

# Ala Said: "I will take her" by Ruth Chevion

For the last two years of the war my mother went into hiding. By then, she had survived two years under Russian occupation, one year in the Lvov ghetto under Nazi occupation, and one year passing for Polish under various false identities.

The brave woman who risked her own life to hide my mother was Alicia Moskalska. This is how it came about:

We are in Aunt Fela's apartment in Krakow in May of 1943. It is evening. Fela is on the couch crying. She is in grief. Fela had been on the train with her niece Herta, my mother, when Herta was pulled off the train by a bounty hunter. Fela had witnessed it. Fela was certain that her niece Herta was dead or on her way to a death camp by now.

Fela felt responsible for my mother. Before the war, Fela had lived with my mother's family in Vienna for several years. She had gone to pharmacy school in Vienna, and moved in with her older sister Susha, who was my mother's mother. Susha had taken care of Fela for several years while Fela studied. The sisters were close. Life had been good for Susha before the war. She had a good husband and a comfortable elegant home in a nice part of Vienna. Fela had become Auntie to Susha's two children Hertie and Ossie. Now all seemed lost. Marcus had died before the war. Susha and Ossie had been taken. Now Hertie was gone too.

Consoling Fela, sitting with Fela in her apartment on this May evening was Alicia Moskalska, nicknamed Ala. Ala was not Jewish. Ala and Fela had become friends at the beginning of the war when they were both employed by the Polish Forest Service in the city of Zakopane. When Fela fled Zakopane for fear the Gestapo was on her trail, Ala picked up stakes also, and each of the two women rented her own apartment in Krakow.

Suddenly, amidst the tears, there was a knock on the door. The two women froze. What to do? This could not be good. Was it the Gestapo? Had Herta given Fela up under questioning? The insistent knocking persisted until Ala finally got up and looked through the peephole. Her knees buckled. It was Herta. It was my mother.

At first, there was joy. There was telling and retelling of how the bounty hunter had let Herta go. But before long, the joy turned to worry. My mother presented a problem. What to do with her now? She would need a job and a place to sleep. She would need new ID papers. Herta couldn't move in with Fela because there was already patchwork situation there. Fela had a job. There was a Polish maid, and two Jewish children. Another Jew living there could bring down the whole flimsy arrangement. What will I do with you now? Aunt Fela asked.

That's when Alicia Moskalska spoke up. "*Ja ją wezmę,*" Ala said in Polish. "I will take her."

Ala hid my mother from May, 1943 until liberation in January, 1945. Ala gave my mother a room to sleep in, and the run of

her apartment at number 8 Kremerowska Street in Krakow. Ala shared with my mother her own ration card, so basically, she cut her own food in half. Later on, another two families would come to hide in the same apartment, sleeping on the living room floor like sardines.

I personally had the honor and the pleasure of meeting Ala in 1993 when my mother and I went to Poland with a group of survivors and children of survivors. There was a banquet in honor of Poles who saved Jews that my mother, Ala and I attended. We three sat together at the banquet. What impressed me about Ala was her softness and her state of calm, her quiet modest elegance, as though all she had done in the war was just natural, nothing special. That was how she came across. I remember she wore a simple wool dress with one gold pin. She smiled at us warmly. She was beautiful. Everything about her was just as it was, with nothing unnecessary added. I had fun listening to Ala and my mother talk together in Polish about their lives since the war.

In 2019, my cousin Uri (Aunt Fela's son) and I joined together to nominate Alicia Moskalska to be recognized at Yad VaShem in Jerusalem as one of the Righteous among the Nations. Uri told a touching story about how Ala had fetched him from a convent where his mother had placed him with the nuns for safekeeping. Ala was able to be out and about to do things like that.

In many everyday contexts, Ala was cover. That was the word my mother used to describe what Ala did for our family, "cover." In her company a Jew looked less Jewish. If you want to prove it to yourself, dear reader, try this little trick. In the photo below, Ala is in the center. My Mom and Dad are on either side of her. Now put your finger over the image of Ala and see if my parents don't suddenly look Jewish!

I would be delighted, dear reader, if you would go on the Yad Va'shem website ([yadvashem.org](http://yadvashem.org)), to see Ala listed there among the other 7,232 Polish people similarly honored as "Righteous among the Nations" for risking their lives to help Jews. See: Alicja Moskalska Gerhardt (Polish spelling, married name) under the Poland tab.

