

My Mother Prayed to the Virgin Mary and her Prayer was Heard by Ruth Chevion



My mother's maiden name was Herta Hausknecht. But in 1942, upon her escape from the Lvov ghetto she became Marta Zawatska (za-VAT-ska).

She studied hard. She was told to memorize her name so deeply, along with the details of where she was supposedly from, and all the

other details of her identity as printed in her false ID, that she would recite them correctly if awakened from deep sleep. Marta Zawatska. Marta Zawatska. Marta. Marta. Marta.

Before I tell you the story of what happened to Marta Zawatska, dear reader, I would like to take the liberty of fast forwarding to New York City in about 1980. My mother was already old, and I was sitting with her in the doctor's office. When the nurse came out to fetch her, the nurse called out "Marta" instead of "Herta." My mother fell instantly into what was for me a shocking incident of what can only be PTSD. She turned stiff and very red and started to breathe hard and look around with wild eyes. "Why did she call me that?" she asked several times, looking at me, looking around at the other people. "Why did she call me by that name?"

It took a while for her to melt and return to the present. What an extreme way to react to being called by her holocaust name. She might have said something like, "that is not my correct name." On the contrary, she seemed to acknowledge on some level that Marta Zawatska was her real name. Maybe someone reading this can explain it to me.

But it was with the name Marta Zawatska that my mother came closest to the flame. It was with that name that she was called to the Gestapo, and that she came out unscathed by praying to the Virgin Mary. This is the story:

Marta Zawatska landed initially in the town of Zakopane where a job had been arranged for her by her Aunt Fela as a nanny for two German children in the household of a German army officer. While it might have been considered dangerous for a Jew to work in the very maw of the beast, she did not have many choices. Marta Zawatska was 18 years old and had no marketable skills besides her fluent German. She had grown up in Vienna Austria and moved to Poland at age eleven. Her Polish and German speaking skills were equally fluent.

The nanny job went well for a while, so well in fact, that when the German man-of-the-house was called back to Berlin, the family wanted to take their nanny Marta with them. But they said, she would of course have to seek permission from the Gestapo to leave Poland. They had already arranged an appointment for her the next morning.

The first thing my mother did when she heard this, was to get a message to her Aunt Fela - the same aunt who had got her out of the Lvov ghetto, the same aunt who had vouched for her to get her the nanny job. Obviously if my mother was

found out to be Jewish, the thread would lead back to Fela, and Fela would be suspected also. She was living in the same town. In addition to herself, Fela had two children to protect. So the fact that my mother was called to the Gestapo was very dangerous indeed. My mother knew that she had to get instructions from Aunt Fela as to what to do. Should she run?

But Fela decreed that my mother was to report to the Gestapo as instructed. My mother had no place to hide if she ran and would surely be apprehended in no time. If she suddenly went absent from her job, Fela reasoned, Fela herself would be accused of harboring a Jew, and her children would be taken also. Without doubt, my mother would have to present herself to the Gestapo as Marta Zawatska, keep calm and do her best.

The interrogation was intense and long. Three Gestapo officers sat behind a desk, pointing a harsh light in her eyes, asking questions in quick succession. It lasted almost three hours. They asked about her childhood, the name of the school she went to, the names of her teachers, the name of the street she lived on, the house number, where her mother bought groceries, the name of the butcher, etc. With her lively imagination she answered all the questions, but the questions came back: what was the name of the school, and what street was it on, and what was the teacher's name, and who was the butcher, again and again.

My mother was blessed with an excellent memory. She passed. She was able to remember all the fabricated information she had given. They said she could go.

As she rose and turned to leave, one of the examining officers said, "Just a minute...before you go we want to hear you pray."

My mother knelt, crossed herself, and recited the Hail Mary in perfect Polish. After that they released her. But, again before she left, one of the examiners said they would in any event keep her ID papers for further research.

She left there knowing that if they researched her ID, she would be found out as having fabricated all these stories. The street name was wrong, the school, the teachers, the butcher, all of it was wrong. My mother had never even been to the town she was purporting to be from. But Fela had already foreseen all this and had arranged for her escape. That night, my mother jumped out of a second-floor window, into a waiting carriage driven by one Witold Moskalski. (Witold was the brother of Alicia Moskalska of the "Thelma and Louise" story from last month.)

How come my mother could pray to the Virgin Mary? Her mother Susha had sent her daughter to secular Polish school. This was not an easy thing in Poland. School was not free. There was a lot of anti-Jewish discrimination for my mother to endure in school. But she liked the school anyway. She didn't even mind that every school day in Poland started with recitation of Hail Mary.