

The German Soldier and the Rose Garden by Ruth Chevion

My mother survived the war without a tattoo.

When asked to explain where she got the mojo to do the breathtaking things she did to avoid getting caught, she described her night in the rose garden.

You can't get the flavor of the incident without the context, so please bear with me while I start at the beginning.

When the war began on September 1, 1939, my mother found herself on her grandfather's farm in the outskirts of Lvov, then part of Poland. Mechel Roth, her grandfather, had for many years cultivated good relationships with the local Christians. He had introduced them to the use of fertilizer, which made them more prosperous. He knew the village people by name and greeted them daily as he brought his cows back from pasture. He played chess with the local priest every Friday night. They were friends. Mechel Roth was so well regarded by the local people that when my mother and I went to Poland in 1993, their descendants came out to greet us and make us welcome.

My mother was at the farm for school vacation. Ordinarily she lived in the city of Tarnow with her mother, but the onset of war had separated them. Hitler and Stalin had made a pact to divide Poland. Mom was caught on the Russian-occupied side, her mother on the German-occupied side. So, Mom lived with her grandparents and went to Russian school, separated from her mother until 1941, when the Hitler broke the pact, and the German army suddenly invaded the Russian-occupied side of Poland.

The farmhouse stood on top of a hill from which there was an open view to the railroad station below. When the family saw German soldiers coming up the hill, they ran out of the house helter-skelter, trying to get away. As my mother ran, a young German soldier in the front line coming up the hill, motioned to her that she was running in the wrong direction. He motioned to her to run away from him. This soldier saved her life right then. Mom turned and ran in the direction he indicated.

When they reached the village at the bottom of the hill, the 12 members of the extended family sought refuge with local Polish-Ukrainian people. My mother was taken in and hidden all night outdoors in a rose garden. As she lay there inhaling the aroma of the roses, she said to herself that she would survive this thing somehow.

I heard this story many times. As I always understood it, the point was that something so supremely beautiful as the smell of roses made her feel that life was worth fighting for.

But writing it down, dear reader, has made me see another side to it. There must have been genuine fear involved. The kind of fear that makes you lose your guts. My mother always said about herself that she was a coward. This rose garden event occurred on or about June 22, 1941, when my mother was 17. The humiliation and wanton killing of Jews had been going on for almost two years in Poland. Suddenly it came to them in Lvov. The Nazis were here!

Maybe she remembered the rose garden so vividly later on, not only because it was beautiful, but because she sustained a trauma there, lying face down in a stranger's yard all night, all alone, and scared, not knowing what would happen next, what she would have to do, what would happen to her, and who would help her. Where was her grandfather? Her cousins?

I think maybe what happened for my mother in the rose garden is that there dawned in her the x-ray awareness that actually got her through. That it was this bizarre juxtaposition of sublime beauty with bone chilling fear that caused a new capability to arise in her at that moment, spontaneously. I'm sure motivation arose there too, but it was this awareness that was the real medicine. Her stories bear that out.

I remember my parents talking about awareness. My dad had a story too, about how one time he was returning to his main apartment but instead of going inside he walked right by as though he didn't live there. Something was off. I would ask him what it was. He said he really didn't know, except maybe the children weren't playing outside. It was just a sense. It turned out later that the Gestapo had been waiting for him in his apartment.

This new insight I just received about awareness feels like a blessing to me. It's so valuable. But what about the German soldier? What do you do with gratitude to someone so anonymous as a soldier who did one small thing? Or to the family whose rose garden it was? Or to the Russian Orthodox priest who preached to his flock that they should help the Jews even at risk to their own lives? It's all so complicated when you delve into the details. The least I can do is tell you about them, dear reader.



My mother's grandfather, Mechel Roth