

Blumenthal, Scott E. *Kiss, The*. Tucson: Loose Leaves Publishing, LLC, 2013. 303 pp. \$18.95. (9781624320088). PB. Gr. 11+.

Recently, Holocaust literature appears to be trending in a new direction. Rather than stories portraying characters as victims of an overwhelming Nazi machine, authors are showing more resistance, more fight, on the part of whoever is being harassed. The reader sees people fighting back – Jew and Gentile - with whatever means available, rather than being led – like sheep – to the slaughter.

In the case of *The Kiss*, the weapon of choice is music. Music to encourage some to go beyond themselves; music that frustrates those in power; music that soothes those who cannot fight back; music that empowers those who can. Music such as no one has ever heard before or since that time. Music provided by a very special group of Klezmer players from the town of Rovner, Ukraine.

Beginning as it does with interviews with scholars and witnesses, the sense that the Rovner Klezmerim was a real band and Aron Beckman its extraordinary leader and potential Messiah, does not seem far from the truth. Who is to say that a highly gifted group of musicians did not play all over Eastern Europe during those dastardly days, losing their lives with many others in a forest outside of Rovno? 6 Million Jews and more than 5 Million others were murdered by the Nazis and their accomplices—almost 12 Million stories left untold. Perhaps the author of this book was guided by one of those wandering souls. Plus each chapter opens with a short, historically accurate account of the events taking place in Germany and the world at that moment in time. Against these snapshots, the story of Aron and his life and that of his friends is intimately described from July 1930-November 1941.

Whatever the origination of the story, it is unforgettable. Aron Beckman, the boy who plays the harp (King David's Harp, no less, or so the legend goes!) and his two equally talented musician friends—Benjamin, the violinist, and Reuven, the flautist—meet at music school and form an almost instant dislike for each other. But this is not about friendship, it is about the music, and once they hear each other play, there is no question they will play together forever and be friends for a lifetime. Their music is indescribable, and almost immediately the legends begin: Their music takes you to a place of unadulterated happiness. Their music evokes the past and assists you in reconciling with estranged loved ones. Their music... Their music... Even the perpetrators of the most heinous horrors could not resist their music's effect.

It is Aron the legends focus on, and Aron the Nazis search for as the band's reputation grows to mythic proportion. It is Aron's life story that we follow, as we read this compelling story.

This is a work of Holocaust fiction. Do not, therefore, expect a happy ending. However, understanding what the ending will be, and all the horror and sadness along the way, there remains the ultimate victory. Aron lived on in his children and grandchildren. The Jewish people live. Hitler (*y'mach sh'mo*) is dead.

Captivating, spellbinding, each sentence amazingly well constructed, it is difficult to stop reading as the story flows seamlessly from one extraordinary incident to another. The web is vast yet all-encompassing and in the end, when we discover who the book's author truly is and where the source material for the story came from, we are shocked, amazed and elated—but, perhaps, not terribly surprised? It all fits together so perfectly. The reader will immediately want to discuss this novel with a friend. The only frustration is that there is no discussion guide included in the back of the book.

Highly recommended for all synagogue libraries with a Holocaust section. Very appropriate for mature high school students.

Kathy Bloomfield, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee and forwordsbooks.com, Washington, DC