

# The Daughter of Auschwitz

The Girl Who Lived to Tell Her Story

By Tova Friedman

In 1950 I arrived in the US as an eleven-year-old Holocaust survivor from Poland. I spoke no English, had almost no schooling and felt very much a stranger in a strange land. All I wanted was to find a way to connect to my new home so once my family settled in I started learning English. I was awkward, self-conscious and lonely, but I thought if I could just share my story with the other children, I could reduce the chasm between us. As my English improved, I approached several students in class numerous times and tried to talk about my past but no matter how hard I tried, I was rebuffed with disdain. Even my seventh-grade teacher rebuked me, “Cover up your tattoo, cut your braids and, change your name. You have a new life now.”

It wasn't until I turned twelve that I made my first actual friend. Unlike the others, Lili was curious about my history, and I told her of my journey descending into hell during World War II, one of the most evil events in human history. It took 78 years, but I was finally able to write my memoirs in “The Daughter of Auschwitz.” This narrative portrays and celebrates the power of hope, love, trust and self-reliance in the midst of terror and cruelty.

My mental and physical survival was due to the unwavering emotional strength and courage of my parents, especially my mother, who always told me the truth. Not once did she shield me from the cruel realities of my surroundings. Knowledge, she professed, was my best self-defence. My memories are imprinted in my mind and have not tarnished with time. Sometimes they even surface in my dreams. I can still see my six-year-old self holding tightly onto my mother's hand as we left Auschwitz. “Remember.” she said, and I do.

My earliest memories are from the ghetto. At the age of three I heard my grandmother shot just outside our apartment. It's a sound I'll never forget. To Hitler, she was old and useless, to me, she was comfort and

refuge. Shootings were regular and most of the victims were the elderly and the children. Useless populations to Hitler.

Our next destination was a labour camp where my parents toiled in an ammunition factory, leaving me alone all day. Each morning, before they left, my mother reminded me. "Don't make any eye contact with the murderers and stand still when the ferocious German Shepards come near you. Try to become invisible." I listened carefully, taught myself to walk with my head down and became a statue when guards with dogs appeared. One day, all the children disappeared but I had been carefully hidden. I was the only one to survive. My mother's instructions changed, "Don't go near the window or you too will be killed if discovered." I obeyed and stayed in the shadows during the day until my parents returned at night.

Eventually, my mother and I were sent to Auschwitz while my father to Dachau. I was taught the new skills I would need to survive; to control my bowels, to never show physical weakness and to protect my utensils. She pointed to the walking skeletons as they were led to the gas chambers, explaining, "Weakness is not tolerated here so never show you're ill and never lose your bowl and spoon or you'll go hungry." As long as I was with my mother, I felt loved and secure. Before I turned six, I was separated from her, but to her credit, I'd already learned the skills of self-preservation.

As a therapist, I know that in order to develop self-confidence and resiliency, children need to have their experiences validated. Today, our children live in a turbulent, uncertain and frightening world that should be acknowledged and explained, especially when they ask. Hopefully, my story, "The Daughter of Auschwitz" will inspire thoughts and conversations about the importance of self-knowledge, self-reliance, trust and hope as well as discussions about everyone's potential to be an instrument of change for creating a better society.