

**NEWS****Threading The Needle To Survive**

For years, Rena Margulies Chernoff of Brooklyn traveled to Boston on Jan. 27. She and a cousin who also survived Auschwitz — they posed as twins — would celebrate the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz as their personal day of rebirth. This year, on the 70th anniversary, Chernoff, 81 and one of the youngest [...]

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This year, on the 70th anniversary, Chernoff, 81 and one of the youngest survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, can no longer travel, but she has written her story, in a project with her son, former CNN correspondent Allan Chernoff. “The Tailors of Tomaszow: A Memoir of Polish Jews” (Texas Tech University Press) is a stark and powerful account of her hometown, combining the voices of survivors and serious research not previously compiled.

“This is critical history,” Alan Chernoff says in an interview. “As many times a year as there are commemorations, it’s not enough. Education is essential.”

In the late 1980s, Alan Chernoff began interviewing survivors of Tomaszow for the Shoah Foundation. “People know about Warsaw and Cracow. But no one would know about what happened to the Jews of Tomaszow unless I did something.”

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Before World War II, Tomaszow had about 14,000 Jews. Rena is one of the four children among the 250 survivors. They survived, as Allan explains, not especially by brains, or by luck, but because they had skills with a needle and thread. This was a town with a thriving pre-war textile business; some said there were more tailors than customers. Rena’s father was a master tailor. When the Germans invaded the town and confiscated property, they asked him to make custom suits for German officers.

In the fall of 1942, when most of the Jews of the town were deported to Treblinka, Rena and her parents were among the 750 who remained in the ghetto. They were all sent to a labor camp in May 1943, and there too the tailors fixed uniforms. From the labor camp of Blyzen, they were sent to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944. In Blyzen and at Auschwitz, her aunt Eva sewed two large pockets in her garment in order to hide a pot of soup.

Rena has an amazing memory for details: She remembers the navy-and-white dress with polka dots that she chose from the pile when they arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau; its pattern reminded her of something she wore in happier days. When it was time to have a number tattooed onto her arm, she said she was 16, as her mother instructed. She was 11.

She recalls the day of liberation when Russian soldiers cried upon seeing conditions at Auschwitz. For Rena, there was too much death around her to feel elation. She and her mother went back to Tomaszow to wait for her father. They soon learned that he was shot one day before the camp was liberated.

While Allan was growing up, he and his mother had a kind of unspoken mutual protection pact: He was aware that she was a Holocaust survivor, seeing the number on her arm every day, and didn’t want to ask about it for fear of upsetting her; she didn’t bring it up for fear of upsetting him. But after attending the 1980 American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and meeting others who survived as children, she began to open up.

A retired New York City math teacher, Rena traveled extensively to speak to students about her experiences and served as a docent at the Museum of Jewish Heritage. Several tailors from Tomaszow went on to careers in New York City’s garment industry, one manufacturing airline uniforms and another working for Oscar de la Renta.

“It was a profession that helped save their lives and allowed them to build new lives in the new world,” Allan says.

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