A chronicle of the life and fate of Lev Aronson, the world-renowned cellist and Holocaust survivor, and the quest for his lost cello. To a musician, his instrument is a partner, an extension of himself. Frances Brent explores the fate of Lev Aronson and the prized instruments that passed through his hands as a way of understanding what was lost and preserved during the Holocaust. Born in Germany, but raised in Russia and Latvia, Aronson traveled through the music world of Europe with great expectations and encountered its cultural collapse first hand. In the Riga Ghetto and in German concentration camps Aronson is forced to reshape his own identity in order to survive. He loses his lover but marries a young dancer who helps him rebuild his life as a musician. In the camps, he “think-sings” the concertos he knows from memory, establishing a sense of time and patience that gives him the strength to survive. After the war, he became the principal cellist in the Dallas symphony, renowned worldwide as a teacher of cello.

Brent paints a moving portrait of a Jewish musician who transcended his own personal losses to transmit the culture of musical Europe to a generation of Americans.

16 black & white illustrations.

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My Personal Review:
I loved this book.

At first glance, and through the first 50-75 pages it seems detached and dry. Full of facts touched with tidbits of humanity. In the latter half of the book the stories really start to come alive.
A quote:

A student who faithfully does everything that his teacher tells him to may become an excellent instrumentalist but will be a poor teacher—however one who has struggled to discover what is important is able to tell someone else. I was a good student, but I had a lot of time to start thinking about things when I was in the camps. I was imprisoned yet strangely free, because thinking was the one thing that couldn't be taken from me. They couldn't tell if I was thinking or not. 

So very true. As a musician, my heart broke when I read this, trying to think of what it would be like to think about the music, but not be able to play it, or listen to it, or know if I would ever be able to immerse myself in the moments we strive for, as musicians.

Another passage tells the story of Lev given a time period of one hour to fill a cart with coal from a mine. They had no watches, no way of telling time. So the incredibly smart man he was, he sung through concertos in his mind. Three of them. 20 minutes long each.

Then there was the welder—the man who saw that, despite Lev's protests, Lev was not a welder and had simply said so to avoid being taken away never to be seen again. And this welder, a civilian, he hungered for musical knowledge. So he welded for Lev, and Lev taught him.

Moments throughout the book are heart-breaking, it is, after all, a story of a Jew during WWII. But the abiding love of music, of his instrument and the definition of Lev as a musician is prominent throughout the book and makes it a book worth reading—especially if you love music like I do.

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