
Helen

Mama and I looked out from the Red Cross truck. Corners of buildings, their stone walls blown away, rose like pyramids from the rubble. Here and there a solitary chimney cast a silhouette against the sky. A few people wandered aimlessly along the streets of Tomaszów Mazowiecki. I imagined my father running up to the truck and opening his arms. But no one greeted us.

Mama turned to me. "Before we do anything, we're going to your grandparents' house."

All I could think of was food. We had eaten little since leaving Auschwitz, and I felt a pit returning to my stomach. "Can't we get something to eat first?"

We found a bakery and bought one jelly doughnut. When we found my grandparents' house, it looked like all the other ruins in the neighborhood: only a few walls remained, surrounded by rocks. Mama sat down on a rock. I climbed up beside her, holding the paper bag with the doughnut. Finally I said, "May I eat my doughnut now?"

Mama nodded.

I broke off half the doughnut and handed it to her. She shook her head and said softly, "No, no, you eat it." I ate her half of the doughnut. Then she motioned across the ruins. "See that wall over there? That was your room before we moved to the ghetto. It was mine when I was a little girl.

Over there, that was your grandparents' room. . . ." Then she fell silent. We sat there in silence for a long time.

I didn't want my half of the doughnut anymore. Finally Mama said, "We can't just sit here. We have to find a place to sleep." She took my hand and once more we looked for shelter, just as we had done at Auschwitz after the Germans left.

It was almost dark. A few blocks away we found an open cellar. The first night in our new home we collapsed on the sand floor and fell asleep. Mama and I huddled under her coat to keep warm.

In a few days we saw Frieda and her mother again, but there was no sign of Frieda's sister, Dorka, or my friend Rutka or her mother. All I knew was that Rutka's father had died on the train to Auschwitz and that Papa had gone to Dachau without him.

Eventually three of Papa's eight siblings returned—his sisters Elka, Helen, and Ita. They had survived not only Auschwitz but also the death march to Germany.

Papa's sisters moved into the cellar with Mama and me. Within a few days Aunt Ita found work in a tailor shop, so we had money to buy food. Other things we scavenged: boxes, crates, scraps of lumber, anything we could make into a table or bed. My job was to sprinkle water on the sand floor each morning to keep dust from kicking up.

Meanwhile, Mama waited for her family—and waited. No one returned. Not one sister or brother, not one cousin, not even a distant relative. Every day we would go back to my grandparents' house and Mama would find a rock to sit on. Each time she would find a different rock, and she would sit there quietly. The rocks became her family.

Mama thought we'd be free of the Russians once we got out of Auschwitz, but now they were all over Tomaszów. Parades and rallies became daily rituals. Every night drunken soldiers came by and pounded on our door, just as they had done at Auschwitz. Ita was twenty and very pretty. Whenever the soldiers came, she was the first to hide.

Finally Helen said, "I'm tired of this. I'm going to Lodz."

"What makes you think you'll be safe there?" Elka snapped. "There are more Russians in Lodz than there are here—it's a bigger city."

Helen threw me a sideways glance, the kind one gives another when a secret is shared between them. Of my three aunts, she was my favorite. She had dark eyes, chestnut hair, and a delicately carved face that masked her willfulness. She had already confided in me the real reason she wanted to go to Lodz: it had nothing to do with the Russians.

"I found someone there, someone special," she finally told her sister. "Besides, I need a job. There's nothing here in Tomaszów. In Lodz I can find work."

"What about the Russians?" Elka pressed.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of myself."

The next morning Helen packed her things. We all walked her to the train. I was surprised to see windows in the cars, not big sliding doors. When the train left the station, Helen waved through the window, smiled at me broadly, and blew me a kiss.

The railroad station at Tomaszów Mazowiecki, where the town's remaining Jewish inhabitants were put into cattle cars and deported to various labor camps.



The Poles treated us worse than the Russians had. Every time we ran into neighbors who recognized us from before the war, their reaction was the same: "Why are you back?" "How come you're alive?" "We thought the Germans killed you!" Rumors came back from cities like Warsaw and Kraków and even Lodz about anti-Semitic gangs that threw rocks at Jews returning from the camps. Then I overheard Ita tell my mother, "Did you hear what happened in Kielce? Another pogrom. Forty-two Jews killed. The Poles just beat them to death on the streets. They accused the Jews of killing their children and drinking their blood."

I worried not only about my father but Helen, too, off by herself in that strange city. Every day I kept asking about her. Aunt Ita said I worried too much for a seven-year-old. Besides, it was time I went to school.



Tova's aunt Helen in 1946

*Tova Friedman (left) at seven,
one year after her liberation. At
right is Frieda Tenenbaum's
aunt Frymca.*



It was the fall of 1946. I found myself in a room full of Polish classmates. But I wasn't ready for school. My mind was in a fog; I couldn't study, I couldn't concentrate. Mama tried to teach me how to count, but I couldn't do it. My classmates didn't help either. Every morning they greeted me with jeers: "You dirty Jew!" "Why are you alive?" "You're just a dirty Jew!"

Was this what my mother meant about surviving alone? Why couldn't people stop hating me? What did I do to be treated this way? A familiar fear began to invade my soul: visions of selections and torture. But this time I wasn't helpless. I would do something about it.

I decided then and there that I wasn't going to be a Jew anymore; from then on I was going to be a Christian. So the next day when my classmates called me a dirty Jew, I replied, "I'm not a Jew, I'm a Christian."

After school a group of classmates followed me home. "Where are your icons?" one demanded.

"My what?"

"Your icons, your holy pictures."

"They're in the back room."

"We want to see them."

"I can't show them to you. We keep them hidden."

"You're lying. We know you don't have any, because you're just a dirty Jew."

I was desperate. The next morning I took some money Aunt Helen had sent for my eighth birthday—Mama said she had found a job at a jewelry store—and I bought a necklace with a cross on it. I put the necklace on and tucked the cross under my shirt. I decided the next time my classmates called me a dirty Jew, I would just pull the cross out and show it to them.

Mama found it first. It made her very sad. "After all of our suffering," she shouted, "after all we've gone through for being Jews, you're wearing that crucifix around your neck!" She tore it off and threw it on the floor.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I said.

She saw from the tears in my eyes how ashamed I was. Then she lifted me onto her lap and cried.

There was a knock on the door, this time a gentle knock, not like the pounding we heard every night. Mama got up to answer. A thin, tired-looking man stood at the door. He had a notebook in his hand.

"Mrs. Grossman? Raizl Grossman?" he said.

"Yes . . ."

The man introduced himself and Mama invited him in. He didn't seem to notice that we lived in a cellar. "I'm collecting names of survivors. I've been looking for my own family. Maybe this list will help find someone."

"There aren't many of us left in Tomaszów," Mama said. "Please, won't you sit down?"

The man opened his notebook. "I have only a few hundred names."

"There were twelve thousand of us before the war."

"I know. Is this your daughter?"

"Yes, her name is Tola."

The man shook my hand and smiled.

"We were at Auschwitz together," Mama continued. "But we don't know about her father. He went to another camp."

"I don't know about mine either, or anyone else in my family. Now you were saying about Tola's father . . ."

"He went to Dachau two and a half years ago. That's all we know."

"His name?"

"Machel. Machel Grossman."

The man wrote it down. "Does anyone else live here?"

"Two of his sisters. Another one went to Lodz."

He wrote their names down too. When he finished his visit, he reached for my hand and said, "Maybe we'll find your father." And he smiled at me once more and left.

Winter descended on Tomaszów again. Every night I prayed that Papa was alive. Every day I imagined him showing up at our door. Aunt Elka said the man with the notebook had only stirred false hopes, but his



Machel Grossman in 1948

visit made me want to see Papa all the more. Days passed . . . weeks . . . a month . . . nothing. Another month . . . nothing. Every night I prayed. "Dear God," I said, "please bring my father back."

Mama taught me how to count. I counted a thousand days since I had last seen my father. Each day I kept counting.

Finally a knock came on the door, a gentle daytime knock. Mama opened it and screamed. I knew at once it was my father. Mama threw her arms around him. I heard him mutter her name. Then he looked down at me and said, "My child!" He lifted me up and hugged me. All three of us cried as we stood in the doorway hugging one another.

When Papa finally put me down, his face was ashen and his hand shook. He could hardly speak and tears streamed down his face. He motioned us inside and laid a newspaper on the table. "I found this on the train," he said. I could barely make out his words.

Mama looked at the newspaper, which described how a gang of youths had stormed into a Lodz jewelry store and beaten a clerk to death with an iron rod. A picture showed a woman lying next to a counter with her head split open.

Tova's aunt Helen, after her murder in a Lodz jewelry store



"My God!" Mama cried.

I moved in for a closer look. The woman on the floor next to the counter was my aunt Helen. I stared at the picture, trying to make sense of it all. My head was in a whirl. I wondered if Papa's coming home and Helen's picture being in the newspaper was some kind of horrible, mixed-up fantasy.

"Dear God," I pleaded, "tell me what is real and what isn't. Tell me that my father is back, and tell me this isn't Aunt Helen's picture."