

The Crystal Beads: Lalka's Journey

Pat Black-Gould

Katya Royz, Illustrator

Purple Butterfly Press (Jun 14, 2022)

Hardcover \$18.99 (40pp)

978-1-955119-20-7

A Holocaust tale for young readers, The Crystal Beads is about the universal natures of survival, heroism, sacrifice, and compassion during wartime.

Set during World War II, Pat Black-Gould's picture book *The Crystal Beads* follows a Jewish girl whose mother hides her in a convent to save her life.

On Lalka's seventh birthday, her mother gives her a crystal rosary. Lalka is Jewish and doesn't understand what its beads are for, even when her mother begins to teach her the connected prayers. In exchange for her gift, Lalka's mother also asks her to surrender the Star of David necklace that her father gave her two years before.

Over the next few months, Lalka's Christian education continues, including through lessons from a sympathetic gentile neighbor. Then, one cold and snowy morning, Lalka's mother takes her to a nearby convent and entrusts her to the care of its mother superior. At the convent school, Lalka is given a uniform and takes religious classes with other girls. Her mother visits as often as she can before her visits stop altogether. Later, Nazi soldiers appear with Lalka's Star of David, accusing her of being Jewish. Lalka's knowledge of the rosary prayers becomes life-saving.

Lalka functions as an everychild in this informative story that's based in truth. She's archetypal, representing the many Jewish children who were separated from their families under terrifying circumstances. Other characters fill similar roles: there are gentiles who offer their Jewish neighbors sanctuary; there are Jewish parents who make heartbreaking choices, gambling to save their children's lives. And the book's back matter includes factual information and thought-provoking questions that further its function as an important educational tool.

Though the book is heavy on text for its young prospective audience, its prose is efficient and unadorned. However, it discusses people's emotions in somewhat flat terms. The facts of the Holocaust, and of those who helped Jewish people during it, are present, if without much dimension, and Lalka's story feels somewhat incomplete as a result. Still, the book's ending raises profound questions about the natures of evil and sin, shared via a child who's endured much. Its illustrations are haunting and poignant.

A historical tale for young readers, *The Crystal Beads* is about survival, heroism, sacrifice, and compassion, showing how these themes crossed religious boundaries in Eastern Europe during World War II.

RANDI HACKER (September 23, 2022)

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