

JASMYNE KASSAM'S REVIEW
of *MALKA* by MIRJAM PRESSELER

Malka tells the story of a Jewish family in Poland during the Second World War when Poland was occupied by the Germans. This family is made up of Malka, whom this book is named for, a carefree seven year old girl, her sister Minna who is sixteen and moody, and their mother Hannah who is a doctor. When the Nazis begin to round up the Jewish people in their town, Hannah thinks that she is safe because some of the German officers are her patients and her friends. However, when one officer tells her to flee the country immediately she heeds his warning and leaves the town with her daughters that day. They try to cross into Hungary, a place where they hope Jews can live safely but escape proves to be much harder than they thought with bleeding feet, homesickness and horrendous weather. They make it over the border into Hungary but then little Malka falls ill. Left behind to be brought along later, she is deported back to Poland and struggles to survive on her own. What she doesn't know is that miles away a broken-hearted mother is searching for her lost little girl.

This was a very dense book. If you could eat books then this one would be a rich slab of rye bread crammed with seeds. I like this writing style because you must chew the words slowly and well in order to absorb all the nutrients. It makes you really think about what is going on in that part of the book. However, one thing I did not like was the sudden narrator change. One minute Malka was the narrator, telling her story and then without any warning Hannah would become the narrator. Although I understand why the author chose to do this I found this quite annoying as it stopped me from getting fully into that part of the story.

I enjoyed the descriptive nature of the book. I was able to picture everything in my head except Malka's hair. I could picture her hair as being brown or dirty blonde, but never golden. I believe this is because the stereotypical image of a Jew would not have golden hair. There was some very poignant imagery in this book which helped to convey the emotion. The scene that stuck in my head the most was when Malka sees the dead boy in the street. You can almost feel her horror. When Hannah realises that Malka is lost you can feel her dread and during the time Malka spends with Teresa, you can sense the love and tranquillity that Teresa generates.

I like the character development in this book. The characters are three-dimensional, not stereotypical which makes them more true to life. All the characters change throughout the course of the book, but it is Malka's transformation which is the most startling. In less than a year she changes from a normal young girl into a frightened street waif who lives from meal to meal. No child should have to face the horrors that Malka did.

This book was not just about Malka, it was also about Hannah who had to make many decisions throughout the course of the book. I feel that she should have done some things differently, but not everything. If she had not been so distracted and wrapped up in her own past, then I think that she would have had better judgement. I also think that she was not really aware of the risks involved herself. Her profession made her feel invincible and provided the armour behind which she could hide. The best thing of course would have been to flee Poland sooner. It would also have been better if she had told her daughters why they were going to Hungary because if they knew that it was a life or death situation then they would most likely quit whining and cooperate. When Hannah decided to leave Malka behind and go on with Minna, I don't think that she really had much of a choice. Her only other real option would have been for them all to stay behind in which case they could have all been found by the police and sent to a concentration camp. At least on her own Malka could be mistaken for an Aryan child.

Even though the decision to leave Malka behind gave them all the best chance of survival, it also had devastating consequences. Being abandoned like that, whilst not intentional, resulted in her relationship with her mother being ruined, and having to face the horrors of survival stripped her of her childish innocence. The ending made me especially sad when she finally sees her mother again and all she says is "I want Teresa".

Reading this book taught me a lot about the holocaust from the Polish perspective and what makes it more real is that Malka is a real person. It adds a whole different dimension to the book when you know you are reading about a real person, not just a fictional character. It makes you feel more strongly about what is happening in the book. I would rate this book 9/10.