

MARCEL LISSEK
BORN IN PARIS, FRANCE, 1937

Both his parents came from large families. His father, an electrician/plumber, left Cologne, Germany about 1933 because of rising antisemitism and went to Paris, where he met his mother who had come from Poland. His father tried to get working papers and his mother even tried to help and talked to Leon Blum, the prime minister. Eventually, his father went from a detention camp to a work camp and finally to a concentration camp (Auschwitz) where he died in 1942. The mother worked as a tailor in Paris. He never really knew his father and cannot remember much about the time before the war. His parents sometimes took the children to Switzerland. People there suggested to leave them there because they sensed that a war was coming. But many people did not believe it.

Early in the war, his mother became sick with heart problems and high blood pressure. One day, a lady came and took him and his older brother Leon to a safe district in Paris that was run by an organization for the safety of children. He does not know where the financial support came from, Probably from the French underground and American and Canadian sources. The children were taken from one place to another, always a step ahead of the advancing Germans, The group took care of the children and they stayed in old castles, caves, private homes and particularly churches, where they received a lot of love and care but only little schooling. Throughout the war, he always stayed with his older brother Leon. His younger brother, by 4 years, Jacques, was too young. He was found again in 1947 after the war in Lille in the North of France.

While he was in camp, the Germans came sometimes and removed young boys, also Jews, to bring them up for labor or army service. At the end of the war, the Germans had 12 to 14 year old boys in the army. In one narrow escape, the Germans wanted to take all boys under 6. His brother was older and locked him into a bathroom until the Germans had left.

This went on for several years during which he saw his mother only a few times. She was still in a hospital and was lucky because there the Germans took only healthy people. After he was 6 years old he had to wear a yellow star. This made him feel good because until then he had been jealous of his older brother who already wore a star.

Once again he narrowly escaped from some German soldiers who came into a barbershop while he had a haircut and his star was covered up. He has lost all contact with any of the boys from that period.

From about 1944 to 1947 he stayed in the castle of Fontainebleu outside Paris. After the war, American and Canadian troops came through and picked some boys and girls to adopt. He saw German prisoners in a fenced-in yard who were well fed by the Americans. At first, the children would not accept chocolate from the Americans. They remembered that during the war, the Germans gave out poisoned candy and children often died.

One of the worst parts of the war was staying in wet caves where there were rats and where they had to be without light and had to be quiet to escape detection. He had heard that Hitler loved Paris and ordered not to destroy the city but agrees that he may be wrong and that the city was saved by some high official.

In early 1941, the Germans did not come to homes to collect Jews but the French police came and took them to the waiting German Gestapo at the police station. Adults were lined up and every 4th (sometimes 3rd or 5th) was taken away. Once his mother was picked, but released by the German officers when she could prove that she had a baby at home. Also, during the war, he, his mother and youngest brother were hidden in Paris by a French family. They had a workshop in front of their living quarters and a small shack behind, where they were hiding and several times escaped detection by the Germans.

After the war, the cold had started and the family decided to leave Europe. His mother had taken care of a man who was a sick prisoner of war and whom she had known from before the war. He had relatives in Buffalo and they got married so that she also could go there, but it took 5 years to obtain the American visa and required many visits to the consulate. Marcel was spokesman for the family because his mother could not communicate well enough in French. They also considered going to Israel or Canada and would go wherever they first got a visa.

They arrived in New York in 1950 and he still remembers seeing the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island which was closed in 1952. He arrived in Buffalo shortly before his Bar Mitzvah.

He is still trying to have French authorities find friends and relatives. He has never been back to Paris but would like to visit now. His family has not heard his story but can see it now on this tape. He always thought not to talk about his life but now feels it is better not to keep it to himself. His wife and one son are now attending college.

He feels that one should not be too materialistic and that the most important things are life, love and family. His mother is in her 80's and now lives in St. Louis.