

# TOLA CUKIER



The most popular spot in Israel and Sarah Gottlieb's apartment was the bench in the kitchen. That's where Tola's friends came after school to do their homework.

The Gottliebs lived in Sosnowiec, Poland, in an apartment that overlooked a gated courtyard and grocery store. It had three large rooms, including the kitchen. Tola's father was a businessman. Her mother raised the family, which included Tola, her older brother, Shlomo, two younger sisters, Miriam Bela and Rifka Nechama, and two of Sarah's orphaned younger sisters.

Everyone in the family spoke Polish to one another, but Yiddish to the father. Like many very religious Jews, Israel Gottlieb looked askance at Zionism. After all, the Messiah, who was prophesied to bring about the return to Zion, had not arrived.

Tola went to public school and private religious school. As Tola recalls, the Nazis "slipped over the threshold" of her country in September 1939. First they took the men, shot half and sent the rest to work. Israel gave Shlomo his fur coat. Shlomo believes it saved his life.

Tola was liberated from a forced march in the spring of 1945. She and friends went on foot in search of their families. In January 1946, she arrived in Paris with two friends from her hometown, where their families cared for her. There, in 1947, in a borrowed dress, she met and married Iser Cukier. Jeanot, their son, was born in 1948.

The Cukiers lived briefly in Patterson, New Jersey, moving to Kansas City where they raised their family. Reflecting on her life's experiences, Tola wrote this poem:

*I want the world to understand, my torn soul that will never mend,  
I want the world to be with me when in agony I stand.  
I want the world to walk with me, to never change my history,  
To recall it step-by-step, to not ever ever forget.  
They were my life, my sweet melody, my hopes that only a child can  
dream.  
So gentle, so kind, and oh so young....  
Couldn't you help stretch out your hand? No pity now.  
It's too late for that.  
My plea to the world, do not distort, respect my past.  
Is it too much to ask?  
I have found a place to be, a land of freedom, liberty.  
They have taken on the task, a National Holocaust Memorial at last.  
Here is where I will sing my song, full of sadness and wrong,  
Of a home of warmth and trust, of the ones I loved and lost.  
Here is where I'll bring my son... Here is where he'll bring his own...  
Here my tears will flow in pain. Here I'll hope, meditate.  
Here I'll bow my head and wonder how the world had gone astray.  
Here is where I'll say Kaddish. Here in silence, I will pray.  
For the six million who perished in so tragic awful a way.  
Maybe here this soul of mine with its deep forlorn cry might find peace  
at last in time.*



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein  
Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and  
After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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