



Pictured with her daughter Itaya Friedman and grandson Aron Goodman, Tova Friedman, a survivor of Auschwitz, has published a memoir. MITSU YASUKAWA/NORTHJERSEY.COM

Auschwitz survivor has a powerful plea

Woman pens memoir 80 years after imprisonment

Phaedra Trethan USA TODAY

Tova Friedman has the demeanor of someone with little time to waste. • There’s an economy to her words, but the directness with which she speaks doesn’t in any way minimize the power of her message: Humanity must never forget the horrors of the Holocaust. • Horrors that Friedman, 86 and still working as a therapist, witnessed firsthand. • She’s one of few Holocaust survivors left, and she knows that her message needs to be amplified for new generations so that those who suffered and died did not do so in vain.

But as Friedman, a child imprisoned at Auschwitz during the Holocaust, and her cohort grow older, worries are growing that the Holocaust is being distorted, denied and even forgotten.

“I share this story, like many others who do, because we cannot forget all those innocent men, women and children who were slaughtered just because they were Jewish,” said Friedman, who also noted that the Nazis targeted others, including disabled people, gays and lesbians and other ethnic minorities.

“I tell the world to remember them. Memory is very, very important,” she said.

Friedman knows better than most the importance of words and warnings: From her earliest days, she remembers her mother telling her how to behave in the Jewish ghetto in Poland. Don’t look soldiers in the eye. Don’t cry or whine or complain. Don’t do anything that will make them kill.

“My mother didn’t cover anything up,” Friedman

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A group of child survivors at the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau in southern Poland on the day of the camp’s liberation on Jan. 27, 1945. ALEXANDER VORONTSOV/KEYSTONE/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Survivor

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said, and telling her daughter the full extent of Nazi brutality, even though she was still a small child, probably saved her life.

Friedman survived the ghetto, and later Auschwitz-Birkenau, but just barely. She remembers being tattooed. Having her head shaved. Being taken to the gas chambers with other children, being told to strip, and then, inexplicably, being spared.

“It’s a warning, a watch, to say look what can happen if we don’t stop hatred, stop being suspicious of each other, for any reason, whether it’s skin color, sexual differences, politics or anything.”

The Claims Conference, a New York-based, multinational advocacy group for survivors, their descendants and others interested in preserving Holocaust history, worked with museums, educational institutions and nonprofits including Yad Vashem and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to survey people across eight countries for the Index of Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness.

Some of the results were alarming.

Across the countries surveyed – the U.S., Romania, Hungary, Poland, France, Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom – many people weren’t aware of the scope of the Holocaust. In the U.S., France and Austria, for example, 21% of people thought the number of Jews killed was 2 million or fewer – far below the actual number, 6 million.

While it might be difficult to comprehend the difference when the murdered number is in the millions, the distinction matters.

“Each one was a person unto themselves,” said Greg Schneider, executive vice president of the Claims Conference. “The Holocaust went on for years across Europe, and the enormity of it is important.”

Nearly half of the Americans surveyed (48%) were unable to name a single ghetto or concentration camp – even Auschwitz-Birkenau, where Anne Frank was taken after she and her family were discovered, and where Tova Friedman nearly lost her young life; or Bergen-Belsen, where Anne Frank ultimately died.

A notable percentage of Americans (44%) also said Holocaust denialism is



Tova Friedman, shown in 2022, is a survivor of Auschwitz who has shared her story across the U.S. MITSU YASUKAWA/NORTHJERSEY.COM



A group of Jewish civilians are held at gunpoint by German SS troops after being forced out of a bunker where they were sheltering during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in German-occupied Poland in 1943. KEYSTONE/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

common and almost half of Americans (49%) surveyed said Holocaust distortion is common.

Schneider called the lack of knowledge about the Holocaust “deeply disturbing.”

“It’s more than just that people can’t

understand the Holocaust that should alarm us. It’s not just facts and figures,” but a lack of understanding how “hate unchecked can lead to horrific acts.”

“Of course this matters for the Jewish people, but ultimately it’s not only about Jews,” he said. “That’s one of the

lessons of the Holocaust – it was an event that was meant to exterminate the Jewish people, yes. But the lessons are ultimately universal.”

Preserving survivors’ stories

The Claims Conference has been recording the stories of Holocaust survivors such as Tova Friedman and others as part of its #RememberThis campaign. The group knows they’re in a race against time, though: There are about 245,000 survivors still alive worldwide, according to the Claims Conference 2024 demographics report, and most of them were children when the Holocaust disrupted their lives and tore their families apart.

Their median age is 86.

“We are living in an era when institutions and facts don’t have the same strength that they used to,” said Schneider. Guardrails, thin as they were, are being removed from social media platforms.

“And this is happening at the same time that we’re losing survivors and eyewitnesses,” like the soldiers who liberated the camps and discovered the dead, and the barely living.

Friedman, who lives in Highland Park, New Jersey, hasn’t only told her story to the Claims Conference, or to classrooms full of schoolchildren, or to congregations.

She’s written a book, “The Daughter of Auschwitz,” but she’s also reaching a whole new generation, thanks to her grandson, Aron Goodman. While she admits she barely understands TikTok (she was initially amazed when Aron told her about the reactions online, saying, “I didn’t realize it was interactive”), their TovaTok account has nearly 515,000 followers and 10.2 million likes.

When it looked like TikTok might go dark in the U.S., Aron started an Instagram feed, as well.

Friedman said she’s happy the videos have caught on. “I wanted to teach the young people, because they will be here when I’m not,” and she has no time for those who’d try to deny or minimize her story.

But the rise in antisemitism worries her: “The world has turned against Jews, and people who’ve never even met a Jew are antisemitic,” she said. “It’s a mantra of intolerance.”

“If we don’t learn to understand each other and stop hating each other, we may all end up as ashes eventually.”