



Sara's Children : The Destruction of Chmielnik

Suzan Esther Hagstrom

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Full of love, joy and hope, Nathan Garfinkel's wedding portrait captures one of life's turning points. The occasion, however, was more momentous than anyone could ever imagine. Only six years earlier Nathan and his sisters, who surround him in the photograph, were reduced to living skeletons, victims of anti-Semitism that raged out of control during World War II. Nazi Germany and its sympathizers brutally murdered more than 6 million Jews across Europe, wiping out entire families and, in some cases, villages. Through sheer luck and by helping each other, the Garfinkels overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to evade death. Sara's Children records how the five siblings survived slave labor, starvation, beatings, typhus, exposure, and fatigue. The starkly written narrative relies heavily on the Garfinkels' own words and interviews with other survivors from their hometown of Chmielnik, Poland. The nonfiction work begins with what they lost: loving parents, an extended family, loyal friends, and a simple, but vibrant, lifestyle. Nonetheless, disturbing signs of anti-Semitism mar their happy childhood. Violence and hatred escalate as Germany razes Poland and sweeps Europe. Each chapter explodes with details of the Garfinkels' terrible ordeal. More than just an individual's memoir, Sara's Children expresses a community's destruction via heartbreaking testimonials from numerous other Holocaust survivors. Written documents from Germany, photographs from the late 1940s, and maps reinforce and verify their account. Places like Czestochowa, Kielce, and Skarzysko-Kamienna, where the Garfinkels were imprisoned and exploited, may not be as familiar to readers as Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, but they were just as deadly. With its vivid descriptions of lesser-known camps, Sara's Children sheds more light on Nazi Germany's vast network of evil. The Garfinkels provide a rare, uplifting footnote to an era of incomprehensible cruelty and unprecedented genocide. While their experience is rooted in the Holocaust, their story of rising above degradation and despair has universal appeal.

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