Gratuitous cruelty in WWII Poland

by Phyllis Chesler

Lodz, Poland

And so, the Polish government no longer wishes to be held responsible for German Nazi crimes signed legislation that threatened up to three years imprisonment for draft bill that is likely to severely limit the ability of Polish Jews and their descendants from reclaiming property lost during the Holocaust.

And yet, atrocities abound, both Love at the End of the World: Stories of War, Romance, and Redemption, much later in life, and it has literally just been published. However, it is an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust and of trauma in general. There are galleries of family photographs (how in God's name did she find and keep them?). Her sons, Doniphan and Nicholas, both wrote Afterwords as did

Tonia's writing teacher. Tonia's entire family accompanied her back to Poland where they made a movie of their visit: *money, then turned them in when their money ran out.*

We need these stories. We need the details. Even then, we will never know it all.

1939, Lodz. The secular, socialist Rotkopf family is starving. Jews were forbidden to work or go to school, were not allowed to buy bread, walk on the sidewalk (just as in Muslim countries), and had to wear yellow stars (distinctive clothing, as in Muslim countries). Jews also even had to surrender their pets—whom they never saw again.

Their provisions were nearly gone. The Rotkopf family is starving. Tonia's eleven-year-old brother, Salek, decided to rescue them all by selling cigarettes. Soon, he returns with "blood streaming down his face from gashes on his forehead…he had been beaten up by three Polish boys, probably not much older than him, calling him 'You dirty Jew,' smashing the box and stool and stealing the cigarettes and change."

When Tonia, with her long blonde braids, wearing a large cross and dressed as a Polish girl, tries to "pass" in order to buy bread—a Polish boy, ordered to point out any Jews in the line, "stopped in front of (her). Then he pointed…the German soldier pulled me out of the line, cursing. With a kick, he shoved me down the street."

In their thick, shiny, new leather boots, the Nazis loved to kick—and to kick hard.

Tonia's very glamorous aunt Kreindel, who wore lipstick and high heels, perfume and fox furs, is "thrown out of a window" by the Nazis.

Chapter after chapter, Tonia introduces us to her father, her mother, two siblings, only to tell us that she last saw her entire family when they were being led away, and when she

tried to join them, a “local German neighbor kicked her in the stomach.” To this day, she does not know whether he was trying to help or hurt her.

True, a Christian woman neighbor once lent the 14-year-old Tonia the cross to wear to buy the bread and Christian neighbors once helped “wash the blood out of her hair.” Important, very Christian behavior, but does it constitute a resistance movement?

As to whether Poles were kind to their Jews pre-Holocaust, consider this: Tonia’s son Nicholas, whose father, Vachel, is Christian, writes: “It was painful for Mom as Christian holidays in Lodz were a fearful time. Jews did not leave their houses because, as she often repeated, on those days it was “an especially good deed to stab a Jew.”

Tonia takes us with her on her journey to Hell, in the cattle car on its way to Auschwitz where, together with 24 year-old Stefan, she spends all night in utter darkness, reciting poetry and singing Chopin. They had worked together in the hospital in the Lodz ghetto. Once the Nazis separated the men from the women, she never saw Stefan again.

The Nazis kicked people hard, cursed them, constantly counted their Jewish captives at twice daily roll calls, had prisoners sleep naked in the mud, in freezing weather or eventually on bunks with splinters, then bedbugs, without blankets. No one was allowed to go to the outhouse alone, everyone was watched. Tonia writes: “I cannot flush a toilet to this day without thinking of it.”

She reminds us: “You could never rest. You were cold, you were hungry, you were starved.” And yet, she did not talk about any of this for a very long time because “I feel pained to tell people about the inhumanity of man to man.”

When Tonia returned to Lodz, a man said: “I thought they killed all the Jews.” And, when she returned to her family’s

one room apartment in Lodz, she was cursed as a “whore” by the woman who was now living there. Tonia fled.

Although Tonia remained a socialist, she knew that the Russians were also anti-Semites. She decided to seek shelter in the American sector.

Even the luckiest, the hardiest, the most loving of survivors are marked for life by such trauma. Tonia is forever after anxious, insomniac, fearful; she waits to be told what to do; she asks men to protect her, she actually feels “safe” with her Nazi Master because he was not brutal towards her.

Although she travels to South America and to the United States, Tonia remains overly obedient to authority, as if she is “hypnotized” by it. But, she is always a bit physically reckless (on skates, on skis, on icy pavements), but she’s unstoppable. Like so many survivors, she is always a bit out of place, dressed “differently,” always in a pleading position.

I will let Tonia have the last word: “Now that freedom is here, the mind is enslaved by the past, by nightmares, by terrible agonies, miseries, pain, loneliness, ugliness. And above all, the excruciating memories and guilt that pop up when someone pays a compliment.”

Thank you Tonia for sharing some of these painful but important details with us.

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