
Mama

I still think of Helen. Sometimes her face comes to me in dreams—her dark eyes, chestnut hair, and radiant smile. When I was eight I wanted to be just like her—graceful, courageous, and free.

My parents seldom talked about Helen after her murder, and Papa never talked about Dachau. All he ever said was that an SS officer shot him in the foot, and that was why he limped when he walked.

Before long, Aunt Elka moved out of the basement. Papa said we needed to move out, too, and find a better place to live.

Mama didn't care. As far as she was concerned she had accomplished her mission, which was saving me. Every time we visited her rocks, she became more and more withdrawn. Then one day she didn't get out of bed. At first she didn't speak, and then she drifted into a deep sleep. For weeks she lay in a coma. It felt like forever.

When she finally recovered, she said, "You'll never know the family you came from." Then I realized it wasn't only Helen's death that haunted her; it was the loss of her mother and father and nine brothers and sisters and all her nephews and nieces. There were more than 150 people. Not one had been heard from, and two years had passed since the last camp was freed.

Finally Papa said, "It's time to leave Poland."

The next thing I knew we were in Berlin—my mother and father, my

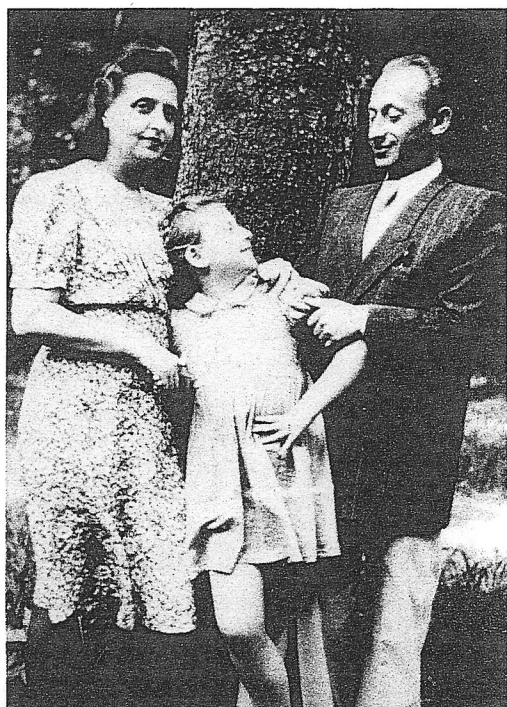
aunt Elka and I. We moved into a little room in the American zone near other Jewish refugees.

My dreams about Helen turned into nightmares. I would see her graceful face and bright smile, and then I would see that picture from the newspaper with her head split open. Then I would see things from Auschwitz in my nightmares, things like looking into a room where a door was ajar and finding bodies piled from floor to ceiling, carcasses all cut up, mangled bodies and pieces of people and no blood anywhere—were these autopsies from Dr. Mengele's experiments?—and then being ordered by an SS guard to go with other children and pull frozen bodies from the ground. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn't pull them loose.

I started sleepwalking. One night I wandered right out the door and down the street to a lookout point. An American soldier found me and carried me back in my nightgown. I remember looking up and seeing the stars and saying, "The stars, the stars," and hearing my parents frantically calling my name. After that, Mama put a wet sheet on the floor so that the cold water under my bare feet would wake me up.

Papa said we were waiting to be assigned to a displaced persons (DP) camp, but we had to have a physical first. "It's just routine," the doctor said as he directed me into his examining room. To my parents' dismay, the doctor discovered scars on my lungs. He sent me to a sanatorium in Bad Wörishofen, in American-occupied southern Germany, to be treated for tuberculosis. At the age of eight and a half, I was on my own again.

*Tova with her parents at
Bad Wörishofen, where she was
treated for tuberculosis*



A whole year passed before the doctor pronounced me cured. By that time my parents were at a DP camp in Landsburg, Germany, about thirty miles east of Bad Wörishofen. My aunts Elka and Ita, meanwhile, had gotten married and gone to another DP camp, at Leipheim.

When I rejoined my parents, Israel had just declared its independence; I remember everyone in the camp dancing for joy and parading with blue-and-white flags. I remember, too, the festival of Purim, when we celebrated Haman the Jew-hater's defeat by our ancient hero Mordecai. Hitler was our Haman. We hung effigies of him by his head, by his feet, by his belly. All the children joined in. We drew pictures of him—a big Hitler with a little body, then a fat Hitler with a little head—making him look as ridiculous as we could. Then we poked sticks at the pictures. It was small revenge for what he had done to us.

My parents debated whether to go to Israel or to America. Aunt Ita and her husband had gone to Israel and already had a daughter. Aunt Elka and her husband were living in Manhattan and had a son.

My parents finally decided on America. It was Passover when we left the DP camp, so we had our seder on the ship. It was a difficult two-week voyage. The ship was an old cargo boat, and we slept on the floor with other refugees. Mama was ill again. Papa handed me his prayer book. "If you pray every day, Mama won't die," he said.

At last, on April 4, 1950, we arrived in New York City.

Papa wasted no time adjusting to our new life. Within a few weeks he found work as a tailor. After a few months we moved into a small apartment in Astoria, a section of Queens. Immediately he set about fixing things up and buying furniture. He even began to speak English.

The adjustment was more difficult for my mother. She told my father she didn't care about how the house looked; it was all so meaningless. She kept saying, "What's the point of all this?"

Every day she talked about her family, her mother and father, her brothers and sisters and cousins, and she talked about Auschwitz. But I was unprepared for the story she told me about two of her nieces, her sister's daughters. Mama said I was too young to remember what happened. Then she sat me down at the table and said, "I'm going to tell you now."

She drew a deep breath and said, "We were getting ready to leave the ghetto in Tomaszów. We were lining up at a church, waiting to go through a gate. My sister had been taken away by the Gestapo. She left two children behind, four and five years old. But your father had papers for only the three of us."

Her lips started to tremble. "We were waiting in line—you, your father and I, and your two little cousins. Papa was carrying you and I was holding the other two, one with each hand. There was a family in front of us and the Gestapo officer said, 'Show me your papers.' He opened the papers and said to the father, 'You're registered for four. Why do I see six?' The father said, 'I'm taking my younger sister and her child. They're strong and they're going to work.' The officer said, 'But your papers are only for four. Why are you taking six?' And the father got very upset and said, 'You're looking for people to work, aren't you?' The officer said, 'You lied!' and he took the whole family—all six of them—and put them into a transport to be killed.

"Our turn was next," Mama continued. "I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. The Gestapo officer looked at your father and me and said, 'How many are you?'" Mama hesitated and drew her breath in again. "I told him, 'Three.' The Gestapo officer didn't even open up the papers. He just said, 'Okay, go through.' And I let go of those children's hands."

I reached over to hug my mother. "He didn't even open the papers," she said, sobbing. "I killed my sister's children! I forced them to let go of my hands. How can I forget their faces? I killed them!"

I cried with my mother. But I knew then and there that I had to put the past to rest, even if she couldn't. I couldn't live with her memories day in and day out.

So I decided it was time to give up the past and live in the present, to learn, to know, and to be like everybody else. I started school in Queens at age twelve. Nobody called me a dirty Jew anymore. In one year I caught up with the other children my age. I started in the fourth grade, then went on to the fifth, the sixth, skipped the seventh, and finished the eighth grade by the time I was thirteen. The teachers wanted to give me a

medal, but they didn't have one that seemed quite right, so they made one up. I still have it. It says, "For the greatest improvement ever."

Even the nightmares stopped. I listened to Shakespeare on the radio. That opened up a whole new world to me. So did the Hebrew school in Manhattan, where I met a boy from Brooklyn. He was a year older than I. It was a Sunday, my first day at school. My family had just arrived in America, and I couldn't speak English. The bell rang and everybody left the room; I didn't know where they were going. This boy came over and said to me in Yiddish, "Did you bring anything to eat?"

"No," I said.

He took me to the drugstore downstairs and ordered me a lettuce and tomato sandwich and a soda. He paid for it himself.

"My name is Maier Friedman," he said.

Someday I'm going to marry him, I thought. I was eleven and a half years old.

In 1952 we moved from Queens to Brooklyn. I became involved in a local chapter of a Zionist youth group, Habonim. Our mission was to protect Jews and prevent another Holocaust.

At eighteen I started Brooklyn College. There I met Marty, who all but made me forget that nice boy Maier from the Hebrew school. We planned to get married. But I needed to see Israel first. I couldn't live with my mother's memories day in and day out. I told myself, "I've got to get out and be free."

So in 1957, my second semester at Brooklyn College, I signed up to go to Israel on a six-week program sponsored by the college. I just told my mother that I was going.

"When?" she asked.

"The boat leaves June fifteenth and arrives July first," I replied.

"Why can't you leave two weeks later and take the plane?"

"Because everyone else is going on the boat."

"I really want you to take the plane."

"Why?"

"Because I may not see you anymore."

"You're being crazy," I said. I wondered if Mama was having another premonition, like the one she had before my first birthday when we went to Tomaszów. "I'm taking you to the doctor, Mama."

I called up the doctor on our street and said, "I'm going to Israel, but I'm worried about my mother. I want her to have a checkup before I leave."

The doctor examined her. Afterwards he drew me aside and said, "Listen, your mother is very attached to you. She's got a clean bill of health, so there's no reason you can't go. If you don't go now, you'll never go."

I decided to travel. But I still worried about her. When we went shopping for my trip, I said, "Mama, you need a housecoat."

"I no longer need any clothes."

"Mama, you're being crazy again."

I asked Marty to stay with my parents while I went to Israel. The day I left, Mama walked me out of the house to a waiting taxi. After I climbed into the backseat, she handed me a makeup kit.

"Here, take this," she said. "It's for you." And she kissed me good-bye.

When I arrived in Tel Aviv, four postcards were waiting for me. They were all from my mother. I read them and chuckled at her English. During the next month I received eight more postcards from her.

Before I boarded the plane home, I bought a silver cup for my parents' twenty-first wedding anniversary. When I arrived back in New York—it was early August then—Papa and Marty were at the plane to meet me and so were Marty's parents. My father looked haggard and agitated.

"Where's Mama?" I asked.

"She isn't feeling well," Papa said. "She has a virus."

"I want to go home."

"No, why don't you come to our house," Marty's parents replied. "We've prepared lunch for you."

So we went to Marty's house—all five of us—and sat down in the dining room to eat lunch. I excused myself to go into the other room. I picked up the phone to call home. No answer. I tried again. Still no answer. I

went back into the living room and said, "I've been trying to call Mama but she isn't home. Where is she? I thought she was sick. Doesn't she know I'm here?"

Papa looked at me and said, "There's no point in your calling. Your mother is dead."

I couldn't believe he hadn't sent for me. Then the questions started coming: Would Mama have died had I not gone to Israel? Is that what my leaving did to her? How could I cope with the guilt? Even if I had left later on the plane as she had wanted me to, would she still be alive?

Mama died on June 29, 1957. She was forty-five. I was still on the boat on my way to Israel. Over a month had passed before I even found out. Marty told me what happened: Every evening he watched television with my mother. One night she got a terrible headache and Papa gave her some aspirin. At ten o'clock Marty went to bed. Mama was still watching television. In the morning on his way to work, Papa saw her on the couch, wearing her new housecoat. He thought she was asleep. So did Marty when he left for class. Neither wanted to wake her. When Papa came home she was still on the couch, in the same position. Marty said my mother died of an aneurysm.

I never found out who mailed the postcards, but that didn't matter. Mama was dead, and part of me died with her.

Every night, for weeks, I cried myself to sleep.