

The Light Shines Bright - The Story of our Shabbat Candlesticks

Lydia Ella Neuf, born July 1918 in Munich Germany under the zodiac sign of Leo was truly a lioness in the midst of chaos during a time of great conflict. She came from humble beginnings and a strong moral foundation laid down by her mother,

Ella Schmitt. Lydia lived and grew up in the Theater District of Munich - a fitting surrounding as she herself was blessed with many talents including singing and drawing. Those who knew her say that her true talents lay deep within her heart. At a young age she finished University and took on many small jobs including; singing on a morning radio show, a chef at a restaurant, and partnered with her mother in a feather-bed business.

Their housing was not limited to the city of Munich. Every summer they ventured to their small bungalow in the Bavarian Alps. It was there they raised geese to harvest the feathers for the beds. Lydia's father, Heinrich, was a rugged man, a loner who geared most of his attention to coo-coo clock making and tended to the geese. He was not fond of the city and stayed in their mountain home. Perhaps not the best arrangement but for the times it was acceptable given the financial downfall of Germany in the 1930's. Despite the chaos and growing evilness with Hitler's power, Lydia and her new husband, Albrecht, opened a restaurant in Munich..."Lydia's Gute Stube", not far from her home in the Theater District in 1939. The popularity soared as did her reputation for a delectable menu and fine wines which made her into a very successful woman beyond her years. Lydia opened her doors to everyone of all races and nationalities including religious affiliations.

When darkness fell over the people of Germany and Hitler made his prejudice known, Lydia's mother, Ella, confessed that her grandmother, from Poland, was Jewish. Lydia took this news to heart and with the help of a local Rabbi she built a separate kitchen in the basement of her restaurant and hired a Jewish chef. Her menu expanded to include Kosher selections.

Lydia was a stickler for proper tableware. Her table settings were a work of art, complete with hand painted china, embroidered napkins, fresh flowers and candles. Ella gave Lydia a set of brass candlesticks that belonged to her Polish grandmother.

Lydia presented them to the Rabbi and asked if they could be on the Kosher table. The Rabbi blessed them and they became permanent fixtures for every meal and prayer.

As the heat rose with Hitler's persecution of the Jews, Lydia moved a table to the basement where her Jewish patrons could secretly meet, eat, pray and make plans for their escape from Germany. The root cellar, a hole dug out in the dirt where spices were stored, became the hiding place for Jews escaping through the underground. Candles perched in the brass candlesticks were the only source of light for the frightened families hiding within the dirt walls, while the laughter of German soldiers echoed through the floor cracks from the restaurant above. Lydia put on the best performance of her time in the face of the enemy. No-one suspected her disloyalty to Nazi party and the secrets in the basement.

At the climax of the war, all of Europe hosted battles and bombings. Munich was not spared. One day Lydia returned from the market only to find her restaurant in rubble. Bombed and destroyed by the German forces. It was unclear whether the bombing was random or was Lydia's secret revealed. Albrecht was killed. Lydia fled to the mountains with her mother and two small children and did not return to Munich until the American occupation, May 1945. It was then she met Lt. Col. Alwyn Brodersen of the US Army National Guard, commander of the 169th Infantry division, who later became one of the commanders under the Marshall Plan in Germany, Belgium and France. It was love at first sight. The German beauty melted the heart of the war beaten soldier. While the Colonel was attending to post-war clean up on a grand scale, Lydia and her surviving friends dug away at the rubble of the restaurant. Buried deep within the pile of bricks and wood lied the candlesticks, wrapped in cloth and unscathed.

In 1953 Lydia came to the United States with her new husband, Colonel Brodersen, two children (from her first marriage), and some belongings including the candlesticks. Lydia placed them on the fireplace mantle where they stayed until the end of her life, November 1970. In her final days of life, Lydia shared the story of the candlesticks with her daughter,

Isabel, the only child of Lydia and Alwyn. The candlesticks moved with Isabel from Connecticut to Colorado, California and back to Connecticut again in 1991. Isabel settled in Kensington and joined the Southington Congregational Church in 1994. A few years later, the church ministry requested from the parish a donation of brass candlesticks. It seemed fitting that the candlesticks would find their permanent home within a house of God, especially to a church that welcomes all faiths and all people. A parallel reflection of Lydia's dream of equality and peace.

Now the candlesticks are where they belong among the Jewish congregation. My mother, Lydia would be so proud that they have found a home with the Gishrei Shalom Jewish Congregation. God bless you all.

Isabel Brodersen Chirico