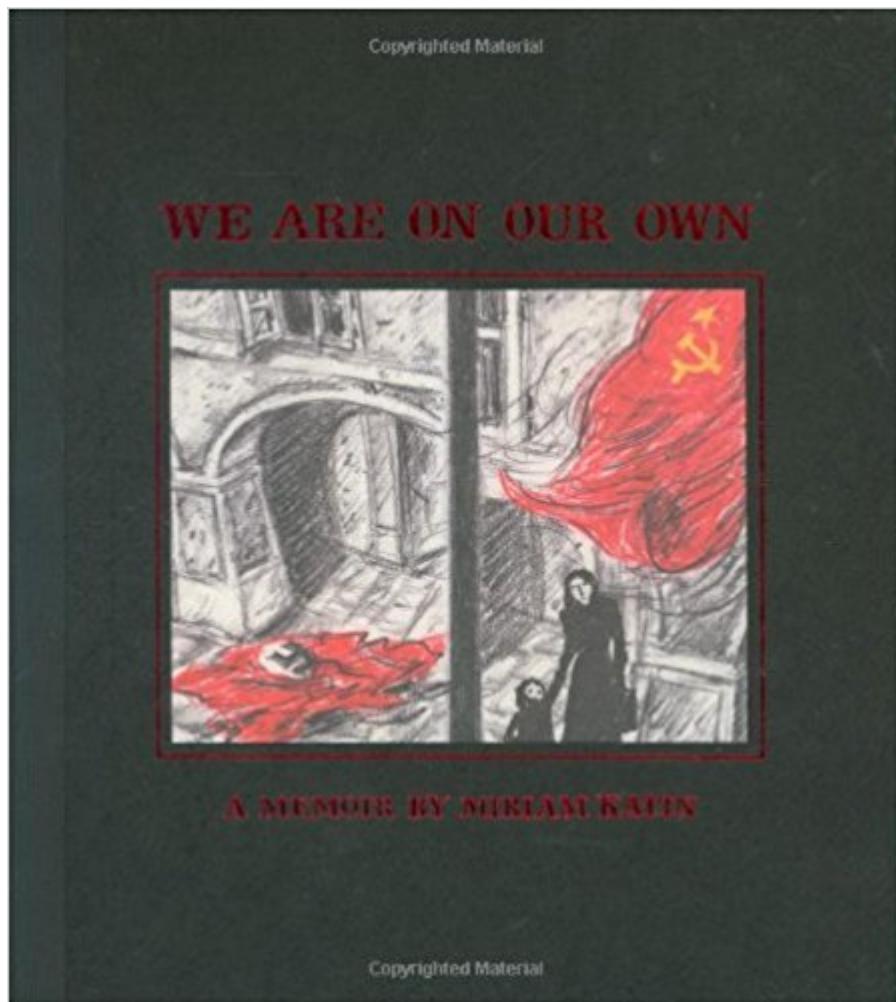


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# We Are On Our Own: A Memoir



## Synopsis

A stunning memoir of a mother and her daughter's survival in WWII and their subsequent lifelong struggle with faith. In this captivating and elegantly illustrated graphic memoir, Miriam Katin retells the story of her and her mother's escape on foot from the Nazi invasion of Budapest. With her father off fighting for the Hungarian army and the German troops quickly approaching, Katin and her mother are forced to flee to the countryside after faking their deaths. Leaving behind all of their belongings and loved ones, and unable to tell anyone of their whereabouts, they disguise themselves as a Russian servant and illegitimate child, while literally staying a few steps ahead of the German soldiers. *We Are on Our Own* is a woman's attempt to rebuild her earliest childhood trauma in order to come to an understanding of her lifelong questioning of faith. Katin's faith is shaken as she wonders how God could create and tolerate such a wretched world, a world of fear and hiding, bargaining and theft, betrayal and abuse. The complex and horrific experiences on the run are difficult for a child to understand, and as a child, Katin saw them with the simple longing, sadness, and curiosity she felt when her dog ran away or a stranger made her mother cry. Katin's ensuing lifelong struggle with faith is depicted throughout the book in beautiful full-color sequences. *We Are on Our Own* is the first full-length graphic novel by Katin, at the age of sixty-three.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. This moving WWII memoir is the debut graphic novel from Katin, an animator for Disney and MTV. It tells the story of toddler Katin—here called Lisa—and her mother,

Esther Levy, Hungarian Jews who must flee Nazi persecution. With her husband off fighting in the Hungarian army, Esther is forced to abandon all their belongings and take on the identity of a servant girl with a bastard child. She survives however she can—whether making alterations on the bloodstained uniforms of dead soldiers or surrendering her body to an adulterous German officer. Katin shows Esther's harrowing experiences with an objective eye, but her own experience of the time is the fragmented memory of a child; unable to understand the vast tragedy unfolding around her, she focuses on the loss of a pet dog. The story flashes forward to the '70s and even later to show the long-term effects on Katin and her family's faith. Katin's art is an impressionistic swirl; early scenes in sophisticated Budapest recall the elegance of Helen Hokinson, while the chaos of war is captured in dark, chaotic compositions reminiscent of Kathe Kollwitz. This book is a powerful reminder of the lingering price of survival. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**\*Starred Review\*** The burgeoning popularity of graphic novels has opened the door to new voices with compelling stories and artistic skills to match; for example, 63-year-old animator Katin, whose remarkable debut this is. It is a memoir recounting how she and her mother faked their deaths and fled Budapest after the Nazis occupied the city. With forged papers obtained from a black marketer, they escaped to the countryside in the guise of a servant girl and her illegitimate child. Katin relates their harrowing lives there and her mother's desperate search for her missing husband after the war. Brief passages set decades later reveal how Katin's traumatic experiences left her without any religious faith to pass on to her own child. The events she reports are powerful in themselves, and her sensitive, softly expressive drawings and straightforward storytelling, both reminiscent of Raymond Briggs in *Ethel & Ernest* (1999), about an English couple during the same period, are likewise effective in conveying violent wartime battles, her mother's emotionally distressing choices, and rare quiet interludes. Moreover, Katin's understatement makes the story all the more chilling and heartbreak. This impressive book belongs in all serious graphic novel collections and is also a natural for Jewish studies. Gordon FlaggCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Growing up in the Westside of Cleveland in the 1950's, I had many chances to meet people who were displaced Europeans settling in America. In fact there were so many of these people a colloquial and derogatory term was placed to identify these people being the phrase "DP". In essence all these people were trying to do was to seek a new life in America. Little did I know of any

of their stories in which they had to endure to get to the shores of the promised new land. One such story is Marian Katin's graphic depiction of her mother and herself fleeing Budapest under Nazi rule in 1944. The very fact that they were Jewish as late as 1944 under Nazi rule gives one the sense that it took a long time for some Nazi occupied countries to be affected by the genocidal programs inherent to this regime. Katin's story which tells of the Nazi terror and later the Soviet invasion shows the true plight of how people lost their homes and in many cases their very lives in the collateral damage of war. Katin's images and narrative show the true emotional and psychological scars of what transpired. The book shows a true and uncensored depiction of true events of a world gone mad. People acting under stress conditions show both their humanistic qualities to help mankind no matter what country they were from and on the other hand people acting selfishly and thinking only of themselves. This story is of people being people under the stress of a world at war caused by political minds seeking their own selfish ends. This graphic story should be added to all the serious historical accumulation of World War II studies showing what this war was truly about. This book is actual history shown in the graphic genre which deserves our serious attention. Very well done and deserving a high five star rating.

The title of Miriam Katin's graphic memoir, *We Are On Our Own*, is the subtext and conclusion of the story of her survival in Nazi-occupied Hungary. It's one of the most powerful and relentless memoirs I've ever read, graphic or otherwise. For sheer honesty, it ranks right up there with Wiesel's *Night*, Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*. Katin's recollections concern the final weeks of WWII, when the Nazis occupying Hungary know that the game is nearly over and the Soviet Army is advancing. Miriam, who's a girl of 5 or 6, and her mother Esther flee Budapest just before the last of the Jews are rounded up. Disguising themselves as gentle peasants, they resettle in the countryside, where Esther finds herself doing what she must to survive--including becoming the mistress of the local Nazi commandant. The tale is gripping: anti-Semitic Hungarians, brutal Nazis, panic and selfishness dancing with compassion and sacrifice. Esther emerges as an incredibly admirable woman. The memoir begins with Esther reading the Biblical creation story to Miriam. But as the harrowing story unfolds, whatever faith in a benevolent and protective God that Miriam and Esther might've had drops away. Time and again, they realize that they, like all humanity, are on their own. The recollections are intercut with contemporary scenes in which Miriam, now a grown woman and still without religious faith, is conflicted about her own child going to Hebrew school and temple. *We Are on Our Own*'s honesty is refreshing as well as potentially disturbing. How can one survive the Holocaust with a comfortable faith--or any faith, for that

matter--intact? This is a question too frequently sidestepped, because the answer to it can be unpleasant. Katin doesn't shy away.

Miriam Katin is my wife of 51 years so perhaps I should recuse myself from a review.

I saw this in an art exhibit, ended up buying and reading the book, well drawn, good author and artist

I read about this author in a scholarly article and wanted to read her book. It's quite moving.

Miriam Katin is also the artist of another bold graphic novel called, "Letting It Go", where she has to come to terms with her son choosing to live in Berlin, Germany - the site of brutal fighting and killing that had claimed countless human lives. For this story, she had drawn herself as an elderly woman with bifocal glasses and unsightly liver spots on her aged hands. Now in this pretty little black book, "We Are On Our Own", Miriam turns herself back into a round-faced little girl with big ribbon bows in her hair as the wide-eyed child protagonist witnessing it all. Here she accompanies her beautiful young mother and aunt clad in the latest 1940s fashion on a seemingly normal day in the romantic-looking Hungarian capital of Budapest, famous for its hot-spring bathing wonderland and storybook-like historical architecture. Then dark things start happening - right after a nice afternoon relaxing at a cute little sidewalk cafe, when the unhappy young mommy has to give up her dog at a Nazi location collecting pets owned by Jewish families. THEN she learns that she has lost her home AND all the furnishings in it, too. And FINALLY, she has to burn EVERYTHING she holds dear to her heart, including turn-of-the-century photographs of her parents in their youth. Not only that; the lives of the young mother and the little daughter may soon be in danger, so she takes her child and flees. Thanks to a mysterious man's help, the two heroines find a temporary shelter with an elderly couple on their isolated little wine-making farm. But lecherous goons from both Nazi and the Russian army eventually come sniffing around, so they take off once again. To face hunger, homelessness, peril, etc. as well as an uncertain future, where they may or may not see the little girl's father ever again. Young Miriam Katin - then known as "Lisa" - was extremely lucky to have retained most of her child-like innocence during the worst times (she had been a little more than a toddler at the time), especially since she only remembered playing with a friendly little dog and noshing on tender little sausages and sweet treats offered by kindly old ladies and dashing Nazi predators, though she also had to listen to very loud strategic bombing at night and being dragged

along in a suitcase through a raging snowstorm. Even better, little Lisa was also blessed with a very bittersweet fairy-tale ending to her frightening little adventure. Otherwise, she would have ended up like Anne Frank or worse, ghoulishly tortured in a medical lab, especially if she had a twin. :(Deftly drawn with soft graphite pencils (there's also some colored intervals taking place in 1960s-1970s, when Miriam herself was an anxious young mother with a child of her own) in fairly cartoon-like style within very neat panels to tell the disquieting tale about how peaceful life in a normal-appearing world can suddenly go to heck in a handbasket and how even the strongest faith in God can waver a little. A bit of warning about page 34, where something VERY gross happened involving the poor, abused dog on the farm. :P

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