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Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, Volume 58, Number 4, 2020, pp. 86-88 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Yellow Hats as Yellow Stars

by GEORGIA KARANTONA AND TASOULA TSILIMENI

The visualization of the horrific massacre scenes of the Holocaust is either difficult or impossible for someone to imagine. In Greece, only a few authors and illustrators of children's literature have engaged in dealing with the Holocaust. A remarkable exception is the picturebook *Yellow Hats*, written and illustrated by Kelly Matathia-Kovo. As a second-generation survivor, the writer and illustrator presents her own family story in a way that is accessible to children and to everyone who wants to learn about a true Holocaust story. The first word of the beginning of the book, *remember*, indicates that the story is based on true events, declaring that the writer is a member of the Jewish Society.

A glance at the cover of the book reminds one of nothing regarding the Holocaust, the Jews, or World War II. Only the yellow-drawn word *Hats* in the title and the word *yellow* itself can be associated with the yellow stars. The story describes the survival of a Jewish family from *therio*, the Greek

word for *beast*, during WWII. Multiple meanings, various symbolisms, narration that emulates the illustrations, and a happy ending compose an appealing story, which enables the reader to think deeper and concentrate on the fear and despair of the dark ages of the Third Reich.

The heroes of this book are a Jewish family who, absurdly, are not portrayed as humans but as animals—sheep. Orwell's famous representation technique seems more powerful than ever in this children's picturebook, as it

can offer latent symbolisms to the reader in an easy and direct way.

Mr. and Mrs. Be, with their seven sheep, used to live in harmony with the other animals on the green farm. Suddenly, there are rumors that wild beasts are looking for the sheep. An adventure is beginning for the sheep family as the rumors come true. The writer's skillfully used imagination makes the reader feel familiar with the story. The number seven she craftily presents was used in a famous Grimm's fairy tale, "The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats." In general, illustrations seem to follow a cycle: from colorful at the beginning, when the family lives in harmony before the war, to black and gray tones when the Nazi danger is emerging, and back to colorful again at the end, highlighting their safety and security after the Allies win and the war is ended.

Even though recognizable Nazi symbols such as the swastika, the Nazi salute, or the Nazi insignia are totally missing from illustrations, the yel-



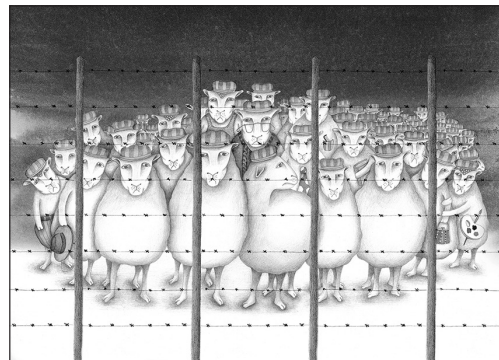
low striped hats refer to yellow stars that all Jews were obliged to wear as a symbol of discrimination. On the visual level, perpetrators are unseen and covered carefully behind the dark sky, which makes the sheep feel and live in fear and anguish. In two spreads, though, the black sky and the gray-tone illustration compose a scene of fear and dread, with the airplanes flying threateningly in the sky, releasing their bombs. Nazis, called wild beasts, intended to imprison the sheep “in dark places.” Obviously, the dark place is either the ghetto where the Nazis transferred the Jews or a concentration camp, as the illustration with the sheep behind a barbed-wire fence depicts.

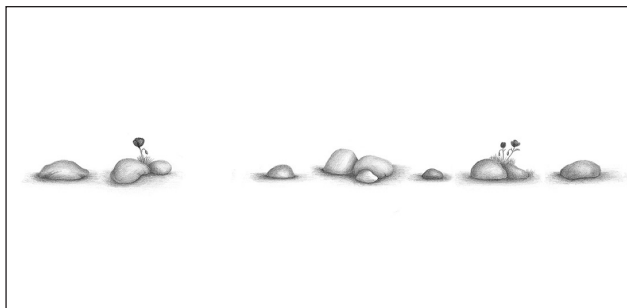
In one spread, the circumstances under which the sheep are forced to live constantly are described as simply as possible. Sheep could neither go to their work anymore nor to school nor out in the range. They could not play with their friends, and they are obliged to wear yellow hats instead of the common yellow stars. These obligations are noticeably referred to in the Nuremberg Laws as constituting the beginning of the end of the Jews’ freedom and as showing the increasing radicalization of policies toward the Jews, which culminated in massive murders.

While Jews are symbolized as sheep, the people who risked their lives to protect and save them from Nazi persecution are symbolized as the rabbit, the cockerel, and the mouse. It is this remarkable choice of the rescuers that reminds us of the “Righteous Among the Nations,” non-Jewish people, who took great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust (Yad Vashem). Rescue took many forms and the Righteous came from different nations, religions, and walks of life. In *Yellow Hats*, the sheep find shelter in a small cabin on the mountain at a time when hostility and indifference are prevailing. Rescuers’ actions were extraordinary as they did not act in a passive manner by enjoying the security and comfort their houses could offer. As is pointed out, all of them, with no exceptions, kept their secret safe, without revealing it to the Nazis.

This story has a happy ending as the family is safe and secure, thanks to their friends’ altruistic efforts. The rabbit, the cockerel, and the mouse proved to be faithful friends who risked their lives to save the family. The story decries intensely those who were blind to the deportation of, persecution of, and discrimination against the Jews in Greece and in other countries. It is the adult reader again who can realize the secret meanings, and only he or she can manage to explain it to the younger audience.

The book is an anthem of life, resilience, and fortitude as the sheep heroes make their lives again, finding ways to overcome the fear, the darkness, and the traumatic experience, despite their sufferings. The book indirectly addresses the strength that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity. Holocaust survivors considered themselves resilient and felt they were transcendent or had engaged in behaviors that helped them grow and change over the years since the Holocaust. This included leaving a legacy and contributing to the community.





In the next-to-last spread, the author refers to modern anti-Semitism, indicating that history is repeated and all of us should stay alert as “the wild beasts...are still up on the mountains.” In the last spread, a row of stones is depicted, referring to all those who were lost but never forgotten. Red poppies seem to flower through the stones as the most well-known symbol of remembrance.

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