

Sisterly Devotion

Two cousins reveal their mothers' long-kept story of childhood terror and unbreakable resilience during the Holocaust

BY MARYLYNN MILLER OKE



Pnina Bat Zvi

Margie Wolfe

The moment had come for **Pnina Bat Zvi** and **Margie Wolfe** to release an emotional legacy from family memory — into the collective consciences of children around the world.

In a poignant interview, Pnina and Margie explain that *The Promise* is a loving tribute to their mothers, Rachel and Toby. In a modern time filled with tension and turmoil, they feel this 'unpretty' picture book also serves as a still-needed reminder that as human beings we are all equally deserving of love, respect and compassion.

Pnina & Margie | Rachel & Toby

Rachel's daughter Pnina grew up in Israel. She entered the worlds of radio broadcasting and the military as a teenager. Pnina sent soldiers' regards over the airwaves before moving on to news reporting and documentaries. After giving birth

to twins at age 50, she now hosts a top-rated current affairs program in Israel.

Her cousin Margie, daughter to Toby, grew up in Toronto. She is an award-winning publisher, producing feminist-inspired social justice and human rights books for adults and young readers at Second Story Press, which she co-founded in 1980.

It seems they were ultimately destined to tell unforgettable stories.

Giving voice to whispers of memories

In *The Promise*, young Rachel and Toby were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp after their parents had been taken, then killed at Treblinka. The girls witnessed daily atrocities and became well aware of the unfathomable consequences if one misbehaved or became too sick to work.

"I started to hear about this story from my mom at a very young age," recalls Pnina. "But, I had it in bits and pieces. As I grew older, I learned the whole story. I wanted to tell it to young readers. Maybe they will feel what I felt when I wrote it, or when I heard it first."

Although Pnina repeatedly asked Rachel and Toby about writing their story, the sisters were very reluctant.

However, after both had passed away, Pnina said, "Margie, now the story is in our hands. Let's write it down.' It took me a year to convince her."

"I had to really convince myself that we could do something that would honour them," reveals Margie. "That was the most stressful for us."

Getting closer to the story

"I missed my mother so much," stated Pnina. "So, I think this was one way to get closer to her. It became very clear about how to write it, what she felt. That dialogue is there."

Pnina's initial draft was followed by many more. It proved difficult to edit down the text.

"It was easy to figure out what I would do because Toby was a very brave and rebellious person," describes Pnina. "My mother Rachel was calm, caring and a very strong woman."

Pnina remembers a scene from *The Promise* where Rachel picks up a secret tin of coins that accidentally fell from Toby's pocket while building a wall at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The precious tin was given to Toby by their father as her parents were being taken away by Nazi soldiers. At the time, her mother made Toby promise that the sisters would always stay together. **No matter what.**

"I worked on this for a long time," said Pnina. "Rachel is afraid she will not be able to keep the promise, that she is not as brave as Toby. I wanted to bring in the doubt. The protagonists are not flat. They have doubts and fears. They encourage each other."

Pnina feels the girls in the story had to acknowledge the absurd situation they were living in, in order to survive it. Margie also felt it was important that *The Promise* reflect Toby's relentless audacity and the ability to endure.

"Toby worked when she was being watched and she didn't work when she wasn't," recounts Margie. "She would sometimes get caught and be punished severely for it. Not obeying and not working when she was supposed to be, were important little victories for her."

Finding a way through the dark

As a professional publisher, Margie wrestled with how to write the challenging story while connecting to young readers in a sensitive way. She remembers how Rachel and Toby shared their stories.

"They told it as fact because sometimes remembering was hard," said Margie. "They were also telling it to children. They didn't want to fall apart in front of us. There are many stories that they never told."

At Second Story Press, Margie has published over 20 children's books related to the Holocaust, including *The Secret of Gabi's Dresser* and *Clara's War* by Kathy Kacer, *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine and *All About Anne* by Anne Frank House. She feels they demonstrate how to tell difficult stories to children. The goal is to marry important content with great storytelling.

While conducting a recent tour at schools, synagogues and libraries, Pnina and Margie asked young audiences why they should read a 79-year-old story.

"Sometimes the kids just put their hands up and they knew," said Margie. "So, we learn never to repeat again. We learn that history, so we understand today. That is most important because these stories tell us about the consequences of hate."

"This whole story goes to hate crime," states Pnina. "I believe that if we speak about hate crime, you have to teach it from a very young age."

Margie acknowledges this extreme form of hatred can start with bullying or name calling before escalating into something greater.

"It's not just about anti-Semitism. It's about racism, homophobia and all forms of intolerance and oppression in the world today that sadly, sadly, sadly people seem to feel emboldened to voice out loud. The story is not in a time capsule and has extreme relevance today."

Going forward, Margie says, "We should know better than when we start calling immigrants or refugees aliens or evil. Ours and other Second Story books will hopefully show kids that strangers should be welcomed, not sent away and reviled."

Finding compassion even if it hurts

Margie and Pnina discovered that children are clear about good and evil. They also want in some way to understand the fear and suffering endured by Rachel, Toby and the other girls

in Barrack 25. That's a good thing.

As a publisher, Margie is comfortable with upsetting young readers — for the right purpose.

"I don't care if they cry a little bit. The crying will not last long and then they will remember. Hopefully, the compassion will stay with them."

Making it surprisingly real

"It's not a pretty little book," states Margie. "Our illustrator, Isabelle Cardinal, was perfect. Her work was not easy. The match was right, and we are really pleased with the art."

When considering artwork for the book, the team had to overcome the fact that no pre-wartime photographs of their mothers existed, so they provided Isabelle with youthful photos of Pnina, and Margie's sister Helen, who most resembled the young Rachel and Toby.

"That was the way we had Isabelle work," explains Margie. "She combines photography with illustration. It's a surreal, real look. A story in Auschwitz is real, but to tell it, it feels surreal."

What happened to Rachel and Toby?

"They actually went on to another camp," reveals Margie. "They were in Bergen-Belsen where Anne Frank died. They were liberated, but Anne Frank was killed almost immediately when she arrived."

Freed by English and Canadian soldiers, Rachel and Toby alongside many others had nowhere to go. They stayed at the Displaced Persons Camp (DCP) at Bergen-Belsen, which



happened to be the location of a never-before-seen photo that Margie discovered several years ago.

"I was looking at photographs in the museum. I'm not tall and there was a photograph way above my head. I started jumping up trying to see it better and people, I'm sure, thought I was a lunatic. I recognized immediately that here is my aunt and mother."

Eventually, the girls married. At Rachel's insistence, she moved with her husband and Pnina's older sister home to Israel, where they faced poverty and near starvation. Margie was born in the DPC at Bergen-Belsen before she and her parents moved to Canada.

Over the years, Rachel and Toby would drop everything to visit each other until Toby's death in 1995. Margie and Pnina feel that if any light came out of their harrowing experience, it may be the unbreakable bond that Rachel and Toby shared throughout their lives.

At a recent presentation of their book, Margie and Pnina were amazed to see frail, elderly visitors pay their respects, including some of the girls from the story. Incredibly, an unfamiliar gentleman shared how Toby had hidden and saved him during the war.

"Their experience was a shared experience most of us will never understand," said Margie. "But hopefully we can learn from it."

Toby died in 1995, with Rachel by her side.

Rachel passed away in 2012. Toby's daughters were with her at the end.

Putting it Out There

Reflective of its unifying message, *The Promise* is available in many languages and is being distributed in different countries around the world.

"We're proud of that and we're so sad our mothers are not here to experience it," laments Pnina.

"There are some countries where they have no idea about the Holocaust," states Margie. "But, because of what's going on in the world today, young readers can empathize and connect to familial love and devotion."

This story ends. The legacy doesn't.

After receiving their first starred review in *Kirkus*, Margie felt they had completed their job well and could finally exhale. As for their mothers' other stories, they will stay securely within the family.

"It's done," exclaims Pnina. "It was very difficult for me, writing and crying."

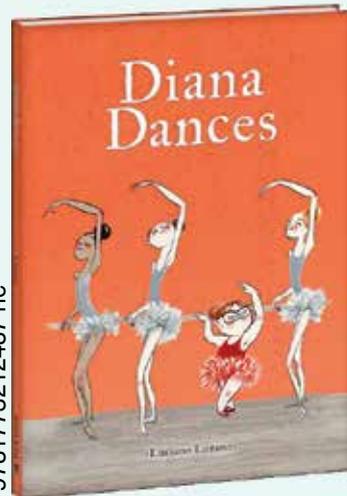
"The point was to honour the women," said Margie. "It was a story that could and should be told."

Margie and Pnina think that their mothers would be very pleased with their efforts and the book itself.

Poetically, just like the photo found at Bergen-Belsen, the cousins "like to think their mothers are smiling down on them." 🕯️

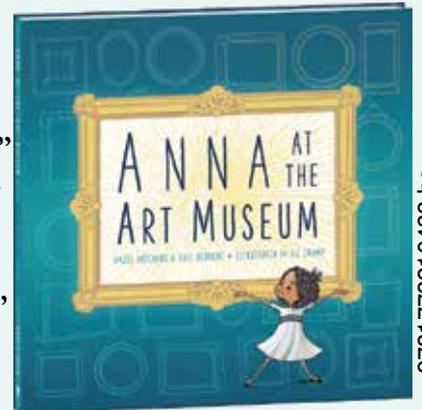
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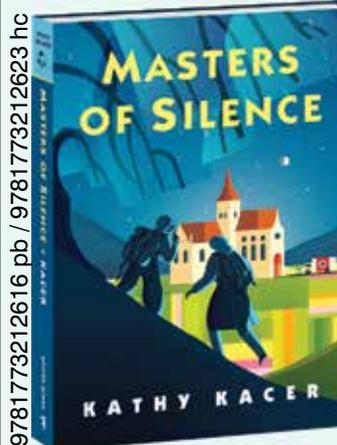
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