

Becoming Alice

Alice Rene

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World War II and its aftermath led to one of the most massive ethnic cleansings in Western history: Nazi Germany deported and killed millions of Jews and the Soviet Union expelled millions more ethnic Germans from eastern countries. But compelling survival stories do exist and Alice Rene's tale is one of them.

Six-year-old Ilse Fell's odyssey begins the day she watches Nazi soldiers goose-step down her street in Vienna. The 1938 *Anschluss* is taking place when Austria is incorporated into Germany by the Nazis. Thus begins a tumultuous and harrowing period for her Jewish family as they flee persecution via Latvia Russia and Japan finally finding safe haven in Portland Oregon.

Among the frightening incidents that occur during the family's flight to safety is one amusing one. As their train pulls out of the station the family learns that the upcoming border is closed and they will be imprisoned. The author and her brother jump out of the moving train. "Mama mama we might be off the train but our clothes aren't. What are we going to wear?" the young Ilse asks. Just then the family spies their suitcases flying out of the train. Their fellow passengers had understood the situation and rescued their luggage.

As often happens when immigrants arrive in a new country their journey is really just beginning. The author struggles to find her place in the new world juggling the difficulties of family conflict and identity crisis as a Jewish foreigner. But shame is her worst enemy. "I was filled with the image of my fashion-ignorant mother my outrageous aunt and uncle and my unpredictable ill-tempered father" she writes. "But worst of all was the shame I felt for myself a shame born in me the day I stood in front of my class as Abernethy School shame that I felt at being called Elsie and Sally shame at my failure to appreciate a Frankenstein movie or learn to swim." Not until the very end of the book does the author find peace with herself when she attends the University of Berkeley.

This is Rene's first book and it is written in short pithy chapters from a child's point of view. The voice is convincing and captures the bewilderment of a child whose parents do not provide adequate information about the events shaping her life. One minor flaw in the book's design is that the font varies in size in a few places throughout the text. But the writing flows smoothly and draws the reader in with plenty of detailed scenes and dialogue. This book is appropriate for both young and adult readers illustrating a universal cultural and personal identity struggle. It was a winner in the Reader Views Awards Program and was selected as a finalist for several other awards. *Becoming Alice* provides a valuable glimpse into the post-World War II Jewish immigrant experience.

LUISE BOLLEBER (May 5, 2009)

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