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At the Altar of Her Memories, Directed by Tova Beck-Friedman

Gulsen Calik



At the Altar of Her Memories is a 27-minute documentary film that captures the heart-wrenching events in the life of Bracha Ghilai, a Holocaust survivor who was barely fifteen years old when the Nazis occupied her hometown in Berehovo, Czechoslovakia in 1944. Employing a mix of puppetry, family photographs and archival footage, director Tova Beck-Friedman lays bare the poignant incidents in her Aunt Bracha's life.



"The Coat" chapter from *At the Altar of Her Memories*, Directed by Tova Beck-Friedman

Ms. Ghilai, who moved to Israel a year after being liberated from the Belsen-Bergen concentration camp in April 1945, started a puppet theater there, initially enacting imaginary tales for school-age kids. In this documentary, her gaze turns inward as she dramatizes painful memories of her days as a Holocaust victim nearly six decades ago. Directly engaging the audience, she manipulates the hand puppets in scenes of reunion or farewell, articulating subtle, understated emotion through the jagged movements of the dolls. As a vehicle in conveying both her personal story and the inexpressible depth of tragedy inherent to this juncture in history, the puppets work well. The Holocaust forms the silent background against which the puppets perform, giving an innocent, subjective dimension to horrifying fact.

Told in wide brush-strokes, Ms. Ghilai's reminiscence is structured in chapters. Black and white titles introduce sub-plots, such as *Nisan*, the episode when she last sees her 7-year-old nephew, or *The Coat*, when Ms. Ghilai's unexpected discovery of her own photograph in an archival album triggers her memory of a fellow victim's generosity.

The film also offers the rare opportunity of being able to peer into Ms. Ghilai's painfully private moments through the lens of her niece. Details of her life, such as the number A-7630 tattooed on her arm, emerge through the ingredients of a larger tragedy as her personal story intersects powerfully with historical facts. Although some archival photographs of actual scenes from concentration camps are used, the audience is mostly spared the visual assault of horrific Holocaust footage. Instead, we are transported to Bracha Ghilai's home where she tells her story in her own words, unscripted. Ms. Ghilai does not talk about the moral/political issues pertinent to the Holocaust. She does not incriminate and she does not cry. And with unexpected power, by denying the audience what most Holocaust documentaries demand, she indirectly articulates her own personal triumph over her past, letting judgment rest.

The story, with English subtitles, is narrated in Hebrew in Ms. Ghilai's voice. Her voice is voluble yet restrained, as if she's holding back the painful resonance of her past from seeping through. Her pale, intelligent face, framed by waves of auburn hair, reflects a quiet determination, validating her right to continued dignity for the balance of her years.

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In the final episode, titled *Shoes*, Ms. Ghilai visits the day of her sister's death in March 1945, a month before the camp's liberation by the British Army in April. At the end of her story, she has a puppet snatch the much-coveted pair of tiny black shoes from the feet of death, lying still on a blanket. The innocent, toy-size props, removed by a puppet representing Ms. Ghilai, hint at the complexity of emotions in which the instinct for survival overshadows the sense of familial loyalty. Still, as Ms. Ghila's voice gives a quiet account of anguished moments within turbulent times, she notes that for her sister Sharie "freedom came too late." The camera, placed up-close to Ms. Ghilai, registers her pained silence as she sits in the well-lit room, re-telling the events of that particular day. She recalls, "But the shoes symbolized life for me. And I wanted so much to live."

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