

Quick Thinking by Ruth Chevion

I have never heard of a hiding situation so livable as my mother's.

For example, my father's mother and sister hid in a closet together and paid money for the privilege. Our friends Anka and Lili were hidden by two men in exchange for sex. My Uncle Isaac hid in the woods under bushes and leaves for so long that he didn't find out the war was over until several months after the end. My Aunt Irene and her sister were hidden for months by a farmer in a dugout in the side of a well so small that they could not stand or straighten out their legs. Hiding from the Nazis was harrowing.

My mother by contrast, had a whole apartment to move around in, and she paid nothing, not one cent. All she had to do was be silent, walk barefoot, and not go near a window. Plus, there was a servant's entrance that could be used for quick escape.

I do know there was a leaky faucet in the room where she slept. Even years later in America, if anyone ever left a faucet dripping at home, she would transform on the spot. She would rush headlong, as if through a wormhole she could get back to 1943 to try one more time to tighten that leaky tap. The sound set her off.

But even with the good conditions, hiding was not an easy time for Mom. She was heartbroken over the loss of her beloved mother Susha and her dear brother Ossie. It's hard to fit such things into our heads nowadays even if we know all about the Holocaust. Your loved ones "taken." As my mother remembered it, she spent her first six months in hiding crying.

She had one book: The Forsyte Saga in Polish translation. When she finished it, she would turn back to page one and start again.

Eventually boredom set in. One day, out the pantry window, Mom spotted a couple making love in an apartment across the alleyway one floor down. She became fascinated. She took a step closer to the window. Suddenly she realized someone was staring at her from an apartment across the alley.

Thinking quickly, she put a kerchief on her head and grabbed a rag. She opened the window, stuck her head way out, and beat the rag on the side of the building. This was the standard way of cleaning in Poland before the advent of vacuums. (I still do it.) Cleaning this way is so much part of Polish culture that there is a dedicated word for it in the Polish language. *Trzepać* (**cheh**'-potch) in Polish, says in one word what it takes eight words to say in English: "to beat the dust out of a

rag." Mom was passing for Polish and hiding at the same time. Whether that observer really believed she was just the cleaning lady or not, we don't know, but the charade seems to have worked as the danger passed without further incident.

About a year later, there was another incident of quick thinking. One night, Ala was going out to listen to the BBC at a friend's house. It was the Spring of 1944. There was tremendous anticipation at that time as to when the Allies (Americans, Brits, Soviets, Aussies, Canadians, Free French) would come in and liberate Europe from the Nazi grip. Everyone was glued to the radio. So, when Ala invited my mother to come along that night to hear the BBC, Mom accepted. It was the only time Mom went outside in those two years.

Of course, it was risky, and they were careful not to be seen. They walked to Ala's friend's house and arrived safely. But on the way back they were late. They missed curfew. I tend to think they were drinking. How else could they have allowed this to happen?

At the stroke of eight p.m., the hour of curfew, Ala and my mother found themselves almost directly in front of the Gestapo headquarters building, just in time to see the uniforms start pouring out of the building in a disciplined trot to catch anyone on the street. Ala slouched and whispered, "*Oh Yesus ranny*," in Polish, under her breath, meaning "Oh wounded Jesus."

My mother whispered to Ala to hush. Then Mom started belting out *Ach du Lieber Augustin*, the popular German drinking song, at the top of her lungs, slurring a bit, while at the same time giving Ala a hearty shove so that Ala staggered and almost fell. Seeing just a couple of inebriated German girls, the Gestapo men looked the other way.

In the photo below from Google Earth, you can see the house in Krakow where my mother was hidden. It is the white building with the black door. Ala's apartment was on the top floor.

