

Escape to the Tatra Mountains by Ruth Chevion

That my mother was able to make the Gestapo believe, even temporarily, that she truly was a Polish girl named Marta Zawatska was miracle enough. She didn't look the slightest bit Polish with her big green eyes and juicy lips, her olive skin, and chestnut brown hair, not to mention her thick ankles. But she spoke beautiful Polish. I'm sure that helped, as many Jews spoke either poor Polish, or none at all. She answered all the Gestapo questions about her (fake) personal life, and then she prayed on her knees to the Virgin Mother in perfect Polish right in front of them.

But what is equally miraculous to me, is that she did not then let her guard down. Because within the hour she was to face another situation.

When she returned to the house where she had been employed as nanny, the family was there. The father was a higher-up in the German army, the mother a German hausfrau. They had sent Marta to the Gestapo, ostensibly to obtain permission to travel to Berlin with them as their nanny. But as soon as my mother walked in, she perceived that they were surprised to see her. In one glance, she knew the whole story: they had lied to her, they suspected she was Jewish, and wanted her to be taken away, but taken quietly so as not to disturb the children with any kind of ugly arrest at their house.

She then did something I particularly admire. She did nothing. She said nothing. She did not reveal her perception of the situation. She did not reveal her own surprise. It may have been something as small as lowering her eyes. She went about taking care of the children. Then later that night, after the children were in bed, she jumped out of the second-floor window and ran away.

For several weeks thereafter, my mother hid in the mountains with "mountain people" as she called them, who were acquaintances of Ala Moskalska. But I can tell you with some confidence what was going through my mother's mind while she was hiding. Where was her mother? Where was her brother? Did the Gestapo go after Aunt Fela after my mother ran away? Fela would have been implicated, as it was Fela who brought my mother to Zakopane in the first place. And what about Ala Moskalska? Who was this person, and why was she getting so involved with this nest of Jews on the lam?

With my mother safely ensconced for the moment in the beautiful Tatra mountains surrounding Zakopane, I can answer some of these questions for you, dear reader, as my mother would later find out.

Mom's mother, Susha, was in Krakow, employed as a maid in a Polish house. Mom's brother Oswald was working as nightwatchman, sharing living space with his mother. I call it living space, but it was actually just two beds where they are allowed to sleep. They were not permitted to be there during the day, and not at all on Sundays. The details of that situation are just too painful to talk about.

Aunt Fela was not caught. She wrote a letter to the Gestapo saying "Doch, wahr das Madchen Jude." Sort of like, "Hah, the girl was Jewish after all" referring to my mother. But Fela too, disappeared into the night, leaving the job and the home behind, moving to Krakow with the two kids, and changing her name. She had been a proper Polish widow, legally married

to a Polish army officer before the war, but suddenly she became a Jew on the run just like all the others.

At that time, Ala Moskalska was 20 years old, just two years older than my mother. She had made friends with Fela at the Polish Forest Service where they both worked as clerks. They had come to share a two-family cottage. Ala and her brother lived on one side of the cottage. Fela with her two children lived on the other side. Then in 1942, when Fela had to skip town on account of her connection to my mother, Ala made the decision to help Fela make the transition to Krakow. But it didn't stop there. Ala would remain with Fela for the rest of the war, helping her save people. In an earlier piece I called them Thelma and Louise. But this was not a joy ride. Without Louise, Thelma had little hope of saving herself, her children, or anybody else. So, when Ala disappeared into the night along with Aunt Fela, leaving her good job, her comfortable home, and also her brother behind, that was the turning point. I would say that was the turning point when my mother's life was saved.



**Photos of
Alicia (Ala) Moskalska
1922-1998**