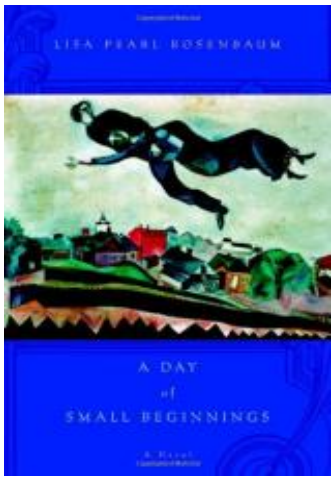
A Day of Small Beginnings

by Lisa Pearl Rosenbaum



About the Book

Poland, 1906

On a warm spring night, in the small Jewish cemetery of Zokof, Friedl Alterman is wakened from death. On the ground above her crouches Itzik Leiber, a reclusive, unbelieving fourteen-year-old whose fatal mistake has spurred the town's angry residents to violence. The childless Friedl rises to guide him to safety-only to find she cannot go back to her tomb. Now Friedl is trapped in that thin world between life and death, her brash decision binding her forever to Itzik and his family: she is fated to be forever restless, and he, forever haunted by the ghosts of his past.

Years later, after Itzik himself has gone to his grave, his son, Nathan, knows nothing of his bitter father's childhood. When he begrudgingly goes to Poland on business, Nathan decides on a whim to visit his ancestral town. There, in Zokof, he meets the mysterious Rafael, the town's last remaining Jew, who promises to pass on all the things Itzik had failed to teach his son-about Zokof, about his faith, and about himself.

And yet, like the generation before him, Nathan keeps what he learns hidden inside himself. With the family legacy in danger of being lost, Friedl's restless spirit guides Itzik's precocious granddaughter, Ellen, on a journey of her own to Zokof, where only Friedl can help Ellen unlock the mysteries of her family's past-and only Ellen can help Friedl break her agonizing enslavement.

A stunning debut novel of enormous scope and beauty, **A Day of Small Beginnings** tells the timeless story of the Leiber family; of the secrets that break them, the love that binds them, and the town that is both their curse and their redemption.

Discussion Guide

1. When we first meet Freidl, she speaks to us from the grave. Why is she so susceptible to Itzik the Faithless? entreaties

for mercy from God that she would return to the living on his behalf?

2. One of the characters asks, *How do you know who you are if you don?t know where your family came from?* (see, page 65) Why do you think this question might be of special significance for Americans?

3. Freidl?s favorite saying from the Talmud is: *Every blade of grass has its own guardian star in the firmament which strikes it and commands it to Grow!* Why do you think this saying has such resonance for her? What does it mean to you?

4. The subject of Polish-Jewish relations is very prominently treated in this story. How would you describe the two peoples? attitudes towards one another and what do you think lies beneath those attitudes? Do you see changes in the nature of their relationship from 1906 to today?

5. Over the course of the novel, what changes take place in the characters? understanding of prayer and in their belief, or disbelief, in God?

6. What was required for Freidl to rest in her grave and what did Ellen do to help her? What do you think happened to Freidl at the end of the story?

7. How does Freidl affect the lives of Itzik, Rafael, Nathan, Ellen and Marek? How did they affect her?

8. How were Nathan, Ellen and Marek changed for having met Rafael?

9. Why didn?t Itzik the Faithless tell his family why he left Poland? What were the consequences to his son and granddaughter for his having kept his past a secret?

10. How do you think things will work out between Ellen and Marek and why?

Author Bio

It may come as a surprise to those familiar with the themes of my book that I come from a family of atheists. Both my grandfathers were men who had turned their backs on traditional religion, which they regarded as a form of bad science. My mother, daughter of a musician, student of Isadora Duncan dance, and a sculptor, claimed that art was all the spiritual sustenance the family needed. But I always suspected my family's fervent belief in mankind's possibilities had religious roots. Growing up in Great Neck, New York, I used to slip out to church services with my Christian friends and to synagogue with my Jewish friends, curious about what I was missing.

At eighteen, traveling alone in Europe, I came upon a rabbi with a long white beard standing in a doorway in Paris. I thought, how quaint, until I saw the plaque above him which read: On this spot, the Gestapo killed two brothers. It made me realize my religion was not something about which I could afford to be so removed and ignorant, that had I been born in another time and place, the fate of those brothers might have been mine.

Upon returning home, I embarked upon the study of Jewish history and theology that has run like a thread through my life. At New York University I majored in Religion and Philosophy and after graduating, spent a year studying International Relations at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel. What amazed me most about that year was how deeply moved I was by Israel's beauty, by its people, and its history. The experience brought me to a job at the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles.

I moved on to Loyola Law School and worked as a lawyer for about five years. But even First Amendment cases relating to the separation of church and state could not overcome my deep boredom with the practice of law. I have left it to my husband to soldier on in that career.

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