

## Aunt Fela sings Oyfn Pripechick, with a guest appearance of Rachel Spierer by Ruth Chevion

If my family holocaust story had a soundtrack, the number one song on it would be Oyfn Pripechick.

The song is a paean to the Hebrew language itself. The title means “At the Hearth.” The lyrics describe a scene in an old time Cheder in pre-war Europe, where the rabbi sits with little children in front of a crackling fire and tries to motivate the children to study hard to learn the Hebrew consonants and vowels. The rabbi tells the children how the beauty of our language will sustain them through hard times, especially through the difficulties of being a Jew in the diaspora.

My Mom learned the song Oyfn Pripechick during the war from hearing her Aunt Fela sing it. This is the story:

It was the middle part of the war, when they were living-hiding in Krakow. Fela had an apartment with her two children, and she had a Polish maid for help. But the maid did not know she was working for Jews. In the evening, after the maid was gone for the day, Fela would sit the two children on the floor, in the middle of the centermost room, away from walls, so as not to be heard, and sing to them in a soft voice the song Oyfn Pripechick.

It's hard to fathom why someone would take such a risk just to sing a song. So many lives were at stake. Why did Fela do it? What was so important?

Fela had grown up on a farm near Lvov in eastern Poland, the youngest of five children of Esther and Mechel Roth. These were kind people who had earned the respect of their Polish neighbors. Mechel Roth was especially well regarded among his Polish neighbors, participating in the life of the village, greeting each neighbor by name every day as he walked his cows home from pasture. He was friends with the village priest, played chess with him, spoke Polish with him. That was outside. Inside, the family spoke Yiddish, honored the sabbath, kept kosher.

So, it was a huge surprise and source of grief for her parents and her siblings, when Felicia, the youngest child, nicknamed Fela, the cosseted favorite, turned away from Judaism, ran away from home, eloped with a Polish army

officer, of all things, and changed her name to Felicitas Truszinska.

But when the war came Fela didn't need false papers. She genuinely was the tall, stately Mrs. Felicitas Truszinska who spoke high class Polish. Though widowed by the time of the war, she had a comfortable situation. She had a job, an income, a home, children, friends, a life.

Exactly why she traded her good fortune to become a savior of Jews, I cannot say. But I do recall a conversation years later, in which I asked her how she came to know what had to be done, how she cognized what was really happening. This question fascinates me. The Nazis did not advertise Auschwitz. They took pains to conceal what they were doing. Of course, we know all about it now, but it took more than a little awareness to grasp the meaning of the situation in the actual moment.

Fela told me that she had happened one day to be on the outskirts of a crowd where Hitler was speaking. She listened. She heard how capable he was of whipping up emotion, the power of his voice, of his words, of his physical presence. She heard him state his intention to eliminate the Jews. She believed him.

Once Fela set about to save Jews, she spared no effort. With the help of Ala Moskalska, the altruistic young Polish woman who was Fela's “partner in crime,” Fela got seven members of her own family, including my mother, out of the Lvov ghetto and into hiding. Later on, Fela made a spectacular rescue of two other families from the Warsaw ghetto and hid them until the end of the war.

As to why she sang Oyfn Pripechik to the children during the war, taking the risk that the maid would find out, that neighbors would hear, that the children would let on, I can only suppose she underwent a profound change of heart. Hitler had made her want to be Jewish again, made her want her children to know they were Jewish, made her entreat them, as the rabbi in the song had entreated the children, to draw strength from their Jewish identity.

The happy ending to Fela's war story is that after the war she emigrated to Israel. She opened a pharmacy in Givataim, married a Jewish man, lived out her life as a proud Israeli speaking Hebrew, and died in Tel Aviv well into her nineties. The two children to whom she sang live in Israel to this day. Mechel and Esther Roth would surely be proud.

As a postscript, dear reader, I would fast forward to the year 2019, the year in which I hosted a Zikaron Ba Salon, meaning "Remembrance in the Living Room." This is an innovative new way to commemorate the Holocaust. In Zikaron ba Salon we sit together in an intimate setting rather than in an auditorium. We hear a survivor speak or see a taped survivor story. Then invited guests are asked to share their own feelings in any creative way — art, poems, insights, songs — concerning the Holocaust. To the Zikaron at my house in 2019, I invited Rachel and Mel Speirer, among other honored guests, and I particularly asked Rachel if she would kindly sing Oyfn Pripechik.

Rachel sang beautifully for us, as you can imagine, dear reader. She had studied the lyrics and gave us a beautiful rendition in her lovely soprano voice. We were a group of 24 people crammed into my small living room, but she made us feel like we had all the space in the world. Thank you, Rachel!



Photo of Fela with her daughter Yoasha in Israel around 1950.



Here is a childhood photo of Fela with her birth family. She is the little girl in the front row receiving a hug from her mother Esther.



Photo of me in conversation with Fela in her apartment in Tel Aviv. She looks short in the photo but she was really quite tall.



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