

Interview with Mr. André WAKSMAN on October 23rd, 2015, Paris, France

André Waksman was born on June 12th, 1943, in the maternity clinic near the Rivesaltes internment camp in Elne, in the *département* of the Pyrénées-Orientales. His mother was taken 150 km or so from the internment camp in Gurs to deliver her baby. His father, Jakob Waksman, was born in Kalisz, Poland, in 1910, and his mother, Suzanne Doctorcyck, was born in Pabianice, Poland in 1911. They met and married in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1935, and had a son named Samuel in 1935 or 1936. Jakob was a cabinet-maker and emigrated from Poland for economic reasons. He had a small business in Antwerp and had another employee before the war. When the Germans occupied Belgium, he was obliged to sell his business, but apparently, the family remained there despite the anti-Jewish laws, trying to keep a low profile.

However, in 1942, the Waksman's and another couple decided to pay a *passeur* to get them to Switzerland, but the man said that if ever they were stopped by German soldiers, if they said they were not Jewish, they would be sent back to Belgium and if they said they were Jewish, they would be arrested. They were stopped and the other couple was sent back to Belgium, but the Waksman's said that they were Jewish and were sent to Rivesaltes. However, a non-Jewish social worker took care of Sam and he never entered the camp. She took him to Suzanne's sister, her husband, and their father, who were living in Pertuis, near Marseille.

The social worker told Suzanne that she should go back to the doctor, after she had already gone through her medical exam, and tell him she was pregnant. He examined her and concluded that she was. (She was not.) So, Jakob and Suzanne went about trying to have a child, despite the lack of privacy in the camp...and they succeeded. This, and other details, are found in a transcription of the interview, entitled, "A Simple War Story", that André recorded with his parents a few months before Jakob died in 1989. (The transcription of the first audio cassette is attached to this summary. André has not completed transcription of the second cassette.)

Jakob was quite talented at fixing and building things. He was allowed the privilege of working outside the Rivesaltes camp. With the little he earned, he supplemented Suzanne's meager diet.

Apparently, Elisabeth Eidenbenz, who ran the maternity clinic in Elne, made sure that Suzanne never returned to Gurs after her baby was born. It is not clear how she was reunited with Jakob and Sam, but they went over the Alps above Nice through Saint-Martin-de-Vésubie several weeks after André was born and made their way to Italy. André has some of his father's identity papers, either under his true name or a false one. André does not know how his parents heard about Ruth Gruber and her effort to take Jews to safety in the United States. He seems to think that they did not fulfill all the requirements to be part of the group, but they were nevertheless accepted.

André was an adorable baby and his mother kept his hair long for several years. (He thinks she wanted a little girl...) The family took the *Henry Gibbons* to the U.S., and as those who are familiar with this particular rescue operation know, the passengers did not go through immigration at Ellis Island and were sent directly to Fort Ontario, in Oswego, NY, the "personal guests" of President Roosevelt. They were not allowed to leave the premises or work outside the allotted terrain.

After living in a sort of legal limbo, in October (?)1946, they were given entry visas to the United States, ferreted over the border to Canada, and re-officially entered the United States at that time.

(On André's travel affidavit, it says he entered in December, 1946, and his father entered in October, 1946, but that is odd because the entire family traveled together.) The Waksman's returned to Belgium in 1948, but decided to settle in the U.S. They received U.S. citizenship in 1951.

The family moved to Hoboken, New Jersey, because Jakob had an uncle who said he would help him get started. He tried to start a furniture business, but it failed. He ended-up working for a company which provided stands and display panels for trade fairs and exhibitions. His mother also worked. For this reason, André and his brother were sent to a Yeshiva in Brooklyn, because the classes got out later than the local public school. It seems that their first language was Yiddish.

André dreamed of attending the University of Chicago and he was accepted, but later dropped out.

He wanted to be an artist and tried his hand, and also attended film school. He is currently both an artist and a filmmaker, living in Paris, but works on projects all over the world.

André realizes that he is lucky that he and his immediate family survived the war.....and also realizes that the circumstances of his birth probably saved the others. However, he wanted to make the point that the "Safe Haven" was an operation that occurred after the liberation of Rome and that the military transport across the ocean at a time when the U.S. was still at war with Germany put the group of people being "rescued" at great risk. He also feels that the United States seems to feel so proud that it was saving intellectuals, scientists, artists, and composers - those who somehow merited that extraordinary efforts be made on their behalf - but André does not understand why one human being is considered more "worthy" of being rescued than another.....