My Mother Remembers

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Introduction

My mother was a great reader. From the time that I was a young child one of our favourite outings together was to the public library in our neighbourhood. We would walk, at first holding hands, then, later, when I was older, side by side, and, later still, I would walk alone while she stayed home. In her old age—she lived until 102—she spent most waking hours napping on a couch and reading until she could no longer see. *The light bothers my eyes* she would say. Even then, she kept books piled on the table close to where she sat. Was it for comfort or remembrance, or as reluctance to allow the passage of time to alter her habits? When, at the last, we hired a caregiver who wanted access to the Internet, the password she created was *bookworm*.

This poem is based on my mother's account of her experience during the war. Because she had a photographic memory, she could remember and recount stories from books and films. During World War II, my mother was transported from the Lodz Ghetto in Poland to Auschwitz, where she was imprisoned for a few months before she was sent to a work camp, where she lived with two hundred women.

My Mother Remembers

Hafsstadt Labour Camp

We walked, every morning, through the town,
while it was still dark—so the people could not see,
and could say later they did not know.

We were skinny, barefoot or in torn shoes,
walking on stones and in dirt to the factory
where we fit metal parts into little holes.

Piece by piece, bending our heads down to the work,
we put the wrong part in the wrong hole,
so the guns would not fire.

Then we walked back through the town,
the smell of bread and meat in the street.
After we were locked in at night,

two hundred women and girls,
the guard gone until morning, we were left
together, sitting and talking like home.

I told stories from books I had read,
Anne of Green Gables:

If I wasn't a human girl, I think I'd like to be a bee and live
among the flowers.

I remembered the words,
and told the stories
until we forgot where we were,

Well, that is another hope gone.

leaning together on cots,

My life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes.

until soldiers threw stones
at the window, yelling, *Come out.*
Come out. The war is over!

Bio: Gail Newman was born after World War II in a displaced persons' camp in Lansberg, Germany. The daughter of Polish Holocaust survivors, she was raised in a community of Jewish immigrants in Los Angeles. Gail Newman's poems have appeared in journals including *Nimrod International Journal, Prairie Schooner,* and *The Atlanta Review* and in anthologies including *Ghosts of the Holocaust*, and *America, We Call Your Name*. Her latest collection, *Blood Memory*, chosen by Marge Piercy for the Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize, won the 2020 Northern California Authors and Publishers Gold Award for Poetry and was the 2021 Best Book Awards Winner in the "Poetry: Religious" category. Gail lives with her husband in San Francisco and Sebastopol, CA.

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