

LIVIA BITTON-JACKSON



I Have Lived a Thousand Years

GROWING UP IN THE HOLOCAUST

WINNER OF THE CHRISTOPHER AWARD

THE CITY OF MY DREAMS

SOMORJA, SUMMER 1943-MARCH 1944

I dream of enrolling in the prep school in Budapest, the capital city. Budapest is a big, beautiful metropolis with wide streets and tall buildings and yellow streetcars whizzing around corners. All the streets of Budapest are paved. In our town we have only one paved street, the main street. And it is not wide. We have neither tall buildings, nor streetcars, only horse-drawn carts and two automobiles. One of them belongs to my friend's father.

Ours is a small farming town at the edge of the Carpathian foothills. The lovely hills loom in a blue haze toward the west. To the south, the Danube, the cool, rapid river, pulsates with the promise of life. How I love to swim in its clear blue, surging ripples, and lie in the shade of the little forest hugging its banks.

We children splash all summer in the Danube. Families picnic in the grass, the local soccer team has its practice field nearby, and the swimming team trains for its annual meet. Even the army camp empties its sweaty contents once a day, hundreds of recruits, into the cool, cleansing waters of the Danube.

When the sun moves beyond the hills and the little forest casts a long shadow over the pasture, herds of cattle and sheep arrive at the Danube. The shepherds drive first the

sheep, then the horses and cows into the water, cursing ever louder, and drive us children out. The mosquitoes arrive, too, with the dusk, and it is time to go home.

The walk through the open pasture is pleasant and cool, but the town is hot and dusty when we reach home. The sheep arrive before us and it is they who churn up the dust. But soon the dust settles, and so does the night. A dark, velvety blanket of silence wraps the town snugly against the intrusion of the outside world. The stars, one by one, light up the dirt roads and the single paved street of the town. By nine o'clock all is quiet. Here and there one hears the bark of a restless dog. Soon the dog, too, will be asleep.

Then the orchestra of insects begins its overture, its harmony disrupted by the discordant croaking of a frog, an inhabitant of a small swamp just beyond the last houses of our street.

I love to lie and daydream for hours after dusk. Life is an exciting mystery, a sweet secret enchantment. In my daydreams I am a celebrated poet, beautiful, elegant, and very talented. My poems open the world's heart to me, and I loll in the world's embrace.

I yearn for my mother's embrace. When, on Sabbath mornings, my friend Bonnie and I join our mothers in the synagogue, Mrs. Adler takes Bonnie in her arms and calls her *meine Schönheit*, my beauty, in German. Mrs. Adler always says German endearments to Bonnie. Mommy only greets me with a hello and a smile, no hug and no words of endearment.

"That's all nonsense," Mommy would respond to my complaint. "Do you want me to call you *meine Schönheit*? Bonnie's mother makes a fool of herself. Why, everyone can see how plain looking her daughter is!"

What does it matter whether Bonnie is pretty? I care only that Bonnie's mother thinks she is beautiful. And what about the hug?

"I don't believe in cuddling," Mommy explains with a smile. "Life is tough, and cuddling makes you soft. How will you face life's difficulties if I keep cuddling you? You're too sensitive as it is. If I would take you in my lap, you'd never want to get off. . . . You'd become as soft as butter, unable to stand up to life's challenges."

Mommy's explanations are unconvincing. I believe she does not hug me because she does not think I am huggable. I believe she does not call me beautiful because she does not think I am pretty. I am too tall and ungainly. My arms and legs are too long, and I keep upsetting things. When I carry a tray of drinks, Mommy shouts at me not to walk so clumsily. That's the reason why everything spills. "Look at Eva. She's a year younger than you, yet how deftly she carries a tray." Or "I was in your friend Julie's house yesterday. You should see how skillfully she helped her mother serve!" Or "See your brother Bubi? He's a boy, and see how much more he helps out, and how much better he is around the kitchen?"

This I know is the secret of my mother's disapproval: my brother. He is the favorite. He is good. He never answers back, my mother says. And never asks "Why do I have to?" whenever she tells him to do this or that. Why can't I be like him?

Why can't I look like him? My brother is good looking, and I am not. I am far from being pretty. He has curly hair, and I don't. My hair is straight. There is not even an inclination of a wave. "What a shame!" I hear my mother say to

What is death all about?
What is life all about?

So wonders thirteen-year-old Elli Friedmann, just one of the many innocent Holocaust victims, as she fights for her life in a concentration camp. It wasn't long ago that Elli led a normal life; a life rich and full that included family, friends, school, and thoughts about boys. A life in which Elli could lie and daydream for hours that she was a beautiful and elegant celebrated poet.

But these adolescent daydreams quickly darken in March 1944, when the Nazis invade Hungary. First Elli can no longer attend school, have possessions, or talk to her neighbors. Then she and her family are forced to leave their house behind to move into a crowded ghetto, where privacy becomes a luxury of the past and food becomes a scarcity. Her strong will and faith allow Elli to manage and adjust somehow, but what Elli doesn't know is that this is only the beginning and the worst is yet to come. . . .

A remarkable memoir, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years* is a story of cruelty and suffering, but at the same time a story of hope, faith, perseverance, and love.

AN ALA BEST BOOK FOR YOUNG ADULTS

★“This is a memorable addition to the searing account of Holocaust survivors.” — *The Horn Book*, starred review

“[I]ntensely involving. . . .” — BCCB



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