

## In the Ghetto . . . by Ruth Chevion . . .

Usually when I recount how members of my family managed to survive the Holocaust in Poland, I focus on facts. I describe how they got false papers, where they hid, who hid them, the near-death experiences, the miracles, etc.

It's harder to talk about the feelings. But there is a certain 24-hour period in my family history I want to look at more deeply.

I'm focusing on the day in 1943 when my Uncle Alex escaped the Tarnow ghetto where the family was incarcerated, tore the yellow star off his coat, and walked to the train station.

This was not a spontaneous action. He had prepared for it carefully for months, borrowing the right clothes, thinking through the minute steps of it, studying how to look Christian, how to get past the guard at the gate, and where to go. But he made these preparations entirely in secret. To his mother, his brother, and his sister, he never revealed until just the night before, that he was planning to escape. He knew they would try to dissuade him. Only after he had the date, the time, and the method of escape fixed in his mind, did he announce to his shocked mother and brother that he would be leaving them the next night.

There is a lot to describe here about what Alex felt. But I will leave that for another day.

My focus for now is on what his mother felt, what her reaction was and what she said upon hearing that her youngest son, at age 19 was planning to escape from the ghetto and attempt to survive on his own, a free agent, in the Nazi infiltrated and Polish-Catholic dominated world.

At the table for the conversation were three people: Alex's older brother - my father Paul, their mother Miriam (my grandmother), and Alex himself. The sister did not participate. Both Alex's brother and his mother argued strenuously against Alex's plan to leave the ghetto. The idea that he would adopt the stolen identity of a Polish person and not get caught and killed, and not bring reprisal on his family, if not the whole ghetto, was anathema to them. Not only was it wildly unlikely to succeed in the context of total Nazi control of everything, it was also a betrayal of his people.

The older brother's line of argument was basically this: "You are just a snot nose kid, what makes you think you can succeed in this adventure? You are irresponsible. You are needed here, but you want to run off on your own as if you are more important. You are just a selfish child." This argument went nowhere. Alex had made up his mind.

Grandmother was heartbroken. You will "schaden," she said. 'Schaden' means 'to convert' in Yiddish.

"You are converting to Christianity. What you propose is to leave your people and become a Catholic. You won't be Jewish anymore. You will be leaving your people," she said.

"Whatever happens to our people," she said, "happens to all of us, but we don't convert. We stay together. We help each other, and we don't convert even under penalty of death."

Was grandmother wrong? In another historical context, that of the Spanish Inquisition, we are encouraged to take pride in non-conversion. In Hebrew school we are taught to applaud those Spanish Jews who refused to convert. Why is it that in the context of the Holocaust our received opinion is that we were dupes for not trying to survive at all cost?

To my grandmother, personal individual survival was less important than her commitment to Jewish life. Several centuries of Jewish life in Poland had been characterized by stolid pacifism, by balancing coexistence with separateness, by accepting that a few would die in pogroms in every generation to save bigger group.

In order to delve into grandmother's way of thinking, we have to let go of the insulting phrase "they went like sheep." Grandmother's plea to stay together, to refuse to convert, even if it might save a life was not like a thoughtless sheep running over the edge of the cliff behind a leader. It was a motivation based on her understanding of a purpose in life, of meaning beyond individual survival.

Admittedly, I come out on my uncle's side of this argument. I feel we are still Jewish even if being Jewish is not all we are. We may not keep kosher, or honor Shabbat, or go to morning minyan, but we know we are Jewish. We may seek meaning in our careers, in creativity, or in meditation, but we still have a Seder, and we still go to services on high holidays.

At least that's how it was in my family after the Holocaust. They didn't convert. They shed their Polish Catholic identities at the first opportunity. Being Jewish was extremely important to them. But they never returned to a life where the activities of daily living were structured and inspired by Judaism. They sought meaning and purpose in life largely elsewhere.

I don't have any answers to this question. On the one hand I admire those family members who escaped from the ghetto and survived. On the other hand, I sense that my grandmother was not completely mistaken.



**My grandmother,  
Miriam Wilk Fessel**

## Never Forget!