



Life Stories

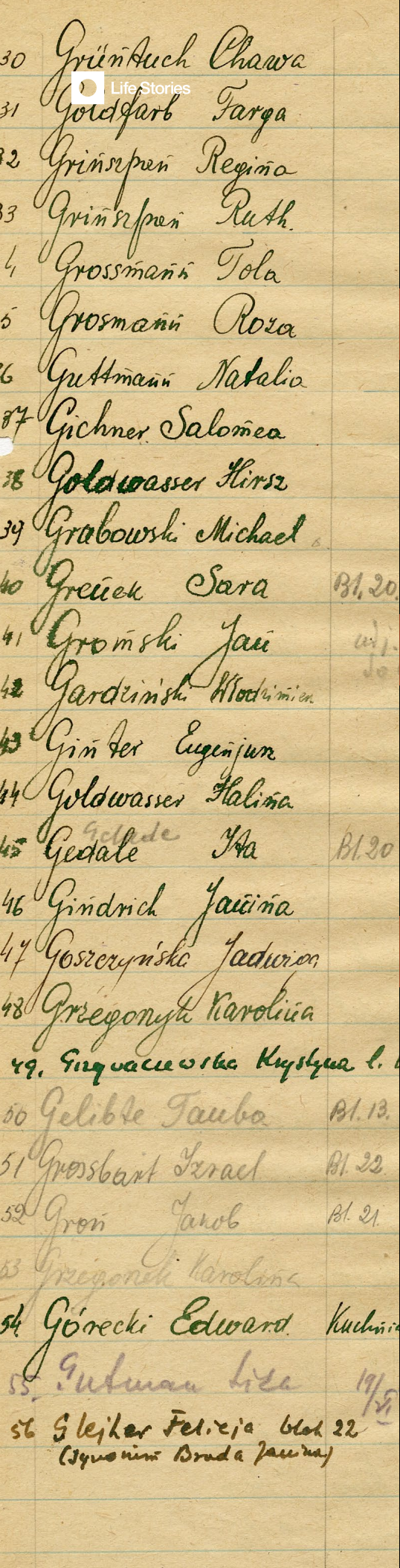


# BEHIND HER EYES

DISCUSSION GUIDE







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# Introduction

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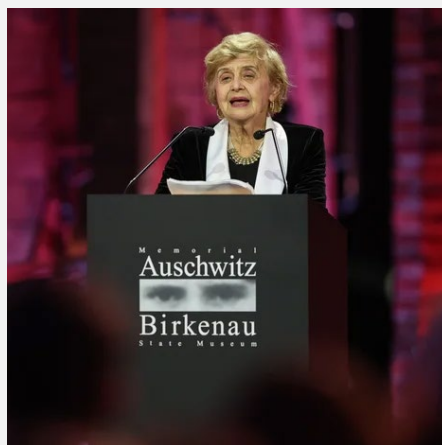
*I am not just a survivor, but I'm thriving. It's like a tree, when a tree has very good roots, the wind cannot just destroy it. I'm grateful that I have these years. A million and a half children were murdered for no reason while the world was quiet. I always felt that since I survived, I should do something with that time to the very end. I've been a therapist for at least 25, 30 years and I've realized what we have to do is talk with each other.”*

**- Tova Friedman,  
Behind Her Eyes**

## USING THIS RESOURCE

Life Stories' documentary, *Behind Her Eyes* together with this guide, offers a contemporary lens to learn about and develop a more nuanced understanding of the Holocaust. This guide provides helpful background, additional historical context, and discipline frameworks for educators and faculty to incorporate Tova Friedman's life story into curriculum and course offerings. In doing so, students have the opportunity to grapple with complex moral questions and decisions and use it as a touchstone to fight against today's injustices.

On January 27, 2025 at the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Tova spoke to an audience of world leaders and survivors underscoring the urgency of this work:



***“All of us must reawaken our collective conscience to transform society into a humane and just world.” Recognizing the gravity of the task, she quoted Jewish sages: “The time is short, the task is great. We may not be able to complete it, but we have an obligation to start.”***

**Together, the film and guide will:**

- **Engage students** of all ages through active viewing, historical research, and thoughtful discussion and reflection about the consequences of hate and prejudice.
- **Connect past and present** by exploring the Holocaust in relation to contemporary challenges such as rising antisemitism, hate speech, and online misinformation.
- **Promote media literacy and critical thinking** by analyzing sources and origins of Holocaust misinformation in publications and social media.
- **Inspire action** by empowering students with knowledge on steps to building a more just and equitable world.

## ABOUT THE FILM

*Behind Her Eyes* (38 minutes) tells the powerful journey of one of the youngest survivors of the Holocaust who uses the power of social media to bridge across generations. Born in Poland in 1938, Tova was one of the few Jewish children to survive the horrors of Auschwitz. Her early years were marked by unimaginable suffering—deportation, starvation, forced labor, and the loss of countless family members to Nazi cruelty. After liberation, she rebuilt her life, became a therapist and continues to be an unyielding advocate for education working against all forms of prejudice and bigotry.

Today, Tova's stories on her TikTok channel '[TovaTok](#)' have a global audience of 75 million views and counting. In these short videos produced by her grandson, she answers questions and shares facts about the Holocaust, thoughtfully connecting her personal story to current issues such as targeted violence against Jews and other acts of intolerance. In sharing wisdom gained by her extraordinary life experiences, Tova proves that understanding both how and why hatred erupts can serve as one of the strongest antidotes to building empathy and compassion. Harnessing the power of storytelling with the reach of social media, *Behind Her Eyes* ensures that Tova's legacy of survival and defiance will educate and inspire future generations to continue her work.

### ACCESSING THE FILM

You may stream *Behind Her Eyes* at no charge at the Life Stories website / [Films & Series](#)

You can access the transcript for *Behind Her Eyes* [here](#).

### A NOTE ON SENSITIVE CONTENT

*Behind Her Eyes* tells the realities of genocide, mass violence, trauma, and war. It also tells of the aftermath of these experiences and the challenges of rebuilding a life including intergenerational trauma. Before screening the film, it's crucial to communicate the sensitive nature and emotionally challenging content they are about to learn about and to prepare students accordingly.



## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

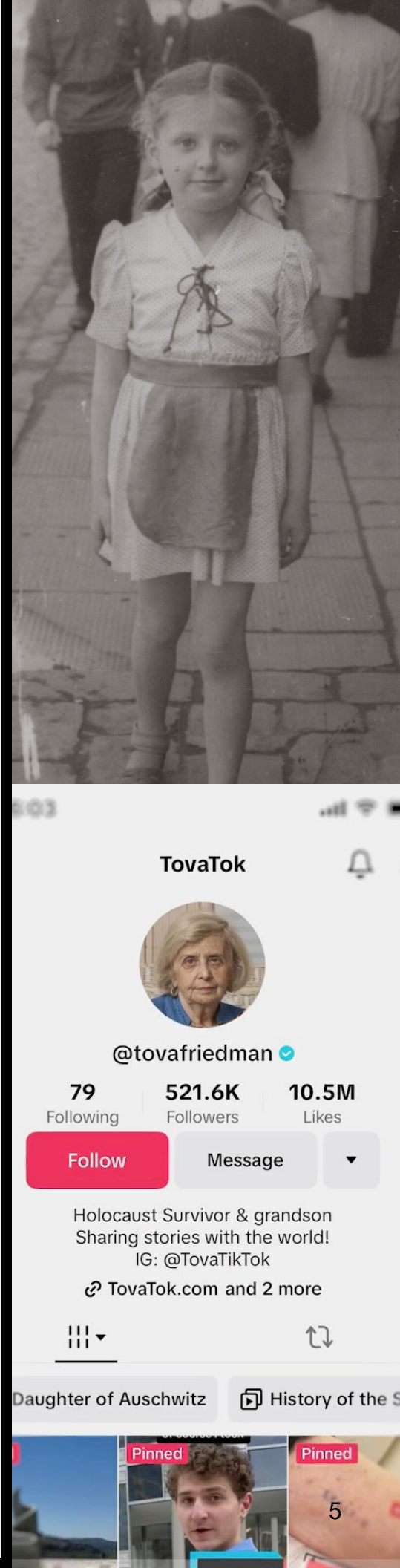
In 2022 we interviewed Tova Friedman for our YouTube series [The Thread](#). Her words were so raw and haunting that we thought about making her story into a short documentary. Initially, the idea remained just that—a concept—until the tragic events of October 7th reignited a sense of urgency. We felt an obligation to contribute to the fight against hate and telling Tova's story became our answer. Two additional interviews with Tova followed, each offering a deeper, more nuanced portrayal of her life as a child survivor and her warnings about the destructive nature of hate.

Our initial interest in Tova began after reading a *New York Times* article highlighting a Holocaust survivor who had reached 75 million views on TikTok. The thought of young audiences engaging with Holocaust history through Tova's storytelling fascinated us. As filmmakers, we saw an opportunity to provide viewers with a more profound understanding of her experiences. Our approach is rooted in Tova's own words—there is no narrator, no historians—just her unfiltered, first-hand account.

Her message about survival became the central theme, particularly the bond between Tova and her mother. In the months before Auschwitz, Tova's mother imparted vital lessons in survival: "be invisible," "avoid eye contact," "do not cry." These instructions, though seemingly simple, meant the difference between life and death for a five-year-old child. One haunting memory stands out—Tova's mother hiding her beneath a warm corpse as the Germans executed all remaining witnesses before retreating from Poland. Even after liberation, Tova's mother guided her starving little girl to eat slowly, preventing the fatal consequences many suffered from overeating too quickly. Tova's mother saved her, and this film highlights this courageous woman who went to every length to protect her daughter—only to succumb to a broken heart and die once Tova was safe.

Our goal is clear: to remind younger generations of the horrors of the Holocaust and the atrocities committed against Tova and her family because they were Jewish. In a fractured world where swastikas appear on celebrity merchandise, education through storytelling is vital. We believe Tova's story will foster understanding, empathy, and a recognition of the pain and suffering endured by countless families during the Holocaust. Tova's ability to reach a young audience through her large social media platform motivated us to make an emotional, truthful film with lessons for today's fractured world.

**Teddy & George Kunhardt**



# Background

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## BIOGRAPHY



Tova Friedman (né Tola Grossman) was born on September 7th, 1938 in Gdynia, Poland, a suburb of Danzig. Her mother Reizel and father Machel were originally from Tomaszów Mazowiecki, a small town near Lodz, Poland. After the outbreak of World War II, Tova, her mother, father, and maternal grandmother were forced into the Tomaszów Mazowiecki ghetto.

After surviving the liquidation of the ghetto in 1942, Tova and her parents were sent to the Starachowice labor camp where they survived until she and her parents were forced into a packed cattle truck and sent to Auschwitz II, also known as the Birkenau extermination camp in July 1944. Upon arrival, her father was transported to Dachau.

As the Eastern Front continued to advance west, the Nazi killing squads roamed Birkenau before abandoning the camp in January 1945, Tova and her mother hid among corpses. After being liberated by the Russians they made their way back to their hometown in Poland. Eventually Tova's father tracked them down and the family was reunited. At the end of the war she was just one of five Jewish children from Tomaszów Mazowiecki to return and among the youngest to survive. More than 150 members of Friedman's family were murdered.

After the end of the war, Tova spent several years in a German sanatorium for tuberculosis and, with her parents, Displaced Persons camps before emigrating to the United States in 1950. They lived in Brooklyn where she met Maier Friedman in grade school. Ten years later they married in 1960 and remained together for 60 years until his death.

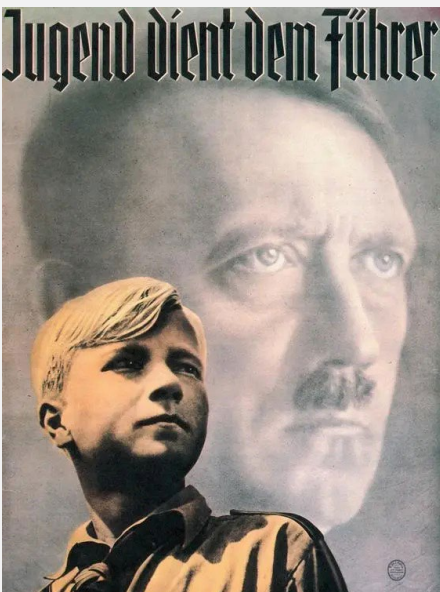
Tova received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Brooklyn College and a Master of Arts in Black Literature from City College of New York. Maier and Tova immigrated to Israel and lived there for over ten years where she taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. After returning to the US, she earned a second Master of Arts in Social Work from Rutgers University and became the director of Jewish Family Service of Somerset and Warren Counties for over 20 years and also worked there as a therapist.

Tova Friedman has four children and eight grandchildren and continues to share her story with students and audiences at public and private schools, at colleges and places of worship all over the country.

# Timeline of Tova's Holocaust Survival

This film-specific timeline provides critical historical events that affected Tova and her family before, during, and after World War II. ***Events and people specific to Tova's story are indicated in italics.***

## PRE-WAR (1933-1939)



- **January 30, 1933:** *Adolf Hitler*, leader of the Nazi Party, becomes chancellor of Germany. The Nazi regime promotes a far right ideology including *antisemitism*, *anticommunism* and suppression of democratic principles.
- **September 15, 1935:** *The Nuremberg Laws* strip Jews of citizenship and institutionalize racial discrimination.
- **August 23, 1936:** *Reizel Pinkusewicz and Machel Grossman (Tova's parents) marry in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, Poland and move to Danzig.*
- **October 1937:** *A violent antisemitic pogrom occurs in Danzig, resulting in approximately half of the city's 12,000 Jewish residents to leave the city. Reizel and Machel Grossman consider returning to Tomaszów Mazowiecki.*
- **September 7, 1938:** *Tova (Tola) is born in Gdynia, Poland.*
- **November 9, 1938:** *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) takes place; this is a turning point as violent antisemitism spreads.
- **Late August, 1939:** *Anticipating the imminent war, Tova, Reizel and Machel Grossman return to Tomaszów Mazowiecki, amid rising tensions.*



“

*I don't remember anything before the war. My memories started at the age of two. I remember only being in the ghetto, nothing before. I remember playing under the table because there was no space for me to be anywhere else.”*

- Tova Friedman, *Behind Her Eyes*

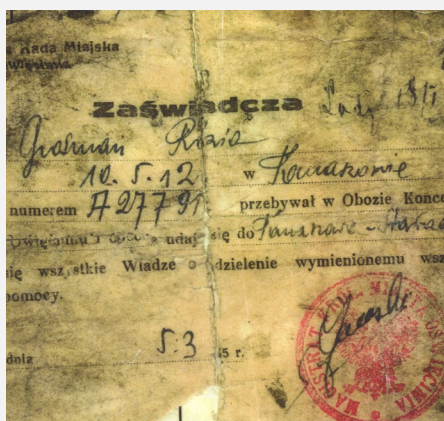
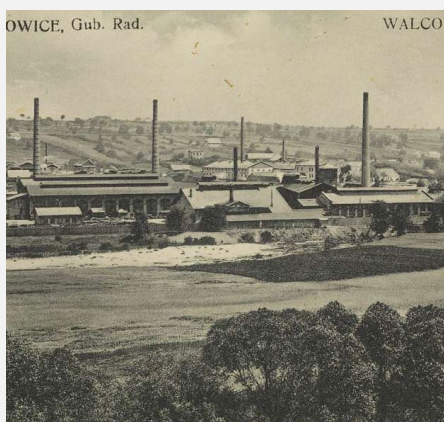
## WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST (1939-1945)



- **September 1, 1939:** World War II begins. Germany invades Poland. The United Kingdom and France declare war on Germany. Poland is partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. **Tova is 1 year old.**
- **September 6, 1939:** German occupation of Tomaszów Mazowiecki.
- **October 16, 1939:** The Great Synagogue in Tomaszów Mazowiecki burned and destroyed. Jewish businesses and homes targeted.
- **May 3, 1940:** Tomaszów Mazowiecki ghetto established. During World War II, **Jewish ghettos** were established in German-occupied and annexed Poland and the Soviet Union. These separated areas of cities and towns segregate the Jewish population. At least 1,000 Jewish ghettos were established during World War II.  
*Tova, her mother, father, and maternal grandmother were forced into the large ghetto. While in the ghetto, Tova's grandmother is executed. Tova is 2½.*
- **February 1, 1942:** Tova's father was appointed to the Jewish Order Service (police force) by the **Judenraete** (Jewish Council). The Judenrat was an administrative body imposed by Nazi Germany within ghettos in German-occupied territories. Tova writes in her memoir, "He had hoped that his position would allow him to save more of his family and friends. But instead, he had to stand by, helpless, as they were slaughtered in front of him."  
(Source: *The Daughter of Auschwitz*, p. 61).
- **October 30 - November 1, 1942:** Deportation of 15,000 Tomaszów Jews to Treblinka. Tova, her mother, and father survived. **Tova is 4.**  
(Source: *Deportation of the Jews of Tomaszow Mazowiecki in 1942*, Yizkor Book).
- **1943:** Tova and her family are moved to the small ghetto; For the next seven months Reizel, with Tova by her side, works at the *Sammlungstelle*, sorting confiscated personal artifacts collected from those who were deported.  
(Source: <https://www.tonybernard.com.au/the-tomaszw-ghetto>)
- **Feb 2, 1943:** Battle of Stalingrad, a turning point in World War II, signaling the beginning of the German retreat from the Eastern Front.



## WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST (1939-1945)



April 1943: [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#).

**Autumn 1943 - Summer 1944:** Tova and her parents are deported to Starachowice labor camp. Machel and Reizel work in the ammunition factory. Approximately 1600 Jews were sent to Starachowice, 600 survived the war. **Tova is 5.**

(Source: [Holocaust History & Survivor Testimony: Starachowice Factory Slave Labor Camps](#), Lecture by Christopher Browning)

**Saturday, July 29, 1944:** Tova and her parents are sent in cattle cars to [Auschwitz](#). Her parents were separated. Tova and her mother were immediately shaved and all possessions were confiscated. Tova was eventually tattooed with the number A-27633.

After recovering from scarlet fever and diphtheria, Tova is transferred to the Kinderlager or "children's camp". **Tova is 5½.**

**October 7, 1944:** Tova's children's barracks are marched to the gas chamber. Due to mechanical malfunctioning, the children returned to their barrack. **Tova is 6.**

**January 25, 1945:** Tova and her mother hide under corpses during the liquidation of Auschwitz. Tova recalls her mother saying to her in Yiddish, "They're gone."

**January 27, 1945:** Auschwitz liberated by the Red Army. A Red Army soldier photographed Tova, far left in a headscarf, and other child survivors.

(Source: [Surviving Auschwitz: A Child Emerges from the Holocaust](#)).

**Tova is 6½.**

“

*What's very interesting to me, human nature, is that people came back to the place where they saw their family last without ever saying to each other 'I'll meet you here one day.' Once you are no longer in danger, you think about life.”*

**- Tova Friedman, *Behind Her Eyes***

## POST-WAR LIFE (1945 - PRESENT)



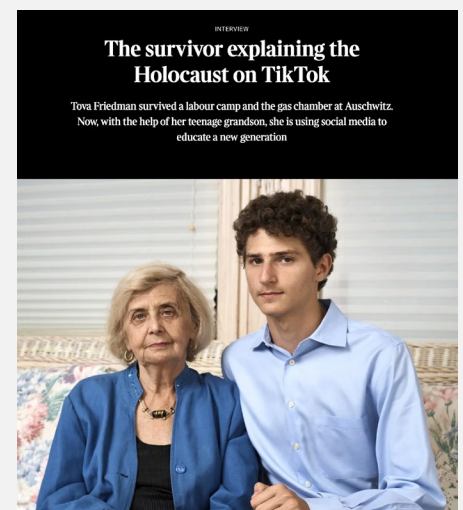
- **Summer 1945:** Post-liberation, Tova and her mother return to Tomaszów Mazowiecki to try and reunite with family. Her father returns after surviving in Dachau. Aunt Helen, her father's sister, who survived the Holocaust, is killed by antisemites in Lodz. **Tova is 7.**
- **1947-1948:** Tova and her family emigrate from Poland, first to Berlin's American, then to Landsberg Displaced Persons (DP) camp, one of many camps providing safe haven for the approximately 250,000 stateless, homeless European Jews. **Tova is 8 ½.**
- **March 26, 1950:** Tova and her parents emigrate to the United States aboard the General R.M. Blatchford. Arrive in New York on April 4, 1950. **Tova is 11.**
- **June 2, 1957:** While Tova is on her first trip to Israel as a student at Brooklyn College, Reizel Grossman, Tova's mother, dies at age forty-five. **Tova is 18.**
- **1960:** Tova graduates from Brooklyn College.
- **June 11, 1960:** Tova Grossman marries Maier Friedman in Brooklyn.
- **May 3, 1967:** Tova and Meir move to Israel with their two children. **Tova is 29.**
- **1977:** Tova and Maier return to the United States, now with four children.
- **1983:** Tova's father, Mahel Grossman, dies at age seventy-two.
- **1990's:** At the age of fifty-four, Tova begins sharing her Holocaust testimony publicly.
- **September 2022:** Tova's memoir of the Holocaust and her life after the war, ***The Daughter of Auschwitz***, is published.
- **January 27, 2025:** Tova speaks at the international commemoration marking the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration and extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau.



# Connections and Conversations

## SUGGESTED PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS

- In what ways do you use social media? What factors do you consider when evaluating the reliability of information you encounter on social media?
- Prior to this screening, have you encountered any Holocaust survivor testimonies, either in person, through video, or on social media platforms?
- What distinctions, if any, do you see between sharing a personal story about an experience and providing testimony about it?
- Before watching this documentary, what comes to mind when you think about the experiences of Jewish children during the Holocaust?
- What aspects of the Holocaust are you most interested in learning about?



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## SUGGESTED POST-SCREENING QUESTIONS

- What was a particularly impactful moment for you in the documentary, or what questions surfaced about this history?
- What did Tova's story resonate with you on an emotional level?
- The documentary includes moments where Tova speaks in Yiddish. What do you think the filmmakers intended to convey by including these Yiddish words and phrases?
- Tova also recalls many lessons her mother passed on to her such as "children are targets," "someday you'll be alone, so you'll have to learn how to save yourself,"
- Now that you have seen the documentary, what meaning do you derive from the title, *Behind Her Eyes*?
- Are there contemporary issues or events you see reflected in Tova's experiences?
- The documentary begins with TikTok videos and concludes with two powerful statements: *"In 2025 more than 43 million people around the world are refugees-the highest number ever recorded. As hateful rhetoric spreads, it remains critical to advocate for a fair and just future for all."* How do you connect this framing or interpret the significance of this as a closing call to action?
- What potential do you see in social media for educating people about the Holocaust and raising awareness about current conflicts and human rights violations? What are the potential drawbacks or dangers?
- Tova states that she is trying to 'undo all that Hitler tried to do.' How does the documentary *Behind Her Eyes* illustrate this goal in her life?
- Tova's message to her TikTok followers ([TovaTok](#)) is to 'leave the world a little better than you found it.' After watching *Behind Her Eyes*, what message would you want to share with Tova?
- What action, big or small, feels meaningful to you right now?



# Photocredits

- Page 3** Tova Friedman gives a speech in front of the historic gate of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Brzezinka, Poland.  
*Source: Łukasz Gągulski/EPA.*
- Page 5** (Top) Tova, age six and a half, returns to Tomaszów Mazowiecki after Auschwitz. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*  
(Bottom) Still image from TikTok, *Screenshot from Behind Her Eyes.*
- Page 7** (Top) Portrait of Tova's mother (Reizel) and her friends' Zionist youth group. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*  
(Bottom) Poster: Jugend dient dem Führer--Alle Zehnjährigen in die. (Youth serves the Führer--All ten-years-olds into the Hitler Youth.) *Source: LOC.*
- Page 8** (Top) Smoke rises from Warsaw following the German attack. Warsaw, Poland, September 1939.  
*Source: National Archives and Records Administration.*  
(Middle) A group of German soldiers and civilians look on as a Jewish man is forced to cut the beard of another in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, 1939. *Source: USHMM.*  
(Bottom) Route of the march to the Tomaszów railway station for the deportation to the Treblinka extermination camp. 30 October and 1 November, 1942. *Source: Tony Bernard.*
- Page 9** (Top) Postcard. Starachowice-walcownia. 1928-1939. *Source: The National Library of Poland.*  
(Middle) Identification card given to Reizel (Tova's mother) by the International Red Cross to provide safe passage home from Auschwitz to Tomaszów Mazowiecki in Spring of 1945. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*  
(Bottom) A group of child survivors of Auschwitz show their tattoos shortly after liberation. Tova Friedman is at the far left. *Source: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu. USHMM.*
- Page 10** (Top) Tova's mother Reizel (far left), cousin, a young Tova, and her father Machel far right after the war in a DP camp in Landsberg, Germany, 1948. In this picture, she is 10 years old. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*  
(Middle) Maier and Tova walking down the aisle at their marriage ceremony in Brooklyn NY. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*  
(Bottom) Tova sharing her story with students at Delaware Valley Regional High School in 2016. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*
- Page 11** (Left) Group portrait featuring Tova's father (Machel) as a little boy, bottom left corner. He is pictured with a group of his extended family in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, Poland, pre-war. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*  
(Middle) Tova and her family pictured in the present day, 2023. *Source: Tova Friedman (Personal).*  
(Right) Tova and her grandson Aron. *Source: The Times, 2022.*
- Page 12** Tova attends the 75th anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz and is seen here surrounded by survivors and holding hands with Ronald Lauder, the President of the World Jewish Congress. *Courtesy of Tova Friedman (Personal).*



A photograph of an elderly woman with short, wavy, light brown hair, looking upwards and slightly to the right with a gentle smile. She is wearing a black blazer over a dark top, a patterned scarf, and a colorful beaded necklace. A blue boom microphone is suspended above her. The background is a dimly lit room with bookshelves, a lamp, and a blurred figure of another person.

# BEHIND HER EYES

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**Life Stories**  
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.