

על מזבח הזכרונות

At the Altar of Her Memories

Produced and directed by
Tova Beck-Friedman ©2005

Synopsis:

At age seventeen, following her liberation from Bergen-Belsen Bracha Ghilai came to Israel to start her life over. As part of her healing process she established a puppet theater. Sixty years later, surrounded by her puppets Bracha recalls the dire events of her youth. Through a mix of storytelling, puppetry and archival photographs we experience the anguish of her narrative while she unlocks chapters from her painful past. Her stories range from the heart-wrenching description of her separation from her nephew, Nisan, to the powerful and poignant account of incredible power of endurance, survival and the guilt that accompanies it.

Running Time: 27 minutes
In Hebrew with English subtitles
www. <http://tbfstudio.com/altar.html>
Contact:
Tova Beck-Friedman
212 – 686 – 9031
tova@tbfstudio.com

DISTRIBUTION & SCREENING:

Yad Vashem; The Holocaust Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem. Israel.
The Jerusalem Cinematheque, Israel.
Massuah, Institute For Study Of The Holocaust, Kibbutz Tel Itzhak, Israel
Beit Li'hiot, Center For Study Of The Holocaust, Holon, Israel.
Bergen-Belsen Memorial Museum, Germany (with German subtitles).
Holocaust Centre, Budapest, Hungary (with Hungarian subtitles)
Steven Spielberg Jewish Film at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel.
The Jerusalem Cinematheque, Israel.
Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY.
The Center for Jewish History, New York, NY
Museum of Jewish Heritage A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, New York, NY.
Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, Montreal, Canada

Screening:

The Jerusalem Cinematheque, Israel (March 29, 2006)
Holon Theater, Israel (April 24, 2006)
Greenburgh Hebrew Center, Dobbs Ferry, NY, (April 24, 2006)
Yeshiva University Museum in New York (April 25, 2006)
The Center for Jewish History (April 25th, 2006).
Grace Church Van Vorst, Jersey City, NJ (April 26th, 2006).
Drew university, Madison, NJ (April 27th, 2006).
Bnai Jeshurun Temple, Cleveland, Ohio (May 7th, 2006)
Maison de la Culture Plateau Mont-Royal, Montreal, Canada.(May 9th, 2006)

Exhibitions:

A video installation at Yeshiva University Museum in New York (April 2006-January 2007).

Distributor:

Groupe Intervention Video
5505 St. Laurent Blvd., Suite 3015
Montreal, Quebec H2T156
Tél: (514) 271-5506 - Fax: (514) 271-6980
Email: giv@videotron.ca



Tova Beck-Friedman
34 E. 30th
New York, NY, 10016

20.6.05

Dear Tova,

I have watched 'At the altar of her memories', the film you produced based on Bracha Ghilai's testimony, several times.

I am not a film expert; I don't understand the ins and outs of film production. I have not learned the subject and have not been involved in the field.

But ---

This film left me speechless, choking with emotions. Since Holocaust testimonies are not only to remember, but also to question – I keep asking myself time and again: How? Could it be real? How could people do such horrible crimes to other people?

The film is a master piece! It weaves puppetry within the testimony with much sensitivity; a delicate balance between horrors versus internal courage. The integration of places, landscape, words and atmosphere is striking.

The film permeates into our innermost layer of existence.

I have seen many testimonial films, but "At the Altar of Her Memories" is head and shoulder above them.

Your professionalism and sensitivity are astonishing. You have made a lasting contribution to both Bracha and to generations to come.

Very truly yours,

Tzipi Kichler

Tzipi Kichler
Director, Beit Li'hiot
Center For Study Of The Holocaust
Holon, Israel



עיריית חולון
מינהל החינוך התרבות והספורט
מחלקת הנוער

חולון, 20.6.05

לכבוד
טובה בק פרידמן

טובה יקרה,

צפיתי מספר פעמים בסרט שהפקת "על מזבח הזכרונות" עפ"י ספור עדותה של ברכה גילאי.

אינני מומחית גדולה בקולנוע. אינני מבינה גדולה בכל הקשור להפקת סרטים. מעולם לא למדתי את הנושא ולא עסקתי בתקשורת. א ב ל –

הסרט הזה השאיר אותי נאלמת וחנוקה מהתרגשות, והחשוב מכל – תוהה ושואלת שוב: איך, איך זה יכול להיות אמיתי?! איך בני אדם עוללו לבני אדם אחרים פשעים זועתיים שכאלה, שהרי עדות מהשואה אינה רק למטרת זכירה, אלא – ובעיקר לסימני שאלה.

הסרט שלך הוא "מסטר-פיס". באיזו רגישות שילבת את תיאטרון הבובות בעדות. באיזו עדינות, כמו נגיעות של אור גנוז – את מעלה בפני הצופה את הזוועה מחד גיסא ואת הגבורה הנפשית מאידך גיסא. באיזו מקצועיות את משלבת נופים, מקומות, מילים ואוירה.

הסרט חודר אל תוך הנימים הכי כמוסים של הלב.

ראיתי סרטים רבים של עדויות – אבל "על מזבח הזכרונות" – עולה על כולם עשרת מונים.

מקצועיותך ורגישותך – מופלאים. בסרט זה תרמת תרומה גדולה הן לברכה גילאי והן לדורות הבאים.

היי ברוכה,

שלך, ציפי קיכלר
מנהלת "בית להיות"
המרכז לטיפוח תודעת השואה ולקחיה

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

Gulsen Calik



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

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.

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

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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.

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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The Redemption of Innocence: Tova Beck-Friedman's "At the Altar of Her Memories"

By Mark Daniel Cohen

Mark Daniel Cohen is the Coordinator of Graduate Studies at the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, and a freelance author who writes regularly on art in New York City, with over 400 articles, art reviews, and essays on contemporary art and aesthetics in publication in a variety of art exhibition catalogues and commercial, university, and art school journals. He has recently completed two books, *The Art of Kenneth Snelson* and *The Judenporzellan of Izhar Patkin*, as well as contributing chapters to *Chawky Frenn: Art for Life's Sake*, *Abstraction in the Elements*, the second edition of *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* by Richard Kostelanetz, *The Teutloff Collection at Brock University, Canada*, and *Nietzsche and Antiquity: His Reaction and Response to the Classical Tradition*. He is currently working on several volumes: *The Prosthetic Soul*, a book concerning the Florentine art of the Italian Renaissance, and two philosophical works, *The Power of the Right* and *Treatise on Poetic Reason*. e-mail : cohenmd@aol.com Web: http://homepage.mac.com/cohenmd1/Art_Writing/

At the Altar of Her Memories

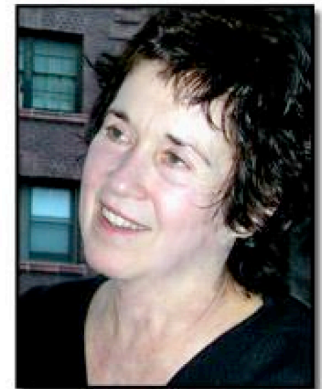
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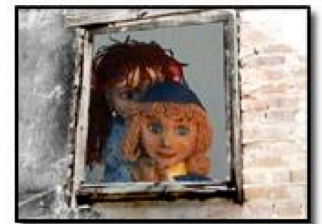
There are numerous worthy reasons for making films concerning the Holocaust, and none of them are obvious. By now, the essential facts of the greatest atrocity in history are well known, and the very horror of it is in the unchanging repetitiveness of those facts—a hellish nightmare repeated millions 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




Mark Daniel Cohen



Tova Beck-Friedman



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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 “atrocities” 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.

Director's statement:

Al Mizbah Ha'zichronot (At the Altar of Her Memories), is the story of my aunt's Holocaust experience told through her own voice and through her puppets. Interweaving puppetry and story telling my aunt, Bracha Ghilai, who spent her adolescent years in concentration camps, unlocks chapters from her painful past.

I have known Bracha for almost all of my life. Following liberation from Bergen-Belsen she came to Israel to be with her older brother (my father) who escaped the war. She was seventeen at the time and assumed the role of an older sister - - we were quite close, but not a word was uttered about her life during the war.

It was only a couple of years ago that I began to hear of her experiences during the Holocaust. A museum painting of a barefoot girl holding a pair of shoes in front of a dead woman had jolted Bracha's memory and led her to break a half a century of silence, lifting the protective lid that suppressed her all those years.

As part of her healing process she established a puppet theater. Sixty years later, surrounded by her puppets Bracha recalls the dire events of her youth. Through a mix of storytelling, puppetry and archival photographs we experience the anguish of her narrative while she unlocks chapters from her painful past. Her stories range from the heart-wrenching description of her separation from her nephew, Nisan, to the powerful and poignant account of incredible power of endurance, survival and the guilt that accompanies it.

Tova Beck-Friedman

Curriculum Vitae:

Born in Israel, living and working in New York, NY, Tova Beck-Friedman is an artist working in the mediums of video, photography and sculpture. After receiving a B.A from Purdue University, and an MA from Goddard College, she was awarded in 1982 a graduate student research studies at Tama University of Art, Tokyo, Japan.

Her work has been widely exhibited in the US, Israel, Australia, Europe and Japan.

Currently a video installation of her documentary "Al Mizbah Hazichronot" (At the Altar of Her Memories) is at Yeshiva University Museum in New York. At the Altar of Her memories has been also screened at The Jerusalem Cinematheque and Holon Theater in Israel; The Center for Jewish History, New York, NY; Grace Church Van Vorst, Jersey City, NJ; Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, Cleveland, Ohio; Greenburgh Hebrew Center, Dobbs Ferry, NY; Drew University, Madison, NJ, and at the Maison de la culture Plateau Mont-Royal, Montreal, Canada.

A recent residency at Louisiana Southeastern University sponsored the production of two video dance projects, *Shadow Walk* and *Passages*. Both films were screened at Columbia Theater, Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond, LA. At the Detroit International Film & Video Festival 2005 and The In Flux Video Art Festival. Thessaloniki, Greece. *Passages* is posted on Cinematic Film website, a Paris based organization for the promotion of experimental films, @ www.cinematicfilm.com.

Among recent exhibitions are: *Wandering Library Project* of The International Artists' Museum, at the 50th Venice Biennale, Italy; New Jersey State Museum; The Newark Museum, NJ; Monique Goldstrom Gallery, New York, NY; The Mitchell Museum, Mt. Vernon, IL; The Bill Bace Gallery, New York, NY; *Ancient emblems-Contemporary signifiers*, Jersey City Museum, NJ; Herzliya Museum, Herzeliya, Israel; Michaelson & Orient Gallery, London, UK; The Tokyo American Cultural Center, Japan.

Additional fellowships, artist's residencies and awards were: Franconia Sculpture park, MN; USA/ Jerom Artist Grant; Accessibility Project at Sumter, South Carolina; Boleslawiec International Symposium, Poland; Clay/Sculpt Gulgong Symposium, Australia; Environmental Sculpture Symposium, MuJu, Korea; Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY; The Center for Visual Arts, Be'er-Sheva, Israel; NJ Museum of Archaeology at Drew University; International Adobe Sculpture Biennial in Be'er-Sheva, Israel.

AL MIZBAH HAZICHRONOT / At the Altar of Her Memories

Bracha Ghilai's story

Produced and directed by Tova Beck-Friedman.

Treatment:

AT THE ALTAR OF HER MEMORIES is a film documenting the story of Bracha Ghilai, a Holocaust survivor. Through a mix of story telling, puppetry and archival photographs we experience the anguish of her narrative while she shares chapters from her powerful story of endurance and survival.

Bracha was born in 1929, in Beregszasz (Berehovo in Czech), Transcarpathia, Czechoslovakia. In 1938 after the "Munich agreement" the area was transferred to Hungary and in 1945 it became part of the Ukraine.

A child actress in her hometown and the youngest of ten siblings, following her mother's untimely death, she was raised by her older sisters. But it was with her sister Sharie, with whom she had a special bond. At the age of fifteen, Bracha's life was interrupted by the atrocities of the Second World War. She spent her adolescent years first in Auschwitz and later in Bergen Belsen. Years later as an adult and already living in Israel, she established a puppet theater and became a puppeteer.

Through her puppets Bracha relives chapters in her life that for many years she tried to expunge from her memory.

The film is half an hour long and is composed of five (5) chapters, a short prelude and an epilogue:

- THE DREAM - a recurring dream and a visit to Bergen-Belsen.
- NISAN - the story of Bracha's nephew's Nisan, who was condemned to death in Auschwitz.
- THE COAT - A precious moment amidst a tragedy.
- THE PAINTING – the trigger that released painful memories
- THE SHOES – a powerful and poignant account of incredible power of survival and the guilt that accompanies it.

- PRELUDE

The film opens with a view of a memorial wall of family photographs at Beit Lehiot, Holon, Israel, a community house for Holocaust survivors. The camera pans across the wall, stops and zooms in on a 1937 Winger-Beck family portrait at Paula's wedding.

The haunting music of HEBREW LULLABY by Joseph Achron is playing.

- THE DREAM

In a desolated area two dancers slowly walk towards one another while Bracha's voice describes a recurring dream she has been experiencing: In her dream she meets her sister and asks her: Are you alive? Weren't you taken to the gas chambers?

And she replies: of course I am alive, why are you asking?

There is a moment of euphoria, but then Bracha wakes up to the realization that it was just a dream.

The dream scene dissolves into forest trees as seen from a moving car. Arriving at a road sign "Getenkstätte Bergen-Belsen" we are entering Bergen-Belsen Memorial.

As the camera pans on the bucolic scene of Begen-Belsen memorial Park, we hear Bracha's voice as she reads a letter to her sister Sharie:

My dear Sharie,

Here I am again on German soil, at the site of the former concentration camp Bergen-Belsen.

I did not forget you.

Even after so many years, I terribly miss you.

One month after you passed away, the British Army liberated the camp. We were freed.

But for you, dear Sharie, freedom arrived too late.

Camera pans on mass graves, and fades to black

- NISAN

Continuing her discussion with her dead sister Sharie, Bracha fills us in on what happened to her since liberation: She immigrated to Israel, continued her education, got married, had two sons and now has 7 grandchildren.

She founded a puppet theater and with the theatre have performed in schools, telling children tales.

Few years ago she finally addressed her personal trauma and and started telling school children of what happened to her during the Holocaust.

The next segment is a reenactment of Nisan's story through a staging of a puppet show.

There are three puppets in the play: a young girl, a boy and an older woman. The boy represents Nisan, the girl stands for Bracha as a young girl and the older woman is the narrator, she is Bracha today.

The narrator opens the play describing the family and the joyous birth of Nisan. But life was interrupted when the country was conquered by the Germans. In

April 1944, at age 15, Bracha, her family, and the other Jewish residents of her town, were forced into the Beregszasz brick factory, which had been turned into a ghetto.

One day a train pulled into the ghetto and they were ordered to get in.

Description of the trip ensues:

“The train was very crowded; there was hardly room to sit.

I held Nisan tightly. I hugged him – I did not want him to be scared.....I sang songs for him, but the train was making a loud noise, it was hard to hear.

The trip was long, it lasted three days and three nights.

The train stopped.

The doors were opened and we heard voices:

Get off fast! get in line!

Children should go with their mothers!

Men and women should separate!

But , I held Nisan I did not want us to be separated.

But then someone came, pulled us apart and said:

The boy must go with his mother!

And Nisan left....

And I did not see him anymore.

And my arm remained stretched for a long time

And a silent cry that only I could hear, escaped my mouth:

N I S A N.....

But I could not see him any longer.”

- THE COAT

The coat tells the story of an amazing discovery.

Yad Vashem had published the *Auschwitz Album: The Story of a Transport*.

In it are photographs taken by the Nazis of transports from Hungary and the Carpathian region as they arrived in Auschwitz.

Among them were transports from Bracha’s hometown Beregszasz.

She purchased the album hoping to find someone from her family, but instead found herself in one of the photographs.

She was ambivalent at first; she was not sure it was her in the photo, but then she remembered a treasured exchange with one of the deportees that was a ray of light in a very dark period: “...today looking back seeing the young girl in the album, I feel like I found a precious moment I have lost a long time ago.”

- THE PAINTING

For more than fifty years Bracha refused to discuss her Holocaust experience. But then something happened. Visiting Yad Vashem

She came across a painting. "Before we moved on, I stopped in front of one of the painting. I felt that the artist painted this painting after he heard my story".

In the painting, a dead naked woman lying on her back. At her foot stands a young girl holding a pair of shoes. She stands with her back to the lying woman, ready to walk away.....

This powerful image triggered Bracha's memory lifting the lid that suppressed those stories all those years.

- THE SHOES

"On January 1st, 1945, we were loaded again on trains."

Starting with a historical perspective Bracha lays out the background to the events.

The Russians were advancing towards Poland and the Germans starts to retreat and decided to transfer the prisoners to Germany.

"Once a again, I am on a train not knowing where we are going."

The train stopped and the prisoners started a grueling walk in bitter cold condition to Bergen-Belsen.

Upon arrival she learns that her sister Sharie is in the camp. The sisters are united and console each other. But here Bracha reveals that while she had torn shoes and her feet were frozen, her sister had good shoes, man's shoes – a subject of her jealousy. But she did not dare say a word.

The situation at the camp deteriorated; people died every day, food was scarce and the hygienic conditions were abominable. They were sick with typhoid. Sharie was much older than Bracha. At that time she was over thirty years old and people above thirty had a little chance of surviving.

One day Sharie would not wake up for roll call,

"I was afraid that if she won't get up and go out,

the block supervisor, known as Blockalteste would beat her up."

She decided to approach the supervisor saying:

"I am trying to wake up my sister but she does not get up what shall I do?"

She said: why don't you go out and leave your sister inside

I ran out for roll call, but was anxious and wanted to know what is happening with Sharie inside the block.

Suddenly the Blockalteste addressed me and asked:

"Is the woman inside the block is your sister?"

"Yes" I answered.

"How is she?"

"Go inside" she ordered

I ran into the block and I saw that Sharie was lying on a blanket and four women were dragging the blanket.

"where are you taking her?" I asked
to revier?

(revier was a clinic from which most patient never returned)
They did not answer. I asked again
“where are you taking her?” and again they did not reply.
And then –suddenly – I realized what had happened. She had died.
She simply died.
I leapt to the blanket I bent down and took her shoes off.
“They are mine” I said “they belong to me”
I turned my back and left, without looking back without knowing where she was taken.

“But the shoes symbolized life for me and I wanted so much to live.”

EPILOGUE

Back in Bergen-Belsen Memorial Park.
Camera pans across mass graves and Bracha voice talking to her sister is heard:

Dear Sharie, I don't know where you were buried

There are so many graves here
And each grave has so many people
So I went to all of them and imagined you lying in them.
Rest in piece and may your memory be blessed.
From your sister who did not forget and will never forget.

The haunting music of HEBREW LULLABY by Joseph Achron is playing again.

A text reads:

Sharie Jakubovitsh died
and was buried in
Bergen Belsen
March 1945

The camp was liberated
one month later.

Feedback:

Dear Mrs. Beck Friedman,

Thank you very much for the DVD about your aunt Bracha Ghilai with the German subtitles. I have just watched the film and I am very impressed by the production. I will also give it to my colleagues of the educational board.

Yours sincerely
Karin Theilen
Stiftung niedersaechsische Gedenkstaetten
- Gedenkstaette Bergen-Belsen -
D - 29303 Lohheide

Dear Tova,

I have just received the DVD, which shows us a part of Bracha's Holocaust memories.

I have seen, that you made this DVD, congratulation for that.

It is unique, because it does not speak only hundreds of dead bodies, tortures, but focuses on two important persons in Bracha's live: Nissan a Sari.

It shows, that to have a very strong connection with somebody, it does not depend on the person's age.....

It is unique because of the "puppet-show", and because this is a silent memory of a huge family, which had suffered a lot.

Warm regards,

Tibi
Dr. Várkonyi Tibor ügyvéd
ingatlanközvetít_- és értékbecsł_
1055 Budapest, Balaton utca 16.
Hungary

Dear Tova,

Just now we (Zbyszek and Zosia) have watched to your deep touching movie. For the first time I saw your picture several days ago, but this evening I had to help Zosia by interpreting of subtitles and we experienced your gloriously work once again together.

We had to compare your work with "The Pianist" by Polanski. He told about the true story, with happy end, which was almost not possible. By all cruelty of this movie it was kind of fairly story.

Your picture was completely different and much more impressive. We had the deep feeling that every sentence told by your aunt was poignant true and that this story cannot have any happy end. It was a piece of real life from these traumatic days.

We are very thankful that we had a chance to meet - in our feelings - with you and with your aunt in this so touching memory.

Thanks to your art and worldly wisdom of your aunt you created not only a document of days which has gone (as we want to believe) but also the act of the art. Which appeals to every human being, independent of it's language of country.

Your work will remain in our memory for the long days.

Once more we wanted to express our thankfulness for the emotions you gave

Yours
Zosia, Zbyszek

Plock, Poland

dear Tova

| really liked your film very sensitive and profound and it was a treat to listen to the compose, subdue and yet so poignant account of your very wise aunt you are very privileged to have her in your family thanks for having told me about this work of yours hope you make many more.....see you soon
best, Manuela

I was there and enjoyed it immensely. Who will be distributing this film, it should go to schools in the United States.

gsteinny@aol.com

www.gallerygertrudestein.com

Dear Tova,

It was an honor to listen to your aunt. I am so impressed by her wisdom, intelligence, and her presence. What a lovely lady. I think I had written in the review that her pale, intelligent face was framed by auburn hair, or something like that, but now I would change it to her keen, alert face. She is so special!!!

Gulsen

Dearest Tova:

Again thank you for your generosity of spirit and sensitivity in recognizing the value of your aunt's story which inspired us of all ages Monday evening at Greenburgh Hebrew Center. Her love of life and respect for memory will echo in our hearts.

I cannot wait to share your family's story with fellow educators, particularly as each decade erases the voices, and your film is quite eloquent. I can see and support its use in the classroom.

Best wishes to you and your entire family, and thanks again.

Appreciatively,
Helene Alalouf
education specialist
Westchester Holocaust Education Center
www.holocausteducationctr.org

Your DVD film describing Ms. Ghilai experiences during the holocaust is a most moving and impressive documentation. The way in which she describes the terrible happenings which you were forced to endure during the holocaust is very moving and touching.

The connection between the holocaust and puppet theatre is unique, and lends your story-telling a dimension of oppressive dramatics. We have never seen anything comparable to that.

Turning the horror into a play to puppetry helps children (and not only children but adults as well) to accept and digest the horrors of the holocaust more easily, because puppets do not arouse so dire fears among the audience

We wish that this important and most successful document may have a wide circulation not only in Israel but in the whole world as well, to ensure that those happenings will always be remembered. Anyway, we shall show the DVD at every occasion that may present itself/

Klaus and Renate Fesefeldt,
Hamburg.

dear tova
what a beautiful evening you created--i loved
meeting your aunt and

can only imagine her agony at losing sharie- her sister. That was quite an- experience for such a young girl--your family are very special-even the youngest whom I met in the back row--

with love,Mary Evangelista

Dear Tova,

I did not really congratulate you enough on your absolutely wonderful film, which was so sensitively and intelligently made. It was so brilliantly paced, and in such a short time captured so many important themes and essentials, and really gripped the imagination and ones emotions. Your film certainly deserves to be widely known and screened.

Since the screening, the whole event has stayed with me, and I have been describing to everyone I speak to at great length the content of the absolutely extraordinary evening, and how having your aunt talk (and sing) in such a dispassionate and professional manner afterwards made the whole event so unforgettable. I am SO pleased my instincts to come to NY were right. Several people have expressed an interest in seeing the DVD. Your aunt's original story about the painting and the shoes, which you said gripped you, and that you wanted to make something with as an artist, has a mesmerizing effect on everyone who hears it.

Lots of love for now

Maureen

Tova,

Your film is beautiful.....I hope it will be shown a lot and many people will see it. Best, Gwenn

thank you so much for extending an invitation to view your film this evening. I LOVED IT! it was so tender and clear, a lot like your aunt herself. I cried a lot. and your aunt, what a lovely address she gave this evening. I was mesmerized by her as i think the whole crowd was. she does command a stage. the only thing is that the puppets will not be on display until may 7 and i'm a little sorry for that. i would have loved to see them up close tonight, but if il had to choose, it would be to see and hear Bracha with her puppets. a truly fascinating time and I thank you again. Jody

Dear Tova,

Thank you for a beautiful and moving presentation.
You are both extraordinary women.

Love,

Dick and Serena

Tova,
Thank you for inviting us to view your fine film and to hear the remarkable, vibrant Bracha Ghilai. (What a person! What an aunt!) The event was a positive and moving experience for both Bill and I.
Best,
Sharla

Tova, last night was terrific. Your aunt was as eloquent as you predicted.
Thank you for the opportunity!

I will spread the word...

all the best, Ali

dear tova-

what a beautiful evening you created--i loved meeting your aunt and

can only imagine her agony at losing sharie- her sister. That was quite an-
experience for such a young girl--your family are very special-even the
youngest whom I met in the back row--

with love,Mary Evangelista

Tova:

Thank you for sharing the memories of your aunt. It was truly memorable way to
commemorate the Shoah that in so many ways shaped our lives. You are doing
a great service to the memory of so many.

All the best,
Natan

As I was watching the documentary I felt as if I was watching a story
telling a story about a woman telling a story through puppets, which were
part of and also told a story. The straightforward narrative allowed all of
the stories and methods of storytelling into play--until the poignant
conclusion.

Rachel

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Despite trauma, Auschwitz survivors fight to keep memory alive

Thursday, January 27, 2005

By Steven Gutkin, The Associated Press

JERUSALEM -- A museum painting of a barefoot girl holding up a pair of shoes led Bracha Ghilai to break a half century of silence about what happened to her in the concentration camp barrack.

She saw herself in that girl, taking her dead sister Shari's shoes for protection against the cold.

"Forgive me, my dear sister, forgive me Shari, but I wanted so much to live, and the shoes symbolized life for me," Ghilai later wrote in a short story titled "The Shoes."

Today, as the world marks the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, there will still be survivors of that camp and others who wake up screaming in the middle of the night and still can't speak about their trauma.

Some, however, are determined to keep telling their stories -- concerned that memories will fade with time, aware that the number of living survivors is dwindling, and fearful that history might repeat itself.

Ghilai couldn't bring herself to talk about her experiences in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps until several years ago, when she visited Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. There she was moved by the picture of the shoeless girl standing beside a naked woman. "And then I started to speak. This is what opened me."



Ariel Schalit, Associated Press

Six decades since her liberation from Auschwitz, holocaust survivor Bracha Ghilai, 75, still bears the identification number tattooed on her arm by the Nazis.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

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Oded Balilty, Associated Press

Ruth Brand's reaction on returning to Auschwitz: "In this place a miracle happened to me. I remained alive."

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

And this is what happened to Ruth Brand: Arriving in Auschwitz from Hungary on May 18, 1944, she was immediately separated from her family, and the German guards promised the 16-year-old girl she would soon be reunited with them.

Her fellow inmates laughed at her.

"Don't you see the chimneys? Don't you see that's where they're burning your people now?" she remembers them telling her.

Her parents, brother, sister and grandmother were gassed that same night.

She recalls a Jewish doctor named Gisela Pearl who performed abortions to save pregnant women from extermination or experimentation, including one in which mothers were tied to beds so that they

couldn't care for their newborns.

The experiments were "to see how long it takes for the woman to go crazy ... and to see how long it takes for the infant to die without food," Brand said.

Brand returned to Auschwitz 60 years to the day of her first arrival there, accompanied by 200 Israeli Air Force officers and a rabbi carrying the Torah.

"Here it is 60 years that I'm walking back into Auschwitz but I'm not alone," she says. "The Torah that they wanted to destroy, our Torah, is with us. I'm saying a blessing that in this place a miracle happened to me. I remained alive."

In Auschwitz death was always close and survival could depend on fluke.

Ghilai said she survived one "selection" -- when the Nazis weeded out the weak and sick for extermination -- by pleading with a fellow inmate to open a barracks window when she was running a temperature. She crawled through the window to safety.

Martha Weiss was 10 when she



arrived at Auschwitz in 1944, and like all children too young to work, she was selected for death. But the Soviet army was approaching and the SS diverted her group from the gas chamber after Soviet planes flew over. She said she and her older sister Eva spent their last month in camp doctor Josef Mengele's notorious experimental ward.



"He would tell little children to sit on his lap and tell them to call him 'uncle,' 'uncle Mengele' and sometimes give them a sweet and in the same tone of voice that he said 'I'm uncle Mengele' he would tell the officials to give them a lethal injection," Weiss said.

"So when he approached my sister, I threw myself on him. I had enough sense to know that it was dangerous but he happened to be in a good mood and it didn't matter to him if he killed Eva Weiss or whether he killed the next person, so she survived."

Martha and Eva Weiss were among an estimated 5,000 mostly sick inmates still in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death complex when it was liberated.



Top: CAF pap
Bottom: Kevin Frayer, AP

A picture made at Auschwitz just after liberation by the Soviet army in January, 1945, shows a group of children wearing concentration camp uniforms, including 10-year-old Martha Weiss, second from right. Bottom: Weiss this year in Jerusalem.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

The Nazis began evacuating Auschwitz 10 days before the Soviets arrived, forcing some 60,000 prisoners into the Polish forests on "death marches" during which many thousands were murdered or died of cold, hunger and exhaustion.

Jack Handeli, a Greek Jew sent to Auschwitz when he was 15, was on such a march.

"They cannot walk anymore ... So you can hear the shooting," Hendeli recalls of the marchers. "They are all shot and in this beautiful white snow you see the red blood of those poor people ..."

"I walked like some kind of robot that does not think anything," Hendeli said.

Living with the memories and the nightmares is a daily struggle for the estimated one million Holocaust survivors still alive today.

Ghilai said that for 60 years she's had the same dream about another of her sisters who died in



the gas chamber, coming to her and insisting she's still alive.

"And I'm so happy. So happy to meet her. And then when I wake up I see that it was just a dream."

Alongside the nightmares, however, lives have been rebuilt.

Bracha Ghilai went on to serve in the Israeli army. Jack Hendeli has a son who's a scientist. Martha Weiss raised a family in Australia and seven years ago moved to Israel, where a suicide bombing injured her granddaughter.

Ruth Brand says her four sons, 11 grandchildren and four great grandchildren are "the revenge I have on all our enemies who wanted to destroy me, destroyed my entire family, destroyed a third of my people."



Oded Balilty, Associated Press

Jack Hendeli, a Greek Jew, was sent to Auschwitz when he was 15.
Click photo for larger image.



Markus Schreiber, Associated Press

Auschwitz survivor Kurt Julius Goldstein wipes away tears during a speech before the International Auschwitz Committee on Tuesday to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp.

Click photo for larger image.

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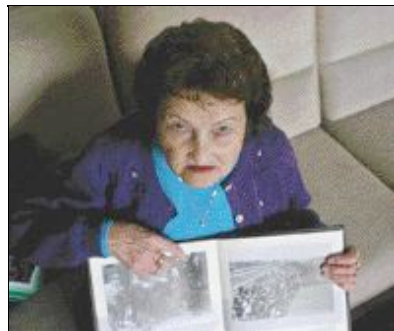
Published January 27, 2005

Fighting to keep their memories alive

On the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, survivors continue to tell their stories.

By Steven Gutkin
 Associated Press

Jerusalem — A museum painting of a barefoot girl holding up a pair of shoes led Bracha Ghilai to break a half century of silence about what happened to her in the concentration camp barrack.



Holocaust survivor Bracha Ghilai, 75, was moved to speak about her ordeals in concentration camps after visiting a Holocaust museum.

Ariel Schalit / the Associated Press

She saw herself in that girl, taking her dead sister Shari's shoes for protection against the cold.

"Forgive me, my dear sister, forgive me Shari, but I wanted so much to live, and the shoes symbolized life for me," Ghilai later wrote in a short story titled "The Shoes."

Today, as the world marks the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, there will still be survivors of that camp and others who wake up screaming in the middle of the night and are unable to speak about their trauma.

Some, however, are determined to keep telling their stories — concerned that memories will fade with time, aware that the number of living survivors is dwindling and fearful that history might repeat itself.

Ghilai couldn't bring herself to talk about her experiences in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps until several years ago, when she visited Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust museum. There, she was moved by the picture of the shoeless girl standing beside a naked woman. "And then I started to speak. This is what opened me."

And this is what happened to Ruth Brand: Arriving in Auschwitz from Hungary on May 18, 1944, she immediately was separated from her family, and the German guards promised the 16-year-old girl she would soon be reunited with them.

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She recalls a Jewish doctor named Gisela Pearl who performed abortions to save pregnant women from extermination or experimentation, including one in which mothers were tied to beds so that they couldn't care for their newborns.

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"And I'm so happy. So happy to meet her. And then when I wake up, I see that it was just a dream."

Today, leaders including Vice President Dick Cheney, Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Jacques Chirac and Israeli President Moshe Katsav are to light candles and hear interfaith prayers at the sprawling camp to mark the arrival of advancing Soviet troops on Jan. 27, 1945, as World War II neared its end.

Germany's President Horst Koehler will attend but won't speak at the main ceremony in acknowledgment of Germany's role as perpetrator of the Holocaust. He is to address a youth forum about the Holocaust in Krakow.

Accused Nazi guard loses U.S. citizenship

Boston — A federal judge Wednesday revoked the U.S. citizenship of a retired Massachusetts factory worker, ruling he lied when he claimed he wasn't involved in the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Jewish ghetto in 1943.

Vladas Zajanckauskas, 89, denied that he was in Warsaw at the time and said his involvement with the Nazis was limited to working the bar at one of their camps in Poland.

But Justice Department prosecutors said he was recruited as a guard in a unit called the "Trawniki men" that helped the Nazis capture and kill Jews in the Warsaw ghetto.

