

# **The Redemption of Innocence:**

## **Tova Beck-Friedman's "At the Altar of Her Memories"**

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There are numerous worthy reasons for making films concerning the Holocaust, and none of them are obvious. By now, the essential facts of the greatest atrocity in history are well known, and the very horror of it is in the unchanging repetitiveness of those facts—a hellish nightmare repeated millions of times over. The specifics of the individual stories cannot be reported often enough, but our sense of the Holocaust as being ultimately “unimaginable” indicates how little we understand, and how much more there is to be conveyed. We know much of the details, but we feel we may never comprehend them. What we need is something more than facts, statistics, and even narratives—what we need is testimony, not merely of the circumstances the survivors who make their testimony had to suffer, but of the weight and import of those events. We need to understand the felt reality of those facts and the intimacies of their experience, in order finally to know the value of them, the meaning of them—to know the true darkness of the horror. Words like “evil” and “atrocious” are too easy—they are mere words. We need to be made to see into the heart of the evil, to feel it, if we are ever to feel a constant need for vigilance against its return.

In her wonderful film “At the Altar of Her Memories,” producer and director Tova Beck-Friedman achieves the distinction of taking a step further into the heart of the evil by taking us into the heart of one of its survivors. Beyond reporting the

story of one victim—Bracha Ghilai, Beck-Friedman’s aunt who suffered the torments of both Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen—the director shows us her response after the hideous facts: the inner workings of her soul after the terror, and the slow re-surfacing of her own heart. What we learn is that there can be a theme running through the life of a survivor, that a survivor needs to and can redeem herself from her experience, and that she can, almost through a necessary impulse, restore the very thing that the Nazis, or any bringer of the nightmare, wishes to destroy. In “At the Altar of Her Memories,” Beck-Friedman reveals to us more than a story—she opens a life in which innocence calls to be protected, and in which art serves as a restorative force, a force restorative of innocence itself.

The story told by Ghilai is simple to recount. Having grown up in Beregszasz, Czechoslovakia, at the age of fifteen, she and much of her family were sent to Auschwitz. For a brief period prior to that, Ghilai along with all the Jews of Beregszasz were forced to live in a ghetto, where she played constantly with her young nephew Nisan. When placed on the transport train for Auschwitz, she protected Nisan, only to suffer the shock upon arriving at the camp of being forced to separate from him, never to see him again. When eventually the Russian army pushed close to the camp, the prisoners were evacuated, in Ghilai’s case to Bergen-Belsen, where she met an older sister she had not seen since her internment. Her sister died only one month before the camp was liberated. Ghilai emigrated to Israel, where she and her husband began a puppet theater. She did not speak of her experiences for years, until only a few years ago, when she saw a painting by Samuel Bak in Yad Vashem, a painting of a young girl standing at the feet of the corpse of her mother, holding a pair of shoes. It reminded Ghilai of her sister’s death and her first impulse to take her sister’s shoes, better than

hers, off the corpse, in order to survive. From the moment she saw the painting, Ghilai has used the puppets of her theater to present her story, the story of her nephew, and the story of her sister.

In the film, Beck-Friedman presents the stories through the words of Ghilai, not only through direct testimony to the camera, but also, when telling the stories of her nephew and sister, in the form of a puppet-theater performance. The presentation conveys unmistakably, in a feeling so intimate it is like a heat in the blood, the continuing horror of the memories, memories that can be approached only by being displaced into the mouths of puppets. But there is more, there is an appropriateness to the use of puppets, as items from children's theater. They heighten the implication of what is being recounted—the assault on innocence, the destruction of the world of a child, and the demolishing of the purity of heart that only a child can have. The implication is in all the details of this survivor's stories: the need to protect her young nephew; the first shock of horror at losing him forever, a child losing an even younger child; the discovery of her sister with whom Ghilai spent her childhood only then to lose her sister again. From the performance by puppets, we can feel the aura, the very mind, imagination, and soul of a child, and the quality of the feeling begins to enter what would otherwise be to us just facts. We feel something of the simple purity of nature, the easy and direct goodness of the soul of a child, and we begin to feel the weight of the nightmare by entering the child's world.

We feel, as well, the restorative potential of art in the theatrical presentation, fused with the imagination of childhood in the use of a child's art, and something of that purity seems indestructible. It survives—childhood innocence, the very

innocence Ghilai tried to protect in her nephew—it remains in the form of art, it stays to tell its story, it outlasts the evil that threatened it.

It is to Back-Friedman's enormous credit that every aspect of the film serves to achieve this effect, to instill this felt understanding. The stories are pared down to the details that matter, the portions that show us children in the center of the maelstrom, without the recounting of the facts of the larger situation. We are focused in tightly on the world of children. When Ghilai's direct testimony is replaced by the performance of the puppets, the puppets are treated by the camera just as Ghilai has been—they are shown in close-up, enacting the story-telling, as if they were truly speaking. We see them as a child would, as if there were nothing in the world but them and us. In particular, there is the framing of the film with recitations of two letters Ghilai has written to her dead sister, who she repeatedly dreams is still alive. Those two moments—presented at the beginning and the end of the film, bracketing it—are moments in which Ghilai returns to the time of her own childhood, the time in which her sister was still alive, and she takes us with her. It is heart-breaking.

The breaking of the heart is something more meaningful, something more urgent, than the mere knowledge that there is evil in the world. It is the knowledge of why it matters that evil exists, and it is the intimate awareness of what evil is through feeling what it does. Evil is the threat of utter destruction of something that is precious and indispensable—the simple, transparent, warm and glowing goodness that we all once knew how to feel. It is only by being brought to feel it again that we can understand not merely that evil lives but why evil is evil, that we can understand what threat it makes by being brought to feel what precious thing it attempts to eradicate. We can know the

nature of the darkness, know the reason that it is darkness, by being made to know again how pure a thing goodness is—by knowing it as we all have once known it, as known with the open heart of a child, by remembering how uncorrupted a thing it is to recognize the difference between right and wrong, by understanding goodness as a fact, by recalling that it is as clear as vision, as loud as song, as fresh as joy. It is the achievement of “At the Altar of Her Memories” that the film does not merely show the shocking truth of evil but also the tenderness in the center of all our souls that cries to be protected.