

# How Shabbat Candles Saved my Family during the Holocaust

## by Ruth Chevion

My Grandmother Miriam believed that lighting the Sabbath candles would save her family. Here's what happened:

Grandmother Miriam and Chava, the youngest of her three children, were hiding in an upstairs apartment in Krakow, having escaped from the Tarnow ghetto. At this time in 1943, Grandfather Elchanan was hiding in Russia. The two sons, Pelek, and Alex, were out and about passing as Poles - Alex running black market gasoline while helping his father, Pelek serving in the Polish resistance army while hovering over his mother and sister.

Nobody could dissuade Grandmother from lighting her candles on Friday nights. Pelek and Chava begged her, remonstrated with her, pointing out the danger of the candles being seen by neighbors.

To no avail.

But she agreed to two compromises. She would light the candles as early as possible, meaning an hour and a quarter before sunset, so that they would be less visible through a window, and she would light them in the bathroom.

One Friday night, their landlady walked in unannounced. The bathroom door had been left ajar. "What's going on here?" said the landlady to Chava. "You are burning candles here like Jews," she said.

Chava replied calmly, "Haha, yes. The lightbulb burned out, so we lit some candles." To which the landlady replied, "For that purpose you need only one candle, not five."

As soon as the landlady was gone, Chava ran to get her older brother Pelek. Luckily, she found him easily that particular night, as he was just returning to his apartment from a trip to Warsaw.

Within hours, Pelek moved them out of their apartment. He had prepared for this contingency by lining up a hideout for them in Warsaw with a Polish woman who hid Jews for money. Chava and Grandmother layered themselves with as many of their clothes as possible, stashed some food in their purses, and left the lights in the apartment burning.

They never had a comfortable place again after that. They had to pay high prices for bad conditions. They struggled to make money. Pelek had to find other places for them as their hideouts failed for one reason or another. They endured hunger and fear, but Grandmother and Chava did survive, as did grandfather, Alex, and Pelek.

Did grandmother's sabbath candles save the family?

We only know the events that occurred, not those that didn't, but I am in awe of the way my grandmother modeled optimism and leadership for her children. In the most dire of circumstances, rather than let go of her spiritual center, she let it shine. I see it as an act of resistance. And it turned out that resistance, even though risky, was necessary to survival.

Photo of Chava:

