

Interview with Mr. Robert SEJWACZ on May 12th, 2015, Marley-le-Roi, France

WAV file M4197006

1 hour 19 minutes 15 seconds

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9 minutes 7 seconds

The COSOR¹

The *Comité des Oeuvres Sociales des Organisations de la Résistance* (Committee of Service Projects for Resistance Organizations) was a clandestine committee set-up during the war to help the families of resistance fighters. It was recognized by De Gaulle in London in 1943 and in 1944, the Reverend Father Chaillet (*Témoignage Chrétien*) and Marie-Hélène Lefauchaux (*Organisation Civile et Militaire*) coordinated activities all over France. After the war, its activities were under the auspices of Veterans' and War Victims' Affairs, as well as the ministries of Health, the Interior, and Labor.

Robert SEJWACZ was born on November 13, 1934 in Paris, France. His father, Walek (born June 6, 1906), was the youngest of three brothers, all tailors, who immigrated from Mogelmica, Poland, to France, in the 1920's. Walek worked out of their apartment, making suits to order, and a man named Monsieur Piel drummed-up business for him. Although he does not seem to have been a French citizen, Walek volunteered and served in the French army from September, 1939, until the capitulation to Germany in June, 1940, when he was taken prisoner and sent to Stalag VIIC, but was eventually released and returned to Paris. (Most of the Poles who were not French volunteered to serve in a section of the Polish army organized in France, or in the Foreign Legion.)

Mr. Sejwacz's mother was named Freida Smulevicius, from a Lithuanian family.

The couple lived on the rue Castex in the 4th arrondissement, on the edge of the Jewish quarter in the Marais known as the "Pletzl". Apparently, an aunt and uncle lived on the same landing with their children. The couple spoke Yiddish to each other, but French to their son. He does not remember any religious practices whatsoever, no holiday meals, attending services or Hebrew lessons. He seems to think that Freida did not speak or read French very well. (A family photo album has quite a few cards and photos with Yiddish greetings or notes on the back.)

It does not seem that the Sejwacz family went to the local police commissariat to sign-up, as Jews were ordered to do. They did not wear the Jewish star. Robert continued attending the local school and taking part in after-school activities organized for all children (*patronage*), regardless of religion. He does not remember other Jewish children wearing the star, either.²

On September 17, 1942, Robert's little brother Henri was born. Soon afterwards, his parents decided to send Robert out to the country because he seemed frail and in poor health. A woman named Madame Juillard, who made regular trips to the Sarthe to obtain provisions to sell on the black market, took Robert with her and found a family to take him in. He ended-up at the small farm owned by Monsieur and Madame Roy in Thorigné-sur-Dué, 2 kilometers from the village of Nuillé-le Jalais, where he

¹ Laura Hobson-Faure, a professor at the Sorbonne, has written about the COSOR children's homes in her book, "*Un plan marshall juif*" and wanted to set the record straight. Mr. Sejwacz seems to think that no archives exist for this organization, the acronym for the *Comité des Oeuvres Sociales des Organisations de la Résistance*, although a search shows an entire collection at the French National Archives. She claimed that no Jewish children were cared for by the COSOR, but Mr. Sejwacz claims that at least half the orphans cared for by the COSOR in the post-war period were Jewish.

attended school. The school teacher was a fervent Communist, Monsieur Londaïs. Mr. Piel, who had worked with his father, had been given a small amount of money and he sent regular payments to the Roy's to provide for Robert's upkeep. He remained with the Roy's well after May, 1945.

During this time, Robert had no contact with his parents, either by mail or otherwise. He was not aware that they had been denounced by someone and arrested, sent to Drancy for three days, and then deported with baby Henri on Convoy 57, which left Drancy on July 18, 1943.

When Robert was 12, in 1946, Mr. Piel ran out of money. Also, if he were to continue his studies and enter 6th grade, he had to leave the village and board at a high school because the village only had an elementary school. Mr. Piel took Robert to Paris, probably to the headquarters of COSOR.

Robert was first assigned to the COSOR home in Char, north of Pontoise, about 60 kilometers from Paris. He remembers an exceptional woman who ran it, Madame Lechat.

Then he was sent to the *Château de Grigny* in Orly, run by Monsieur Duvauchelle, where he passed the exam to get in to 6th grade and obtained the highest score in the *département*. Orly was a home for girls and boys.

When the owner of the *château* decided to take back his property, the boys were sent to Saint-Germain-en-Laye. There, Monsieur Tomeno, "an exceptional teacher and educator" according to Mr. Sejwacz, ran the establishment. He was Catholic, but allowed each child to choose if he wanted to receive religious instruction or not.

In 1948, the COSOR created a group called "*La chorale des petits chanteurs de la Bohême*". A benefactor named Monsieur Gardinier, who owned a large cement factory, took the boys on tour and then settled them in a home near Geneva, where they lived, cut-off from the world, for two years. The boys were responsible for cleaning and cooking. Robert attended school, *le Collège modern*, while they were there. It seemed that Monsieur Gardinier was a homosexual and was having legal problems in that respect. According to Mr. Sejwacz, some of the boys in the choir were abused by him. Mr. Gardinier absconded one day with all the money the choral ensemble had earned while on-tour. The boys were sent back to France, where the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs placed them in a home in Boulogne-Billancourt, on the western edge of Paris.

Mr. Sejwacz chose not to pursue his academic studies and studied electronics. He was given his first job at a research company, rented a small room in Paris, but fell gravely ill. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the spinal column and the kidneys and spent 5 months in the Saint Louis Hospital and 4 months in a nursing home, first in the north at Berck Plage, then in the south of France, near Vallauris. He later returned to his job at the Dervos lab and met his future wife, from a non-Jewish Polish family, at a camp-site where counselors were trained to work with youngsters. He became the sales representative for a company that manufactures large, industrial ovens, and traveled widely all over the world. His wife taught elementary school. They have two daughters and four adult grand-children.

It seems that at the end of the war, relatives found Mr. Sejwacz, but very quickly decided that they did not have the means to take care of him. Until he retired, Mr. Sejwacz did not do much research concerning his own family. The other COSOR children and the adults who directed the COSOR establishments and taught them were Robert Sejwacz's true family. He is intensely dedicated to keeping in touch and making sure that the surviving members of the various homes he was in get together regularly. Although Monsieur Tomeno died at a relatively young age, the COSOR boys stayed in contact with his widow, who provided many of the photos they copied from their time at Orly and Saint Germain-en-Laye.

Mr. Seiwacz was kind enough to donate a photo of himself and his mother, taken in Paris, and made into a postcard to be sent to his father, Walek, while he was enrolled in the French Army between 1939 – 1940. Apparently, Mr. Piel retrieved the family photo album when they were deported and gave it to Robert when he saw him again, after the war.