



In Our Hearts We Were Giants: The Remarkable Story of the Lilliput Troupe, a Dwarf Family's Survival of the Holocaust

Yehuda Koren, Eilat Negev

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This remarkable, never-before-told account of the Ovitz family, seven of whose ten members were dwarfs, bears witness to the best and worst of humanity and to the terrible irony of the Ovitze's fate: being burdened with dwarfism helped them endure the Holocaust. Through dogged research and interviews with Perla, the youngest Ovitz daughter and last surviving sibling, and other relatives, authors Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev weave the tale of a beloved and successful family of performers who were popular entertainers in Central Europe until the Nazis deported them to Auschwitz in May 1944. Descending from the transport train into the hell of the concentration camp, the Ovitz family—known widely as the Lilliput Troupe—was separated from other Jewish victims. When Dr. Josef Mengele was then notified of their arrival, he assigned them to sequestered quarters. His horrific "research" on twins and other genetically unique individuals already under way, Mengele had special plans for the Ovitze. The authors chronicle Mengele's loathsome experiments upon the family members, the disturbing fondness he developed for these small people, and their interminable will to make it out alive. Dozens of telling photographs are included in this horrifying yet remarkable tale of survival.

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From Reader Review In Our Hearts We Were Giants: The Remarkable Story of the Lilliput Troupe, a Dwarf Family's Survival of the Holocaust for online ebook

Greta is Erikasbuddy says

I've been wanting to read this book for quite a while after seeing the documentary on The Smithsonian Channel.

(documentary is on youtube at time of review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IWXC...>)

You follow a family of Jewish 7 dwarfs from Transylvania. They are a part of an acting troupe. They are the richest family in their town.

They are also extremely interesting to Dr. Josef Mengele.

You follow the family as they are taken away from their home. Sent to live in a ghetto. And then transferred to Auschwitz where they experience the tortures of the Nazis.

Not only do you follow their lives before WWII but also after. Everything is told and their lives are amazing.

I recommend this to anyone who is interested in this time period.

Debbie Estenes says

They were giants ! The book appears to be brutally honest even when you get the feeling it was something the group would have preferred to take to the grave. Their were times in the book, I had to put it down..... Nothing during the holocaust was easy and even though this family appeared to have it easier than most, they too suffered..... It was a miracle they survived through what they endured..... I recommend reading this book.

Marty says

So sad. I usually can't bear to read Holocaust related stories. This was very moving.

Coolcat says

OK book. I expected more emotion. It was getting there and when the war ended, the book took a turn and became very dry. I missed the connection of title to the book's contents. I don't recommend unless you are doing research on the Holocaust.

Paula Lambert says

I picked this up at a library sale because of its interesting title and subject matter, thinking it would likely connect to a sort of sub-interest I have in circus history. It does not, first of all, relate to that at all, as the Orvitz family, whose story is told here, were adamantly NOT circus or "freak show" performers (there was a rising popularity of "lilliputian-themed" shows of all kinds around the time they rose to popularity in their native Romania). This is a WONDERFUL book that kept my attention rapt; I read it in one day. That's over 260 pages, no small feat, really, and due partly to my ability to read quickly, but also because I became so anxious to get to their survival. The book is divided into roughly three sections: the family's history (and history of dwarfism in that part of Romania), which is fascinating on its own; the family's endurance of the holocaust, having been "saved" by no less than Josef Mengele himself, and then the family's difficult reintegration back into society after their release from Auschwitz. The second part is what kept me reading determinedly, as I knew from the title--no spoilers here--that the family would survive, and I was anxious to get to some kind of relief and resolution. Truly, "luck" becomes a very relative term; the family had an extraordinary amount of luck their entire lives, largely because of their determination to stay so closely together as a family. But their lives were spared (they were in fact the only family unit to survive intact at the camps) only because of Mengele's twisted desire to study them. What they survived was horrific experimentation on top of witnessing the horrors amassing all around them. Still, these authors balance well, I think, their research and story-telling, leaving this truly a story of hope and wonder. They are very respectful of the Orvitz's family history, while including occasionally conflicting reports from others who knew them: neighbors, fellow survivors, etc.

It's hard not to find one's self fascinated and delighted by details of the tiny instruments specially made for them, their carefully constructed costumes, the wooden stools they must carry with them everywhere to be able to reach or climb onto things, etc., yet, again, the authors are very respectful of what was ultimately a handicapping condition, one quite difficult for both the small and normal-sized (ultimately, caregiving) family members to deal with. No pity here, either, as this is a family who worked extremely hard, and who were determined to see themselves as nothing other than true artists. That part of their story is one of the most important lessons of the story overall: that artists must first and foremost take themselves and their craft quite seriously, and then work with diligence that others will see them that way, too. Other reviews here focus on this as holocaust literature, and it is, but I think it something lovely and special that anyone considering themselves an artist might take to heart as well. That part of the book is important and should not be overlooked.

Jenna Leigh says

First of all, let me be clear: the story in and of itself is horrifying, and absolutely worthy of being told; however, the writing of this particular book is, frankly, just poorly done.

I was really looking forward to reading this book. I have read many, many books on WWII and the Holocaust, and I thought this would be a great way to learn about a different perspective during the war. And then I started reading it. For about the first half of the book it's interesting, and then past that, for some reason, it just gets redundant and monotonous. As it recounts what happened after the war, it becomes almost like a dull list of people and places that the family met/travelled to. I'm can't even remember if I finished this

book or not... I think I at least skipped some of the end, because the last chapters just weren't really adding anything to the story.

In the end, I'm glad I read it. As I said, the story is worth hearing, and it taught me about Dr. Joseph Mengele, who I actually knew nothing about before starting this book. However, I was disappointed in the writing, and the extreme emotion of the story just didn't come across because of that.

J.M. says

I caught a special on TV once about Perla Ovitz, one of the little people in the Ovitz family whose dwarfism caught the attention of Josef Mengele and saved them from being killed at Auschwitz. This book is an excellent historical look at the life of the Hungarian Ovitz clan and their lives before and after the war.

If anything, I would've liked a bit more on the genetics of dwarfism, but I understand that isn't the focus of the book. Though the pain they endured at Auschwitz wasn't glossed over in the text, it also wasn't too explicit, and won't turn off the majority of readers.

This was a very interesting chapter in Holocaust history and I'm very glad I read it. I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in learning more about the Shoah and its impact on the conquered people beyond Germany's borders.

Becky says

I saw the documentary about the Ovitz family and I had to find out more about them. They were obviously very talented artists. I have read a few holocaust memoirs, and I had no idea that the survivors had such a hard time finding a place to live after liberation. That is so shocking and appalling to me those people lost everything and want to start over. The Ovitz's had a great career and came up with many fresh ideas. They genuinely enjoyed entertaining people. Their experience at Auschwitz is tragic yet inspiring. They never gave up on being positive. Somehow some of them were grateful to Mengele, which I don't think I could be. But if they weren't dwarves they wouldn't have survived, they peaked his interest in finding the comparison between normal sized people and dwarfs.

Petra says

Bij het lezen van de achterflap van dit boek werd ik geïntrigeerd. Een klein gebleven familie, of dwergen als je ze zo wilt noemen, wordt geselecteerd door Mengele en overleefd op die manier Auschwitz... Dat moet wel een interessant verhaal zijn. Op de een of andere manier verwachtte ik dat het in roman verhaal verteld zou worden. Het is meer een historisch document wat me als buitenstaander van het verhaal liet voelen. Je voelt je niet betrokken.

Het verhaal is nog steeds intrigerend. De familie wordt pas later in de oorlog naar Auschwitz vervoerd en daar aangekomen worden ze door Mengele geselecteerd. Ze overtuigen hem er van dat vrienden van hun ook familie zijn. En juist omdat er een aantal leden van de familie groot zijn hoopt Mengele het geheim van dwerggroei te ontdekken. Het lukt hem natuurlijk niet. Het verhaal vertelt verder dan alleen de jaren in de

oorlog. De reis naar Israël en hoe men daar overleefd.

Het historische verslag is ontstaan door meerdere betrokkenen/ooggetuigen te interviewen verschillende bronnen te lezen. Dit zorgt voor veel verschillende verhalen uit de oorlog, verhalen die elkaar ook vaak tegenspreken. De een vertelt dat de dwergen altijd wat trots door het kamp liepen met hun make-up en mooie kleding en dat ze Mengele aanbaden. De leden van de familie vertellen dat ze bang waren voor Mengele maar natuurlijk geen keus hadden. Het mooiste vond ik dat iemand vertelde dat als de dwergen konden overleven in Auschwitz dat dat haar wat meer vertrouwen gaf.

Het laatste hoofdstuk wat vanuit de schrijvers wordt verteld trok me veel meer. Dat laat zien hoe groot de invloed van schrijfstijl is. Je leeft toch echt meer mee. De beschrijving van het kamp nu als bezienswaardigheid klinkt eigenlijk verschrikkelijk en misschien wel wat respectloos. Wie wil er nou een ansichtkaart uit Auschwitz? Maar goed. Een verschrikkelijk verhaal is met respect opgeschreven, maar een andere schrijfstijl had me meer getrokken.

Becky says

The story of the Ovitz family's devotion to one other and to their religion is by turns heartwarming and heartbreakng. By now, many of us have read books, seen movies, and heard stories about extraordinary survival won through that extraordinary horror, the Holocaust. This book stands with the best of those stories because of its uniqueness -- seven of the 10 Ovitze were dwarfs, and therefore the entire family became the special "pets" of the dreaded Dr. Mengele.

The writing is hardly slick or seamless, but it gets the job done in a more than satisfactory manner. The text seems to speak English with an accent, and while that can be a tad distracting at times, it confers that much more veracity upon the story of the Ovitze.

The resourcefulness, dedication, and intelligence of the Ovitz dwarfs enables the reader to see them as much more than medical curiosities. Not only are they real people, they're very special people. Frankly, people of this caliber would be worth writing a book about even if they were of normal stature. Dwarfism aside, the story of the Ovitze is that of a loving, close-knit, traditional family of a type that seems sadly alien to many of us today.

The family's Jewish faith remains strong even in the face of growing persecution. When it is decreed that Jewish performers may perform only for Jewish audiences, the Ovitze skillfully contrive to obtain identification papers that do not identify them as Jews, yet they remain observant by conveniently falling ill on every sabbath, so they do not have to perform. Later, when they are held in the concentration camp, they manage to say prayers and fashion makeshift candles in secret observance of holidays.

The suffering the Ovitze endured at the hands of Mengele is not related in excruciating detail, but what information we are given is excruciating enough. This book is generally more vague, more poetic about the concentration-camp atrocities than other books, but it is no less horrifying.

Horrifying, too, are some of the details of the Ovitze's lives after the war. They remain devoted to one another, and continue to stick together, but now they are also bonded by what haunts them. Their nephew -- who was only a baby in the camp and learned to call Mengele "Daddy" so that he might be spared from torture -- recalls being awakened frequently by his aunts and uncles screaming in their sleep.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book are the conflicting accounts of the dwarfs' activities in the concentration camp. Several witnesses claim to have seen the Ovitze performing in the camp, whereas the Ovitze always firmly maintained that they did not perform -- and indeed, would not have done such a thing. Other witnesses claim to have seen several of the dwarves kowtowing to Mengele and to have heard them praising him to the other prisoners. The Ovitze deny this as well.

The authors of the book do not attempt to clear up these discrepancies; they simply present both sides, and acknowledge that perhaps certain people's memories are clouded or inaccurate. I admired this tactic.

This remarkable family made their way in a world that gave them very little more than sharp minds, winning personalities, each other, and their strong faith. Though they did gain wealth and widespread renown before and after the war, during the very darkest years of their lives, the bare essentials -- wits and wit, family and faith -- turned out to be riches in themselves.

Karen Mardahl says

Because of a recent visit to Auschwitz, I have been looking for stories about the people and the history of the place. The visit itself was very moving and emotional. I felt I had to steel myself against some of the awful bits that our guide told us. It is all rather overwhelming. I think my desire to read more is the typical feeling I have about places that I visit on trips - I often want more background and education about what I have seen, or I want to remember the lessons I learned. This is an unusual place. I don't want to know all the stories because some of it is too awful. I learned some terrible facts about the place that I had not known previously, and I kind of wish I still didn't know them. I bought one book in the book store there, and then I photographed the display of books they had on sale for later investigation. One of these books is "In our hearts we were giants". The thing about these books by survivors is just that - they survived. That makes such books slightly easier to digest.

This book begins with the story of the father of this "Lilliput Troupe" to set the lives of the little people in perspective: what opportunities in life were there in Romania for little people in those years, etc. This laid the foundation for how the family became actors and how they functioned as a family. The fact that they were a family and worked almost as one unit played a significant role in their survival. It is almost distasteful to say this, but it may just be that they were fortunate to arrive at Auschwitz after the arrival of Dr. Mengele. If he had not been there, they might have been sent straight to their deaths because they would have been deemed unfit for the work camps. Mengele was curious about people who were different, but I doubt, from the reading, that he thought of them as people, but only as lab rats. That gave them a chance to survive for more than a day. I personally think that arriving at Auschwitz so late in the war was also a saving factor. They arrived in mid-1944 and the Germans fled the place in early January. That meant they were only in the camps and under observation by Mengele for about half a year. Who knows what would have happened to them if the Russians hadn't scared off the Germans just then. Anyway, I digress. The last half of the book is about what happened to the family after the war. This provided a more complete picture of how Auschwitz affected the lives of the survivors.

The book seemed very well researched. They presented contradicting accounts of events - what did some eyewitness accounts state in trials in the early 60s and what did the Ovitze family state. They then proposed reasons for the differing accounts and left it to me, the reader, to make my own decisions. I thought this was a fair way of presenting some of the information. From the writing and the acknowledgements, I can sense that they did an incredible amount of research and investigation and in multiple languages. The book cannot

have been an easy task. The storytelling itself was excellent. Together with the sense of a well-researched book, I give this book 5 stars. It is not just about Auschwitz, however. It is also a tale of people with disabilities and how they are perceived in society. This could also be a relevant book for someone doing disability studies.

PS I have been dragging my feet with some books lately. The fact that I started this on a Friday night and finished it on a Sunday morning testifies to the readability of this book. It was a real book, too, not an audio book.

Avi says

I learned a lot from this book. Like all books on this subject it's so very sad and at times hard to read, I did however find out about other people in this book that I hadn't come across before. Words and thoughts fail me to try and comprehend what these people went through, no matter how many accounts I've read, it always shocks and sickens me the cruelty of some people.

Susan says

This was an amazing story of 7 sibling dwarfs surviving a WWII concentration camp. The book through their release from the camp was a well written documentary of their lives and journey through Dr. Mengele's experiments. The last few chapters of the book fell flat and left me wondering why the authors felt the need to rush through the end of the book. Over all it was a terribly interesting story and I recommend it to anyone interested in WWII stories you may not be familiar with.

Elizabeth A. says

My father was a WWII book collector. He taught me never to forget. I read this book out of curiosity and was touched by their courage in the face of such adversity. Its not a book of blood and gore. It celebrated the human spirit. I highly recommend this book.

Candise says

It's an incredible story, I especially like the references the author makes to other memoirs and some differences of opinion about experiences and perceptions.

It's a unique story and, for me, it stands out in my holocaust studies.

Lorraine says

This was a fascinating book! I have read quite a bit of Holocaust related books, but this was from an interesting perspective...a dwarf family who survived because they were oddities. I had seen a PBS special

about this family and was intrigued to find out more.

Kristin says

World War II era non-fiction has fascinated me since I took a course on Hitler and the 3rd Reich in college. I recently read a book that was based on the effect World War II had on China, and enjoyed it quite a bit, having never given consideration to that country's role in that part of history. In a similar vein, when it came to the concentration camps in Europe, the story of the Jewish people being sent there and many killed is well known, but I didn't know the full story of how Jews of small stature, along with the disabled, were singled out until reading this book. The main paper I wrote for that college course was on the horrible experimentation performed by Dr. Josef Mengele, who used the readily available and helpless population of the concentration camps to become subjects for research that he hoped would elevate him to the status of an elite, world-renowned scientist, but the resources I had available at the time focused primarily on his work with twins, so that became the focus of my paper.

Had I read this book back then, I surely would have felt compelled to include the Ovitz family and other dwarves (the term is used freely in the book) who were also Mengele's subjects. Of 10 children born to Shimshon Ovitz, himself a dwarf, and his two wives, 7 were born with the same condition as their father. With the help of their taller siblings and other average height peers, the 7 Ovitze formed the Lilliput Troupe and became well-known musical performers in their native Romania as means of bringing in money and fulfilling a promise to their parents to always stay together. However, like so many of the European Jews at the time, they could not escape the reach of the Nazis and found themselves on a train to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and likely the gas chambers had the sight of 7 dwarves getting off the train not caught the attention of Dr. Mengele. Including spouses, children, 2 of the 3 tall siblings (the 3rd had chosen to forge his own path early in life and ended up dying in a concentration camp during the Holocaust), and some friends they passed off as cousins, a total of 22 Ovitze were spared immediate death and instead transported to the barracks where Mengele's other chosen individuals were housed. Despite constant testing and bloodletting, which was particularly hard on the dwarves and their toddler nephew who all had little blood to give, along with the same poor conditions all concentration camp residents were subjected to, all 22 survived the Holocaust. The authors also include the stories of other survivors who were part of Mengele's group to give an outsider's perspective on what the family experienced.

For the most part, the book was based on first hand accounts from the lone surviving Ovitz sibling, youngest dwarf sister Perla; cousin Regina; nephew Shimson, the aforementioned toddler; some of the extended 'family' members; and some of the artists who Mengele took a particular interest in the work of and had them sketch or paint his subjects. I particularly enjoyed that they provided the history of the family before the Holocaust, then continued in the aftermath, as it was not a return to normalcy for anyone after the liberation of the camps.

The outsider perception of the Lilliputs was interesting, as there was quite a bit of envy and resentment towards them because Mengele, being a vain man himself, allowed them to keep their fancy clothing and makeup, provided them with extra food, afforded them more private housing than his other subjects, and appeared to treat them better in general because they were so uniquely fascinating to him. Even when they tried to return home, they weren't welcomed, the non-Jews in town expressing anti-Semitism, feeling that the Jews, and especially the Lilliputs, had prospered before the Holocaust at the expense of the non-Jews, and since things hadn't improved in town with the Jews gone, surely having them back would make it even worse. At the same time, their surviving Jewish neighbors, seeing the family return largely intact, wondered what made them so special while everyone else around had lost almost all of their family members.

Definitely a worthwhile read that makes me think and want to learn more about the Ovitz family and others who survived, particularly the ones who caught the attention of Dr. Mengele, because their stories are that

much more compelling knowing the extra horrors they endured at his hands.

Mimi says

The novel *In Our Hearts We Were Giants* follows the story of the Ovitz family before, during, and after WWII. It reveals their fate and the fates of other dwarfs, twins, and individuals with assorted physical differences as they were experimented on by Dr. Mengele in the Auschwitz concentration camp during WWII. The narration brings them (and their extended family) to life, both as individuals and as the entertaining Lilliput Troupe. A truly remarkable tale of survival and endurance.

MMF says

I want to give this a 3.5. It's a very interesting story from history, but the way it is told is oddly detached. Maybe this was unavoidable as most of the persons concerned were already deceased when the book was written. There are a lot of digressions on related topics like other little people of the time, the history of Jewish entertainment, etc. They're interesting and not irrelevant but again, the overall impression is of watching the story from far away. There was very little about any of the Lilliput Troupe as people, their personalities, etc which would have made the story feel more alive.

Still, there are some advantages to the far-off approach. The focus is on uncovering the facts in the midst of all the eyewitness accounts, and telling the story of the Troupe as a unified entity (which it had to be in order to survive). I'm glad I read it.

Kate says

"In our Hearts we were Giants" is quite possibly the kindest, gentlest Holocaust story I've ever read. Although there are horrors in it, as there must be, they are delivered dryly with very few details. It's also unique in that, none of the 'characters' you come to know and admire through the pages will die in Auschwitz. (I wouldn't consider this a spoiler, since this information is readily found from the photos in the center of the book--and who doesn't look at the photos first?)

That this group of dwarfs and their entire extended family managed to survive is miraculous. I was astounded, again and again, by the sheer luck that blessed the Ovitz family. Partly owing to their own audacious personalities and partly owing to peculiar twists of fate, they fared far, far better than most Jews during the Holocaust. While horrible things did happen to them, given their size and relative fragility, I'm really amazed nothing worse befell them. And throughout their trials, full of twists and turns and struggles, they seemed to remain cheerful, hopeful, and devoted to one another. It was nothing short of inspirational.

While I don't think it did a terrific job depicting the full scope of the horrors of the Holocaust, I don't think that was its intent. Neither did it depict Josef Mengele as the demon that he was and I think was because, for the Ovitz family, he was as much their savior as their torturer. In fact, having read extensively about Mengele over the course of many years, I was surprised to encounter a different perspective of him.

I would not recommend this as a standalone history of the Holocaust. You can't read this book and have a

firm understanding of all that happened, how truly horrific the Holocaust was, how horrible were the daily operations of Auschwitz, or even the sheer scale of the genocide. Instead, I think it would make an excellent following act to something more comprehensive and honest. Or, perhaps this would be an excellent introduction to the topic for young adults.
