as a housekeeper for a rich family, Albert cleaning a jewelry store, and Marion working at a Laundromat. Marion started school but she was placed in the fourth-grade with nine year olds due to her level of English knowledge. She had grown plumb and was starting to mature so it was especially odd. She did well in math and European geography but English was a challenge, as it was her third language (after Dutch and Hebrew) in three years. Albert was also struggling with English. In December 1948 they celebrated their first Hanukkah in Peoria and Albert got Marion a pair of nylon stockings, which she hated because it meant having to grow up. She did not want to abandon her childhood; she wanted a real childhood outside of the concentration camp.

The next year saw great improvements for the Blumenthals. Ruth learned that her skills as a seamstress could command a high wage working for a local tailor and then found an even better job doing custom tailoring. Albert got a raise at the jewelry store and became an assistant clerk. Marion added babysitting to her work. They were able to move into a modest apartment of their own. By attending summer school and getting help with English after school, Marion was skipped to junior high. Marion also started to slim down as she realized her near starvation produced in her a habit of eating only rich foods. She was then accepted by the boys and girls in her class. Peoria was comfortable and secure, with good jobs, a good school system and a Jewish religious community. The family began to attend synagogue services regularly.

In 1951, during High Holy Days, Marion found herself in the women's balcony of Peoria's Orthodox synagogue. Marion was dressed nicely and noticed a boy from



Peoria's Bradley University looking at her. She was only sixteen and had just started dating but the young man approached her and asked if he could walk her home. Marion learned that he lived in Long Island. He had fine manners and loved his family. He was nineteen. Marion knew he was special and they realized they were meant for each other.

Marion and Nathaniel Lazan dated for two years and were married on August 2nd, 1953. They had their first child, David Walter, in 1955, their daughter, Susan, in 1957 and their third child, Michael, in 1960. When *Four Perfect Pebbles* was published in 1996, they had five grandchildren and lived in Hewlett, New York.

Starting in 1981, Marion started to talk and give interviews about her experience in the Holocaust. In April 1995 she revisited many of the scenes of her childhood. They visited Walter's grave. They met the Huth family in Hoya, Germany. The Huths were busy reconstructing the history of the town's Jewish community back to 1754. A local historian, Erika Arlt, did the same in Trobitz and was writing a history of the death train.

Albert and his wife Diane live in Atherton, California, where he is a financial consultant. He got an M.B.A. in finance and marketing from Northwestern. He had returned to Hoya on army duty in Europe in 1958. Future visits in 1983 and 1993 took him to Westerbork, Bergen-Belsen and his father's grave. Ruth remained in Peoria until 1956 and lived in California and then New York, where she still lives. She is still spirited and energetic at eighty-seven. She remains a large presence in the lives of Holocaust survivors.



Characters

Marion Blumenthal Lazan

Four Perfect Pebbles is Marion Blumenthal Lazan's memoir of life in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Holland during World War II where she and her family were placed in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp along with tens of thousands of other Jews and racial and ethnic minorities. Marion was only a child at the time and spent all of ages nine and ten in Bergen-Belsen. Marion has compared her story to that of Anne Frank's had Frank lived. Frank and Marion both lived in Westerbork in Holland for some time and while Marion survived, Frank died of Typhus in 1945 just like Walter, Marion's father.

Marion grew up in Hoya, Germany with her older brother Albert and her parents, Ruth and Walter. Walter ran a store that he used to support his family. When Hitler came to power, they experienced increasingly greater discrimination leading Walter to try and get the family to the United States. Marion, just a child, hardly grasped what was happening when her family had to flee to Holland and then lived in Westerbork as it was transformed into a Nazi transit camp. Bergen-Belsen was worst of all, where Marion's weight dropped down to thirty-five pounds. To survive, Marion had to learn extreme methods of emotional suppression and to eat extremely little. Most of her time was focused on survival and locating four identical, perfect pebbles to represent her family. We learn little of Marion's personality as a child, but her story does not end in Germany. When her family ended up in Peoria, she found work, regained her health and married well, having three children of her own and more grandchildren.

Ruth Blumenthal

Ruth Moses met Walter Blumenthal when she worked for his family's store after moving from East Prussia when she graduated from high school. She ended up in Hoya on a whim. When she and Walter were married, they settled into life as a storekeeper and his wife. Ruth worked as a seamstress. When their two children were born, Ruth was their primary caretaker and constantly looked out for them, for instance, making sure that they had a decent education. But what Ruth could not handle was the rise of Nazism. Walter did his best to help the family escape but Ruth and her children were inevitably pulled into the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. During their imprisonment, Ruth took care of Marion, as the men and women in the camp were separated. She did her best to collect rations and make sure that her children were fed.

After the Blumenthals were released, Walter died of typhus and Ruth became the primary caregiver for the family. She did her best to ship her family around refugee facilities and to family homes. After three years in Holland, having made sure her children were receiving an education and working as hard as she could, Ruth got her children to the United States. She was frightened about their prospects, even after



reaching Peoria, Illinois, but she found that her skills as a seamstress could command high wages and was able to give her children a decent life.

Albert Blumenthal

Marion's older brother whose resourcefulness helped the family to stay alive in Bergen-Belsen and afterward.

Walter Blumenthal

Marion's father, a storekeeper, who served in the German military but was still forsaken by his country. He lost his hope in Bergen-Belsen and died of typhus soon after he and his family were released.

Oma and Opa

Marion's grandparents on her father's side who Walter and Ruth stayed in Germany to care for as their window of escape disappeared.

The de Levie Family

The Blumenthal's cousins who they stayed with in Holland.

Adolf Hitler

The dictator of Germany from 1933 to 1945 who was the cause of the Holocaust that the Blumenthals suffered through.

Josef Kramer

The administrator of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

German Jews

The first victims of Nazi discrimination and mass killing, of which the Blumenthals were members.



The Survivors of Bergen-Belsen

The Blumenthals numbered among 2500 survivors of Bergen-Belsen who ended up in Trobitz, Germany after they were freed by the Russians. A third of them died from typhus.

SS Soldiers

Nazi shock troops responsible for running the concentration camps.



Objects/Places

Hoya, Germany

The hometown of the Blumenthals.

Trobitz, Germany

The abandoned East German town where the Blumenthals lived for a few months after being released from Bergen-Belsen.

New York City

The Blumenthals lived here for a few months before they were transferred to Peoria.

Peoria, Illinois

The town the Blumenthals had never heard of but which became their American hometown.

Rotterdam, Holland

The port city in Holland where the Blumenthals hoped to escape to America.

Westerbork Transit Center

The refugee center converted into a transit camp for the Holocaust when the Nazis conquered Holland.

Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp

One of the great concentration camps during World War II and where the Blumenthals struggled to survive for two years.

Typhus

A disease that infected many prisoners in Bergen-Belsen and which killed Marion's father.

Zyklon B

The gas used to kill people in the Holocaust that the Blumenthals were terrified of.

Starvation and Infection

Common causes of death in Bergen-Belsen.

Yellow Stars of David

The identifying marks that the Nazi government forced Jewish people to wear.

Discrimination

A constant feature of life for Jews in Nazi Germany.

The Holocaust

The systematic killing of six million Jews and many millions more of other minority groups and political dissidents set in place by the Nazi government during World War II.

Visas

Documents that represent permission to live in a country where one lacks citizenship.



Themes

Surviving a Horrific Tragedy

Four Perfect Pebbles is a story about a family that survived the Holocaust, so it will obviously include among its themes the struggle to survive. But having the context that surrounds the Blumenthals' time in Bergen-Belsen shows a will to survive that pervades the life of the family. The Blumenthals' story begins in Hoya, Germany with the regular business of life in 1920s Germany. When Hitler comes to power, however, things quickly take a turn for the worse. When Walter's story is boycotted, he turns to selling goods in the countryside. When the persecution of the Jews begins in earnest, the Blumenthals' protect Oma and Opa and then flee to Holland, attempting to get American visas. When their visas are put on hold, they continue to weather the difficult life in Westerbork which is transformed into a transit camp when the Nazis take over. Soon thereafter the Blumenthals are sent to Bergen-Belsen.

At Bergen-Belsen, the family gathered all the rations they could, kept their noses down, and fought off illness and starvation all against extraordinary odds. When they escaped the Russians, they quickly made a temporary home in Trobitz, Germany and when Walter died, Ruth continued the struggle to survive by getting her children back to Holland and then to New York City and finally to Peoria. The entire book is one attempt to survive after another all in the context of Hitler's Germany.

Discrimination

Again, given the Four Perfect Pebbles is a story about the Holocaust, it will inevitably contain the experience of the evils of discrimination. At first, Hitler was something of a joke to the Blumenthals, at least throughout the 1920s. But they became increasingly concerned as Hitler rose to power, given his anti-Semitic rhetoric. The discrimination that befell Germany Jews after Hitler came to power began in part with an enforced boycott of Jewish goods and services which, much to the Blumenthals' horror, was wholly obeyed by their fellow townspeople. As time progressed, Jewish stores were attacked and Jews were forced to wear identifying yellow stars and go to their own schools. As World War II progressed, prison camps were set up and Jews were imprisoned en masse, often treated worse than any other prisoners in history.

The Blumenthals endured all of these events as part of the German Jewish population. They fled to Holland and tried to flee to American to avoid discrimination but to no avail. Walter in particular could not understand the discrimination against him and his family given that he had served in the Germany army in World War I and yet discrimination came nonetheless. As the Nazis were losing the war, the extermination of the Jews began to accelerate and Jews were brought further and further into Germany so that the Nazis could hide their terrible crimes. Again, the Blumenthals endured it all to the very last. The only fate they did not suffer was being literally murdered and tortured directly.



Freedom and Sorrow

The ideas of freedom and sorrow are closely tied throughout the book. The Blumenthals struggle against all odds for freedom and experience their struggle as laced with extraordinary sorrow as they were traumatized by tragic event after tragic event following the sudden and steady downturn in their lives. The Blumenthals' story begins with them happy and productive members of Germany society but when Hitler rises to power their life prospects become worse and worse. First their store is boycotted then they have to flee Germany to Holland, selling all of their assets for a fraction of their worth. They try to build a life in Holland but the threat of German conquest makes that difficult. Walter struggles to get his family to the United States but they ultimately cannot get their visas. Immigration to the United States was limited so they could not get out of Holland.

Once the Nazis take over Holland, the Blumenthals find a small room in their transit camp and do their best to live a stable life but their room is quickly overcrowded. Eventually they are taken to Bergen-Belsen despite hoping to escape the certain doom that awaited them there. At Bergen-Belsen, they struggle to even stay alive, as they are absolute slaves, condemned to the most extreme form of poverty imaginable. The struggle for freedom is always met by sorrow. When the Blumenthals finally escape the Nazi regime of persecution, Walter dies of typhus, again mixing freedom with sorrow. And when the remaining Blumenthals finally escape to the United States, they must leave everyone they know behind to live in a city they have never heard of: Peoria, Illinois. While things improve dramatically for the Blumenthals after a few years in the United States, their lives were always marred by their suffering in the Holocaust.

Style

Perspective

Four Perfect Pebbles has two authors, Lila Perl and Marion Blumenthal Lazan. Lila Perl is the major author and not a character in the book. She is an author of juvenile literature, writing contemporary novels for middle-school aged children. However, she turned to non-fiction writing after writing fiction and when she met Marion Blumenthal Lazan and heard her talk about surviving the Holocaust, she felt compelled to help Marion make it into a book. She feels that Marion's story gives the world an opportunity to think through the life of Anne Frank, had she survived. Both girls were similar in age and both were imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen. Lila notes that she traveled to Germany and Eastern Europe several times in preparation for writing the book, along with extensive bibliographical research. Thus, the first perspective of Four Perfect Pebbles is that of a professional writer of young adult literature intent on bringing Marion's powerful story to the public.

The second author is Marion Blumenthal Lazan. The memoir is hers though it includes the thoughts and perspectives of her other family members, especially her mother Ruth. The book is written in the third-person, so it speaks about Marion, not from her perspective. However, within the book Marion is quoted and in these passages one gets a feel for who she was as a child. Nonetheless, something about Marion's perspective is opaque. Emotional feelings are described but somehow the intense emotional pressure of Holocaust survival is not fully expressed. This may be due to the audience the book is aimed at.

Tone

Four Perfect Pebbles exhibits the dual tones of sorrow and young adult narrative, which make for an odd juxtaposition. First, the tone of sorrow should be fairly obvious. The book starts off with Marion's family living happily in Hoya, Germany. As years pass, their family's condition becomes worse and worse until they are starving and traumatized in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Even when they escape, Marion's father Walter dies quickly thereafter. And when the war ends, Ruth is terrified for her family's future, having no job and having no permanent place to live. The tone would have a sense of stress and haste but there is so little hope in some parts of the book that their unknown future is overwhelmed by a sense of doom and loss that continues even when the family escapes to the United States.

On the other hand, Four Perfect Pebbles contrasts to Holocaust literature for its relatively muted tone. More often than not emotions are merely described impartially rather than explained in detail from a person's point of view. Parts of the book that one would expect to be dramatic, like Walter's death, are passed over relatively quickly. The

reason for this muted tone is likely that the audience, being middle-school aged children, would be less likely to engage a book that was more emotionally taxing.

Despite the reasoning behind the two tones, they fit awkwardly together. A book about the Holocaust seems strange with such a muted tone, though it is not clear how else to write about such an event for a young adult audience and not discourage many readers.

Structure

Four Perfect Pebbles has a simple, straightforward structure. The first chapter, like many such books, starts in the middle of the story, at one of its most dramatic points, and outlines the basic themes of the book. Thus, "Four Perfect Pebbles" explains the idea of the four perfect pebbles and survival in Bergen-Belsen. From there, the remaining eight chapters are structured chronologically. Chapter 2, "A Small Town in Germany" gives the background story of the Blumenthal family and their lives in Hoya, Germany. It also tells the story of the rise of Hitler. Chapter 3, "Get Dressed and Come with Us" explains the increasing degree of discrimination that the Blumenthals endured, including Walter's imprisonment by the Nazis.

Chapter 4, "Escape to Holland" discusses the Blumenthal's decision to leave Germany for Holland and their lives in Westerbork. Chapter 5, "The Greatest Disappointment", explains how the Blumenthals' hopes of going to the United States were dashed by World War II and U.S. immigration restrictions. It also takes them to Bergen-Belsen and explains how the Blumenthals survived there. Chapter 6, "On the Death Train" explains the final weeks of the Blumenthals' imprisonment and Chapter 7, "Freedom and Sorrow" explains the mixed feelings of freedom that the Blumenthals' experienced, as their escape was immediately met with Walter's death.

Chapter 8, "Holland, Again" shows Ruth taking Albert and Marion to Holland to live. They waited three years for the opportunity to travel to the United States. Chapter 9, "America, At Last" finishes the book with the story of how the Blumenthals adjusted to life in the United States.



Quotes

"Four perfect pebbles. One for each of us. You'll see. I'll show you the fourth one tomorrow." (Chapter 1, 7)

"We talked about the store, about the events of the day, and mostly about that man Hitler." (Chapter 2, 12)

"And when Jewish blood spurts from the knife, Then things will again go well!" (Chapter 2, 17)

"Get dressed and come with us." (Chapter 3, 28)

"Who would want to stay in Germany after Kristallnacht? It was more than just a warning. It was the beginning of the end." (Chapter 3, 33)

"We could see now that our escape to Holland had not been an escape at all. Instead we had been caught in a trap." (Chapter 4, 52)

"Even the very worst conditions at Westerbork were a heaven by comparison. For Bergen-Belsen was hell." (Chapter 5, 62)

"But this, this refusal to honor the Palestine certificate, was the greatest disappointment of all." (Chapter 5, 64)

"The stench of burning flesh from those open pits remains in my nostrils to this day." (Chapter 5, 68)

"These sights all told us that the war must be coming to an end." (Chapter 6, 82)

"It was exactly two weeks since we had boarded the death train in Bergen-Belsen. The date was April 23rd, 1945." (Chapter 6, 84)

"We wanted to stay as close to each other as my four perfect pebbles, the little stones that I could hold in the palm of my hand." (Chapter 7, 95)

"I think we all were numb with the shock of Papa's death. We had come so far, through flight, imprisonment, evacuation, the Nazi's final attempt to destroy us, liberation at last, and now this—freedom and sorrow." (Chapter 7, 99)

"Mama, Albert and I were part of the huge crowd that started to gather as early as five a.m., all of us craning our necks for a first view of the Statue of Liberty. When the tall figure of that longed-for symbol of freedom appeared, I became too choked to speak." (Chapter 8, 112)

"I was not ready to say farewell to the childhood I had never had. I wanted sweets and games. I wanted to be as carefree as my nine-year-old classmates, who knew nothing



of the deadly concentration camp in which I had spent the ninth and tenth years of my childhood." (Chapter 9, 120)

"Somehow, I knew even then that this person was someone special.... I began to realize that he was the man with whom I would spend the rest of my life. His name was Nathaniel Lazan." (Chapter 9, 124)

"For the past fifteen years Marion has been giving talks and interviews about her Holocaust experience to both children and adults in schools and other settings, and has at last been able to put her story into book form." (Epilogue, 126)

Topics for Discussion

Why didn't the Blumenthals take Hitler seriously in the 1920s?

How did Jewish discrimination escalate during Hitler's rule?

What are the Four Perfect Pebbles? What do they symbolize?

How did the Blumenthals survive Bergen-Belsen?

How did the Blumenthals reach the United States?

Did Four Perfect Pebbles have a happy ending? Why or why not?

How did their time in Bergen-Belsen affect each of the Blumenthals?