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# Broken Song

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Lasky, Kathryn. *Broken Song*. Viking, 2005. ISBN 0670059315. \$15.99. 154 pp.

Reviewer: Irene Halliday

Reading Level: Intermediate, Young Adult

Rating: Outstanding

Genre: Historical fiction;

Subject: Jews--Russia--History--19th century--Juvenile fiction; Violin--Fiction; Persecution--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

Reuven Bloom, the young revolutionary firebrand who helped Sashie and her family escape from the Russian Tsar's persecutions in *The Night Journey*, tells his own frightening, yet triumphant, story of escape. 15-year-old Reuven is a gifted violinist, tempered and shaped by the magnificent music he produces. He narrowly escapes being kidnapped by the Cossacks for the Tsar's army because his parents repeatedly hide him in the family's potato hole beneath the floor boards of their home. During Hanukkah celebrations with his parents and two sisters, Reuven must once again climb down into the potato hole. Suddenly, screams and crashes accompany gunshots in his home. Reuven can barely make himself stay hidden, especially when a stray bullet blasts a large splinter of wood from the plank above his head. Looking through the opening, Reuven sees his sister murdered, and his own violin stolen by one of the Cossacks. In shock and without hope, he hears a whimpering from his 3-year-old sister, Rachel, who escapes death by being trapped in her crib under a fallen wardrobe, and is stirred to action. When he emerges, he lovingly covers his dead sister's body with a tapestry, sees his murdered parents in the doorway, and realizes he must prevent Rachel from seeing what has happened. It is now up to him to plan carefully and carry out their escape into Poland, and from there to America.

How Reuven manages to get himself and Rachel to safety makes for fascinating, yet sometimes harrowing reading. Reuven's humanity and sensitivity serve him well as he faces situations and decisions that could rob him of all feeling. He becomes a revolutionary and turns out to be a highly capable explosives expert. But Reuven's heart is not in the revolution. Instead of looking for a "new world," he is looking to repair a "broken world." The music inside him has been stilled for a season, but it reasserts itself in time to save him from murderous revenge on the Cossack who killed his family and stole his violin. Reuven's basic goodness and ability to care about people leads him to assist other Jews to escape, and, finally, to leave his "broken song" behind and begin a new one with his sister and other relatives in America. Because of the horror scenes, though sensitively handled by Lasky, this is a novel recommended for ages 10 and up. It would greatly enhance historical studies about Jewish pogroms in pre-revolutionary Russia, and could also be useful for psychology or sociology units. Skillfully crafted and carefully developed, this is a story that awakens sympathy for that which is best in humanity, as well as a horror for that which is harsh and evil. We are genuinely and gratefully relieved when Reuven is able to rise above the horror, re-awaken the music within him, and make a positive and satisfying life in a new land.