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From the Nazi camp to Paris cafes and The Clash

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Major/Minor
by **Alba Arikha**

Quartet £15 **£12.99 inc p&p**

★★★★★

On the surface, Alba Arikha might seem to have had a wonderful childhood, the sort that makes the rest of us feel short-changed.

She was brought up in a fashionable part of Paris in the Eighties, the child of the celebrated artist Avigdor Arikha who painted, among many others, the Queen Mother.

Alba's mother Anne was an American poet and her godfather was Samuel Beckett, the legendary Irish playwright who could be relied upon to turn up with lovely birthday presents.

Artistic giants including Henri Cartier-Bresson and R.B. Kitaj regularly popped in for supper. So it comes as a surprise to learn that Alba was miserable most of the time. Her parents, though loving people, lived the austere life of pure art and expected Alba and her younger sister Noga to follow suit. Television wasn't allowed, rock music was 'degenerate' and make-up



SAD GIRL: Alba Arikha, left and above, with her mother Anne and Samuel Beckett in the Seventies

forbidden. There's more to this accomplished memoir, though, than a well-worn tale of adolescent angst and super-strict parents. Skilfully, Alba Arikha begins to plant clues to the central mystery that is making everyone so jumpy. Her father, accomplished and confident by day, often wakes up in the night screaming. Sometimes Alba can hear the words – in German – 'Raus Jude! Achtung!'

Gradually it becomes clear he is having flashbacks to the nightmare years he spent in

Transnistria, in a concentration camp on the borders of modern-day Ukraine. Alba knows that he was interned there as a child, along with his mother and older sister. His father never returned.

Is this weight of inherited sadness the reason Alba feels so miserable all the time? Could her father's early suffering explain why she has taken to being so rude that strangers feel inclined to slap her? The book never quite answers this central conundrum.

What it does do, though, is unwrap the mystery of how Avigdor and the sister he loathes managed to get out of Transnistria when so many other youngsters perished. The story is a thrilling one – think Schindler's List but with extra twists and turns. We also begin to understand the reasons why Avigdor and his sister Elena can barely acknowledge each other.

Alba Arikha has written a wonderfully atmospheric book. On the one hand we are in Paris of the early Eighties – riverside cafes, The Clash and first kisses. On the other, we are in Eastern Europe in 1944, a place of trauma of the sort that takes generations to heal.

Avigdor Arikha died last year aged 81. His legacy will be his painting, but this story, beautifully told by his daughter, promises to linger just as long.