

LEO WEINRIEB
BORN 1917
ZAGORZA, RUSSIA

Leo Weinrieb was born 1917 in Zagorza, Russia. His parents fled illegally to Germany to avoid service in the Red Army. His father worked at first as a coal miner but after an accident could not continue and opened a furniture store. Eventually, they were allowed to stay legally. In 1933, they felt threatened by the rise of the Nazis and went illegally to the Netherlands. He shows a picture of the family with himself and his younger brother. In Amsterdam they obtained papers to go to Brazil where his father worked in a brick factory and he learned manufacturing of leather goods.

In Germany he had first attended a Catholic school for four years but then had a Jewish upbringing. He also went to an art school to learn window dressing but was fired after a year because he was a Jew.

In Brazil it was too hot and although they did not want to go back to Germany, they did not think it would get that bad and after eight months took a chance. However in 1934, they went back to Holland and this time received permission to stay. He started a successful factory for leather belts and brought in a Jewish pocket-book designer from Paris.

In 1940 Hitler invaded and the factory was confiscated. Then he made plastic rain hoods at home and soon had eighty people doing work for him in their own homes. In this manner he managed until 1942.

Young boys were caught in the streets, taken to Mauthausen and their ashes were sent back to the parents who had to pay for them. The underground movement started and he and his brother were involved in different groups who did not know of each other's activities. Leo had a Brazilian citizen document and the Germans believed he was a Brazilian citizen and therefore did not have to wear the yellow star. Once he took in a Dutch family to hide in his home. They now live in British Colombia. With his business, Leo made enough money that they did not need food stamps.

With the underground he did all kinds of illegal activities. In 1941, he got married but after 1942 it was no longer safe and they slept in various abandoned places. Eventually, the underground helped them to hide on a farm with a couple and their three children. His family received false papers and called the couple their parents. They slept in an attic room where he made a false floor for hiding if necessary. They stayed there for about two years until the end of the war. They had a radio and could hear the BBC news.

Earlier, his parents once were caught in a raid and were supposed to go with a transport to Auschwitz. Leo bribed an ambulance driver, put on a white coat and went to the place of assembly. There he impersonated a German and took his parents and a few others back. Later his parents were caught again and taken to Bergen-Belsen. After liberation, he put on an English uniform and went with a truck convoy to Bergen-Belsen to look for his parents but they were stranded somewhere on a train. Later he volunteered for an office to screen survivors and by chance found someone who had a written message from his parents who then came back.

His two brothers and his sisters also survived in hiding. Following a radio appeal he adopted a young repatriated boy whose parents were found later. He earned a living by making small wooden shoes to be sold as souvenirs and moved back to Amsterdam. In 1948 he came to New York City through an uncle in Pittsburgh. He then had two small children and earned money by selling ties from a stand in front of Macy's. However, he did not like New York and moved to Buffalo. Some of his relatives in Poland did not survive the war. He shows several pictures of family groups.

In Buffalo, he first got a job with a paper company, then as a money collector and finally he owned a pawn shop for eight years. Then he moved to San Diego where he worked for J.C. Penny's but he preferred the East and came back to Buffalo where he started a wholesale jewelry business.

Most of his stories he did not tell to his children because he did not want them to hate people. He did help the farmer with whom he was in hiding by buying him a chicken farm and he is still in touch with people in Holland.

He is glad that the world is now aware of what human beings are capable of doing and we must stand guard that such things do not happen again.