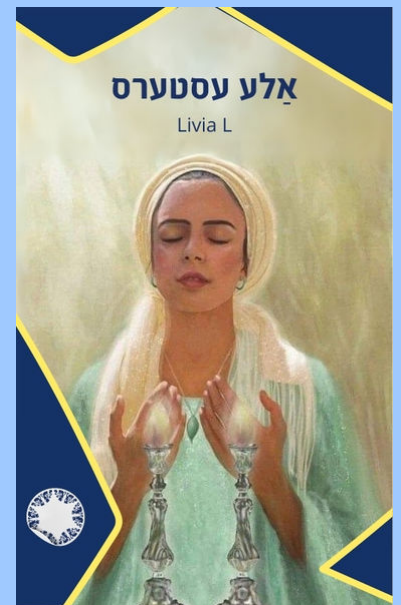




KALEIDOSCOPE

All of the Esters



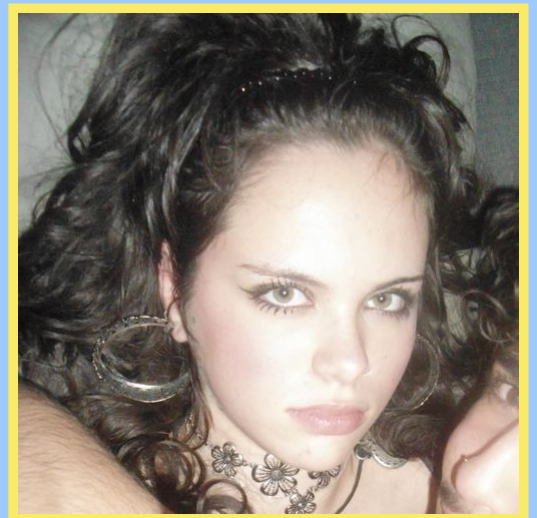
Name: **Livia L**

Gender: **Female**

Country of residence: **Sweden**

Writing language: **Yiddish**

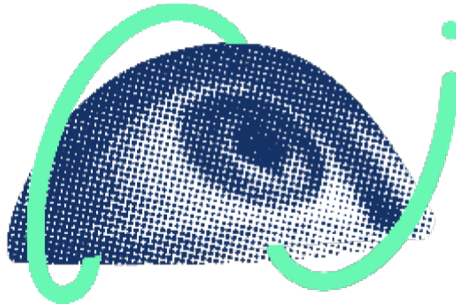
When I light the Shabbat candles, I feel them with me - all the Esters, all the women who knew how to carry a world in silence. The flames dance, each one a quiet defiance, a reminder of a strength that endures across generations. These lights are not merely candles; they are voices, memories, and the unyielding power of survival.



The Shabbat candles flicker before me, each flame holding secrets I can only begin to understand. They are more than mere lights on this quiet evening - they are voices from across generations, each one a whisper in a language that seems woven into my blood. These flames are a bridge, a bond that stretches back through time, binding me to the Esters who came before me, and maybe, to those who will come after.

My mother once said that the candles are like open doors to our past, a way for us to remember. "When you look into the flame," she told me, "you are seeing all the women who stood before you, who carried their names with strength and silence." And so, as I stand here, bathed in the soft glow, I imagine the women whose shadows stretch through me, silent witnesses to lives that have shaped my own.

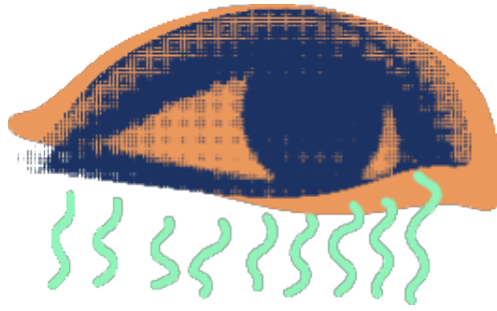
There was Ester, the queen, whose courage echoed through ancient halls, who stood unbroken before kings to save her people. And there was my great-grandmother, also Ester, a woman with no kingdom, no crown, only the quiet resilience of a survivor. She carried the same name, but her throne was the darkness of survival, her power and the ability to endure. In her, the flame did not blaze; it smoldered, hidden, a quiet ember in the deepest part of her heart.



My great-grandmother Ester was born in Łódź, Poland, in 1914, to a family that struggled to survive. Her world was filled with the heavy, unspoken weight of poverty and prejudice, the kind that seeped into every corner of life. Even as a child, she understood that survival was a quiet battle fought every day. Antisemitism was as constant as the air, woven into her childhood as naturally as laughter might have been for others. It was there in the eyes of her neighbors, in the voices of her teachers, and in the shadowed corners of her schoolyard.

When she was nine, Ester left school to work as a servant for another family. Her hands, too young to know calluses, learned the rough language of labor, washing dishes and scrubbing floors to support her parents and her siblings. In those strangers' homes, she slept on two chairs pushed together, a makeshift bed for a child whose dreams had already been tempered by the world's indifference. There was no room for softness in her life, no place for the fragile hopes that children are supposed to carry.

But even then, Ester understood what it meant to be strong. She bore her name with a silent pride, as though it were a cloak that shielded her from a world eager to forget her. She held her dignity close, tucked it into her heart like a hidden ember, knowing it was something that no one could take from her. In that quiet strength, she was already more than a child; she was becoming the Ester who would endure, the Ester who would survive.



As she grew older, Ester met Jakob, a man with a spirit as unyielding as her own. They built a life together, one carefully crafted from hard work and quiet defiance. They opened a small grocery shop in Kolumna-Łask, a modest place filled with the smells of bread and spices, a fragile sanctuary in a world that grew more uncertain by the day. By 1934, they welcomed twin boys into their lives, though they were taken too soon. Then came Majer, their son, and a few years later, Masza, their daughter.

For a brief moment, life held a fragile beauty. Ester and Jakob had created something that was theirs, a place of laughter and warmth, even as the shadows gathered around them. Yet, beneath it all, Ester must have felt the weight of the world pressing in, a quiet warning that their peace was a fleeting thing, delicate as the flame of a single candle in the wind.



The Nazis came like a storm, sweeping away everything in their path. They took the shop, their livelihood, and forced the family into the Łódź ghetto—a place where life was reduced to mere survival, where each day was a struggle against hunger and despair. Ester's siblings were scattered, her parents already lost to the unfolding horror. The ghetto was a place of whispers, of souls crushed beneath the weight of hopelessness, where families clung to each other as if the warmth of their bodies could keep them alive.

And then came 1942, a year that would carve itself into her soul.

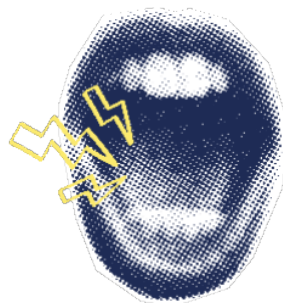
The Nazis came, demanding children, tearing them from their mothers' arms. Ester held her children tightly, her heart shattering with each scream, each desperate plea that faded into silence as the trucks pulled away. She spoke of that day only in fragments, her words heavy with a grief too vast for language. In her desperation, she ran, refusing to let them go, until a soldier's bullet found her leg. The pain was nothing compared to the agony of loss, but the bullet remained, a physical reminder embedded in her flesh, a scar that would linger as long as she lived.



Ester and Jakob were separated, torn apart like pages from a book, each sent to different camps. She did not know if he was alive, or if her children had been lost forever. Ester and her sister Cela clung to each other, the last fragile thread of family in a world stripped bare. They were taken to Auschwitz, then to Ravensbrück, though the order of those horrors is a detail lost in the fog of memory.

At Auschwitz, they became numbers. Names were stripped away, and humanity was reduced to ash and smoke. Gold teeth were ripped from mouths, bodies discarded like waste. Ester endured unimaginable suffering, each day another chapter of cruelty that words cannot hold. She saw people die around her, souls extinguished for no reason other than the sadistic pleasure of those who held power over them. She had seen her own children taken; she had known a sorrow that hollowed her out, leaving only the fragile shell of survival.

In that abyss, her only anchor was Cela. They clung to each other, a bond that defied the darkness, a whisper of family in a world that had forgotten what that meant.



The camp was a place where days blurred together, each one a hollow echo of the last. Hunger gnawed at their bodies, reducing them to shadows, barely more than bones wrapped in skin. Yet in this bleak landscape, Ester's spirit remained, a quiet defiance hidden deep within her, like the last embers of a fire.

One morning, they were lined up as usual, their bodies frail, their eyes hollow. The guards walked along the line, pointing, selecting who would work and who would go to the gas chambers. Each gesture was a death sentence or a reprieve, a casual act that held the weight of life and death. When the guard's finger landed on Cela, Ester felt a surge of something fierce, a fire that had lain dormant but now blazed within her.

She stepped forward, her voice steady, her gaze unyielding, and spoke words that would echo through her lineage. "My sister is strong as a horse and can work," she said, her voice a quiet challenge. "She only looks weak. If she is to go, then I will go too."

The guard looked at her, perhaps taken aback by her quiet boldness, and after a pause, he sent Cela to the line of workers. In that moment, Ester had saved her sister's life—a single act of defiance against a world that had tried to strip her of everything, including her strength. For Cela, that moment was more than survival; it was the embodiment of the bond between them, a bond that had been forged in suffering and held together by love.



Liberation came like a whisper, a gentle breaking of the dark. Ester and Cela found themselves on the white buses to Sweden, each step a journey back to the world of the living, though they were shadows of who they had once been. In Malmö, Ester stepped onto foreign soil, her body a fragile 38 kilos, but her spirit, though battered, still intact. She was alive, but the world she returned to was not the same, and neither was she.

Even as her body began to heal, her heart searched restlessly, reaching across borders and oceans for the family she had lost. She held onto the hope that Jakob had survived, that somewhere in the broken pieces of their past, they might find each other again. She searched for her children, though she had seen them taken, and part of her knew they were gone. Still, the heart clings to what the mind knows is lost.

Jakob, too, had survived, though barely. Hidden in a latrine tank, submerged in filth for days as bullets flew outside, he had emerged skeletal, his body reduced to 33 kilos. He did not know if Ester was alive or if he would ever see her again. Each had thought the other lost, yet a fragile thread of hope bound them across the void.

In 1947, fate finally brought them back together. It was an improbable reunion, a miracle in a world that had tried to erase them. They were both scarred, both carrying the weight of what they had endured, yet somehow, they had found each other again. Together, they stepped into the uncertain light of a new life, carrying within them the strength of all they had lost and all they had saved.

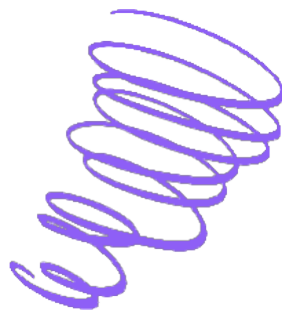


My mother would tell me these stories as if they were treasures passed down, not just memories but inheritances. She spoke of Ester's quiet strength, her belief that every soul carried a worth beyond measure, her unwavering sense of justice even in a world stripped bare of it. Ester had saved her sister's life in a place where lives were valued less than shadows. She had endured the unimaginable, yet within her burned a love for life that even horror could not extinguish.

My mother would tell me, "Ester was not only a survivor; she was a woman who held onto her humanity when everything else was taken." And in those moments, I felt as though I, too, was connected to that strength - a strength that was neither loud nor visible but pulsed quietly, like an unbreakable heartbeat.

Ester's legacy was not one of bitterness or anger. She carried within her a reverence for life, a respect for all living things. My mother told me that Ester would never harm even a fly; she would open her hand to let it go, refusing to take life needlessly. She would scatter crumbs for birds in the garden, a small act of kindness, a reminder that even the smallest creatures deserved compassion.

When I light the Shabbat candles, I feel them with me - all the Esters, all the women who knew how to carry a world in silence. The flames dance, each one a quiet defiance, a reminder of a strength that endures across generations. These lights are not merely candles; they are voices, memories, and the unyielding power of survival.



I bear her name, Ester, as a middle name - a connection to her that feels more like destiny than coincidence. By some twist of fate, I was also given her identification number, a fragment of her life embedded in mine. The odds are one in ten thousand, yet here I am, carrying her name, her story, her strength.

Though I never met her, Ester feels like a part of me. She lives on in my mother's stories, in the quiet pride of her survival, in the flame that flickers each Shabbat. When I stand by those candles, I am not just myself; I am a part of her, of all the women who bore our name and carried our heritage. I am an echo of the queen who saved her people, of the grandmother who endured unspeakable suffering, and of the mother who passed these stories to me as a gift.

In the flicker of the Shabbat candles, I see them all - the biblical Ester, my great-grandmother, my mother. They are bound to me in the glow of those flames, a silent strength that will never fade. And in this, I know that I, too, am bound to carry their legacy forward, a light in the darkness, a voice in the silence.

As I light the Shabbat candles tonight, I feel the weight of all the Esters who came before me, the quiet resilience that flows through our family like an unbroken thread. These flames are more than mere symbols; they are voices, memories, and an enduring strength that transcends time.

Each Friday, as the candles flicker softly before me, I am reminded that I carry with me the lives and legacies of those who walked this path before. My great-grandmother Ester, who bore her name as both shield and banner, who endured unimaginable loss but held onto her humanity, lives on in these flames. My mother, who passed down her story, gifted me this legacy, teaching me that true strength is both quiet and unyielding.

The Shabbat candles are our connection, a bridge between past and present, a reminder of the strength that has carried us through. As their light fills the room, I feel the presence of all the Esters - the queen, the survivor, the storyteller. I am bound to them in silence and strength, a part of their story, and they are a part of mine.

Tonight, as the candles burn, I make a quiet promise to carry this legacy forward, to live with the resilience and compassion that defined them. In the glow of the Shabbat candles, I know that I am never alone. I am surrounded by the strength of my ancestors, by the memories and love that have been passed down through generations. Their light guides me, and as long as these flames burn, their story, our story, will endure.

