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Hello, America



Synopsis

The year is 1951 and eighteen-year-old Elli and her mother arrive in New York City. Finally they can leave behind bitter Holocaust memories and become real Americans! From office filing all day, to the challenge of night school, to interpreting the intentions of Alex, a handsome and persistent doctor, Elli soon finds learning English is only half as hard as "making it" in this new world. Against a backdrop of soda shops, skyscrapers, and subways, acclaimed author Livia Bitton-Jackson fuses old-world tradition and modern dreams, in this vivid kaleidoscope of immigrant America.

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Customer Reviews

Livia Bitton-Jackson continues the story of her life after Auschwitz in "Hello, America," the third installment of the trilogy she began with the powerful "I Have Lived a Thousand Years." The year is 1951 and the narrator, whom everyone calls Elli, is ecstatic when she and her mother sail into New York Harbor. Elli wonders, "America, will you be my home? Will you embrace me as a daughter yearning to belong, an equal among equals....?" Although she never attended high school, she yearns to go to college and become a teacher. She also eagerly anticipates a long-awaited reunion

with her beloved older brother, Bubi, whom she has not seen in four years. Elli has painful memories of the past. She recalls with an ache in her heart the last glimpse that she had of Papa in the old country when he was taken away by the authorities, never to be seen again. She cannot forget the harrowing years that she and her mother spent in Auschwitz and in the DP camps. However, her troubles do not end in America. Bitton-Jackson recounts the difficulty she has dealing with a frosty female representative of HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, as well as an employer who tries to take advantage of her. On the plus side, Papa's brother, Uncle Abish and his wife, Aunt Lilly, give Elli and her mother a warm American welcome. When she first arrives in New York, Elli is a greenhorn with an uncertain command of English. She even believed the ship's captain who transported her to America when he jokingly told her that she would need a passport to cross the Brooklyn Bridge. To her, America is a puzzling and overwhelming place, and she is particularly appalled by the conspicuous consumption and waste that she sees all around her.

This book goes into territory very very few Shoah memoirists have--what the person's experience was like after leaving Europe and arriving in America. I'm glad Mrs. Bitton-Jackson decided to make her memoirs a trilogy, covering all of the important years and events of her adolescence and early years as an adult--the Shoah, the experience of going home after liberation and then beginning the long slow process of leaving home once again, this time of their own choosing, and finally what it was like when she and her mother joined her brother and some other relatives in America. Too many Shoah memoirs never go this far. Elli has long dreamt about what America would be like, and finds that, while in many ways it really is the land of her dreams and fantasies, it also has a side she never knew existed. She and her mother begin finding out that America is not like Europe, that you can't just leave a basket of groceries unattended on the street while you're in another shop, that you're not supposed to greet anyone on the subway, that it's dangerous to hitch a ride, that they are now expected to keep their tragic pasts to themselves, that people in America throw things away and buy replacements instead of repairing them, and that people just don't want to hear about what they went through or that they were in the camps. The rabbi-director of the school Elli eventually is allowed to teach at has some words with her on one occasion because she told her students the truth about the number on her arm (in age-appropriate language) instead of saying that it was her phone number.

HELLO AMERICA by Livia Bitton-Jackson is the sequel to I HAVE LIVED A THOUSAND YEARS: GROWING UP IN THE HOLOCAUST. HELLO, AMERICA begins right where I HAVE LIVED A

THOUSAND YEARS left off...with her and her mother standing on the ship seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time. The book shares her experiences (good and bad) of her new life in America. Of course, she is surrounded by an unfamiliar and seemingly strange culture and language. As she learns English (and the culture), she begins to feel more and more at home in America although life is not always easy. She finds that most Americans just are not interested in hearing about the Holocaust or recognizing her pain and anguish. In fact, some Jewish-Americans seem not to care about the experiences of those in the holocaust. This is what she finds so unbelievable. The book shares her experiences working, shopping, dating, and learning the culture--for example, she learns that the streets are not always a safe place--as well as her emotional experiences as she still deals with the aftermath of surviving the Holocaust while other family members and friends did not. Probably the most memorable scene of HELLO, AMERICA is when she is sharing her experiences as a first grade teacher in a Hebrew school. The principal--a rabbi--calls her into his office to discipline her for daring to mention the fact that she was in a concentration camp. She explains that the child saw the number tattooed on her arm and asked where it came from. He tells her that she should have lied and said that the number was her telephone number. She is outraged, offended, and shocked..."In my pain and bitterness I wonder, do all Americans, Jews and Gentiles who were untouched by our tragedy and don't even want to hear about it, feel like him?

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