

LIA LEVI

# JUST A GIRL

A TRUE STORY OF WORLD WAR II

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**HARPER**

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Raccontata agli altri bambini e basta

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Twenty-five years after the publication of *Una bambina e basta*  
by edizioni E/O, Lia Levi has adapted her story for young readers.

## A LETTER FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE OCEAN

Dear Young Readers,

The person writing this short letter to you is that very same "just a girl" from a long time ago. I am a grandmother now, with five grandchildren (three older, two still very young), and my work, my passion, is writing books. I have published many books, but this one, which I recently adapted for you, was my first, and it is undoubtedly the one I love the most.

The events I describe in *Just a Girl* really did happen to me in Italy between 1938 and 1945. And although my story happened a long time ago, it is still so clearly etched in my mind that it feels as if it all took place just

a few months ago.

Is this a good thing? I have been asked that question more than once by some of my readers who are sensitive and young like you are. The things that you remember, they say to me, were often very painful. Wouldn't it have been better to just forget? I have always answered, "No, it wouldn't." My roots, the "way I was made inside," were created in this way. I grew up always embracing whatever I was experiencing and whatever I was feeling at the time, and I don't want to rid myself of these parts.

In the book you've just finished reading, you saw what happened to me as a young girl in fascist Italy in the late 1930s and the 1940s. I experienced discrimination and persecution just because my family and I were Jewish. Our persecutors had transformed the word *religion* into *race*.

*Levi Lia of the Jewish race* were the words written on the report card they would give me at school! Jewish race? It made no sense to reduce me to this one part of my identity. But still, this label was used by the Nazis to set their vicious plan in motion to wipe out the Jewish people.

Racism continues to stain society today. It exists in your country, too, perhaps in many different forms. This is why it's important for you to condemn these outbreaks and fight against racism with all the strength of your young age.

But let's go back to my childhood. I have talked to a lot of young people, and some have asked me if my childhood was unhappy. Before I answer their question, I would like us to pause. We must have at least a moment of silence to express our respect for the six million Jews who were massacred in the Nazi concentration camps, a million and a half of whom were children.

That was nothing but tragedy.

Let me be clear: I belong to another category. I am among those who survived. We are the ones who escaped deportation.

And it is because of this that I can answer the question: no, I did not have an unhappy childhood. I could describe my childhood as difficult, and sometimes stormy, but it was not unhappy. In spite of the dark cloud that hung over me, my days were also filled with games, much-feared tests at school, quarrels with my sisters, movies,

favorite singers, plays that we as children would organize and put on, and, last but not least, reading. Reading, while stretched out comfortably on my bed, all those marvelous books that made me dream and that took me to many places. That was my favorite pastime! (This is not a campaign on my part to encourage young people to read . . . or, actually, maybe it is!)

After all, children are flexible, and they adapt easily. Their games and pastimes can be adjusted to fit the space they are allowed to have. I am sure that you, too, have seen pictures of children of war playing among the heaps of debris from houses destroyed by bombs.

I have wonderful memories of my childhood filled with plays and reading under my covers in the dead of night.

I also learned something from that experience: I learned that when you're in a difficult situation, you don't have time to ask yourself why it's happening or try to understand it. That can come later. During those first moments, what you need to do is think hard about protecting yourself—about what steps you must take to be able to move

forward. This is a strategy that will help you in many of the situations you will find yourself in throughout your life.

But if your great-grandfathers and great-great-grandfathers with their stars and stripes had not arrived with their allies to defeat Hitler and annihilate his plan to take over all of Europe, I—and others like me—would not be here talking to you from the other side of the ocean.

So, would you be willing to do something for me? Would you please give your country a hug for me?

Every single day of my life, deep down inside me, I have thanked those generous, beautiful American soldiers who came as saviors when they appeared on the horizon one summer morning.

—Lia Levi, Rome, 2021

A PHOTO ALBUM  
OF LIA LEVI AND HER FAMILY,  
1938–1948



*Gabriella, Lia, and  
Mama near the Statuto  
Cinema in Turin, 1938*



*Vera (age two), Gabriella (age six), and Lia (age eight),  
1939*





*Gabriella and Lia at a party by the seaside in Liguria, 1940*



*The last summer vacation in Liguria before Jews were forbidden to go on vacation, 1940*



*The Levi sisters on the balcony of their home in Turin, 1940*



*Portrait of Lia, age ten,  
for her elementary school  
diploma, 1941*



*Lia's parents,  
Leontina Segre and  
Alessandro Levi, 1942*



*Lia (right) and Gabriella in their Girl Scout uniforms just after the end of the war, 1946*



*Lia's first holiday after the war, 1948*



*Back to school after the war, 1948. Lia is in the front row, fifth from the left.*