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A Silver Cup and a Hooked Rug

By Ruth Chevion

When the Nazis entered Tarnow, (my father's home city in Poland), one of their first decrees was that Jews should bring all their silver objects to the Gestapo. My father's family had beautiful silverware, and some lovely silver ritual objects. There was a five armed silver candelabra for the sabbath, a silver Hanukka menorah, a special silver spice box for ending the sabbath, a silver holder for the braided havdalah candle, silver salt boxes, etc. But most precious of all was a little silver wine cup that my father had received as a gift upon his bar mitzvah.

The cup was already 150 years old when it was given to my father in 1935. It is about 5 inches high, and one and one half inches wide at the lip. Engraved with the swirls and curlicues of old world silversmithing, the couple of small dents it has in the stem only add character. The cup survived the Holocaust. Here's how:

When the order came down to turn over all silver to the Gestapo, Grandmother Miriam did comply to some extent. She surrendered a few objects. But not all. Her best Sabbath candelabra she hung from a long rope down into a well. To Polish friends she entrusted the Hanukka Menorah, and other favorite pieces for safekeeping. Then with the help of her three children, gingerly so as to leave no marks, she lifted a floor board in their city

apartment. Into the narrow space under the parquet, she nestled some objects that were special to her: Grandfather's silver snuff box, some spoons from her silverware set, and of course the cup. Then they replaced the board.

Before they could finish hiding the cup and the other objects, there was a knock on the door. The man who stood there was a Polish man of the town. They recognized him. He was a well known outspoken anti-semitic, a Jew hater, someone who might have been happy to see the Jews of the city being rounded up, harassed and removed. After introducing himself, as though he needed introduction, he offered to safe keep anything for them. He would keep anything they gave him safe to the end of the war, he said. Anything at all. Calmly, Grandmother went and rolled up a hooked rug she had made and some pictures and handed them over to him. Politely, she closed the door behind him.

When the war ended, Grandmother Miriam, with my dad and my aunt Chava, found their way back to Tarnow. In the search for things she had secreted, Grandmother found very little. The sabbath candelabra in the well was gone, rope and all. The Polish friends either had no memory of anything entrusted to them, or had themselves disappeared in the interim. But a few things did survive. The little silver kiddush cup was safely under the floorboard having rested there and tarnished peacefully for six years, along with the spoons and the snuffbox.



The rug and pictures came back too. Shortly after the family's reappearance in Tarnow, the man appeared at their door and dutifully returned the rug and the pictures, wrapped just as grandmother had wrapped them six years earlier.

They questioned him. Grandmother Miriam and my Aunt Chava had no reason at that point to be reticent. "Why did you do this?" they asked. "Why would you of all people? We know you were no friend of the Jews. Why did you keep our property for us for such a long time and bring everything back?"

"I didn't like the Jews any more than anyone else did," he replied. "But what the Germans were doing was wrong. I felt I had to do something."

My Aunt Chava and I discussed this story again a few years before she died. We were sitting in her living room in Kiriath Motzkin in Israel talking about her Holocaust experiences. "You never know about people", she observed with a smile.