

I was Apathetic, She Said . . . by Ruth Chevion

My dad seldom spoke in detail about his experiences in the war. His accounts tended to skim the highlights. In the story about rescuing his sister, he said he had grabbed Chava (**Ha**-va) out of a line and pulled her over a high wall to safety.

It was not until years after my father died z"l, that I heard the story from my aunt Chava's point of view. Sitting in her sunny apartment in Kiriya Motzkin, speaking in her excellent English in her sweet voice, she told me the story in detail. She wore a blue print dress the day we talked. She was so calm, so quick to smile, so composed.

As she told it, a "selection" had been announced in the ghetto early that day. Every individual — young, old, healthy, or frail — had to line up and appear before the commandant to be chosen either to stay in the ghetto or to walk the 3K to the train awaiting them at the Tarnów station. At age 14, unskilled in any work that was useful to the Germans, Chava was selected for the train.

She was nearing the train, marching with thousands of people who had also been selected for death that day, when suddenly her brother Pelek appeared out of nowhere, took hold of her hand firmly, and pulled her off the march. They ran away together.

Chava was starting to explain what happened next, but I did a double take. I asked her to please stop and go back. "How come a guard didn't shoot both of you right then?" I asked.

Her reply shocked me. "There were not many guards," she said. "We did not need to be guarded."

Chava's mindset that day is anecdotal, of course. Every person in that march had their own reasons to walk almost willingly to the train. But Chava's mental state is what we have. It is her feelings while on the march that I want to discuss with you today, dear reader.

Chava answered "no" when I asked her if she had been hungry. "I wasn't hungry," she said. "I was apathetic."

"I had lost all my friends," she explained. They had been taken already. I was very close to my friends, especially in my youth group Gordonia. I had become religious together with these girls. They meant a lot to me. They had all been taken before. My cousins who lived upstairs, Jonathan and the others, my aunt Rosie, my uncle Ephraim Menashe, my grandmother Dvora, all taken, all gone. Why should I live when they are dead? Let me be with them."

This of course is why they say we went like sheep, dear reader. In fact, the mindset Chava described was nothing like sheep. Sheep want to survive. Chava's mindset was suicidal.

"I had begun to question why they hated us so much. Maybe we were bad. There were posters everywhere with such ugly pictures of Jews with big noses, squeezing people, causing all the troubles of the world."

When you know my aunt Chava it's almost inconceivable that she could have felt this way. She was the only one in the family who refused to work in the tar paper factory. She rebelled. She had been beaten up by a German in the factory and she had thrown away the privileged "necessary worker"

papers that would have saved her in that selection. She chose not to work for these Germans anymore. So how did that staunch pride and self-respect diminish to the point that she was "apathetic"?

Could it happen to me in that circumstance, I ask myself? The Nazis induced depression so cleverly, so villainously, with such studied awareness of our Jewish values.

As my conversation with Chava continued, she described what happened later. Her brother Pelek paid a lot of attention to her after the rescue, she recalled with a smile. "He joked with me and played games with me." She recovered. She became a full participant in the family's subsequent escape from the ghetto. At some level my dad must have understood what had to happen to her mind, and he knew what to do.

Is it any wonder dear reader that we Jews literally pray for our minds? Have you noticed in the *Amidah*, our sacred prayer of 18 benedictions, that the first section is a prayer for our minds?

Take care dear reader. Never let depression defeat you. Hold on to your precious mind.



Photograph of Chava