

## Keeping the Candles Lit, When the Light Has Gone Out

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*Sabbath Candles, a cornerstone of Jewish practice.*

Eclipses are funny things. They stop the world, and we all look up together, watching that constant sun slowly disappear before our very eyes. And together, we wonder, for just a moment, if the light will ever come back.

This year the world marvelled at an unbelievable eclipse. Across the United States, people bought protective glasses to witness the astronomical

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phenomenon together. That Monday, I stood outside my hotel in Indianapolis, packing up my truck to head home from GenCon, the largest gaming convention in the United States. My team and I had run a very successful Dresden Files larp only two days before. In my bag, I had the IGDN Award won by *War Birds*, an anthology put together by Unruly Designs. The book brought together the stories of women who contributed to war: forgotten stories pushed aside by the incorrect narrative that women remained passive during conflicts and didn't contribute actively. I contributed with a game called *Keeping the Candles Lit*, about the experiences of Jewish women fighting as partisans during World War II.

As the only member of the *War Birds* team present at the IGDN Awards, I stood up to collect the award, stumbling over my words. During my impromptu speech, I thanked the team and everyone who supported the book. But most importantly I thanked the women who inspired the game I wrote: my grandmother, Nora Stern, and my mother, Esther Kessock. After accepting the award, I texted my mother as my friends and I celebrated back in our room. "*War Birds* just won an award, and my part of this is because of you."

As I looked up at the eclipse only a few days later, my phone rang. It was my father back in New York.

"Come home as fast as you can," he said. "The doctors say she's very bad."

My friends and I packed up the car and drove sixteen hours straight to get back. By the next morning at ten a.m., only half an hour before I reached the hospital, my mother was dead. I will never know if she saw the text I sent. I like to think she did.

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I wrote *Keeping the Candles Lit* as a tribute game more than a freelance project. When Moyra Turkington approached me to contribute to the anthology, I was interested. While I've written a number of fan-tribute games for intellectual properties like *Battlestar Galactica*, *My Little Pony*, or *Dragon Age*, my smaller larps are motivated by my interest in creating deeply personal, emotional, intimate experiences. The chance to create a game based on true historical stories to small groups of people at a time seemed right up my alley. The question really came down to what story to choose. The answer almost chose itself.



*Inspiration for Keeping The Candles Lit, Esther Kessock.*

In my experience, there is an absence of Jewish stories in the media, and this is even more true in the larp world. When Jews do appear in media, their stories are usually framed by unfortunate stereotypes or fixated on specific historical

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narratives. The most familiar of these are the Christian stories about Jews in the time of Jesus, Hanukkah and Rosh Hashanah, the Americanized and secularized Jewish experience of Woody Allen or Jerry Seinfeld, or the ‘mysterious’ and often maligned ultra-orthodox narratives. And of course, the Holocaust, an ever-looming specter over any war story involving Jews. From Schindler’s List to Inglorious Bastards, it seems no one can have a conversation about World War II and Jews without immediately framing the narrative around concentration camps, gas chambers, and pictures of atrocities beyond measure. It’s easy to fall into these tropes when creating a game about Jews during World War II. But easy wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted to make a game that was difficult, that challenged the narrative of the passive Jews, victims of the barbarity of the Nazi genocide machine. In the stories about the partisans of Europe, I found my inspiration.

The tagline of *War Birds* is “we have always fought,” the ‘we’ meaning women. But the truth is, Jews also had narratives of oppression brought down on them by political powers going back into antiquity. In my research, I discovered the stories of so many Jews who escaped the Nazis to join resistance cells across Europe, hiding in forests to survive and strike against German forces as partisans. In my eyes, these stories gave us the backdrop for a larp with agency and drive, beyond the tight confines of prison camp walls and the Nazi stranglehold. It provided a new lens for the Jewish experience. Within that framework however, there was an added layer worth exploring: the story of the woman’s experience during a time of crisis.

For most non-Jews, the interior lives of religious Jews and especially Jewish women is largely a mystery. Cultural and religious practices are hardly explored publicly or in media, and as a minority group often seen as impenetrable, the importance of these practices to Jewish identity might be difficult to understand. Yet to someone like me, who grew up Orthodox Jewish, I was raised with an innate understanding of the depth and meaning of religious practice in Jewish life. Tradition isn’t just a song from *Fiddler On The Roof*, but the cornerstone connecting generations of Jews in the global diaspora. Travel the world and you will meet another Jew whose practices are much like your own, no matter the language they speak or the place they call home. Jewish practice binds us, and never so much as the traditions connecting women. Passed down from mother to daughter, Jewish women are taught they are not only the keepers of the home, but the ones to teach their children the importance of their heritage. They are not just homemakers, of course, but *aishet chayil* – women of valor – who serve as the bedrock of cultural

transmission. This is how it was passed down to me, from my own mother and grandmother, and from my female relatives. While the men might be more visible in their religious garb, their prayers, and their practices, we women almost had our own language, passed around between one another, connecting mothers and daughters back in a chain through centuries.

This was the story I wanted to tell when I sat down to write *Keeping The Candles Lit*. Not the story of war and the devastating effects on Jews across Europe. Instead, I wanted to focus on a story close to my heart, peeling back the layers of mystery about Jewish belief and practice and letting non-Jews, if even for one moment, see what this living, breathing tradition looks like from the inside. But more than anything, I wanted them to see what happened when war tried to tear those important bonds to pieces.

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My grandmother, Nora Stern, came to the United States as a refugee. She was born in a tiny town in Hungary which no longer exists on the maps; it was razed to the ground by Nazis after they took her and her entire family away. Of her massive, twenty-five-member family, only my grandmother survived. She languished in a recovery camp in Sweden for months, gaining back her health after being liberated from Auschwitz. There, she met my grandfather Zev, who had lost his wife and daughter, and the two married. In the United States, they opened up a sandwich shop and struggled every day to make ends meet. They had my mother, Esther, in 1949, and my uncle Mitch not long after. My grandfather developed cancer, leaving my grandmother to tend to his health and raise my mom and uncle alone. By the time my mother turned sixteen my grandfather was gone, and together the women of my family kept food on the table and a roof over their heads. So when I was born, both were already *aishet chayil*, those women of valor, who spent their time steadfast in their beliefs, bonded by equal struggle and religious ties passed down from mother to daughter. And soon, passed down to me.

My grandmother never talked about the war to me. I spent most of my childhood at her house after school, since my parents both had to work, and she never spoke more than two sentences at a time about her experiences. Later, when I was twelve or thirteen, she visited my house in the evenings. She would sit at the kitchen table and my mother would type out long stories on an old typewriter. When I offered to do the job on a computer, the two threw me out of the room. I later found out my grandmother was telling her story – all

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of it – for the Holocaust museum in Washington DC. I was never allowed to read the accounts, but I know they haunted my mother years after. When my grandmother’s health began to decline, I’d hear her crying out at night when I stayed over to look after her. She’d cry for her friend Chaya, who she claimed was hiding “under the bed.” When I asked my mother about it, she only shook her head. Chaya died in the war, and that’s all they’d ever tell me. These were the stories I heard, the half-kept secrets, the looming knowledge of half a family gone, of roots being replanted in salted earth.

Working on *Keeping the Candles Lit*, I knew these were stories I could tell. I could frame the story of mothers and daughters coming together to rebuild life in the ashes of destruction. But that narrative was well-trodden, and didn’t reflect the women of iron I knew existed during the war. Instead, I considered the bond between my mother and grandmother, the religious practices they shared and passed on to me, and wondered what it would look like to try and pass down those beliefs, to keep those religious practices, while being hunted. Jewish culture in Eastern Europe during the early twentieth century reflected generations of insular cultural development and deeply structured life. What would happen to those understood places in society, that structured life, for those people on the run for their lives? More than anything, what would happen to the bonds between mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, in the light of a new world? The small-town life of Eastern Europe was upturned, burnt down, destroyed forever. Before these women was a future of new countries, new families, and maybe even the death of everything they loved. To many, it might mean the death of belief in a God that could let the Nazis destroy their very world.

This cultural disruption was the heart of the story I wanted to tell. And it all came from my own personal, inexplicable guilt.

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Structurally, I had the tentpoles of *Keeping the Candles Lit* before I even realized why I truly wanted to tell the story. I knew I wanted to show the partisans fighting, the difficulties of women keeping their religious practices, and the connections between three generations of women as they struggled to survive. It wasn’t until much later that I realized why I personally wanted to capture the importance of these traditions for the rest of the world to see. I discovered it when I finally sat down to write the damn game after weeks of complete and total writer’s block, as I tried to find a way to encompass an entire culture’s

meaning in a few pages. I procrastinated. I worried I would do a bad job and misrepresent Judaism, or worse, not get my point across. I wondered how you could crystalize generations of significance and beauty into a few thousand words. I couldn't imagine how I could pass that weight on to players who might not even know a single Jew in their lives, or only knew the bagels and cream cheese and 'oy vey' Jewish experience of secular media.

It took peeling back the layers of my own childhood, of the years spent in Jewish school and at my grandmother's kitchen table, in synagogue with my father, or being held high on my uncle's shoulders at a Jewish wedding as a child, for me to understand the moments, the tiny precious breaths between rhetoric, dogma, and rote. In designing the game, I had to find the places where agency for play existed in concert with a litany of beliefs the players might not completely understand, but could tie in with their own backgrounds and cultures. While someone might not understand the rituals of the Sabbath completely, they could potentially connect to the experience of sharing a peaceful moment in front of holiday candles with their relatives. They could understand the importance of eating food rich with the memories of their ancestors, made for special holidays, shared together as religious or familial practice. They could understand the tensions of a family trying to transmit their culture down to the next generation in a rapidly changing world. These were the hooks I needed to connect, to distill the feeling of personal connection, rather than religious significance.

In the end, I found myself emotionally unprepared for the project. I forced myself to delve into meaning behind religious ritual I'd had a tempestuous relationship with all my life, to rediscover the beauty and importance in the Sabbath rituals, the modesty of dress and living so wholly important to Jewish life, practices I'd often questioned from a "progress" feminist position. Yet *Keeping the Candles Lit* forced me to face my feelings and rediscover much of what I'd left behind. When I finished writing the game, I didn't want to look at it or playtest it. Instead, I handed it off to my roommate to run. I didn't want to look at the damn thing ever again. It took months for me to understand that writing the game had ripped off a bandage about my culture, about our history, and about the transmission of tradition in my own family. *Keeping The Candles Lit* tore open old wounds about my relationships with my mother and grandmother, about my guilt at no longer being religious, and about my feelings of failing them both. It reminded me of years of fights, of disagreements and arguments about the importance of history, culture, of our practices and

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their importance. And it made me realize I'd written *Keeping the Candles Lit* as much as a tribute to the things I'd left behind, as for the rest of the world to see the Jewish world I deep down cherish so much.

My grandmother died when I was sixteen. She never got a chance to see the woman I am today. I often think she might have liked me now, though she would probably have (metaphorically) kicked me in the head over the years for things I'd done. Looking back, some of the greatest moments of my life were spent in the hours before the Sabbath, cooking her special chocolate roll cakes and listening to Yiddish songs on the radio. I will never forget lighting Sabbath candles with my mother, listening to her say the blessing, and waiting for my father to come back from synagogue while we talked the way only mothers and daughters only can, in the comfort of our own kitchen at home. This shared language of mothers and daughters came from our connection, which I'd left so far behind, severed just as much as it might have been in the heart of war.

The role of the daughter in *Keeping the Candles Lit* will always be me, the seeker for a new future in the face of change. And that's why I'll never run or play my own game. I don't need to, and I don't think I ever could.



*Shoshana and Esther Kessock, CUNY Brooklyn College graduation 2010*



In the end, I don't know if my mother ever saw the text message about winning the IGDN Award for *War Birds*. The award plaque rests on my shelf, and I have a hard time looking at it. I have a hard time even looking at the *War Birds* anthology, even though I'm proud of my contribution. There's just too much of my family, and too much of me in the game.

But before leaving for the convention, I hugged and kissed my mother, and she wished me well. I told her if she wanted me to stay home, she just needed to ask. She gave that universal Jewish mother shrug and said, "What would it matter what I said? You'll only do what you want anyway. You always do." And she was right. But even though the words sounded so harsh, I knew she meant them with a certain sense of pride. Her last words to me were, "I'll talk to you when you get back," although maybe the last words we shared with one another were in a text about how much she inspired a game shared throughout the larp world. I know my mother backed the Kickstarter for the book, even though she'd never larped in her life, and she read the game. And that's got to be enough, for me.

