

Joel F. Nommick – My Story

My parents Jean Nommick and Agnes Serman were born in Estonia, "Russian Empire" in 1902 and 1906 respectively. They immigrated to Western Europe, and my father left in 1925 and went to Berlin staying with relatives and then to Paris in 1927, my mother left for Paris in December 1927.

They were married in May 1928 and went to Buenos-Ayres (Argentina) where my father had an older brother with his wife and son. My Mother's brother John was also there, and where my older brother Bernard was born on February 1st, 1929.

My father and my uncle were friends and partners in the trading of furs.

My parents and my brother came back to France at the end of 1929 and settled in Garches on the west end of Paris. My second brother Serge was born in Saint-Cloud in April 13th, 1931 and they moved to La Celle Saint-Cloud.

In 1937 my father and my uncle became owners of two companies that were going in liquidation. They were the biggest creditors and the judge offered them to take over in order to save the businesses and the employment. One was a tannery and the other a manufacture of Fur coats. (300 workers) They were in the village of Thoisse (Ain): 1200 Habitants. Nearest large city is Macon. By 1939 the two companies were consolidated and very profitable after reorganization.

In 1940 after the fall of France and the establishment of the Vichy government under the Presidency of Marechal Philippe Pétain, anti-Jewish laws were enacted. In 1941 the Jews had to register with the authorities on a special list of citizen as well as all foreign Jews. My father was denounced to the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs and arrested by the French police then jailed in Nantua, later transferred to Saint-Paul prison in Lyon, then to the Camp of Vernet in the Pyrenees region. My uncle followed in the same camp but was removed by the Consul of Argentina since he had an Argentinian passport. He then joined the resistance in the Alliance network in the Beaujolais.

After a few months, my father was able to move to a military hospital in Toulouse in the spring of 1942. In May my mother and my brothers joined him in this city.

At the same time the management of the company was given to an administrator named by Vichy and the former shareholders got back the ownership of the business in total spoliation of the laws of the Third Republic.

In July with the help of a doctor in the hospital my father was admitted to Ax les Thermes a spa village in the Pyrenees on the border of Spain. My mother and my brothers moved with him at the Hotel Beausejour and plans were laid for my family to go to Spain with the help of the Mayor of the village.

His friend Poldi Berger was also in a camp and his wife and children were staying with my parents at this time, waiting for Poldi to arrive and for everyone to go to Spain together. Unfortunately, Poldi went directly to Spain leaving his family with my parents.

In September 1942 the Vichy police came to get my father and once more he was able to bribe an officer and was the only one taken. Two days later he was sent to Drancy and on September 25, 1942 he was on the convoy 37 to Auschwitz (1008 mostly Jews from

Romania). He wrote to us on the eve of the departure giving hope and faith in the future and urging us to go in hiding.

He arrived in Auschwitz on September 29, 1942 and was registered with the number 66.059. Then my mother and my brothers as well as Poldi Berger's family returned to our house in Thoissey.

My brothers went back to school at the Lycee in Macon. They were staying at a room and board place Pension Devaux. The landlady had several guests - my uncle John, two young men from Alsace who did not want to serve in the German army and my brothers. The landlady went to the Kommandantur in Macon and denounced them all because she thought that would help the release of her son who was a prisoner of war in Germany. Fortunately, the German commanding officer was an old veteran of WW1 and sent word to them of the impending arrest at 6:30 AM the next day, so they had the time to escape during the night and went into hiding.

I was born three months later on December 30, 1942 in Macon.

During this period until September 1944 we had false identities and remained in the village where neighbors helped us with food etc. In fact, numerous Jewish families were hidden on farms (about 22 persons) and survived.

During my father's stay in Auschwitz, we received two letters from him, and during the month of August 1944, he was transferred to Gross Rosen and Mittelbau commando Nordhausen in February 1945 under a new number 115.800 then subsequently to Mittelbau Harzungen and to Mittelbau Hospital after being beaten severely by SS guards. He was released on March 30, 1945 and sent to Bergen-Belsen where he was liberated by the British troops.

He wrote to us on April 15, 1945 expressing his joy to be reunited with his family and to finally meet the son he has never seen. I am that Son.

We were waiting every day for his return and without news we asked the British Red Cross to make a research and they informed us that he had left for Russia on July 9, 1945. But since then we have not found out what happened to him.

After the liberation we received letters from several former prisoners (French, Poles, Russian, Hungarian, etc.) who met him in the camps and were looking for him and were totally surprised that he was not with his family.

I have several stories regarding these events:

-We received a letter from a SS Colonel from Auschwitz whose lawyer at the Nuremberg Trial was looking for my father to testify in his favor as to how well he treated the Jews.

-A French officer who was a survivor of Bergen-Belsen and wrote a book about his arrival in the camp and describing how my father would go at night to steal some food to help them survive.

-Another prisoner in Auschwitz from our village brought back to us a French dictionary initialed by my father.

-A lady from our village who was deported to Ravensbrück for resistance and ended up in Belsen-Bergen met my father and told him that she was expecting the French soldiers would bring them back soon.

-We were also looking for a cousin of my father Ernst Raskin and his wife. They were refugees from Germany in France in 1933. They were sent in 1940 to the camp of Gurs and Auschwitz in 1942 and both perished upon arrival.

-So many people leaving DP camps and trying to emigrate to the USA, Canada, Palestine etc. in the late 1940's and early 1950's were contacting my mother to have some news about my father.

-I remember cousins of my mother in a DP camp in Austria. My uncle John went there in 1949-50. He got them out and helped them to go to Israel.

-On the 31st of July 1954, I was home for the summer holidays when someone rang the bell. I went to open the door and saw a man in his early thirties. He asked to see my father and when I told him that my father died in Bergen-Belsen in 1945 he started to cry without end. I did not know what to say or do and called my mother.

This man was from Laon in the northwest of France and was on his way to the south for vacation with his family and driving on Route Nationale 6 when he saw a sign indicating our village: Thoisse 4km. He did not pay attention but a few minutes later he remembered, turned around and came to see my father.

They stayed for a couple of days with us. And he told us his story of how he was arrested at the age of 18 and sent to Auschwitz because he was a member of the communist youth. He arrived in June 1944 and contracted typhus. My father and a Jewish Hungarian doctor hid him and feed him soup, and he was able to recover and survived this horrible time.

He told us what an inferno they were living in, and how he developed such a friendship with my father. I still have a vivid memory of those stories. The description of the calls and counts of prisoners for hours at a time, the arrival of hundred of thousands of Hungarian Jews in the early summer of 1944 gazed upon arrival and burned to ashes in the ovens of the crematorium.

-In the village in July 1944 twelve men were arrested and deported to Dachau, eight of them did not survive.

During my own youth and my formative years in primary and secondary school, I was privileged not to suffer from Anti-Semitism. The boarding school where I studied many years was the only Lycee to be awarded the Medal of the Resistance. Many students and teachers were killed or died in camps.

My graduate years at the Institute of Political Sciences in Lyon where I studied for my Master's Degree helped me to get an overlook of the history of politics in Europe from the end of the Monarchy in 1789 to the present times and how the catastrophic Treaty of Versailles and Trianon, the failure of the League of Nations and the weaknesses and

cowardice of European Democracy and their leaders in the 1930's permitted these horrible crimes to happen.