

Gienia Biggs

Title: *Letter to My Sons*

Author: Gienia Biggs, edited by Ruth Wajnryb

Publisher: LARA Consultancy (self-published)

Place of Publication: Waverly, NSW

Year of Publication: 1996

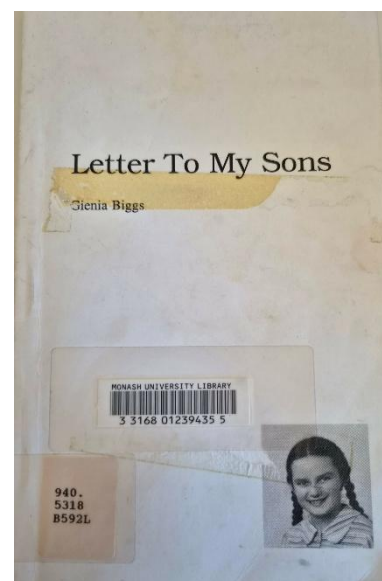
Location of Book: Monash University Library, State Library of Victoria, State Library of NSW and National Library of Australia.

Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Rzeszów, Sieniawa, Katowice; Ukraine: Lvov (Lviv); Kazakhstan: Kokpetky; Alma-Ata; Austria: Vienna, Rothschild Hospital and Bindermichl DP camps; Australia: Sydney.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Jewish refugee; Soviet exile; adolescent survivor; *Bricha*; DP camps.



Letter to My Sons is the 60-page memoir of Polish-born adolescent survivor Gienia Biggs, who was not yet thirteen when the Nazis invaded her hometown Rzeszów. After fleeing with her family to Lvov, she survived the war in exile in Kazakhstan.

Pages 1–30 describe the author's childhood and family, including their fate during the Holocaust. Pages 31–46 recount the family's flight to Sieniawa and Lvov and their subsequent deportation to Soviet Kazakhstan. Pages 47–60 describe their repatriation to Poland, time in DP camps, and emigration to England and Australia.

Gienia Biggs (née Herschtal) was born in Rzeszów, Poland, the youngest of four children born to Cecilia Engelberg and Ozyash Herschtal. She had three older siblings: two brothers, Kubesh and Mietek, and a sister, Stefa, who was ten years her senior. Her father was a respected jeweller and the family lived comfortably. They were raised in a traditional Jewish household, keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, and attending synagogue on Jewish holidays.

In September 1939, during the German invasion of Poland, the Herschtal family fled east, reaching Sieniawa, where the Engelbergs, Gienia's maternal relatives, lived. While sheltering with her maternal grandmother they were overrun by the German army. Subsequently, Gienia witnessed thousands of dejected Polish prisoners of war being marched through the town by German soldiers. Her older siblings subsequently left for Lvov, while Gienia remained with her parents and grandmother. Two weeks later, the Red Army occupied the town and the family fled to Lvov to reunite with their relatives.

In Lvov, the family lived with Gienia's sister Stefa and her husband. Gienia resumed her education and began learning Russian. However, after Stefa was interviewed by the NKVD and innocently disclosed the names of all the relatives sheltering in her home Soviet officers arrested the family. On the night of 13 April 1940, they were taken to the railway station, packed into cattle wagons, and deported east. The wagons had only a hole in the floor for a toilet, and prisoners received food and water just once a day.

On 1 May 1940 they arrived at Zhangiz-Tobe railway station in Kazakhstan. They were transported by lorry to a village in the Kokpetky district of the Semipalatinsk region, where they survived in primitive conditions, including a small clay hut with a hole in the floor for food storage. The family endured scorching summers and bitterly cold winters, with snow reaching the roof of their hut. They each found work, supplementing their meagre income by selling and bartering valuables brought from Poland and food parcels sent by relatives.

Following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, increasing numbers of refugees arrived in Kazakhstan, bringing reports of German atrocities, although the full extent of the Holocaust remained unknown. During this period Gienia was fortunate to be able to continue her education and, after matriculating, travelled to Alma-Ata to study medicine. Following the end of the war, the Herschtals were repatriated to Poland in 1946. They reunited in Katowice with Kubesh and his wife, who had survived in hiding in Warsaw.

After the Kielce pogrom the family decided to leave Poland permanently. Assisted by *Bricha*, they crossed the Czech border on foot before being taken to a safe house. On *Bricha*'s advice, they posed as Greek refugees while travelling by train through Austria to avoid attracting the attention of Soviet authorities. After arriving in Vienna, they were accommodated in the Rothschild Hospital DP camp before being transferred to the Bindermichl DP camp near Linz, where Stefa and her husband were living.

In April 1947, Gienia returned to Vienna to continue her medical studies at the University of Vienna. There she met her future husband, Mundek Biegeleisen. Fearing communist repression, the couple decided to join Mundek's surviving relatives in England. Gienia travelled there as a volunteer worker and the pair married in August 1948. They settled in Bradford, where both found employment in the textile industry.

Stefa and her family emigrated to Australia in 1948 after obtaining landing permits with the help of relatives. By the end of 1949, Gienia's parents and brother Mietek had also settled in Sydney, while Kubesh followed in 1956. Lonely and with few family in England, Gienia and Mundek emigrated to Australia in 1952 with assistance from HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrants Aid Society), travelling aboard the *Ravello* from Genoa to Sydney. After settling in Australia, they anglicised their surname to Biggs and raised two sons, Victor and Daniel.

Letter to My Sons offers a concise autobiographical sketch of Gienia's childhood, wartime experiences and post-war migration. The narrative summarises her flight from Nazi-occupied Poland, life under Soviet rule, exile in Kazakhstan, repatriation to

Poland, and experiences in DP camps before emigrating to England and then to Australia. The memoir offers a broad chronological account of the author's experiences, rather than a detailed or expansive narrative. It does not describe her later life in Sydney. Written as a personal account addressed directly to her sons, it preserves Gienia's recollections of her family, survival, and displacement, both during and after the Holocaust. It was self-published in 1996 and edited by Ruth Wajnryb.