

## **An Interview with Aranka Siegal**

### **Why is the main character named Piri and not Aranka?**

I wasn't sure where the book would go and I wasn't ready to reveal my past to my friends and my children.

I changed only two names -- my sister Violet's, to Iboya, and mine -- and mine was not really fiction. Babi, my grandmother, called me by an endearment of my Yiddish name, Pearl -- Pirilla -- and the children in her village heard it as Piri, so I was called by that name in my grandmother's village.

### **In the photograph on the cover of *Goat*, you seem to be looking out into the distance. Do you remember what you were looking at?**

This is one of the few family photographs that survived the war, and I like it because it shows an average family -- not a family shunned by society or one outside the law. I think I was just shielding my eyes from the sun. Some people have said it was a prophecy -- that I'm looking into the future. But I think I'm simply a little girl shielding my eyes from the sun.

### **There are letters from Etu and your American relatives in *Grace*. Are they the actual letters or recollections?**

Violet and I received letters from our sister and from relatives in America after we arrived in Sweden, and they were very precious to us. For the book, I translated them, and I tried to be as close to what they said as I could be.

### **In *Grace*, you quote a letter from Etu in which she tells you not to return home to Beregszász. "It is no longer our house." [p. 74] In all these years since the war, have you returned to your childhood home? Have you gone back to Sweden?**

No, I never went back. Etu had a horrific experience when she went back. There were strangers living in our home, and they wouldn't let her in. She had to call on a neighbor to act as a witness, to say that it was her home. The inside of our home was destroyed; the doors had been used for firewood. The whole city was completely different. The only thing she salvaged was the photograph that appears on the cover

of *Goat* and a couple of others. After the war, Violet and I realized that the Hungarian people were our enemies -- they had cooperated with Hitler. Their brutality and cruelty were unexpected.

I did go back to Sweden -- I dedicated *Grace* to the people of Sweden. The Swedish family I lived with gave me a second chance to become part of a family. I did go back to visit them. I still have two brothers left -- I call them brothers and they refer to me as "little sister" -- that's how much we feel like family.

### **On page 213 of *Grace*, you wrote, "I had always been an optimist, but I was starting to believe that everything was transitory. I made a vow that in the future I would not hold back my affection from people I cared about. I had never stopped regretting my failure to use those final hours in the freight car to tell Mother how very much I loved her." How well have you lived up to this promise you made to yourself?**

I have definitely kept my promise about showing my feelings of affection and love. I've learned to be careful about not hurting anybody's feelings -- I try to be deservedly complimentary by finding something good in everyone I meet. I tell people how much they mean to me. I don't hold back hugs and kisses. It's important to show affection.

**In this post-9/11 world, we are all victims of terror. We are afraid of things we hear about, things we imagine. Many young people suffer sleepless nights or nightmares. Before the ghetto, did you feel terror? How did the feelings change while you were in the ghetto and in the camps, and later, after the liberation?**

At age nine the fear had started. I overheard from Babi that Jews in Poland were being rounded up and taken to nobody-knew-where, and I heard the name Hitler. Then, when I was able to return to my home in Beregszász, everything had changed. My father was in the army. The city was warlike, people were uneasy; they were not as open or as friendly as before.

The next trauma was that I could no longer go to school. I was humiliated in front of my Christian friends by the schoolteacher, who said that Jewish children were no longer permitted to go to school. Walking home, I knew that I was innocent of any wrongdoing, but I felt like an outcast. I was grateful to find my mother in our warm kitchen waiting to comfort me.

When we were taken from our home and put into the ghetto, in the open barracks of the brick factory with dirt floors to sleep on, with hardly any food or water, and an exposed latrine, I didn't think things could get any worse. But upon our arrival at Auschwitz, Violet and I were separated from Mother and my little brother and sister. That was the scariest of all. In Auschwitz we lived in constant fear of the selections, never knowing whether we would be chosen for work or the gas chamber -- and watching the endless billowing of smoke and flames from the chimneys! That's where I suffered my worst nightmares.

The most painful part of it was that nobody cared. Nobody did anything to stop the trains. It made us lose faith in humanity and in God.

9/11 was different -- there was unity and we showed that we cared. The world did learn. Everybody was sympathetic to the victims and their families, and we now have tribunals to try crimes against humanity.

My mission, in telling my story, is so that if a child sees prejudice in the classroom, she steps in and asks, "What if that were you?"

My feelings after the liberation are described in *Grace* -- it was not elation. I came to realize that I had been in total denial that my mother had been taken to the crematorium. This was my only hope for survival: that we would go home. That foolish dream kept me going. If I had really known and accepted that my home and my family were gone, I would have perished like my friend Judi. Liberation brought the truth. When the camp was first liberated, I saw the men from the men's camp come looking for their mothers, wives, and sisters -- and they looked worse than we did! I saw one couple reunite, and the woman was upset that the man didn't recognize her, but she said, "It's all right, as long as we are together." With liberation came the realization that life would never be the same again. It took a long time to become a teenager again. I had to learn to live again, to trust again. It was not a happy ending.

**When you talk to young people about your experiences, how do you convey to them the enormity of the Holocaust?**

It's impossible -- nobody could do it justice. The one who came closest was Viktor Frankl -- he was a psychiatrist who experienced Auschwitz. He saw things through professional eyes and could analyze what was happening. He wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, which has become one of my favorite books. It has helped me sort things out. It's a profound book for mature readers.