Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

TOVA FRIEDMAN INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Tova Friedman, Holocaust Survivor
July 26, 2023
Interviewed by Noah Remnick
Total Running Time: 32 minutes and 49 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:
Human beings are built to have resilience. That's-that's how we were made. I really think — I think that human humanity is very strong. It's not always tested. And-and if we're tested. We'll make it, and then we can heal. And then we can heal enough to help others heal.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories
Tova Friedman
Holocaust Survivor
Surviving Auschwitz

00:00:41:00

NOAH REMNICK:
Can you tell me where and when you were born?

00:00:44:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

I was born in a place called Gdynia, which is part of Danzig, in Poland. Danzig is a free city. They always have German, have Polish, and I was born in the Polish side of it, called Gdynia, in 1938, September 7th, which is exactly one year before the war. The war was September 1st, 1939, so I was exactly a year old when the war broke out.

00:01:18:00

NOAH REMNICK:

So is it safe to say that you have no memories of life?

00:01:21:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

Before the camp? No. None at all. No. My memory started at the age of two, two and a half. And that's only sporadically, you know, because there's certain things that are so unforgettable that even a child who can't express it verbally. I just, I express that later on. I knew what was going on. It just — it was very abnormal time.

00:01:47:00

NOAH REMNICK:

So entering the camp, do you have any memories of-of walking through those gates for the first time?

00:01:54:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

The first camp, I don't remember. The first was the ghetto. That means they robbed us all up and they put us in a…in a tiny apartment and so forth, with rules and regulations and so forth. I have memories not entering, but living there because I lived it till I was four and a half. Then came the labor camp that I remember very well, going to a labor camp where my parents worked the whole day. And then, of course, were the outfits that was very memorable. We got on the terrible train, got off the train, and there we were. That's my memories. Start from entering, uh, the labor camp in Auschwitz.

00:02:40:00

NOAH REMNICK:
Tell me a little bit more about that then. Entering Auschwitz for the first time, that-that train ride and entering those gates for the first time?

00:02:47:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:
Okay. There were very few children left, if any. I don't think there were any except myself, because they had taken. You see, in each place I was the first thing they did was killed the children that the elderly, for all kinds of reasons, and I was hidden at the time of the selection, came so that I was one or maybe, maybe out of two, I don't know, children that went on the on the transport to Auschwitz. I remember that very well, because that was the first time that my mother and father were separated. Till then, we were as a family, three of us. My-my grandmother was killed. Everybody else disappeared or were killed. We didn't see anybody except—but we were there. I knew my mother; my father and I was part of their lives. And then

entering the-the cattle car, my father was taken away to work with men. And I was with women, with my mom. And we got—I remember my mother helped me on it because it was very, very hard to get on. And then I remember the ride. It was 36 hours. I didn't know it was 36 hours. I found out later and I remember very much. I mean, it was…by then I was five and a half. But I was an adult five and a half. I wasn't an American five and a half. I was a different type of child. And it was very hot, and we were sweating because there were so many women all together. And I remember my thoughts. And the worst thing was I had to go to the bathroom, and I didn't know how. I couldn't move. And I kept saying, "Mom, mom, I need to go." And I don't think she even heard me, there was so much noise and screaming. And then I realized everybody was going where they were. They stood so dry. The whole…the whole, uh, uh, place was dark, except there was a little window. But we did let in some light. But as I was small, the light never reached me. So I remember standing there and falling asleep on somebody else's back, like a woman. Even her back was perspiring, and I just put my head up, and my mother was holding me around the whole time until we arrived. I remember that very well, screaming the smell, you know, smells. Something that stayed with you forever. And I smelled the candle, the car people were throwing up. They had dysentery. See, I knew I was going to Auschwitz, but I don't know if I knew what death was. I knew it was a place you don't come back from. But I didn't know what exactly the adult women knew. So they were, like, screaming and crying and so forth. So, I remember that very well.

00:06:13:00

NOAH REMNICK:

When entering Auschwitz for the first time, what do you remember about that?

00:06:17:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

Oh, yes. You can't forget that because it was, you see, entering when we got on the cattle car was…we didn't have a platform. My mother had to pick me up and put me in. Arriving, there was a platform so we could go down. And I remember the light—it was the light by the signal. And I saw most of all the dogs. I've always seen dogs. You know, the German shepherds to this day, I think I live near a dog park right now. And ugh, each time they passed by a house with the German Shepherds, I know they're wonderful, smart dogs. And these are my neighbors. But it's a terrible feeling. And I remember the German Shepherds. They were very close to me because they were right by the train as we got off. And I still remember their saliva. And I was tall enough to look straight into their eyes. And they looked at me. And I remember saying to my mom, "I'm going to be killed by them." And she said, "No. They're trained only to kill if you run and you're not going to run." So, I would say the entrance, the first maybe hour or so was very, very memorable. There was a smell. I said, "What's this smell?" And she pointed to the chimney, and I knew what she meant. They were the burning of the bodies: if they were gassed, then they were burning them. She never hid anything from me. And then, they made us undress. All that—she said, "Get undressed." I said, "Why? Why am I going to get undressed?" She said, "Because they want to check that we're healthy, if we're not—" She pointed through the smoke. I knew right away. You know, I've been so conditioned to know life as it was that you didn't

even have to say sentence. You just had to point. I knew what it was. And then they took us, and they cut my hair. They took away my clothing. Cut my hair. Shaved my head. You know, it's interesting entering the cattle car. You're still sort of human. You went as a family. I was with my mother, and I had my own clothes, my own shoes. I had my hair. I looked like skinny, hungry, but like a person. There was a-a point where you separated…you stop being a human being. You entered a person, and you walked out on the other side because that's how it was. You know, you enter here and then you—I don't know how it was, but another door opened—you were, you were…not a human being. And after they shaved you, your hair and gave you some clothes, you were no longer yourself.

00:09:32:00

NOAH REMNICK:
Tell me a little bit about the living quarters. Paint a picture for me. The sights, the smells, the sounds.

00:09:38:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:
And I don't remember the language. You woke up in the morning after you were…and at night, you couldn't…you didn't go to the bathroom. You made in big pots that were over-flowing everywhere. So in the morning each child would try to clean up a little bit, and then you could wash. They would take you to a place for you to wash place—winter, summer–very quick. Then you went to the toilet which the toilet was like uh, slabs of wood cut thin. And big holes in it. And one time I fell in when I was with my mother still. Because

they were gigantic holes, and I couldn't hold on, so I fell in. Um. And when you went back, they gave you something to eat. You were fed twice a day, and the rest of the time you just wanted to think about food. Oh and they counted you! With my mother, before I was tattooed, it was called Appel, you stood outside. You counted for hours. At ah, with the children, we were counted inside. We didn't go outside, but they counted us as numbers. They read—they called out the numbers. And I had a bed, mate. And she died. She was 12. To me, she was so old. I wasn't worried that she died. I knew she would die because I could see her starvation signs. We, you know, kids would say she got three weeks or two weeks, she's going to die. The word was pagan. Pagan is a Yiddish word that means it's like street dying. It's like a street person that sort of disintegrates. It's not a nice death like a dog that people forget to feed dies on the street somewhere. So that's the word. So, I would say she's going to die like that. So, I worried that they were going to call her number, but I knew her number because I heard it so much. So, I remember pulling her by her feet to the spot in the front where all the kids had died that night. But she was my responsibility. She was in my in my bed. And then I said, "Oh, she's here. She's here. I know her number." I was so proud of that, because otherwise they would call. They would call. They would call. Nobody's answering. We would get punished. What if she ran away? I don't know how she could run away, but they were, like, irrational if somebody was missing. Completely irrational! They would punish everybody. So, I averted the punishment by knowing her number and pointing to her. She died. I knew she would.

00:12:45:00

NOAH REMNICK:

You've mentioned a few times the starvation, that overwhelming starvation. Can you tell me a little bit more about that feeling?

00:12:51:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

There is no way for you—it's one thing, I have to tell you, you have to be there. There is no way. There is no way to describe what happens to your mind and your body when you are deprived of food for a very long time with no hope of getting any. I mean, it just — it takes over. That's all you can think about.Somebody once said, I don't remember it's my quote, somebody else said, "How did God look to you?" And the person said, "A piece of bread." You know, I got a gift from my mother on my sixth birthday. It was a piece of bread. and it said, I didn't know I had a birthday or anything—it said, "Tola, happy six birthday." I couldn't read. Somebody, one of the caretakers who was there, read to me. And then being who I am, I saved it because to me, life wasn't so terrible. I expected it to be worse. And I had this fabulous image, cause I saw everybody dying around me. I said, "Oh, that's going to happen to me." What's going to happen to me is I had this image. I was going to be lying, dying, just about to expire. And then I said, "Oh, I don't have to. I have—I have bread. I'll take the piece of bread, and I'll eat it and I won't die." So, I hid it for that, for that purpose. It was my insurance policy, but I hid it inside my shirt. And in the middle of the night, rats came and ate it all.

00:14:47:00

NOAH REMNICK:

Were there any moments in particular when you thought your own death was inevitable?

00:14:53:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

All the time. It was just a matter of when. I thought that being Jewish, you'd die. It went together: child being Jewish and-and death was like one word. It was like, you know, it's like kids now know when they five, five and a half, or whenever they go to kindergarten, then go to first—they accept it. They know when they'll be going to kindergarten. So, they—they-they anticipate their birthday so they can they're going to be…that's how it was with me. I knew exactly. As soon as I—I didn't know the year or when. All they had to do was find me and that's it. Or I was part of a selection of a group they were ready to take the kids. I'm among the kids. I thought at-at any moment, I will be dead.

00:16:03:00

NOAH REMNICK:

What do you remember about the day you were taken to the crematorium?

00:16:07:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

Ah, they gave us a delicious breakfast. Which was the best. I didn't care, but I knew we were going because the barrack before that went the few a few days before. I knew the kids disappeared. I knew where they went, but I didn't care because I was going to eat. I told you the only thing on Earth was food.

What comes after? What comes after I eat? I didn't care. It was something salt, something delicious, something sweet. Delicious stuff. And we, and we, and we ate. And then we got dressed. I was very cold. I didn't have gloves. So, I went to the next barrack because I know the kids weren't there. And my mother's calling me by my name. She's calling. "Where are you going?" I could recognize a voice. I said, oh my mother because who knows my name? Nobody called me by my name. And I said too, it was a crematorium. And everybody was screaming because the women had children in same group. There was screaming and crying. And, and, and I talked to the little girl next to me because we had partners. And I said, "Why are they crying?" "Every Jewish child goes to the crematorium." That's what I said to her. And then we walked, we walked. And then we came back because they-they told us to come back. And I remember it was dark already. We went and there was light coming back. It was dark. And I hear voices again. What happened? What was going on? And I said to my mom, I heard a voice. "They couldn't do it this time. They'll take us next time." Just like that. Like, as if nothing is the way it's supposed to be. Just, next time. I wasn't elated. I wasn't happy. It was, you know, when you grow up like that and you know nothing else…even horror becomes normal right?

00:18:22:00

NOAH REMNICK:
Can you tell me a little bit about the day that your mother found you in the camp? Did you have, uh, any sense of certainty that she was still alive, even?

00:18:31:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

No. Well, I did hear her. You know, I heard her calling me. I didn't see her, but I heard her. And I didn't know about time passing. I can't remember. I didn't know. You know, children, I don't think know time that well. But all of a sudden, she appeared. That was already when the-the-the-the-the person who watched us disappeared also. It was almost the beginning—it was almost when the allies were on their way, and so she could get into our barrack. Otherwise she couldn't have got into the barracks. She would've been shot. You can't go out to a different barrack. And she—I also had trouble recognizing her. She looked terrible. Terrible. It wasn't my mother, the way I remembered her. I had not seen her for quite a while and I didn't remember her, but she convinced me she was my mother. It didn't take long and then she just knocked me out. She had the plan, which I did know about, and took me to the infirmary of women. But I remember her holding me very tightly because outside there was chaos just to make it from our barrack to-to the to what I guess she thought was a safe barrack was, you know, you didn't know if you could make it. There was shooting, you see the Germans were walking around with guns shooting everybody who didn't get into the line fast enough. They were lining up everybody to leave Auschwitz. They were going to walk them to Germany because they didn't want to leave them as witnesses. By then, it was chaos. They will shoot. The dogs were barking. There was shooting. They were—they were…anybody who didn't….and we didn't want to go in that line. My mother said that she will not survive on that trip she knew was very far she said to be. And it was snow outside. And she said, look at me. She was just her feet was swollen. Her stomach was…she

looked terrible. She said…she had those shoes. She had like rags. She said, I'm going to die on the road. And then she said these words, I don't want you to live alone in this world. I don't want you to survive by yourself. I want you to die with me here. Will you die with me in our streets? I said yeah. She thought you'd be shot. You know, you can't just decide not to go in on that line. Because everybody who didn't go fast enough was shot. But we snuck out and we were walking near the barracks very close to the barracks, who shouldn't be seen. And we came to this hospital, infirmary. And I remember she took my hand, held it very tightly, and she went from corpse to corpse. Didn't know what she was touching. Bodies were all you women until she found the corpse she liked. I looked at the corpse. It was a woman, warm. She could manipulate her body because the woman must have died minutes earlier. She said, get in. She helped me. She took off my shoes and she manipulated my body in such a way. I know exactly what you wanted. She put my mouth, my head under her, her arm right here. Armpit. Put my mouth to the ground. My face to the ground. My head was here. And then she put my legs, one in between the woman. She was manipulating it, and then she covered it. But the woman's hands were out and the blanket was up to her chin, but her hands were out. She took them out. They were like this. I could feel it, you know, because my head was right here. And she said, try not to breathe much. Nobody will cover you. Don't cover yourself. No matter what happens. If she disappeared. And I know what she wanted. So I started breathing very shallow into the ground, to the bottom. And then I heard the screaming and yelling out. Oh, they were coming. People were everywhere, and they were shooting those who were dying. Now, it doesn't make sense to anybody. But by then, nobody was in their right mind. The Germans were not

in their right mind. They want to just get out right away before the Russians came and take as many people with them and kill those who stayed behind. So, they started walking all around, and somebody stopped by my bed. [They] wanted to make sure that the dead person was really dead, otherwise they would shoot that person, that woman. And I remember I stopped breathing. I was afraid the blanket would move. I—luck! My luck! The person moved on. I could hear the boots. I couldn't have kept my breath any longer. And even then, it was very shallow. After the person left. And screaming and yelling. Oh, I remember that! And shooting. And then there was quiet, but there was smoke. And then I said, oh—my mother said, "I can't get uncovered. I can't breathe"—but I would not uncover myself. I knew she was right. I knew if I listened to her, I'll survive. I'll make it. So, I didn't uncover. By the time I couldn't hold anymore, she uncovered me. And these were her words. "They're gone. Just like that." In Yiddish. "They're no longer here." And I looked around. So many people had also hidden with corpses. And in order to get out of bed, they pushed the corpses off the bed so they could get [out]. I didn't, because my mother took me out. The corpse was still on the bed. She helped me out and put my shoes on, but I couldn't find my shoes. I don't know what happened. So, I was barefoot and all these people, and the corpses all over. And all—and the place was burning. It was the smoke. They had set the infirmary on fire. And then we walked out with everybody outside. And lots of people were walking. It was dark and there's snow. And I was wearing I don't know what. But I remember walking towards the gates and that was January 25th: the Russians came January 27th. But on January 25th, the Germans had gone already. They left two days before the Russians came. So that's how we were liberated.

00:26:01:00

NOAH REMNICK:
Why does it matter to you so much to tell these stories? What is the importance of storytelling in your life?

00:26:06:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:
Storytelling is who we are. You know, there was a time where people couldn't read or write, and storytelling was the way to give history. All the books that you have started with storytelling, and I'm telling this story in order not to be forgotten. It's true. Now we have books and internet and all that stuff, but there's nothing like a real story. It has a terrific emotional effect, much more than the written word. The reason that Hitler was, was so successful because he was a great storyteller. He was a great speaker. And that taught me a lot. Also, I want to be a speaker so that the people will hear me and have it have an effect. And I want my grandchildren to do the same. So I speak every time somebody wants me to. Very important not to forget those who aren't here anymore by telling their story because they refuse to tell it.

00:27:19:00

NOAH REMNICK:
You also had children of your own? How and when did you eventually tell them the story of your life?

00:27:24:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

Right away. As soon as they ask: my children, my grandchildren, as soon as they see my number, I don't tell them. I tell them as they get ready. First, I tell a three-year-old, yeah, “Why did you write this on your head? You're not supposed to write.” I said “Yes, I didn’t. Bad people did it to me.” And as they get older, they know more and more and more until they know as much as I do. And then I took them to—many of them came with me to-to Auschwitz to say the prayer of the ashes. And they saw the cattle car. And they come with me to speaking. I make my children and grandchildren part of my life so that when I'm not here, they will continue.

00:28:16:00

NOAH REMNICK:

What is the main lesson you've wanted to convey to your children and grandchildren about your experience?

00:28:24:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:

Remember, this is part of your history. If you're Jewish or if you're not, even if you're just human being, this is what happened if we’re not careful. Remember those, the innocent people. Remember the destruction of innocence on this earth. Number one. Number two: be more cognizant of your environment. Your environment! Because by not seeing and not listening and not caring, this is what may happen. You’ve got to be awake, you know, to see what's going on. That's…the third thing is, which maybe is the last, is that I guess: hope. I see hope for humanity. I see positive things. But

we have to work at it. You know what? I'll tell you a little story, which I sort of like. A grandson asked his grandfather: tell me about your feelings about things, he says to his grandfather. The grandfather said, "You know, I always have two feelings. One is good and one is bad. One is kind, and the other one is me." And the grandson said, "Which one wins?" And the grandfather said, "The one you feed. So, you have to feed the good side of you." It really feels very important and on every level.

00:30:17:00

NOAH REMNICK:
Talk to us a little bit about the-the importance of family in your life and—

00:30:21:00

TOVA FRIEDMAN:
Family has been the most important thing in my life because Hitler wanted to kill our religion, our continuity, our people. In fact, I wanted six children, one for every million that was killed. But I stopped at four. But now I'm very happy. I have eight grandchildren. They all are very proud of being Jewish. They're educated Jews. They've been to Israel. They're going to be—I—they're going to continue my story. All of them, all eight know the story and I know that they will continue, and they come with me, not…whoever is available when I travel, and I talk. So, I think it's been…I sort of did, I did…when Hitler said, Let's kill the Jews. I said, "I'll have as many kids as I can." Get rid of the religion? Nuh-uh. Not mine. They're go to be very Jewish. Some of them speak Hebrew. And its sort of a-a…an oppositional like I've tried to undo what he tried to do. And it's very

meaningful to me. It's not just the theory. You know? That's why they're so important in my life. It's as if I'm vindicated, you know, this is—I'm here. And I am not just a survivor, but a thriving in a way. And I don't have uh survivor's guilt. I have something else which is newer in psychology, but I had it before they wrote about it. Survivor's growth. I feel…I feel like I'm still fighting, you know? For our right, our people, our—us.

END TC: 00:32:49:00