

Thelma and Louise by Ruth Chevion

There was no way my mother could have escaped from the Lvov ghetto without help from outside.

She might have tried, along with her mother and her brother, to get past the guards at night. But what then? Walk to the train station like a family of skeletons in rags? Without German I.D. papers? No shoes? No coats? And even so, where would they sleep the first night? Where would they get money for a meal, for train tickets? No. It was not possible to escape without help from outside. But help did come. It came in the form of the two women in the photo below.



Please dear reader, look at the photo closely. What do you see? Are these women sisters? Notice the Polish peasant blouses. Notice their intimate pose with heads together. Are they Polish? Or are they Jews passing for Polish?

The woman on your right as you face the photo- the one with the round white collar - was my grandmother's younger sister Felicia, whom we called Fela. Though Jewish by birth, she had never been caught because she had a perfect Polish identity. She had married a Polish army officer several years before the war and taken his name. To her family's chagrin, she had left the Jewish identity behind. By the time of the war the husband had died, and she was in all respects a proper Polish widow with genuine papers.

The woman on your left as you face at the photo - the one standing slightly behind the other - is Alicia Moskalska. We called her Ala. She is about 21 years old in this photo. She is the Polish woman who volunteered to help Fela save her family. Ala provided Fela with something very rare and precious during the war: She provided Polish cover. With Ala at her side, Fela could be out and about. In Ala's company, Fela could pass for Polish. For Ala of course, the opposite was true. She was taking on the risk of being associated with a Jew.

That is the message of the photo. See how they have mocked up their clothes, hairdos, and expressions to make Fela look Polish by association? Besides providing cover, Ala could also stand in for Fela when necessary. One time Ala took Fela's place to fetch Fela's son from the convent where he had been hidden.

In the incident that is the subject of this particular story, Fela and Ala rescued seven people from the Lvov ghetto. They were my mother Herta, Grandmother Susha, Mom's brother Oswald, three cousins named Carl, Mark and Leo, plus Edmund, the father of these three cousins. For each of these seven people, the two women provided an Aryan identity story together with Nazi issue I.D. papers to match the story, some street clothes, and an address where they could sleep. All this they arranged in advance. The trickiest part was the I.D. papers.

Because it was not feasible for them to buy seven sets of I.D papers on the black market, Fela and Ala decided to make the I.D. papers themselves. They could get a camera for the photo, and an ink pad for the fingerprints. But where to get the genuine blanks with the proper Nazi insignia on the correct grey paper? They needed the blanks.

They came up with a plan. Both Fela and Ala were employed at the time by the Polish Forest Service. Upstairs from their office, one entire floor was occupied by the Gestapo.

One night after work, they went back to their office in the Forest Service. They went into the ladies room, and opened the window. While Ala stood guard, Fela (the one on your right in the photo) climbed up the side of the building, opened the window to the upstairs ladies room in the Gestapo office, went in and stole a stack of blank Generalgouvernement I.D. booklets with Nazi insignia already printed inside.

She then climbed back down the way she came, shut the window, and the two went home with what they needed. A few days later, Fela took the train to Lvov, snuck into the ghetto and got everyone out.

Think Thelma and Louise. Besides getting those seven people out of the Lvov ghetto, the two of them went on to rescue another two families out of the Warsaw ghetto - the Jaffes, and the Korngolds. By the end of the war there were some twenty people sleeping like sardines on the floor of Ala's Krakow apartment.

After the war, Fela went on to remarry and live out her life in Tel Aviv. Ala remained in Krakow until her death in 1998. She married and had a daughter. She is honored at Yad vaShem in Jerusalem in the garden of The Righteous among the Nations.