

'Hell Had Opened': A Holocaust Survivor's Memoir

In reading Leah Cik Roth's *My Eyes Looking Back at Me*, one dominant theme that comes across is that of gratitude. This is a strange theme in a memoir of a holocaust survivor.

I got to meet Leah and hosted her in Israel, giving me a unique sense of her story and who she is. While eager to read her memoir, I didn't expect something so positive and powerful.

Leah's childhood reflections are not easy to get through, and it's clear that she had many challenges to overcome from a very young age. These shaped her life and were sad indeed, forcing her to grow up and become a survivor long before she was marked for death by the Nazis where she survived over and over again.

As sad as her story and the loss she endured is, it is imbued with gratitude for what she had. It's probable that her attitude when it was happening to her was not always so positive, but with the benefit of decades of hindsight and faith in God, there is a deep and positive message of gratitude that's pervasive.

There is also a sense of gratitude that she told her story at all, and that she was helped to do this, through a deep process called soul-writing by Menucha Meinstein who gave voice to Leah's decades of stories and experiences.

Leah's story is about more than her physical survival, it is a memoir of the survival and thriving of her spirit. Thus the subtitle, "insight into a survivor's soul."

The first part of the book recounts Leah's life before the war and holocaust in which she got caught up, and from which there

was no escape. Albeit peppered with challenges and sadness we would wish on nobody, it recounts a simple and even charming life of the Jews of Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s until hell opened on earth.

As a holocaust memoir, Leah shares many of the deepest pains and horrors which she endured. Bearing witness to Leah's story and those of other survivors is essential so that when Leah's generation is gone, and deniers are emboldened and have the audacity to say the holocaust never happened, good people will affirm it did.

Far too few stood up as righteous Gentiles when 6 million Jews were being shot, gassed, and burned. A new generation of righteous Gentiles must emerge in this generation to be sure what happened then is never forgotten, and that it will never happen again.

It's striking how there are virtually no photos from the first half of Leah's life and story, but of course not surprising. Having never lived in a *shtetl*—an Eastern European Jewish village—it's also a testament to Menucha Meinstein giving such vivid imagery to this era that's lost now, but through these pages one feels the places as if one had been there even if just for a moment.

The book's name aptly comes from an unexpected experience Leah had in seeing herself in a photo from when she was a concentration camp inmate where she sees herself then, looking at herself today, generations and thousands of miles past.

One of these experiences where Leah's life was literally saved from the hands of death is recounted vividly is when Leah, as a child herself, was saved from the gas chamber by the Nazis placing a higher priority on murdering a trainload of children that had just arrived at Auschwitz.

"A transport of children arrived during the night, and the Nazis set a higher priority on killing these innocents. It

haunts me to this day. I can still hear the chorus of screeching children from where we stood in the field outside. Their shrill primal screams faded into empty space as the poisonous gas sucked the life's breath from the lungs of these young martyrs. Very ... Very slowly ... Their voices faded. Within half an hour ... Silence. Hell had opened."

Having spent several precious hours with Leah in Israel, I had the experience to witness firsthand how she says that no matter where she is, she's always meeting people she knows. This takes place several times in her memoir, but I saw an occasion of it with her at Kibbutz Kfar Etzion, which she mentions briefly in the book, but about which I got the back story in person.

It's hard to imagine a holocaust memoir sharing qualities of a self-help book, but *My Eyes Looking Back at Me* does that. Leah recounts valuable lessons from her father which make her who she is today. Her motto, shaped by this, is "life must move forward no matter how painful it may have been. It is possible to create a better future and to triumph over evil if your desire is strong." Leah knows this all too well through her own life experiences. She is an authority.

"Step forward 38,620," she was ordered. Then the Nazi commander made an example of Leah to the other inmates. "He beat me savagely with a whip and he kicked me with his black boots. Writhing in pain, I fainted. Coming around I wondered, 'Am I still alive?'"

As Leah's memoir ends, it's apparent that there's more, but that reading this much has been a painful process. She shares how "when we began to write, I was not completely open. Some things were too shameful. Painful demons lurked over my shoulder yet I began to understand it was somehow healing to reveal the inside details. I had hidden for so long, even from myself."

Leah's story is a story of survival. Her fearless charge always to be better and move forward, "Life is short. Every day brings something new. Let's go further, time is short," could be the conclusion of a valedictory address in high school or college. (Here we are. We started off young and naive. We faced many hard tasks and challenges along the way. We learned from and overcame them. And now we won.)

This is fitting because Leah's story takes place during the season of her life when she should have been learning about academic subjects in school, not learning the hard way in which she was forced to do.

It's our job to read and recount Leah's story, and those of others who witnessed and experienced these horrors first hand, and to share these with the next generations. It may not make the best graduation gift, but as a gift for someone you love and want to excel in life and overcome all challenges, it may be the most *meaningful* graduation gift you can imagine.

Either way, *My Eyes Looking Back at Me* is required reading.

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for 's *Standing With Israel*. You can contact Jonathan at firstpersonisrael@.