

I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust Study Guide

I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust by Livia Bitton-Jackson

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Plot Summary

The story begins the town of Somorja in the summer of 1943 when Elli, twelve, longs for the exciting life led by her older brother, Bubi. Elli spends her days in the typical pursuits of young girls of her age. Her friend Bonnie and she sometimes go to the Danube to swim, as do many others in the area. The river also serves as a place for watering herds of animals, such as sheep.

Elli lives with her parents at a time when Germans are threatening people of every ethnicity other than the Aryan race. Elli and her family, Jews, are soon targeted. Forced to wear the bright yellow star on their clothing at all times, Elli simply refused at first to go out, though Bubi wears the star like a badge of honor. When Elli attends a final school function - the school having been closed due to the impending war - she encounters a classmate who notes the star on her coat. Elli notes the sadness in his eyes as he looks at the emblem and it seems that he already knows that those of Elli's fate will be facing hardships in the days to come.

Soon Elli, her family and all Jews of their town are forced to turn over all their valuable possessions. Ignoring the edict, Elli's father buries some jewels, making certain that each family member knows their location. In his words, it's impossible to know which of the family will return from the next dictate - that all Jews will be moved to a "ghetto" seventeen kilometers away. Though quarters are cramped and there is inadequate space and no privacy, the Jewish families find a peaceful co-existence. As the families are running out of food, the able-bodied men are sent to a labor camp. The remaining Jews are soon forced to walk a great distance and are then shipped by train to Auschwitz.

At Auschwitz, Elli and Laura are spared the gas chamber by a fluke of fate when a Nazi leader notes Elli's light-colored hair. Though all children her age are being summarily executed, the soldier tells Elli that she is forever after to say her age is sixteen. Once in the camp, Laura and Elli encounter cousins and then Elli's aunt. From these, they learn some basic rules of survival. Soon Laura and Elli are transported to another labor camp and later to a factory where they help in the manufacture of German airplane equipment. Laura is severely injured but Elli refuses to allow her mother to give up on life.

Finally, Laura and Elli reconnect with Bubi, though they hardly recognize him. When the Allied soldiers near, the family and thousands of other prisoners endure a grueling train ride that ends when the Americans take the SS guards as their prisoners. Only when they reach home do Elli and her family discover that her father is among the casualties of the prison camps. When an uncle learns of their survival, the family begins making plans to travel to New York. As Elli and her mother stand on the deck of a ship, they get their first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, the symbol of the country Elli and her family will now call home.



Pages 12-34

Pages 12-34 Summary and Analysis

The story begins in "The City of My Dreams" in the town of Somorja in the summer of 1943 when Elli, twelve, longs for the exciting life led by her older brother, Bubi. Elli spends her days in the typical pursuits of young girls of her age. Her friend Bonnie and she sometimes go to the Danube to swim, as do many others in the area. The river also serves as a place for watering herds of animals, such as sheep.

Elli's mother, Laura, is not demonstrative with hugs and cuddles and Elli believes it to be because Elli herself is not pretty and because Bubi is Laura's favorite. Elli is ambitious in her studies, making her Bubi's equal in terms of grades, though Bubi attains his without putting forth the effort to study. Elli's father says that ambition is a desirable trait because a person can sometimes accomplish more by being ambitious than by having a natural ability toward a particular thing.

The family is Jewish and is frequently accosted by Hungarian police who have complete control over the Jewish population. One night there is an insistent knocking on the door and the family expects it to be a raid, but it's Bubi. He tells a story of Nazi soldiers arriving at Budapest where he attends the Jewish Teachers Seminary, but his father, seeing nothing of the story in the papers of the following day, refuses to believe that it could be true and sends Bubi back to school. The next day after Bubi's departure, the story breaks in local newspapers and Elli's father considers going to Budapest in search of Bubi, but Laura urges that he not. Another father does and neither father nor son are ever seen again. Bubi returns on his own and Elli notes that Budapest - the city she'd planned to live in while attending the seminary - becomes the "anteroom of Auschwitz."

"Hey, Jew Girl, Jew Girl ..." describes the decision to close all schools on March 25, 1944, meaning Elli and those in her class won't have the opportunity to graduate. She leaves the school that day to taunts referring to her Jewish background. "The Tale of the Yellow Bicycle" describes March 27, a date in which all Jewish residents are ordered to give up all possessions of value. Elli's father takes her to the basement where he shows her the location of their most valuable jewelry, buried in an effort to save it from soldiers. She rails against the situation and her anger increases when her new bicycle - a yellow Schwinn which she hasn't yet ridden - is among the items to be surrendered.

In "The Tale of the Yellow Star," Elli learns from the town crier that all Jews are to wear a yellow cloth star on their outer clothing at all times and to paint a yellow star to the left of the doorway of the residence. Elli is again very angry at the situation, especially at the requirement to wear the star as the sign of her Jewish background. Bubi proudly creates a star out of cardboard, covers it with bright silk fabric and begins wearing it as if it were a badge. Other young boys pick up Bubi's attitude and the stars are worn proudly, but Elli resolves her hatred of the situation by simply refusing to go out. Then she learns that there's to be one final meeting of the students from her school during which final



report cards and diplomas are to be distributed. Students are required to pick up their documents in person and Elli wavers, but again decides that she won't go out. Bubi goads her into going and she rushes to the school where she isn't taunted this time for being a Jew.

At the school, Elli learns that she has received the coveted Honor Scroll. A young boy named Jansci Novak also receives the Honor Scroll, and after the final assembly is dismissed, Jansci congratulates Elli. Elli has been interested in Jansci and now returns the congratulations. As they leave together, Jansci tells Elli that he'd like to see her again. He says that he plans to return to town each Thursday and that he'll be going to the library each Thursday afternoon. Elli agrees to meet him there the following Thursday.



Pages 35 through 70

Pages 35 through 70 Summary and Analysis

In "Farewell Old Mr. Stern," Elli's planned meeting with Jaszi never happens. Over the period from April 5 through April 18, the town crier announces that Jews are not to socialize at all with Christians and that Jews are forbidden access to public buildings, including the library. The penalty is arrest and Elli finds that neighbors and friends walk by without speaking and with no signs of recognition. Then Elli and her family are told that they are to be ready for relocation to Nagymagyar, a village fourteen kilometers from her home. Each family is to take one room of furniture and a specific amount of belongings. The packing falls largely to Laura as Elli becomes ill with a severe stomach ache and her father becomes like "a statue of stone." Elli's Aunt Serena is to accompany them and all are to be out of the city by one o'clock.

Elli and her mother remain behind as the other carts leave the city, planning to travel on the final cart which is filled with firewood, but want to go first to the cemetery where Laura's parents are buried. On the way, they encounter Old Mr. Stern who is praying at a wall. Laura asks him what they must pray and he says that they should pray for the long road that lies ahead of them. With only a half hour before the deadline, Elli and her mother rush back to the waiting cart and the angry soldiers who are fully aware that two Jewish females remain free in the otherwise "Aryan" town of Somorja. As they leave the town, Elli rides so that she can see her home and wonders if she'll ever return.

In "The Ghetto," Elli and her mother arrive to discover that hundreds of people are crammed into a small area. They are under heavy guard, have inadequate toilet, bathing, cooking and sleeping areas, but soon begin to create a bearable life. Elli's family shares a small three-room house with a family named Blumenfeld and considers themselves lucky to have even this much space. Elli notes that some families have to sleep in the synagogue and that many are cooking over open fires. With the number of people crammed into the small area, close friendships are quickly formed and Elli soon attracts the attention of a boy named Pinhas, though he never talks to her.

Elli has become known for her poetry which is often focused on the darker sides of life. While her mother criticizes this tendency, her father tells her that it's good to realize that life is "laced with pain." While in the ghetto, she transcribes her poems - more than one hundred in all - into a single notebook. Then rumors begin that the people are to be moved to work camps. In "A Miracle," Laura says that such a move would be an improvement because food supplies are running low and in this way they could at least have an opportunity to work and buy food. Then a former classmate of Elli, Marta Kalman, arrives at the fence with her mother in search of Elli. Finding Pista Szivos, a young guard on duty who had once asked Elli her name and who had seemed kind, Elli asks permission to talk to Marta, only to discover that Marta and her mother have risked arrest to bring food - flour, a goose and eggs - to Elli. The guard allows them to leave the food, though urges them to hurry lest they be seen.



In "Daddy, How Could You Leave Me," Elli's father and most of the men in the camp receives word on May 14 that he is to leave for a labor camp the following morning. Her father and brother spend some time studying the Talmud while Laura packs food and other supplies for his trip. Elli tries to remain awake but falls asleep after eliciting the promise that her father would wake her the following morning. She wakes to find their room empty and rushes out but sees only the shape of her father as he is taken away with the other men.

In "Can I Keep My Poems, Please?" members of the ghetto are ordered to surrender all books, documents and photos. Elli plans to ask that she be allowed to keep her journal of poetry but sees a young mother denied possession of a single photo and hides the journal instead. She and the others watch in horror as all the papers - including religious documents - are burned. In "Aunt Serena," the family prepares on May 20 to leave with orders to take only what they can carry. They are hard pressed to decide what they'll need and as they consider what might be left behind, Aunt Serena smashes dishes and valuable vases so that no one else will gain possession of them, then screams that she'll die before allowing them to take her away, until Laura and Elli stop her rampage. In "Oh God, I Don't Want to Die," Elli finds herself separated from Bubi and in the company of the young soldier, Pista Szivos, who tells Elli about his family and goals in life. Elli takes a chance and asks Pista to take possession of her poetry, which he does though without initially realizing the danger or the significance. He promises to have them for her upon her return. Then Elli and her family are put aboard a cattle car of a train and Elli fears that their death is imminent.



Pages 71 through 100

Pages 71 through 100 Summary and Analysis

In "Auschwitz," Elli, her mother, aunt and brother travel for four nights in the cattle car, arriving at Auschwitz on May 31. They are told to leave their possessions behind. Men are driven one direction and women and children another. Elli, her mother and aunt watch as Bubi is knocked down by an SS guard as he's taken from them. Eli then encounters a man who fingers her hair, notes that it is blond, and asks if she's Jewish. She answers that she is to which the man orders her to the right, though with a warning that she is, from now on, to say that she's sixteen. Aunt Serene is pushed to the left and Elli's mother begs to go with her sister but the man says that Elli needs her more. In "Arbeit Macht Frei," the women are driven into a room, forced at gunpoint to strip, and are shaven. Elli notes that they are now members of that "exclusive club" of Auschwitz.

In "Born in the Shower," the women are blasted with cold water before being given shapeless gray dresses and shoes that don't fit and being turned into a large fenced area. Elli can barely walk in shoes that are too small and both she and her mother are starving for a drink of water. They soon encounter two cousins, Hindi and Suri Schreiber from Satoraljaujhely, and then Laura's sister, Elli's Aunt Celia. By now, Elli and Laura are desperate for a drink and are directed by their cousins to a "lake" that is really just a puddle of putrid water. They are desperate enough to drink anyway though they are warned not to drink too much.

When mealtime comes, women are divided into groups of five and given a single portion to share. Elli, her mother, aunt and two cousins attempt to form a group at the advice of the cousins who say that by doing so, they will be more willing to share equally the small portions. When the horrible food comes, both Elli and her mother throw up but both are encouraged to try again with the admonition that there is nothing else to eat and they must learn survive. Then the little family is split up and Elli's first day at Auschwitz comes to an end.

In "The Riot," Elli describes a "riot" that occurs on May 31, her second day in Auschwitz. The incident involves a young girl who is screaming out that someone is killing her mother. An older woman tries to calm the girl but to no avail. Then someone shouts that they smell gas and many of the women rise to their feet, trying to break through the doors, though they are locked. The guards arrive and take the young girl screaming for her mother away. A few minutes later, Elli and the others hear a shot. The women are forced outside for roll call at dawn. It's cold and some bring blankets, so that five stand huddling together in the cold under a single blanket. Elli wishes she had thought of that until they are ordered to take their blankets back inside and are hit on the head as they do so. There is a large eighteen-year-old girl who is the head of the barracks and who wields power over the inmates. Elli notes that the woman arrived at sixteen, has survived for two years, but has apparently paid a horrible price for her survival.



In "Teen Vanity," Elli describes her shock at seeing her reflection in a window on her fourth day at Auschwitz on June 3. She notes that they are punished for any infraction that is called "sabotage." One day she sees a girl with blood running down her leg and initially fears that the girl has been shot, but then realizes that it's her menstrual cycle and that, without any underwear, there is no way to stop the flow. Elli is mortified and thinks ahead to her own cycle which will likely begin in about three weeks. She knows that the war will be over by then because there is no way she could endure this for any longer period of time.

In "The Dawn of New Hope," the date is June 9 and June 10 when Aunt Celia has made arrangements for a woman to trade places with her later in the day so that she will be in the barracks with Elli and Laura. Suri and Hindi are searching for girls willing to make the same arrangement. But on that day, Elli and Laura, along with others from their barrack, are forced to march away from Auschwitz, loaded onto a train and transported to Plaszow, a place Elli describes as the "most notorious forced labor camp in Poland." While Elli holds to the hope that their new situation will be better, Laura hates having left her sister behind, especially considering that Celia has begun suffering from diarrhea - a deadly disease in Auschwitz.



Pages 101 through 142

Pages 101 through 142 Summary and Analysis

In June, Elli and her mother are being forced to work at leveling a hillside in preparation of construction. In "Mommy, There's a Worm in Your Soup," Elli describes the slow acclimation to the work they perform and the pace they are forced to keep under threat of whipping. At noon, they are allowed to stop work for a half hour to eat. On a particular day, the food arrives early and become putrid in the hot sun. When they begin to eat, Elli discovers worms in the soup and points it out to her mother. Laura says that she is hungry and tells Elli that there are no worms in the soup and that she is not to say anything else about it.

In "Alien Heroes," Elli describes a scene in which a group of men and women - not Jewish by their appearance - arrive under guard and are summarily executed in groups of ten. One man, left for dead, crawls out of the mass of bodies and hurls himself at an SS guard before being killed. Their identities are not yet explained but Elli notes that the women risk punishment by looking at the fallen bodies off and on for the next hours, and that she aches for the futility of their actions.

In "The Uprising," Elli and her fellow prisoners are working at moving dirt when a sudden rainstorm sends them scampering for cover. When the commander arrives, they are forced back to work with promise of a "decimation" the following morning for their act of "sabotage." The decimation is an act carried out in which the members of a particular group are lined up and every tenth one shot, though there is no way to tell where the executioner will begin his count so no way to determine who is the tenth. Elli spends a horrible night, certain that she or her mother will fall to the decimation. Two girls who have managed to keep a prayer book hidden begin to read and are joined by the entire barrack.

In the morning, the decimation doesn't occur. The women are forced to work as usual though the SS guards are late in arriving. Throughout the day, groups of civilians arrive by truck under heavy guard, are questioned and trucked out. Then word is circulated that there is an uprising and that these and the civilians killed earlier were part of a plan to liberate the inmates of Plaszow. Elli notes that she is thankful that they are alive, but allows herself to consider the possibility that if the uprising had been successful, they might have been freed.

In "Hitler is Not Dead," the women one morning hear an array of rumors, including that Hitler has died and that the war is nearing its end. Elli and her mother have now been prisoners for seven and a half weeks, and she says that she has become a true concentration camp inmate. One morning, all are taken from the prison camp. Plaszow is abandoned and the inmates forced to pile onto the cars of a train, one hundred to a car. They remain stationary for hours and breathing becomes difficult because of the heat and lack of air. No one has room to do more than squat or stand. Then word



comes that thirty additional people will be put onto each car. While some say the car can't possibly hold thirty more, there's nothing to do but endure. Then they begin to move and breathing becomes easier. After awhile, many faint and are piled together but when the air temperature cools, most feel slightly better. Then they arrive and Elli sees the sign notifying them of their arrival at Auschwitz, and she notes that it's a sign to her that Hitler is not dead.

In "Tattoo," Elli continues to pull her mother along, despite Laura's objection that she can't go on. They are taken to a room where they are to be tattooed and Elli chooses a long line because the tattoos seem neater. At the end of the long wait, she has become more than an anonymous inmate - she has become A-17360.

The new barracks has tiers of bunks and women sleep twelve to a tier. In "The Broken Bed," Elli explains her horror at discovering that the bed above her mother has a broken plank, then comes crashing down on the two of them, pinning Laura in an unnatural position. Elli is told that her mother has a severed spinal cord and that she will likely die within the next few hours. Elli remains with her throughout the night. In "Is it True About the Smoke?" Laura is taken the following day to the infirmary, called the Revier. It's noted that those who remain in the infirmary for more than three weeks will be "removed." Desperate for news of her mother, Elli learns where Laura's bed is and shares a few words with her mother each morning. One morning she's caught by an SS officer and forced to spend twenty-four hours kneeling in a particular place where she sees groups of youngsters and fresh-faced people, new arrivals bound for an unknown location, though Elli comes to believe that they are headed to the gas chambers.

In "The Selection," Elli learns that those who have been in the infirmary for more than three weeks are to be "selected," and calls on a woman from her old neighborhood, Mrs. Grunwald, to help carry her mother from the infirmary. Ilse Grunwald also agrees to help, as does a girl named Yitu. The four go to the infirmary though to do so is a punishable offense. When they arrive, four nurses carry Laura out. Elli and the others, weak themselves, get her to the barrack, help prop her up for roll call, and smuggle her back inside to rest afterward. Then it's learned that there's to be a selection from their barrack. In "The Transport," Elli pretends to be leaning on her mother for warmth as they are each examined by the guards. Laura passes muster and is taken for a work detail but Elli is told to remain when guards see a sore on her leg. Desperate to be with her mother, she slips back into line, covering the sore this time, and is ushered out for the work detail. It takes her some time to catch up with her mother and she calls their reunion and transportation from Auschwitz a "divine miracle."



Pages 143 through 182

Pages 143 through 182 Summary and Analysis

The women are often forced to strip for showers and examinations and their shoes are the only possessions they retain. In "A Handkerchief," Elli notes that her mother has one possession - a handkerchief with her initials embroidered on the corner - and that she keeps it wrapped around her foot inside her shoe. As they prepare for transportation yet again, Laura has trouble with the handkerchief because she is now partially paralyzed from the accident and an SS guard twists Laura's arm cruelly behind her back. Elli, forgetting everything, jumps onto the guard and is severely beaten, though it's noted she's fortunate that she wasn't killed for this unpardonable action. They are loaded again onto rail cars and shipped away from Auschwitz.

In "This Must Be Heaven," the train arrives at Augsburg. The women are unloaded and the SS guards leave immediately. There's some confusion as the new military guards - not SS but regular military - ask about luggage and why there are men here when women had been requested. The guards learn the prisoners have no possessions and are women, then direct them down a street that appears very normal to the fifty women from the prison camps. One guard asks Laura for her name and Laura first provides her number, but then is addressed by name and asked if she can hurry. When Laura says she can't go any faster, she isn't beaten but is told she'll have the opportunity for recovery. They are then fed a reasonable amount of good food and several begin to cry.

In "Herr Zerkubel," the girls are sorted by features with light-skinned, light-haired, blue-eyed girls being given the most challenging tasks because their Aryan looks indicate them to be the most intelligent. Elli is among those and notes that they are manufacturing parts for German aircraft. Though she takes pride in successfully completing one of the complex parts, she knows that she and the others are "toiling against ourselves."

In "Leah Kohn, Forgive Me," Elli notes that the arrival of an SS guard prompts a change in the treatment and attitudes at the airplane factory. Their regular guards drop the air of concern and either don't meet the eyes of the women prisoners or begin carrying whips along with a threatening attitude. The food is downgraded and the living conditions made less desirable. One evening, those shoveling snow discover a stash of potatoes and smuggle in enough for each inmate to have one. They enjoy the treat that night after dark, though Laura saves hers and, using stolen oil, lights a makeshift "lamp" for the Sabbath. She's caught and the women are more careful when they conduct a similar ritual for Hanukkah.

Then the women are presented new clothes. Elli receives a beautiful pink dress and a wonderful, though worn, coat. She notes that a civilian worker takes a second look at her changed appearance and the women all feel as if they are beautiful in their new clothes. Then Elli sees the name "Leah Kohn" embroidered in the coat's lining and



realizes that it was likely taken from a young Jewish girl who may be cold now or even dead. She notes that the coat is now a weight to be endured.

In "The Bowl of Soup," Elli is among those chosen to work outside clearing rubble from a bomb, but slips away with several other girls when they are denied the opportunity to retrieve their coats. The girls who didn't hide are given the opportunity to get their coats and those who did are forced to stand in a hall all day without water or food. That night, Elli finds that her mother has saved a bowl of soup for her. Elli refuses to eat it all, noting that it's her mother's noon and evening ration, and her mother refuses to have any for herself. They argue and Laura pours the soup out, then the two women fall into bed together, inconsolable. Elli says that she later learns that this was the night her father was killed. In "The Bird of Gold," Elli says that she dreams that night that she and her father witness a bird of gold that exuded an incredible light. Elli says she wakes to realize that her father has died, though she doesn't share the dream with anyone.

In "An Echo in the Fog," Elli and Laura hear rumors that the Allied forces are approaching, that liberation is near, and that they are to be evacuated out of reach of the saviors. They are forbidden to talk about their pending evacuation and Elli wishes she could tell Mr. Scheidel, a civilian who has become Elli's friend. He has brought her crusts of bread that she shared with her mother and later, at her request, paper for writing poems. Those leaving Augsburg stop first at Camp Landsberg, but the camp is filled to capacity and they are sent on to Muhldorf and then on to Waldlager where they have been told there are men from their village and soon reconnect with Bubi, who is in poor condition.

In "To Face the World," Laura is assigned to work in the kitchen where she has as many raw vegetables as she wants to eat but is not allowed to take any out. Elli continues to give Bubi her bread and he eventually begins to talk. Then one day the guards are missing and Bubi is able to go to the women's side of the camp where he and Elli talk. Elli tells of the plans she's made for after their release, but Bubi says that he's certain they are the only survivors of their family.



Pages 183 through 223

Pages 183 through 223 Summary and Analysis

In "The Lost Game," everyone is loaded onto a train with some two hundred cars at the Muhldorf train station. There are rumors as to where they are going but no one knows for certain. Elli and Laura are together but they have lost sight of Bubi. The train alternately moves and stops, though the prisoners are given nothing to eat or drink. Then the train stops at a cornfield and someone opens the boxcar doors, saying that they are free. They are near a cornfield and some people rush to the fields, eating raw ears of corn or even the leaves from the plants. Others rush toward a nearby hamlet but Laura refuses to do either, walking along the tracks in search of Bubi. They find him walking along the tracks in search of them and are just deciding what to do when they hear gunfire. Prisoners are cut down in the fields and they try to reach the train as Germans order them back into the cars. Laura puts a piece of cloth around Bubi's head and says they'll pass him off as a woman so that he can ride in the car with them.

In "It's An American Plane," the train pulls into a station at noon where trucks with red crosses painted on them wait. The prisoners are told they will be given hot soup and are told to come to the windows of the cars. When many are standing, gunfire erupts and many are shot. Elli decides that the soup was a Nazi plot. Bubi is bleeding from the head and Laura refuses to lie down to better avoid the gunfire, though Elli believes Bubi to be dead. Then the doors open again and German soldiers order them out of the car as planes fly overhead and begin firing on the train formation. Elli then realizes that Bubi is alive and the three get off the train and under the train car. When the prisoners are again loaded onto the cars, the dead are removed by soldiers and piled along the tracks.

In "Freedom, At Last," Elli counts the dead and dying in the car, and there are several. One girl awakes and is terrified when she discovers that she can't see. Elli notes that the girl hasn't realized that she was shot in the eye. Then the doors open and there are two men in uniforms that Elli doesn't recognize. She doesn't understand their language but then a man arrives who speaks Yiddish. He tells them that he is an American soldier and asks them what camp they are from. As the prisoners are given aid by local people who claim they had no knowledge of the concentration camps, one woman begins to talk to Elli. She says that the labor must have been difficult for a woman of Elli's age, then reveals that she believes Elli to be "sixty, or sixty-two" years old. Elli tells her that she is only fourteen and that, "I have lived a thousand years." The woman makes the sign of the cross and moves away.

In "Homecoming," Elli, Laura and Bubi begin the trip home in June of 1945. They are driven part way by "handsome young Americans with black faces," walk some distance and catch a train to Samorin. Their home is completely empty except for piles of human excrement on the floors of each room. They wait, hoping that their father will soon return, then Bubi learns that their father died at Bergen-Belsen shortly before the

liberation. Bubi has received permission to attend school in New York and they have an uncle there who is willing to help them. The three have vowed that they will never again be apart. Elli notes that, though she's back in the town of her home, she no longer feels that she belongs here. Everywhere she goes, she has memories of her father and friends.

In "America, Will You Be My Home?" Elli returns to school, though she knows no one in her class. The majority of the children in her class were displaced by the war. Laura has sold some of the jewelry to pay for Bubi's schooling to prepare him for study in America. She sews for the Russian girls to earn enough money to buy food for the family. As Laura is beginning to prepare for their trip to America, Elli tells her that she would prefer to go to Palestine. They put off the discussion until Bubi comes home for the weekend and put the issue to a vote. Laura and Bubi vote for America and Elli agrees to go with them.

In "The Statue of Liberty," Elli and Laura stand at the rail of the ship, "The General Stewart," and get their first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty on April 7, 1951. Elli impulsively turns to the other passengers and asks if anyone knows the American national anthem. When no one does, she begins to sing the Israeli anthem in Hebrew and is soon joined by the voices of many other passengers.



Characters

Elli Friedman

Also known as Ellike, she is thirteen when the family is taken into custody by the Hungarian army and turned over to the Germans for interment at Auschwitz. Elli is a good student who is dedicated to her desire for good grades, and that dedication results in recognition for her good grades. When Jews are ordered to wear a yellow star on their clothing to identify them as Jews, Elli responds by simply refusing to leave the house for days. When she is notified that she is to pick up her report card from school, she initially decides that she won't go, but her brother goads her, saying that it's cowardly of her to skip the presentation simply because she doesn't want to wear the star.

While Elli's original reaction to the situation may indicate a lack of courage, that attitude changes dramatically over time. Once she and her mother are interred in a German prison camp, Elli's strength is frequently the reason the two survive. On several occasions, Elli's mother asks to be allowed to die. When Elli's mother is in an infirmary and Elli learns that those who have been in the hospital for more than three weeks are to be killed, Elli risks her life to save her mother. Elli is a budding poet and notes that her poetry sometimes defines her. Despite this, she doesn't attempt to recover her poems lost during her incarceration, citing the fact that to be so worried about a possession is to lessen the sacrifices of Auschwitz.

Laura Friedman

Elli's mother. Laura teaches Elli to be strong and says that cuddling a child only makes that child more sensitive. Whether it's Laura's teachings or Elli's nature, Elli becomes a strong person during their incarceration and Laura finds herself often leaning on Elli for strength and comfort. On one occasion, Laura begs to remain in a train car, though she seems to know that it means she will be killed.

Despite the weaknesses that show, Laura also has strengths that play an important role in the survival of Laura and Elli. When Elli is severely beaten in a shower by an SS guard, Laura calls out to her, telling Elli that she can't help but that Elli must get to her feet. On another occasion, Laura finds the ability to eat soup that is crawling with worms because she is so hungry. Elli notes that her mother had been a very finicky person prior to their incarceration, so this is an example of Laura's strength. Laura's ability to soothe others is another of her positive traits. When Laura and Elli have just witnessed a young girl lose both her sisters, it's Laura who tells the girl to remember the date so that she can mourn them. Elli notes that she would never have thought of something like that, but that it provides some comfort to the young girl at a moment of chaos.



Bubi

Elli's brother who is attending school in Budapest when the SS invades, though his father doesn't immediately believe the story of the invasion. Bubi is seventeen at the time the Jews are taken into custody. He is separated from Elli and his mother upon their arrival at Auschwitz and is reunited later at another camp. Bubi survives and returns home with Elli and their mother after the Germans are defeated.

Jancsi Novak

A classmate of Elli's, Jancsi is also a winner of the Honor Roll at their final class meeting which stands in place of a formal graduation exercise. Jancsi stops to congratulate Elli and the two make plans to meet at the library on the following Thursday, but the Jews are prohibited from visiting public places in the meantime and that meeting never takes place.

Aunt Serena

The sister of Elli's mother, Aunt Serena favors Elli with treats such as sugared orange peel prior to the forcing of Jews into concentration camps. She is widowed and seen as somewhat frail by her family. On the night before the family is to be moved from the ghetto at Nagymagyar, she becomes greatly agitated and breaks up the dishes that she's going to be leaving behind, saying that she doesn't want to leave her possessions for the soldiers and that she would rather die than to be forced to move again. She does travel on with Laura and Elli to Auschwitz but is separated from the two at the gate and Elli never sees her again.

Pista Szivos

The young soldier who kindly allows Elli to receive gifts of food from a former classmate and her mother. The same young soldier travels with Elli and her mother and aunt as they leave Nagymagyar. As they travel, he tells Elli of his own family and his own dreams, prompting Elli's trust. She gives him a notebook filled with her poems for safekeeping. It's noted that Pista doesn't realize the gravity of the situation because he apparently didn't see the collection of the many books, photos and religious documents that were then destroyed by the soldiers.

Doctor Mengele

The notorious Nazi leader who determines whether prisoners will live in the horrors of Auschwitz or will die immediately in the gas chambers. Mengele is standing near the station when Elli and Laura arrive and fingers Elli's hair, remarking on the golden color.



He then sends Elli and Laura in one direction while sending Elli's Aunt Serena to the gas chambers.

Marta Kalman

A former classmate of Elli who apparently benefited greatly from Elli's tutoring in specific subjects. Marta and her mother arrive at the gates of the ghetto in Nagymagyar in search of Elli and give her food including flour, a goose and eggs. The gifts are presented at great risk to Marta and her family as contact between the Jews interred in the ghetto and people from the outside is strictly prohibited.

Elli's Father

Though never named, Elli's father is a major figure in her life. When he takes her to the cellar to show her where the most valuable of the family jewels are buried, he tells Elli that there's no way to know which of them will return from their forced deportation. This is an indication that he has a greater grasp of the seriousness of the situation than some others.

Aunt Celia

Laura's sister. The two had not seen each other in several years until their meeting at Auschwitz. Aunt Celia gives Laura her bread ration on the day Laura and Elli arrive and, along with two cousins, instructs them on ways to survive in the prison. Aunt Celia has contracted diarrhea on the day Laura and Elli are taken from Auschwitz and they never see each other again.



Objects/Places

Budapest

Where Bubi lives while attending school and where Elli plans to go upon completion of her own lower education.

Samorja

The town where Elli and her family live.

The Danube

The beautiful river where Elli and her friends, as well as many others from the area, go to swim and to water herds of sheep.

Jewish Teachers Seminary

Where Bubi attends school and where Elli has applied for admission.

Nagymagyar

Where Elli and the many other families are held in a "ghetto" until their transfer to Auschwitz.

Komarom

Where Elli's father is told he has to report for work from the ghetto at Nagymagyar.

Zahlappell

The twice-daily roll call at the prison camps, including Auschwitz.

Plaszow

The forced labor camp in Poland where Elli and Laura are taken after a short stay in Auschwitz.



Augsburg

Where Elli and Laura are sent to work in a German airplane factory.

Waldlager

The prison camp where Elli and Laura reconnect with Bubi.

Bergen-Belsen

Where Elli's father dies shortly before liberation.



Themes

The Will to Survive

The will to survive is an overriding theme in this story and can be seen in almost every situation and scene. One of the most notable is the willingness of both Laura and Elli to drink putrid water and to eat horrible food that seems to have sand and even bits of material in it. When Elli is given her first taste of the horrible food in Auschwitz, she retches, as does Laura. Their cousins urge them to try again and their reason for this urging is that there isn't anything else to eat and that they must retain something in their stomachs in order to survive.

Another example of this will to survive is the ability of the prisoners to work in all kinds of weather with very little food and to stand in the cold for hours for roll call. It's also noted that the women typically encourage each other to stay out of trouble and to do what's necessary, fearing not only for those who might be punished but also realizing the entire barracks of prisoners are often punished for the alleged misdeeds of a single person.

The Need for Hope

When Elli and Laura are incarcerated in Plaszow, a group of civilians are brought in. Though the civilians are all executed, Elli notes that there is a ripple of hope among the prisoners that these civilians had been caught fighting for the freedom of the prisoners. Even though the attempt was unsuccessful, the thought that there was someone working toward that end remains important to the prisoners who are looking for any means with which to hold onto their hope.

This same theme is seen later when the prisoners are hoping for the arrival of Americans. Another aspect of this theme is seen in the beliefs held by many that their loved ones are being held, safe, in some other camp. Elli tells Bubi that she plans to reunite with their relatives and Bubi, having heard the stories first hand from those who worked in the crematoriums, says that all those loved ones are dead. Elli admits that she's known this all along but has held onto the hope that there really was a camp for the old, the young and the infirm.

The Corruption of Power

The SS guards are perfect examples of the corruption of power. Guards answered to no one for their cruelty and were often brutal in their demands and punishment. Doctor Mengele has the supreme power to determine which of the prisoners will be housed in the prison and which will be gassed immediately. As he sees Elli, it's her blond hair that catches and holds his attention. Though Mengele is sworn to uphold the laws of his government, he promptly breaks those laws on a whim, sending Elli to the prison instead of the gas chamber.



Another example is seen at the airplane factory where regular military guards were responsible for the prisoners who arrived from the prison camps. The women prisoners are treated kindly, fed well and given adequate housing arrangements, but this all changes when the SS guards arrive. When the military guards are apparently given the complete power over the lives of the prisoners, they become aloof and some begin carrying whips. The quality and quantity of food drops. This is an example of how easily power corrupts.



Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person from a limited perspective. The reader knows only what is happening to Elli at any given point. This perspective is acceptable, considering that the story is a biographical account of Elli's life prior to, during and following her imprisonment as a Jewish girl during the Holocaust, but sometimes leaves questions unanswered. For example, Elli tells about the appearance of a group of civilians who are apparently questioned, beaten and executed. Their identities are not revealed though Elli refers to them as "heroes." In the next chapter, a larger group is brought to the prison camp and Elli talks of these as revolutionaries who were attempting to set the Jewish prisoners free. This limited information is tantalizing but some readers may still have questions after reading this section.

Tone

The story is set in German-occupied territory in the 1940s. The events and many of the places are real, which lends an air of credibility to the story overall. For example, Doctor Mengele is a famed SS leader who is mentioned in many books. In this story, it's Doctor Mengele who touches Elli's blond hair and sends her into the camp rather than to the gas chamber, despite the fact that SS policy dictated that a child of Elli's age was to be executed immediately. Mengele was sought as a war criminal for his role in the Nazi prison camps, though the single encounter was apparently the only time Elli met Mengele. There are also references to Hitler, German's commander who began the Nazi death camps, including Auschwitz. By using real places, people and events as the setting, the story becomes highly believable. The lives of the Jewish people are also realistic and credible. Most were ordered to give up valuables and some managed to hide items for safekeeping until they could return after the war.

Structure

The book is divided into forty chapters. None of the chapters are numbered. Each is titled and titles offer a clue as to the content of that chapter. For example, the chapter titled, "Mommy, There's a Worm in Your Soup" details the story of Elli warning her mother that there are worms in the soup and Laura's determination to eat the soup anyway. Other chapters with similar titles include, "Daddy, How Could You Leave Me?" and "Is It True about the Smoke?" Both titles are very explanatory. There are others that are less so, such as "The Ghetto," "A Miracle" and "Teen Vanity." Each title does hold a clue about the upcoming chapter, but each are sufficiently vague that the reader is left to guess about the outcome. Chapters range in length from less than two pages to seven with several set at five pages in length. Chapters tend to cover one specific event.



Quotes

"What if I forget and say hello? Or respond to a friend's hello? And what if ... we don't forget? What then? Would we pass each other like strangers? But that's not possible." Farewell Old Mr. Stern, Page 36

"It will be over soon. Soon all this will pass, like a bad dream.' Mommy's words of comfort suddenly, inexplicably, fill my heart with fear." The Ghetto, Page 48

"I do not sense God here in the pitch dark of the cattle car. The train begins to move and gusts of air rush in through the gaps. A shiver runs through my body. Oh, God, I do not want to die!" Oh, God, I Don't Want to Die, Page 70

"We have become members of an exclusive club. Inmates of Auschwitz." Auschwitz, Page 80

"Unknowingly, we survived the selection of the diabolical Doctor Mengele, the handsome psychotic monster who had tenderly stroked my 'golden hair' and in a kindly voice advised me to double-cross his SS machinery and lie about my age so as to save my life." Born in the Showers, Page 81

"Aunt Celia crawls into the dusty hole and the two sisters hold each other in a silent clasp. They have not seen each other for three years. And now, a reunion in the scorching hole, in Auschwitz." Born in the Showers, Page 88

"My hair has started to grow of a scalp of flaming red from the onslaught of the sun. The sharp, yellow bristles against a scarlet backdrop make my head look like a blushing porcupine." Teen Vanity, Page 97

"Is it true, dear God? Is it true that the little children are trampled underfoot in the gas chamber? Is it true that the stronger adults struggle like wild animals to reach pockets of air high up and trample the weaker ones, and the little children? They told us, over and over again. So we should stop screaming when we heard it. So we should believe it." Is It True About the Smoke? Page 132

"I had known about the gas chambers all along. The shadow of the gas chambers followed us even when we left Auschwitz. And yet, I had stubbornly clung to the myth of the camp for the children and the elderly." To Face the World, Page 181

"We will be freed - to do what? To face a world in which children were gassed with their mothers. To face the world in which this was possible. My God. My God. I have just been robbed of my freedom." To Face the World, Page 182

"So this is liberation. It's come. I am fourteen years old, and I have lived a thousand years. I am numb with cold. With hunger. With death and blood, and the rattle of the train rolling on and one ..." Freedom, At Last, Page 205

"I want to go to Palestine, the Jewish Land, and live among people who share my inner void." Homecoming, Page 212

Topics for Discussion

Describe Elli's life as a child. What are her hopes? Are these similar to those of other children her age? How are Elli and Bubi the same? How are they different?

Describe Elli's relationship with her mother prior to the incarceration. How does it change over the course of the time they are held prisoner? What is different when they emerge?

What is the significance of the yellow Schwinn bicycle? What information does Elli receive from her father about some family jewelry about this same time? Describe how the family comes to be moved to the "ghetto." Describe life in the Ghetto.

Who is Aunt Serena? Aunt Celia? How do Elli and her mother come to spend time with each of these women? What are their fates? Relate the conversation Elli and Bubi have about Elli's plans to find all their missing family members once she's free. What turns out to be the truth of the situation?

What is Elli's reaction when she is told that she'll have to wear a yellow star on her jacket? How does that differ from Bubi's reaction? Which do you believe to be the correct reaction? Why? What does Elli believe will be the reaction of friends and neighbors to the order that Jews and Christians not speak to each other? What turns out to be the truth of this situation? What other items, other than the star, are symbolic in this story? Describe three and their significance.

Describe the arrival of Elli, Laura, Aunt Serena and Bubi at Auschwitz. What is it about Elli that causes her to be separated from Aunt Serena? Why do you believe this event occurs?

Elli has a notebook that contains more than one hundred of her poems. What is the fate of this notebook? Why does Elli come to trust the soldier with her possession? Why does Elli not go in search of her notebook later?