

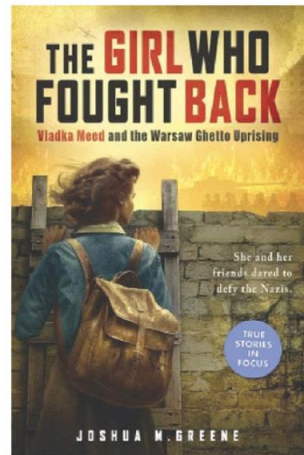
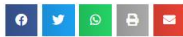
Inspiring Holocaust Memoirs: An Important Tool for Introducing the Young to the Holocaust

Scholastic Focus has now come up with a series of stories for middle grade readers written by Joshua M. Greene of girls and women who went through the Holocaust that is not only appropriate for these younger readers but compelling literature.



Michael Berenbaum

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Renee Hartman with Joshua M. Greene, *Signs of Survival: A Memoir of the Holocaust* (New York: Scholastic Press: 2021).
Joshua M. Greene, *The Girl Who Fought Back: Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (New York: Scholastic Press: 2024).

I am often asked to recommend a Holocaust memoir appropriate for pre-high school students and until recently was often at a loss for what to recommend beyond the *Diary of Anne Frank*. Scholastic Publishing, the largest publisher of children’s books in the world, has now come up with a series of stories for middle grade readers (grades 4-7, ages 9-12) written by Joshua M. Greene, about young women who went through the Holocaust. The books are not only appropriate for younger readers but compelling literature.

Scholastic describes the series as “carefully researched narrative nonfiction books that will change the way young readers see the world.” Greene feels the mandate of his series is to relate the experience of young women who survived the Holocaust, based on their own testimonies and carefully researched history, in order to bring young readers closer to the experience of those who were there. Thus far, there are five books in the series, and each can be read on its own. This review will consider two of these works: *Signs of Survival: A Memoir of the Holocaust* co-authored by Greene the book’s subject, Renee Hartman; and *The Girl Who Fought Back: Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*.

Renee Hartman was the only hearing member of her family, so from an early age she had the responsibility of translating the world of sound into sign language for her parents and younger sister. Imagine not hearing the boots of German troops running up the stairs or their knocks on

the door. When her parents were deported from Slovakia early in the Holocaust, Renee and her younger sister, Herta, were left to fend for themselves, first in hiding and later in Bergen Belsen. In dialogue with her sister, Renee recounts her experience as a young child who must grapple with being on her own, responsible not only for herself but for her hearing-impaired sister, and doing what she had always done, interpreting into sign language the world of horror that they were experiencing.

Intuitively brilliant Renee sought refuge with a family that she knew who were also hearing impaired and who took in the young children until it became too dangerous. Ultimately Renee and Herta were incarcerated in Bergen Belsen where they not only suffered the fate of their fellow prisoners but had to navigate the brutality of the concentration camp guards who took extra delight in torturing not only Jewish prisoners but those who were handicapped. Renee and Herta's stories are retold from their testimonies. One must pay special attention to what Herta describes about observing the world more intensely than those who could hear.

Both girls survived and came to the United States, where Renee was instrumental, with her husband Professor Geoffrey Hartman, the Sterling Professor of English Literature at Yale University, in founding what is now the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, the first such archive in the United States, established 45 years ago in the now seemingly antiquated times when the technological battle for dominance was between VHS and Beta.

Joshua M. Greene, a filmmaker and biographer, wove the book together from the testimonies of both women, commenting just enough about the history of the Holocaust and World War II to give context to their stories. There is a heroic dimension to survival itself and an even greater heroism when one of the two subjects was handicapped and the other responsible for herself and her sister. Simply put, the story is inspirational especially for young readers blessed with hearing, blessed to live in freedom.

Just in time for the 81st anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Scholastic will publish yet another book in this series for younger readers, *The Girl Who Fought Back: Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Vladka, her nom de guerre, was born Feigele Peitel and joined the Warsaw Ghetto resistance months prior to the battle. She was given terribly dangerous assignments, not the least of which was to smuggle out of the ghetto a map of Treblinka, the killing center for Jews on the Warsaw Bialystok rail line, where 925,000 were murdered between July 23 and August 4, 1943, so that it could be passed on to London through underground channels. Resistance fighters naively believed that if the world knew, they would act to rescue the beleaguered Jews – or at least to protest their murders. Even false hopes were useful in the struggle to survive.

Vladka was sent to the Aryan side of the ghetto wall to serve as an arms merchant, purchasing difficult to obtain weapons and clandestinely smuggling them to the young Jews willing to fight. One of the most gripping parts of the book is the description of her climbing the 11-foot-high wall that surrounded the ghetto with dynamite on her back. Greene based his work on Vladka Meed's early Yiddish memoir, *On Both Sides of the Wall*, which is soon to be reissued in a new translation and her testimonies along with those of her husband Benjamin Meed, the legendary leader of the survivors' movement. Through Greene's writing and Vladka's

words, the reader experiences the ordinariness of her great heroism. She was fully dedicated to doing the job assigned to her, however dangerous, however precarious to her existence. She sought no credit, uttered not a boastful word for her achievement, but merely did everything in her capacity to serve. One also experiences her anguish finding herself on the outside of the ghetto when the fighters confronted the invading German troops and their Ukrainian accomplices, killing fighters, setting the ghetto aflame block by block, building by building.

There is even a bit of romance, just enough to intrigue young readers. Vladka met Ben, the man who was to be her husband, in the ghetto. She told him, “My father is dead, my mother is dead, my brother and sister are dead. I am going somewhere, and I can’t tell you where, but if I don’t return, I want someone to miss me. You can be my boyfriend.”

Out of such desperation and loneliness love was born. Their first wedding was simple. Ben’s mother took off her ring, gave it to her son to place on Vladka’s finger, lifted a cup and said in Yiddish: “Let it be with Mazal.” Only later was the marriage consecrated by a Rabbi under the *chuppa*.

One must salute Scholastic for offering this series and admire Greene for choosing poignant stories, complex tales, which he tells in a manner that young readers can comprehend. His work is about young women who will not only educate young readers about the Holocaust but inspire them as well.

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