

Born Survivors

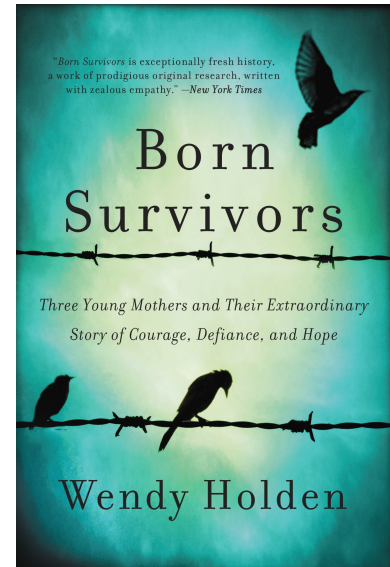
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Introduction

Among the millions of Holocaust victims sent to Auschwitz II-Birkenau in 1944, Priska, Rachel, and Anka each pass through the concentration camp's infamous gates with a secret. Separated from their husbands and strangers to one another, they are pregnant and scared. After losing so many other loved ones to the Nazis, these women are determined to hold on to all they have left: their lives and those of their unborn babies.



Born Survivors follows them as, against all the odds, they give birth to their babies and go on to build new lives with their children after World War II. Theirs are stories of hardships and miracles as they narrowly escape the clutches of Dr. Josef Mengele at Auschwitz; conceal their condition after they are sent to a Nazi slave-labor camp, where they are half-starved and almost worked to death; and as the Allies close in, survive a seventeen-day train journey to Mauthausen in Austria. By the time they arrive, all three babies have been born—but because the camp has run out of Zyklon B, their lives and those of their mothers are saved. Sixty-five years later, the three “miracle babies” share a remarkable, inspirational story of three mothers who defied death at the hands of the Nazis to give their children life.

Questions for Discussion

1. Courage, defiance, and hope are the key themes of this book. How can these themes be directly applied to each of the mothers? Who do you think exemplifies courage, who embodies defiance, and who represents hope? Do these roles shift as the book progresses?
2. Dr. Josef Mengele, described as the “Angel of Death,” becomes the first common denominator in the three stories. What is it about him that makes him the personification of evil? Why do you think the word “angel” was used in his nickname?
3. One of the dominant threads of the book is hope. How does each of the mothers remain hopeful in the face of almost certain hopelessness? Can you describe a time when hope played a significant role in your own life?

4. The book and film of *Gone with the Wind* was very popular before the war, with a particular resonance for the mothers in *Born Survivors*. What is it about the vain, self-centered character of Scarlett O'Hara that they most admire?
5. All the women had similar backgrounds, but were they were very different as people. Who initially comes across as the strongest or the most likeable, and why? Who seems weakest? How do those judgments evolve over the course of the book?
6. As Priska gives birth to Hana in the factory, SS guards place bets on the baby's gender. Why do you think they felt Hitler would win the war if the baby was a boy, but would lose it if the baby was a girl?
7. The events at the train station in Horni Briza provide some of the most touching scenes in the book. What do you think determines people's actions in such dire circumstances, and what influences someone's decision to collaborate, like the SS Commandant, or resist, like Mr. Pavlicek and his neighbors?
8. Rachel gives birth to Mark on an open coal wagon in the middle of a deluge. Nobody expects her or the baby to survive, and yet she somehow found the courage not to give up. Can you describe a situation in your life where you overcame a significant obstacle or challenge, surprising yourself with your own strength in the process?
9. All three mothers would say that, more than anything else, luck played the largest part in their survival. While reading this book, what instance of good luck stood out to you as the most important, and why? How has luck played a role in your own life?
10. If you could use only one word to describe how *Born Survivors* made you feel when you finished it, what would it be? What aspect of the story most inspired you? What moment most deeply affected you?