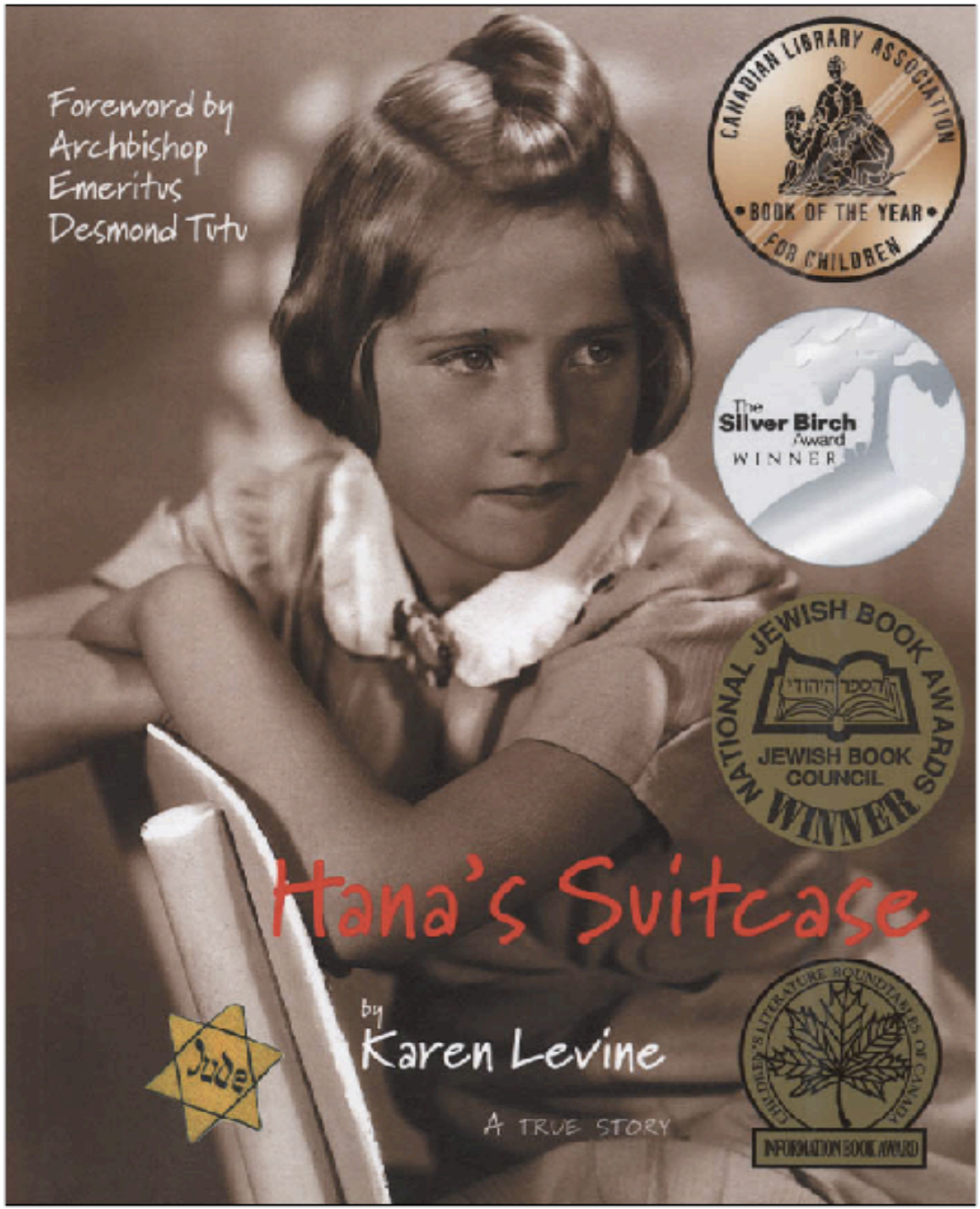
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by
Karen Levine
A TRUE STORY
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A TRUE STORY


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For my parents,

Helen and Gil Levine.

Foreword

The untimely death of anyone is always very sad but none more so than the death of a young person whose life is so filled with promise. There are many heart-wrenching stories of the loss of human potential which emerge from the tragedy of the Holocaust. *The Diary of Anne Frank* immediately comes to mind, but *Hana's Suitcase* bridges many worlds. It tells the remarkable and very moving story of how the curiosity of Japanese children inspires Fumiko Ishioka, a teacher at the Tokyo Holocaust Center, to embark in 2000, some 55 years after the Holocaust, on an epic search to give 'life' to a name which appears on a forlorn suitcase — one of the many thousands of confiscated suitcases found at the Auschwitz death camp.

How extraordinary that this humble suitcase has enabled children all over the world to learn through Hana's story the terrible history of what happened and that it continues to urge them to heed the warnings of history. Hana's story reminds us all to be constantly vigilant to inhumanity, predjudice, bigotry and the terrible consequences of silence, indifference, and apathy.

This book will be a useful tool for teachers in South Africa, who are teaching in classrooms that are so removed in time and space from the terrible events of the Holocaust. Nobody can easily grasp the persecution and deaths of millions of people. It is only through the personal stories that we can understand the extent of the tragedy. Hana came from an ordinary Jewish family and like any young girl she had modest hopes and dreams for her future. However that future was denied to her simply

because of who she was, not because of anything that she or her parents had done. Young people here in South Africa will be able to identify with Hana's dreams and recognize the discriminatory laws passed against her family, their exclusion from society, her parents' incarceration, and having to assume adult responsibilities long before she should. All this will resonate with young South Africans as they learn about their own painful history. As we struggle with the challenges of building a new South Africa, this book helps to remind us that each person should be valued as being of infinite worth, irrespective of differences, and that, with that attitude, we will ultimately create a more caring and just society.

Hana wanted to become a teacher, and surely through this little book her dream is being realized.

+Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu,
patron of the South African Holocaust Foundation

Introduction

Hana's Suitcase is a true story that takes place on three continents over a period of almost seventy years. It brings together the experiences of a girl and her family in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s and 40s, a young woman and a group of children in Tokyo, Japan, and a man in Toronto, Canada in modern times.

Between 1939 and 1945, the world was at war. Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler wanted Germany to rule the globe. At the center of his vision was the brutal elimination of the Jewish people from the face of the earth. To get rid of his "enemies," he set up dozens of prison camps — called concentration camps — across Europe. Jewish women, men and children from almost every country on the continent were deported; they were torn from their homes and sent to the camps, where they endured terrible suffering. Many people died of hunger and disease. Most were murdered. In these death camps and elsewhere — where Hitler's followers carried out his terrible plan — six million Jews were killed. One-and-a-half million Jewish children were among them.

In 1945, the war ended and the entire world learned the horrors of what had gone on in the concentration camps. Since then, people have been trying to understand more about what is today known as the "Holocaust," the worst example of mass murder — or genocide — in human history. How did it happen? How can we make sure it will never happen again?

In Japan, a country allied with Nazi Germany during the Second World War, attention to the history of the Holocaust is relatively new. An anonymous Japanese donor, who wanted to contribute to global tolerance and understanding, decided it was important for young people in Japan to learn more about this aspect of world history. Single-handedly, this donor has endowed the Tokyo Holocaust Education Resource Center, which is dedicated to that purpose.

At a Children's Forum on the Holocaust held in 1999, two hundred students from schools in the Tokyo area met Holocaust survivor Yaffa Eliach. She told them about how almost every Jew in her village, young and old, was murdered by the Nazis. At the end of her talk, she reminded her audience that children have the power "to create peace in the future." A dozen of the young Japanese people there took her challenge to heart and formed a group called "Small Wings." Now the members of Small Wings, aged eight to eighteen, meet every month. They publish a newsletter, help run the Tokyo Holocaust Education Resource Center and work to interest other Japanese children in the history of the Holocaust. They do their work under the guidance of Fumiko Ishioka, the director of the Tokyo Holocaust Center.

The suitcase — Hana's suitcase — is a key to the success of their mission. In it lies a story of terrible sadness and great joy, a reminder of the brutality of the past and of hope for the future.

Tokyo, Japan, Winter 2000

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REALLY, IT'S A VERY ORDINARY LOOKING SUITCASE. A little tattered around the edges, but in good condition.

It's brown. It's big. You could fit quite a lot in it — clothes for a long trip, maybe. Books, games, treasures, toys. But there is nothing inside it now.

Every day children come to a little museum in Tokyo, Japan to see this suitcase. It sits in a glass cabinet. And through the glass you can see that there is writing on the suitcase. In white paint, across the front, there is a girl's name: Hana Brady. A date of birth: May 16, 1931. And one other word: *Waisenkind*. That's the German word for orphan.

The Japanese children know that the suitcase came from Auschwitz, a concentration camp where millions of people suffered and died during the Second World War between 1939 and 1945. But who was Hana Brady? Where did she come from? Where was she travelling to? What did she pack? How did she become an orphan? What kind of girl was she and what happened to her?

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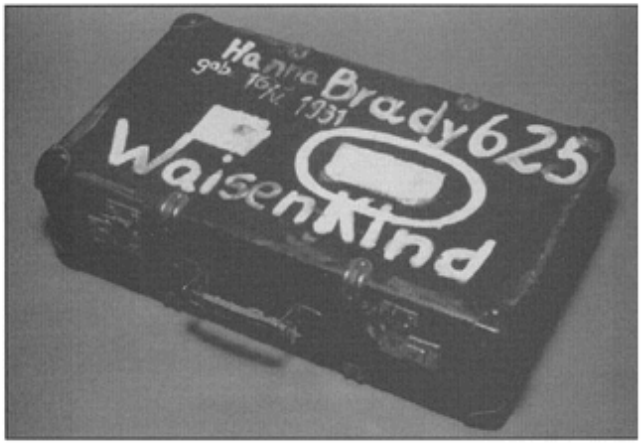
The children are full of questions. So is the director of the museum, a slender young woman with long black hair named Fumiko Ishioka.

Fumiko and the children gently take the suitcase out of the glass case and open it. They search the side pockets. Maybe Hana left something that would be a clue. Nothing. They look under the polka-dot lining. There are no hints there either.

Fumiko promises the children to do everything she can to find out about the girl who owned the suitcase, to solve the mystery. And for the next year, she becomes a detective, scouring the world for clues to the story of Hana Brady.



Hana's suitcase. Though she spelled her name with one "n," the German spelling has two, as on the suitcase.

The town of Nové Město na Moravě and its surroundings.

Nové Město na Moravě, Czechoslovakia, 1930s

IN ROLLING HILLS in the middle of what was then Czechoslovakia, in a province called Moravia, there was a town called Nové Město na Moravě. It wasn't big, but it was famous. And in the winter, especially, it was a very busy place. People from all over the country came to cross-country ski in Nové Město na Moravě. There were races to be raced. There were trails to be blazed and there were frozen ponds for skating. In the summer, there was swimming, sailing, fishing and camping.

Nové Město na Moravě was home to 4,000 people. Once the town was well known for making glass. But in the 1930s, people worked in the forests and in little workshops that made skis. On the main street, there was a large, two-story white building. It had a two-story attic. And in its basement, a secret passageway led to a church on the town's main square. In olden days, when the town was under siege, it was used by soldiers to store food and supplies for the people of Nové Město na Moravě.

The town's general store was on the ground floor. There, you could buy almost anything — buttons, jam, oil lamps and rakes, sleigh bells, stones for sharpening knives, dishes, paper and pens and candy. On the second floor lived the Brady family: father Karel, mother Marketa, Hana and her big brother George.

Father worked six days a week in the store. He was an athlete, known to almost everyone in Nové Město na Moravě for his love of soccer, skiing and gymnastics. He was also an amateur actor with a big booming voice that could be heard from one end of a playing field to the other. Because of this, Father was chosen to call the cross-country ski races over a megaphone, so that everyone could hear the action. He was a volunteer firefighter who, with other men from the town, rode the fire engine to help people in emergencies.

The Brady family opened their home to artists of all kinds — musicians, painters and poets, sculptors and actors. When they were hungry, they could always find a hot meal, produced by Boshka, the family housekeeper and cook. And their artistic talents found an eager audience, which, of course, included two impish children — Hana and George. Sometimes George was called upon to play his violin. Hana was more than willing to demonstrate her skill on the piano to anyone who would listen. And in the middle of the living room, there was a record player that was cranked up by hand. Hana played her favorite song — “I Have Nine Canaries” — over and over again.

Hana in costume for a school play.

Mother was a warm and generous hostess with a good sense of humor and a very loud laugh. She, too, worked six days a week in the store and people often came in just to hear her jokes and banter. She paid special attention to poor people in Nové Město na Moravě who lived on the outskirts of town. Once a week, she would prepare a bundle of food and clothing that Hana would

deliver to needy neighbors. Hana was very proud of her mission and she nagged her mother to make care packages more often.

Hana was a helper in the store, too. From the time they were very small, Hana and George had the job of keeping the shelves stocked, clean and tidy. They learned how to slice yeast, chisel small lumps off the sugar loaf, weigh spices and seasonings, and twist paper into the shape of hollow cones to be filled with candy and sold as treats. Once in a while, Mother noticed that some of those candy cones were missing. Hana never told on George. And he never told on Hana.

Nové Město na Moravě. The Brady family lived on the second floor of the fourth building from the left. Their store was on the main floor.

There were always cats around the store, who worked full-time as mouse catchers. But once, as a special treat, Mother and Father ordered fluffy white angora kittens as pets for the children. Two soft

little bundles arrived through the mail in a box with breathing holes. At first, Sylva, the family wolfhound, a huge grey furry creature, sniffed around them suspiciously. But soon the kittens, who Hana named Micki and Mourek, became accepted members of the family.

Hana and George went to the public school. They were average kids, who got into regular mischief and had the usual problems and triumphs. There was just one thing that was different about them.

The Bradys were Jewish. They weren't a religious family. But Mother and Father wanted the children to know about their heritage. Once a week, while their playmates were at church, Hana and George sat with a special teacher who taught them about Jewish holidays and Jewish history.

There were a few other Jewish families in Nové Město na Moravě. But Hana and George were the only Jewish children in the town. In their early years no one really noticed or cared that they were different. Soon, though, the fact that they were Jews would become the most important thing about them.

Tokyo, Winter 2000

BACK IN HER OFFICE, half a world away in Japan and more than half a century later, Fumiko Ishioka remembered how the suitcase had come to her.

In 1998, she had begun her job as coordinator of a small museum, called the Tokyo Holocaust Center. It was dedicated to teaching Japanese children about the Holocaust. At a conference in Israel, Fumiko had met a few Holocaust survivors, people who had lived through the horrors of the concentration camps. She was astonished by their optimism and their joy in living, despite everything they had been through. When Fumiko felt sad about things in her own life, she often thought about these survivors. They were so strong-willed and wise. They had so much to teach her.

Fumiko wanted young people in Japan to learn from the Holocaust as well. It was her job to make it happen. And it wasn't an easy one. How, she wondered, could she help Japanese children understand the terrible story of what happened to millions of Jewish children on a faraway continent over fifty years ago?

Fumiko teaching children at the Center about the Holocaust.

She decided the best way to start would be through physical objects that the children could see and touch. She wrote to Jewish and Holocaust museums all over the world — in Poland, Germany, the United States and Israel — asking for a loan of artifacts that had belonged to children. She posted her request on the Internet. She wrote to individuals she thought might be able to help. Fumiko was looking for a pair of shoes and for a suitcase.

Everyone turned her down, telling her that the objects they had so carefully preserved were too precious to send to such a small museum, so far away. Fumiko wasn't sure what to do next. But she wasn't the kind of person who gave up easily. Just the opposite. The more rejections she got, the more dedicated she became.

That fall, Fumiko travelled to Poland where many Nazi concentration camps had been located. There, on the site of the most well-known camp, she visited the Auschwitz Museum. Fumiko begged for a short meeting with the Museum's assistant director. She was given five minutes to explain what

she wanted. When she left the assistant director's office, she had a promise that her request would be considered.

A few months later, a package from the Auschwitz Museum arrived: a child's sock and shoe, a child's sweater, a can of Zyklon B poisonous gas and one suitcase — Hana's suitcase.

The Holocaust Education Resource Center in Tokyo, Japan.

Fumiko Ishioka and one of the children visiting the Center.

Hana loved to play outdoors when she was young.

Nové Město na Moravě, 1938

HANA HAD BLONDE HAIR, blue eyes and a very pretty round face. She was a strong girl. Once in a while, Hana would provoke a battle with George, just to show off her muscles. Even though her brother was three years older, Hana would sometimes emerge the winner. But most of the time, Hana and George played well together.

In the summer, in the creek behind their house, they pretended to be in the navy. Climbing into an old wooden washtub, the children sailed along until one or the other pulled the plug in the middle and they sank, laughing and splashing. There were three different kinds of swings in the backyard meadow — one for a small child, a two-seater, and one that swung from a giant tree out over the creek. Sometimes, the neighborhood children would gather there for swinging contests. Who could swing the highest? Who could jump the farthest? Often it was Hana.

In the long halls of their apartment over the store, Hana raced on her red scooter, George on his blue one. In the winter, Hana and George built snow forts and skied. But Hana's greatest love was skating, and she worked hard perfecting her pirouettes on Nové Město na Moravě's frozen pond. Sometimes, when she wore her special red skating outfit — the one with the white fur on the ends of the sleeves — she imagined herself a dancing princess. Her parents, her friends and her brother applauded both the performance and the dream.

The children building a snow fort.

Because her parents worked six days a week, Sunday mornings were special for the family. When they woke up, George and Hana would snuggle up in their parents' bed under the fluffy feather comforter. On Sunday afternoons in the summer, they would all pile into the car and head off to the nearest fort or castle for a picnic, sometimes with Uncle Ludvik and Aunt Hedda who also lived in Nové Město na Moravě. In the winter, there were sleigh rides and long cross-country skiing adventures. Hana was a very strong skier. On the eight-kilometer run between Nové Město na Moravě and a nearby village (which had a wonderful tearoom with delicious creamy pastries), Hana always led the big family pack of cousins, even though she was the youngest.

Hana in her special red skating outfit.

Both Hana and George learned to ski when they were very young.

But by New Year's Eve 1938, there was a new and menacing feeling in the air. There was talk of war. Adolf Hitler and his Nazis were in power in Germany. Earlier that year, Hitler had taken over Austria. Then he had marched his armies into parts of Czechoslovakia. Refugees — people trying to escape the Nazis — started appearing at the Bradys' door, asking for money, food and shelter. They always found a warm welcome from Mother and Father. But the children were mystified. Who are these people? Hana wondered. Why are they coming here? Why don't they want to stay in their own homes?

In the evenings, after Hana and George had been sent to bed, Mother and Father would sit by the radio and listen to the news. Often friends came and joined them, and they would talk long into the night about the news they had heard. “We’ll keep our voices down,” they would say, “so as not to wake the children.”

The conversation of the adults was so intense, the discussions so heated, that they rarely heard the squeak of floorboards in the darkened hall, as Hana and George tiptoed to their secret listening post just outside the living room. The children heard the talk about the new anti-Jewish laws in Austria. They heard about *Kristallnacht* in Germany, when gangs of Nazi thugs roamed through Jewish neighborhoods, breaking windows in homes and stores, burning synagogues, and beating people in the streets.

“It couldn’t happen here, could it?” Hana whispered to her brother.

“Shhhh,” said George. “If we talk now, they’ll hear us and we’ll be sent back to bed.”

One night, their neighbor Mr. Rott presented a shocking idea to the adults. “We can all feel that a war is coming,” he began. “It’s not safe for Jews to be here. We should all leave Nové Město na Moravě, leave Czechoslovakia, for America, for Palestine, for Canada. For anywhere. Leave now, before it’s too late.”

The rest of the group was taken aback. “Are you crazy, Mr. Rott?” one asked. “This is our home. This is where we belong.” And that settled that.

Despite the bad times, the Bradys were determined to celebrate the coming of 1939. On New Year’s Eve, after a feast of turkey, sausage, salami and pudding, the children got ready to play the traditional game of predicting the future. Hana, George, and their young cousins from nearby towns were given half a walnut into which they each wedged a small candle. A large basin of water was dragged into the middle of the room. Each child launched a little walnut boat into it. Eleven-year-old

George's boat wobbled in the water, turned round and round, and finally came to a stop, lopsided. His candle kept burning. Eight-year-old Hana launched hers and, for a moment, it glided along without a quiver. Then it shook, turned on its side, and the candle hit the water and went out.