

The True Adventures of Gidon Lev: Rascal, Holocaust Survivor, Optimist

Julie Gray

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The True Adventures of Gidon Lev is the compelling biography of a Holocaust survivor who attests that human beings are capable of both incredible evil and transcendent love.

Julie Gray's collaborative biography, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev*, is an inspiring account of a small boy who survived the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, and of the man he grew to be.

Gray, a convert to Judaism, had heard about the Holocaust through books and films, but had little personal knowledge of that "absolute nadir of humankind" until she moved to Israel and encountered many survivors. There, she met Lev, who was in mourning for his wife of forty years. Needing to keep his mind occupied, he decided to write his life story, and he asked Gray for help. Lev's recollections and extensive notes form the basis of this narrative, which also encompasses Gray's personal thoughts and observations.

Lev's firsthand account of Nazi horrors is powerful and disturbing. He was born in Czechoslovakia in 1935 and imprisoned in Theresienstadt from the ages of six to ten; Lev was, out of many thousands of child prisoners, one of only ninety-two who survived. Twenty-six members of his family were murdered by the Nazis. The confusing and fearful events of the Holocaust are seen through his eyes; he conveys "suffocating dread" in a succinct, poignant manner, and recalls, in gruesome detail, the destruction of the village of Lidice and the massacre of its gentile population. Hitler's mistake, the book argues, was to have filmed it all: the film, discovered by the Allies, made it impossible to hide or deny Nazi atrocities.

Gray's background information is interspersed with direct quotes from Lev, resulting in a lively, conversational text. The flow between its narrative and quotes is natural and smooth, as are its transitions between the past and present. Its unusual style makes Lev's presence and contributions active, and the affection between Lev and Gray is obvious in their playful banter and teasing. Crossed-out lines show where the two disagreed or made needed changes to the text, making the process of creation visible. Gray's growth and development can be seen as the pain Lev experienced becomes real to her; for Lev, growth came as he mustered courage to relive what he had held inside for so long, and his voice is spirited, optimistic, and passionate.

Lev moved to Israel in 1959, lived on a kibbutz, and served as a soldier in the Six-Day War. Facts about Israel's land and people, Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, suicide attacks, and attempts at peace activism are included, suggesting that the troubles and complexities of the area's past still linger today. The book's concise historical overview and appendix provide additional insight into the roots of the conflict and a region always on the brink of war. Clear, crisp black-and-white photographs reflect happy times in Lev's life.

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KRISTINE MORRIS (September 10, 2020)

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