

A Thank You Note to the Many Polish People Who Helped . . . by Ruth Chevion

Holocaust stories fly around inside my head.

One time, my mother was on a train going from one hiding place to another when the Gestapo boarded and started an inspection of papers. My mother's papers had been hurriedly made in the ladies' room at the station less than an hour before. The phony stamp with fingerprints were still wet. She was cooked. Spotting a man sitting alone who looked nice, she sidled up to him and whispered in his ear, "I'm Jewish, please say I'm your fiancée." Silently, he put his arm around her and pulled her close. She was saved. I have no record of his name. Only a story.

One time, my Uncle Alex had been put to work in the cellar of a factory beside an older Polish man. While they were working one day, a woman came and gave Alex a slap across the face with the back of her hand. A key he had cut for her the previous day, did not work. She was the secretary of the Nazi boss of the factory. The old man said to Alex, "I wouldn't take that. You should run away."

The old man then came up with a plan. He said he would go to the cemetery and find a grave of a child born about 1924, so about the same age as Alex, and he would go to the village priest and say he had lost his baptism papers. With these baptism papers, he would apply for a new *Kennkarte* (German ID). This is how Alex got false papers and escaped. He was never caught after that. I have no record of the old man's name, but the plan he invented was subsequently used by my father also. The funny part was that they both ended up with the same first name: Jan and Jan.

When my mother and I visited Poland in 1993, we went to the house where my mother had been hidden the last two years of the war by a Polish woman named Ala Moskalska. Other people hid there too. An elderly couple who had lived in the building back in the 40s was still there. "We knew something was going on up there," they told us. "We just didn't know what it was. Strange people went in that apartment at all hours." This elderly Polish couple only helped with their silence, but I would certainly not be here telling stories without their silent resistance.

I could go on and on. My life has always been peopled with survivors and children of survivors. Everyone has a story. Every story is breathtaking. Somewhere along the way, it seems that every survivor story has a moment where someone not Jewish helped.

To be sure, there were Polish people who were complicit. No doubt. There was a landlady who took a bottle of vodka in exchange for information about my mother's whereabouts. Luckily, that did not work.

I have no statistics as to which group was larger, the complicit or the resisters. But my anecdotal evidence says that for every Jew who survived there was probably at least one anonymous Pole who helped.

I'm thinking of my great-grandfather's chess partner, that Priest who gave a sermon that moved the townspeople, and of the neighbors who later hid the family in their gardens. I'm thinking of the Polish girl who passed along pillow talk she heard from her Nazi boyfriend. I'm thinking of the man who kept the rug, and of a different man who pretended he needed help with his car, and of the farmer who dug a space in his well.

These many who helped are not eligible for recognition at Yad Vashem or any Holocaust museum because we don't know their names, and maybe they did only one small thing, or maybe they only refrained. To them I offer my personal gratitude expressed in the Temple Israel newsletter.

I'll end with a love story.

After the war, my parents moved to Antwerp, Belgium. We lived there in a tight community of Holocaust survivors from Poland. In the house where we lived all the apartments were full of Holocaust survivors. We children heard their stories night and day.

There was one man who stood outside the house yelling "ULLA, ULLA" for days at a time. He would be out there shouting her name begging her to come out. He cared nothing for the fact that he was making a scene and being a disgraceful nuisance. She had promised her father that she would not marry him. He had hidden her during the war and fallen in love with her. It was not surprising in a way. Who would not fall in love with the golden curled smiling blue-eyed Ulla? Even I was in love with her, seeing how she languished in her embroidered slip smoking cigarettes, showing that skin and those legs. But after her father died, she did go to him, and lived with him until he died. Then she came to America and lived in Florida until she too died a few years ago, never having married.