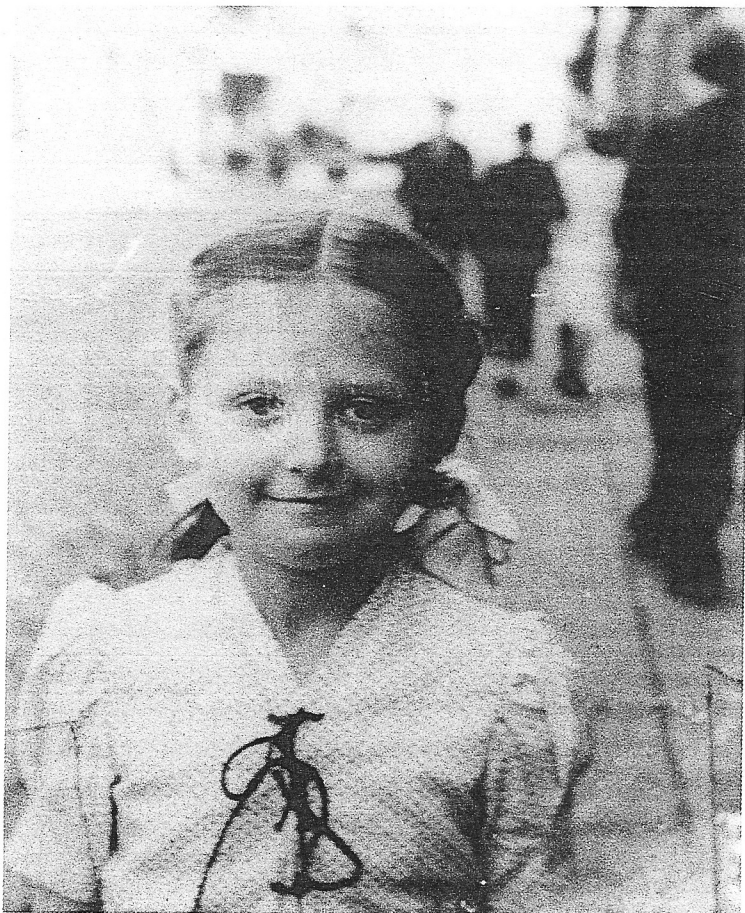

The Chink in the Wall

Prisoner A-27633. Name: Tova Friedman [née Tola Grossman]. Born September 7, 1938, in Gdynia, Poland, to Machel and Raizl Grossman. Childhood home: Tomaszów Mazowiecki, Poland. Sent with parents to forced labor camp at Starachowice, Poland, spring 1943. Deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau June 1944. Age on arrival: 5 years, 9 months. Liberated January 27, 1945; age 6 years, 4 months. Immigrated to United States April 4, 1950. Home: New Jersey.

My name is Tova. My mother once told me that I was the youngest person to survive Auschwitz-Birkenau. I don't know that for certain, but I do believe I am the youngest survivor to remember the place. I was six years old when the Russians liberated me on January 27, 1945. The reason I remember is that my mother, who survived Auschwitz with me, explained things to me as they were happening, making sure I understood as much as a young child could the horrible things we witnessed.

I was born Tola Grossman on September 7, 1938, in a town called Gdynia, on the outskirts of Danzig [now Gdansk], an international free port on the Baltic Sea. My father, Machel Grossman, had come to Danzig to attend a Zionist convention and never left. After falling in love with this beautiful, modern port, he opened a clothing store with his brother.



Tova Friedman in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, two years after liberation

My mother, Raizl Pinkushewitz, came from a family of scholars and rabbis and spent most of her time taking care of me, an only child.

I once calculated the odds of all three members of my family—my mother, my father, and myself—surviving the war as Polish Jews: it came to one in one thousand. We were among the lucky ones.

It started with a premonition my mother had two weeks before the war started. She wanted to go back to Tomaszów Mazowiecki, the town in central Poland where she and my father grew up, to celebrate my first birthday. My grandparents hadn't seen me since I was born, but my father didn't want to go. He told my mother, "I can't leave my business unattended. Who will take care of the store?"

They had a big argument over this. My mother, normally a quiet,

unassertive woman, said she was going back no matter what, and if my father didn't want to go, she was going alone, with me, and that was that. So my father asked his younger brother to tend the store while the three of us went to Tomaszów to celebrate my first birthday.

We left on the train August 25. One week later the Germans invaded Poland; their first target was Danzig. My father's store was destroyed in a bombing raid, and my uncle was killed.

The date was September 1, 1939—the day the war began.

We never returned to Danzig. After my birthday we stayed at my grandparents' house in Tomaszów, a much smaller town of forty thousand people, where my parents thought we would be safe, although it was already overrun with Germans. One of my earliest memories is staring through the window at their high boots and listening to the rhythmic marching that made me too frightened to move.

Later, the Gestapo forced us out of my grandparents' house and put us in a section of town called the ghetto. We moved into an apartment with several other families. One of the couples, the Tenenbaums, had two daughters, Frieda and Dorka. Frieda was six and Dorka was two. Dorka's family called her Bombowiec, but I don't know how she got that nickname. I remember playing dolls with her under the kitchen table.

The ghetto was just one step in the Nazis' plan to deal with the "Jewish problem." In Tomaszów, where my ancestors had lived since the early 1800s, signs started appearing in restaurants and movie theatres that said, "Jews not allowed." My father even brought home a German beer mat that contained the inscription *Wer beim Juden kauft ist ein Volkverräter* [Whoever buys from a Jew is a traitor to his people]. Then came the confiscation of Jewish-owned property: homes, businesses, cars, jewelry—anything of value. After that came the ghettos and the labor camps. Last came the death camps.

In the war's early years the Germans spared people in their twenties and thirties; they wanted them to work in the munitions factories. They mostly killed the intellectuals—teachers, doctors, and lawyers—and the elderly who couldn't work. The Gestapo would storm into the ghetto at night, pound on doors, and order the older people to come out.

Sometimes the Gestapo would shoot them on the spot; that's how my mother's parents were killed. They were shot in front of their home, right out there in front of everybody. My father's parents were put on a truck and shot outside of town.

A similar fate came to my uncle James. The Germans considered him an intellectual. He was a lawyer, a German Jew, married to my father's sister. He was a nice-looking man with bushy eyebrows. I used to sit on his lap and play with his eyebrows. Then one day he disappeared. I was three years old when the Gestapo took him away.

Many others disappeared from the ghetto in the dreaded roundups. Some were murdered, others were deported to unknown destinations. When we woke up in the morning, it wasn't unusual to find an entire street deserted. We knew the Gestapo had visited during the night.

In 1943, on a bright spring afternoon, it was my family's turn to be visited. The Gestapo pounded on our door. They ordered us to pack our things and get on a truck. The ghetto was almost empty. Frieda and her family had been shipped out earlier. All our friends were gone. Only twenty-three people were left to "clean up" the ghetto. Our destination was Starachowice, a town about sixty miles away where the Germans needed workers in a munitions factory.

A few hours later a cluster of guard towers loomed ahead. We passed through a gate in a barbed wire fence. By then the sun was almost down. We were put into a room with strangers. There weren't enough beds to go around, so I slept on the floor. That was our new home.

Every morning after that, at five o'clock sharp, my parents were put in the back of a truck again and taken to the munitions factory. Usually they came home very late at night. Meanwhile, I was left with other children on the street, loosely supervised by one or two pregnant women. We ran around like street urchins, eating from garbage cans and shooting at one another with sticks, shouting, "I'm the Nazi, you're the Jew," while the SS watched from the guard towers with their machine guns.

A few days after we arrived at the labor camp, Mama sat me down at the table and said, "There are certain rules you must know. First, if you see an SS person coming toward you, step off the sidewalk. Second, don't

ever look into the eyes of an SS person. Third, if you're wearing your hat, take it off out of respect."

No sooner had I learned these rules than the SS ordered everyone in the camp to line up along a fence. Two officers led a woman to a post and tied her up. Then another officer about thirty feet away lifted a rifle and put a bullet through her head.

After the shooting, Mama and I passed a house where two children stood clinging to their father, all three crying silently. Mama said it was the woman's family. "Why did they shoot her?" I asked. Mama replied, "She didn't get off the sidewalk fast enough to let an SS man through." After that, I promised myself always to follow the rules.

One thing I didn't learn was how to sit on the toilet: it was a high wooden platform with big holes in the top. One morning when I had to go really bad I fell through the hole. I shouted and shouted, but nobody heard me. I started to cry. Finally somebody came and pulled me up by my hair, and Mama hosed me down.

It was a beautiful day in April, my first memory of Passover. Rivka, one of the pregnant women who watched over the children, had built a makeshift oven by laying a square of bricks on the ground and covering it with tin. She ignited some paper and twigs under the tin.

"Hurry," she said as she poured some water and a small portion of flour on the children's table. "We have very little time to make the matzo. Here, take this fork and piece the flattened dough in a straight line. But do it quickly, very quickly."

From the corner of my eye I spotted the SS guns pointing down at us from the towers. Was that why Rivka was in such a hurry? Would the guards shoot us if we didn't finish the matzo on time? I didn't know that the *kashrut* of the matzo depends on how quickly one mixes the dough with water and slips it in the oven.

When the matzo finished baking, Rivka said, "I know how hungry you are, but don't eat it now. Wait till your parents come home."

That night my parents found me fast asleep holding my treasured

matzo. When they woke me, I told them about Rivka and the seder. Papa gathered the three of us around the table, and we ate the matzo in silence.

Many nights I would lie on the floor pretending to be asleep, and I would listen to my parents talk about their day at the munitions factory. One night I overheard Mama say, "I heard at the factory that the Germans are gassing people somewhere."

"Nonsense," Papa replied. "They're not gassing anybody. We live in a civilized world. The Germans are just using us for labor until the war is over, and then they'll send us home."

A few days later Papa returned from the factory and announced: "We're going to Palestine."

"I'll believe it when we're there," Mama said.

"Listen. There's a list," Papa said. There were always lists. You would get on this list and that list. "I just bribed an SS guard," he said.

"Why?" Mama said.

"To get on the list—to go to Palestine."

"I said I don't believe it."

"Well, it's true," Papa said. "I told you the Germans just wanted us for labor. They just don't want us in this country. It doesn't mean they're going to kill us. They just don't want us. That's okay. We'll go to Palestine."

So we waited for the list to be called so we could go to Palestine.

Meanwhile the selections began. People in the labor camp began to hide when the SS came around at night. I asked Mama, "What's happening?" She said, "They're taking people away. We don't know where."

In the morning I went to a friend's house to play. She lived in another part of the camp. When I got there her family was gone. The door was left open, and things were strewn all over the floor: toys, a jewelry box, a doll. I thought, I should take this stuff and play with it. But something was wrong; I couldn't play with these things. When I got home I told Mama, "I went to visit my friend, but nobody's there."

"Ah," she said, "so they took that street."

Mama figured that any day now the SS would be taking our street. She told my father, "We need a place to hide." She pointed to the ceiling where Papa had installed hooks for hanging clothes. "What about there?"

Papa took the clothes down and cut a square in the ceiling. The opening between the rafters was barely wide enough for a five-year-old to climb through, let alone a grown-up, and the crawl space was so low we couldn't sit up. But Papa said it had to do. As Mama handed me back down, I spotted daylight through a chink in the front wall. Papa put the cutout section back and Mama rehung the clothes. The cutout was invisible from the floor.

Several nights later Papa came home and shouted, "Quickly, quickly, hide quickly!"

Mama jumped up from the table and pulled her chair over to where the clothes were hanging. Papa got up on the chair, shoved the clothes aside, and pushed me through the ceiling. Then he pushed my mother through. There wasn't time for him to climb up, so he put the cutout back and shoved the clothes back into place.

The shouts from the street had already begun: "*Raus! Raus!*" [Out! Out! Everybody out!] I heard my father drag the chair back, so I knew he was still downstairs. Then the shooting began. I sat crouched over on Mama's lap, trying to look through the chink in the wall.

The SS were taking the children. Everybody was screaming. Mama pressed her hand over my mouth. Through the chink I spotted a child clinging desperately to its mother's neck. An SS guard seized the child's arm. The screaming mother refused to let go. With a powerful thrust, the guard yanked the child from her arms and hurled it on a truck.

When the selection ended, it was already dark. Mama and I came down from our hiding place. "You can't go on the street anymore," she said. "From now on you have to stay inside."

No longer were children seen in the labor camp. Like my grandparents, I became dispensable. You were either too old or too young to work. So when my parents went out at five in the morning to go to the factory, I had to stay indoors, alone. I had no choice.

The roundups, the shootings, the selections: that's how I thought Jews

were supposed to live. I thought you had to be punished because you were Jewish. I didn't know any other life.

But I knew what to do when the situation called for it. One day an SS man came to our house; you always knew when one was approaching—*thump, thump, thump*—in those big boots. Before he opened the door, my mother stood up. Instinctively, I darted behind her and froze. The SS man just stood there in the doorway, looked at my mother, and walked away.

Papa said that any day now we'd be going to Palestine. Others in the camp were on the list to go there, too. But days passed . . . weeks . . . a month. Nothing. Then one day Papa barged through the front door, slammed it behind him, and kicked the chair under the table.

"That list we're on," he said. "It isn't going to Palestine. It's going to Auschwitz."