

Managing Bubbie

Russel Lazega

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This biography honors the realities of hardship in the life of a Holocaust survivor while still drawing reasons for hope.

Russel Lazega's loving biography of his grandmother, *Managing Bubbie*, details Lea Winter's treacherous flight to freedom. This engrossing account of her journey through Belgium, France, and Spain in the 1940s, spliced with humorous scenes from the 1980s, pays tribute to the survivor-turned-Miami-Beach matriarch. World War II, whitefish, matchmaking, miracles, game shows, and grit fuse in a singular voice that brings history and memory to life.

Born in Poland, Lea left for Brussels as a young woman to work in a textile mill. By 1940, she was married with two daughters, and she and her family were forced to flee the Nazi invasion of Belgium. That event sets off a remarkable story of maternal love amid the deprivations of war. Chapters alternate between the family's months spent as refugees and interludes that feature Bubbie in her nineties.

Latter sections—written in the form of scenes for a comedy script—contain exchanges between Bubbie, the author, and their relatives. Frequently set against the background noise of popular television series that mark the era, including *Jeopardy!* and *The Dating Game*, the dialogue brims with misunderstandings, arguments, and peculiar antics. Levity underscores the Lazega clan's bonds despite occasional dark revelations, which include the death of one of Lea's daughters. With subtle nods to Neil Simon, the absurd intensity of Bubbie's reasoning captures a large-hearted personality who will “schlep” for miles to better the lives of those she loves.

When the writing turns back to the war in Europe, Lea's fearless nature takes center stage. Quick-thinking, resourceful, and faced with incredible luck when it comes to finding strangers who offer help at the right moment, Lea walks her children over the mountains to Spain and eventually reaches America. Scenes focus on the urgency of their circumstances, yet do so without drama. A particular talent for showing Lea as a mother who moves out of necessity—rather than mythologizing acts of heroism in hindsight—strikes an honest chord. The work skillfully balances struggle with moments of respite, resulting in a well-paced read that honors the reality of hardship while still drawing reasons for hope.

Through lucid, attentive lines, *Managing Bubbie* builds a powerful tribute to a woman who never surrenders even when odds seem impossible. A handout, officials turning a blind eye, shelter, directions, a word—each gift builds a chain toward the future, where the greatest blessing is a home filled with familiar faces, and a story is an act of deep remembrance.

KAREN RIGBY (May 13, 2016)

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