

Interview with Monique KREPS-SELLAM on November 22, 2018 Paris, France

WAV M4197007

1 hour 16 minutes 44 seconds

Monique KREPS-SELLAM was born in Paris, France, on March 28, 1940. She states clearly at the beginning of the interview that she has absolutely no recollection of anything that happened during the first five years of her life and that this has troubled her for a long time. She has gone to great lengths to reconstruct that time and the years of her childhood.

Her father, Abraham Joel KREPS, born in 1900 in Opole, Poland, immigrated to France via Germany in 1920, and started to make a living as a tailor.

Her mother, Ryvka Wald, lost both parents at an early age. Her marriage to Abraham Kreps in 1929 was arranged so she could obtain papers. They lived in an apartment at 48, rue de la Goutte d'Or, in the 18th arrondissement, where they both toiled in a small workshop in the same building. A daughter, Rose, was born in 1930.

Although she states this discreetly, without rancor, Monique knew at an early age that her arrival was neither expected nor desired. She mentions that Ryvka had no idea how to be a mother and tries to understand why she acted as she did. Apparently, during air raids when sirens sent people racing to bomb shelters, her mother fled without a thought and it was her sister Rose who grabbed the baby and brought her along with the family.

In 1941, Abraham reported to the local police station, summoned by the "billet vert", sent to foreign Jews. He was transferred to the camp of Pithiviers, near Orléans. Ryvka bribed some of the guards and had planned his escape, using a visit by his daughter Rose to plead with him to flee, but he refused to leave, showing solidarity with another Jew from Opole. He was deported to Auschwitz on Convoy n°4 in June, 1942.

Ryvka fell in love with a man in the Jewish resistance, Marcel Bruck. From then on, Monique was sent to a small town not far from Paris, Grosrouvre (in the Yvelines), where she lived with Madame Gouast, who seemed to have taken in quite a few other children, even before the war. In Paris, her mother and Rose were warned by a *gendarme* that there would be a round-up on July 17th, 1942, and they avoided being caught. The *concierge* helped them flee to the unoccupied zone, where other Jewish families gathered at Châteaumeillant in the *département* of the Cher.

Monique does not remember if Madame Gouast was kind to her or if she suffered from loneliness or hunger. It seems that there were visits from time to time. (A photo of Madame Gouast before the war, shows a plump and matronly woman surrounded by infants in front of a small house.)

As incredible as it may seem, Abraham was one of 59 men out of 1,000 men on Convoy n°4 who survived Auschwitz, but on his return, he announced to Ryvka that he no longer wanted to live with her and their children. Ryvka's romance with Marcel had soured, too.

So, in 1945, Monique was sent to another foster family in the Orne, "Maman Blanche" and "Papa Clément". During the war, this family had taken in and protected several Jewish children. A few years later, she returned to her mother, who was struggling to make ends meet. She beat

Monique regularly and it seems that around 1951, a social worker arranged to send her to the *Ecole départementale de Vitry* and later on, the *Maison des enfants de Sèvre*, which took in Jewish and non-Jewish children. As the daughter of a man who had been deported, she was considered a “*pupille de la nation*”. This meant that she was a ward of the state and that the French government was supposed to make sure that she grew up in decent conditions and look after her well-being.

Meanwhile, Abraham Kreps set-up house with a widow whose husband had perished at Treblinka. Besides Solange and Claude, Chava Aronwald’s children, the couple had two sons born in 1947 (Michel) and 1951 (Daniel). Monique’s sister Rose Kreps came to live with them, too.

“Not everyone has the good fortune of being an orphan,” quips Monique. (“*Tout le monde n’a pas la chance d’être orphélin,*” wrote the playwright Jules Renard.) Monique considers herself lucky to have been under the care of devoted social workers, who seeing her aptitude for learning, obtained a scholarship for her in 1957. She remembers a Madame Dadoune, who was also a psychologist, at a Jewish organization in the 7th arrondissement on the avenue de Ségur.

She went on to pass her baccalaureate, study literature, obtain a master’s degree in law, and also became certified documentalist at the CNAM (*Centre Nationale des Arts et Métiers*). She spent most of her career at the association of the mayors of France, where she enjoyed her work.

She married a Jew of North African descent, more religious than she was. They had a daughter and a son, now adults. Though her father was never a presence in her life, he endowed her with a rare genetic disease that has affected her son, *Osteogenesis imperfecta* or “Brittle Bone” disease. (She later found that her father’s brothers and sister in the United States and Brazil also passed this disease on to their offspring.) This created a strain on her marriage and Monique thinks that this is one of the reasons that she and her husband finally divorced.

Monique is very active in the association of former children who lived in homes and went to summer camps created by the CCE (*Amis de la Commission Centrale de l’Enfance*, the organization created by Jewish Communists in 1945 to take care of the children of resistance fighters, those who were deported, and those who were executed.) She writes regularly for their newsletter on a variety of subjects. She is also on the board of the future virtual museum dedicated to the Jewish Resistance and foreign resistance fighters, based at 14, rue du Paradis, the MRJ-MOI. She enjoys the friends she has made and created close relationships there.

In the last ten years or so, there have been a number of works by sociologists, journalists, and psychiatrists about hidden children. Boris Cyrulnic, himself a hidden child, has written and spoken at length about the concept of “resilience” and the work of the sociologist Nathalie Zajde is important, too. However, Monique mostly thanks Jean-Pierre Guéno, who gave former hidden children a popular forum to express their trauma – in a book, exhibition and television appearances – which really freed her and enabled her to speak of her tumultuous and confusing childhood, allowing her to fill in the blanks of events she could not remember.