

Henry Sontag

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**Name:** Henry Sontag

**Town:** We lived in a town which was then Austria, became Poland , and is now Russia. My parents moved to Vienna before the first war. So, I grew up in Vienna.

**Parents:** My fathers name was Maurice, my mothers name was [???]. I had a brother and three sisters who all survived. My parents perished and my grandparents.

**Childhood:** I went to grade school and middle school. At 14 a quit because it was only compulsory up until 14. I had some training at trade schools. My older sister survived. She went to Switzerland and then to England. My younger sister went to Italy with her husband. I was considered a Polish subject, but in reality I was stateless. My youngest sister was deported from Belgium to Auschwitz.

**Was life comfortable in Vienna?**

It was comfortable but the Austrians were very anti-jewish. If something was wrong , it was blamed on the jews. But we were young. We didn't pay much attention.

**Was there any personal discrimination?**

Not really. My neighborhood was about 20% ~ewish. Once the propaganda from the Nazis came, we felt it.

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Before the Germans came, [???] wanted all the votes for him. Before he [Hitler?] marched in he counted all the jewish votes. We would have voted for him anyway, we had no choice. In Vienna, the jewish population was about 10%( about 250,000}. It was , somehow, pretty comfortable.

I was working in a factory house which had to close up in 1932. After that I had many odd jobs. About a year before Hitler came, we had a guild system. If you wanted to learn a profession, you had to sign up and get an apprenticeship. My mother had a permit to conduct business. She didn't use it, but she paid for it, because you never know when you~d need it. I discovered this, and I said ~ Maybe I could use it my mother's name. It was march 1938 that the Germans came in. I took my brother and we travelled to Germany and Belgium, where we were caught. We were sent back and to jail. We were sent to a concentration camp called [???-burg].

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My brother had a heart condition. I said, " Go see the doctor". So, he went to see the doctor, who was an elderly gentlemen. The doctor said," What are you doing in jail. What did you do?". "Nothing", my brother said. The doctor said he could get us out. Two weeks later, under funny circumstances, we were released. We came out and there was somebody waiting for us outside. He said, " If you don~t go back to Vienna, and you are caught again, you will go straight to the concentration camp. Don~t try to stay".We decided to cross the border into Belgium.

**How did you make it acro~s the border?on foot?**

Somebody gave us a piece of paper with a plan. We took a streetcar to the border. When we got near the border we had to go into the forest. The first time we were caught we just stopped. A border guard was screaming~ What the hell are you doing?~ He pointed out where the border was. He must have known. That couldn't have been the first time. WE gave him cigarettes and he let us cross the border. We were in Brussels for two weeks before the Germans came in. When the Germans came in, we [got] 15 kilometers from Brussels. We were offered a ride. He said, " Are you Germans, you're not from here." We said, " No, we are jewish."So, he took us to a prison. From there we were transported by cattlecar to [??? France ???].This transporter was bombed by the English after four days in the cattlecar with no food or drink.

~ Missed a lot here

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The French soldiers had to protect us. But they were angry that they had to protect Germans. They had mixed feelings. After four weeks we came to a camp, and we stayed there under terrible conditions.For two weeks after this, many people were sick. Sickness was the worst thing. Very painful. We couldn't complain.The Germans closed in and the French moved us to [SaintSoucrain??] It was close to the sea, and the conditions were terrible. Imagine eating onions for days. The commander from the camp bought food but we had to throw it away [ because it was spoiled].

**You say you were in a camp. The~e were French people?**

French people. Before, a man came who spoke German. He said, I hear there are some jews who want to fight against Hitler.So, we stood in line to sign the papers . But do you know what he wanted us to sign? Papers to join the foreign legion. We wanted to fight Hitler not go to Africa. He said, "I'm giving you an opportunity to get out of this camp, and you don't want it?" Some people signed.

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In the camp, there was a lot of corruption.Some people had some

money. So, since there was nothing to eat, some soldiers came in to sell us bread from their rations. They were punished. People started to die. A few Jewish doctors were there and were helping us. They [the French] didn't want to admit it ~ the conditions ], because they didn't want the population outside the camp to know.

When I was sick . I found I couldn't stand up. I had another friend and we decided to sneak out of the camp. There were guards, but one day there was a sandstorm. The guards were hiding and we sneaked out. We went to a town.

#### **Did you speak French?**

A little bit because I was living in Belgium.. My sister's husband was a sports reporter and his father was a foreign correspondent for Austria. My mother used to make fish. On this Friday night, we sat around to eat. My mother wanted to meet the in-laws. They had to leave at 12:00 to work on the Sunday edition. Mr. Burg said, "Stan, we have to go to work~ My sister said to her husband, " You are not going" He said, ~Yes, I am going". She said, " If you go you will not find me when you get back~. His father said he had to go. That same night, he was arrested. He was put in a camp with two parts and there was an [ alley] between them. You were not allowed to go up to this fence. But you could hear people talking--Austrians, Germans. So one day we went, thinking we would meet somebody there. We were in between the two parts and I said to my brother, "You know , this is crazy" We knew our brother in law was sent to battle. We heard a voice. It said, " who are you?". " Why can't I see you?" WE wanted to see each other. Someone said, "I have a candle in the barracks". This Mr. Burg was a stately man. When we saw him, we shrank. His hand was missing. When

they arrested him, they didn't want him leaving any evidence with his writings.

~ Missing a part ~

When he was [released?] his wife knew he was coming to Vienna.

I met my wife in Belgium. She was Polish. She and her parents fled on foot to Belgium and then France.

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#### **You were married at this time?**

Yes. I was married. She had fled with her parents to France , and she didn't know what happened to me. She checked the Red Cross [ etc]. We are sitting in the camp one day and somebody walked by with an envelope and I recognized the handwriting. I said, " Hey, is that letter for me?". He said; " Here." So, anyway, I knew where she was. When I left the camp I went to Toulouse. Toulouse is not too big a town. There was a lot of people who were not French. There were a lot of refugees, mostly Jewish people. The Vichy regime was cutting off sections of the city and sending people to camps there. We went to Belgium and stayed there until 1941, when it became again impossible. One day, they knocked on my door and gave me a . It said that I was needed and should report to work for the war cause. When they came, I closed my apartment and looked

for one . There were many vacancies but people don't always want you. And you don't know who you are talking to. One lady looked at us, and she said to stand over there. We asked if she had a room to rent. She took us in. We stayed there as long as possible.

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In the meantime we had contact with some resistance people and we went out at night sometimes. We left and went to France, and there was an underground there.

**Can you tell us about the underground?**

One time we came to a little town and I saw the commander of the French , and this was the man I was looking for. I hung a crucifix on my wife . One lady too~us in and made us food. When we left, she warned us-" ~e careful. There are many jews out there. I can see that you are catholics." So, we found out this commander and we went to his house. There were kids running around.She [his wife] said he was not there. WE waited, and she was putting dishes away with my wife and they liked each other. When he came, I told him that someone had told me who he was and he blew up. But then he calmed down. He said I could stay with him, and I could go out with him. He said, first I have to ask you something. He said, " Are you ~ewish?'. My instinct was to say "no".The next day he asked again and I said, ~' no'~. I had false papers , and by coincidence his wife was Belgian. She remembered a family with this name in a ~rench

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{12:52~ region. I spoke French with an accent. She said, " Why don't you speak French"

We went into the forest and there were maybe twenty people talking. He asked again if I was ~ewish. I said "No. But what is the difference?". He said then that he wouldn't waste one of his men for a jew. W~ left and never stayed two nights in one spot. France was divided. W~ went to the other side of France. Meanwhile it had been a long time since we left Belgium. IN 1943 we tried to go to Switzerla ~. They wanted to keep my wife and my son and send me back. Myr'screamed and grabbed my legs. They said, " Okay, for a while you can stay, but you cannot contact anybody here." There was a law to deport people from Switzerland. I got a letter later that the war was over.

**How did you support yourself?**

There were many labor camps in Switzerland. I got pennies--hardly enough for cigarettes. My wife was working in a camp also. After the war, my wife was a citizen of Belgium, so she could be

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repatriated. Her, not me. I left Switzerland and went to France, where I was arrested and put in jail with Germans. One day , a Belgian officer came to take Belgian citizens home. There were six

ewish boys there. Two were from Belgium. When we came to see the captain, I told him I was Jewish, and my wife was in Belgium. He said if I didn't have any papers I had to [ contact someone in Belgium?] 3 or 4 days later, a man walks in and says, " Where are the Jews that want to go to Belgium? A couple of days later he took us out. He said, ' I am President of the Jewish Community. First of all, eat".

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**What authority did he have to do this?**

He was President of the Jewish community. But, the authority was with the Belgian commander. He didn't want us. Nobody knew me in France. They knew me in Belgium. He drove us around and brought us to city hall to give us some [ Belgian marks?].

We went to the Jewish people that we knew. We were looking for a place to stay the night. [ A woman] with an apartment said she would take me in.

**So, were you reunited with your wife?**

My wife had been repatriated legally and would be arriving in two weeks. She came home, she asked everybody where I was. She didn't know what to think. I was hoping to have an apartment and everything before she came. So, she went to the landlord we had before. He offered her a room in the attic. I came back and I didn't know where to go. So, I went to the same landlord. He said ' Oh, you're back already. Your wife must be happy". I didn't even know my wife was there. Later, someone asked me " How is your sister?" I knew she had been at Auschwitz. I said, " She's here?", and he said, " sure she's here". I found out she was very, very, sick. She needed hospitalization. So, we were told that they didn't have enough room for their own people and that we would have to go back to Austria.. So. the Red Cross took her back to Austria. Then one day I read an article in the paper. There was a lady in a camp, she was being accused by the British of helping the Nazis kill people. She mentioned my sister as a witness that she didn't do it. So, they took my sister to Hamburg to be a witness. The judge said, " Is it true that she gave you shoes and she gave bread?". She said, " I cannot answer unless you let me give my commentary". The judge said, " What is your commentary?" The commentary was that she took it from people she killed. They administered pills to kill them. You would put the pill on your tongue. She knew it, but she still gave the pills to the people. She was hanged later. My sister asked them [ The British] to take her back . They wouldn't do it. She had to go back on her own. She was very sick.

**Did you then find her?**

I didn't know where to look. But she found her husband.

**What about your brothers and sisters?** I had three sisters and one brother

**The brother that was with you?** Yes.

**Did he survive?** Yes , he survived. One sister went to Italy. From there , they went to the                      republic. They told us at the Red Cross that we

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could write letters. We didn't know where everybody was. But one sister I knew was in Switzerland. ~                      Hard to follow for about two minutes ~ Four weeks later we got a package . My sister sent us papers. I was not there at the camp. I had gone to Belgium. So, he [ brother?] wrote me from the camp. He had been transferred to another camp. He wrote, " Should I wait for you?~. I said, " I will follow you" He went to the                      Republic. It was the last, or one of the last , ships who left Europe and Africa. So, I lived in Belgium until 1951.

**Were you reunited with your son?** Yes, because he was with my wife.

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What can I tell you? My family, counting parents, uncles aunts[etc]. There were 60 or 70 people killed.

**So, you left in '51 with your family?**

Yes. I lived in Belgium and I didn't want to stay there. I went to the American consulate. They told me I would have to wait ten years. My family said why don't you come to the                      Republic if you don,t want to stay in Belgium. It's not like living in Europe. It's a backward country. I went to the                      Republic in 1951 and stayed there until 1960. In 1958, the trouble started and I didn't want any part of it. So, I went to the American consulate

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to apply again. They gave me a questionnaire. They asked me what happened to the first request. Two days later I had a Visa. I came here.

**Did you bring your family the first time?**

The first time I went first. The second time she went first. She left maybe a month or six weeks before me.

**Did you settle down in LA?**

Yes. WHEN I came to the U.S. I had family in New York and in Chicago. I had a sister in L.A. I said to my wife, " Let's look at all these places and see what is best."

**You must like Phoenix even better.**

I like phoenix, I came here because of my wife~s sickness. Arthritis. It started with pains in her fingers. Nobody could stop it. I heard about the climate in Phoenix. In '74 we came back to Los Angeles, and she could barely walk up the stairs. She got slowly better, but two years ago she could not walk anymore. She broke her hip in '75. So, we moved back to Phoenix. Then she fell

down and broke her pelvis. The next time she fell down she broke the pin in her hip. Now, she weighs only 86 lbs.

**Is your son in Chicago?**

Yes

**Do you see your grandchildren at all?**

Yes.

..... {missed} could it happen again?

Yes. It wouldn't happen easily here. But Germany was a democracy with equal rights for jews. History has taught us. There are several Latin countries which were democracies once and are now dictatorships. People are very selfish. I remember in Belgium they were marching about 200 jews down the street. I was in a streetcar and a young girl said, " Look at those jews". The conductor said, "How can you say that. If today it 's the jews, tomorrow it's you." She looked at him like he didn't know what he was talking about. One thing is very important I think- Education. You cannot educate hate out of people, but you can ~get rid of superstitions]. Like in the Catholic countries where the church is so important.

**So you think it has to do with the church?**

Anti-semitism definitely stemmed from the church. People are so ignorant. The moment they hear you are jewish they say , " Oh, you killed my God~. I say," How could I kill your God?~

I had my friends who were not jewish, and they were good friends. People are good, but still they are influenced. They are ignorant. After the so called Anschluss, a young lady down the street came and embraced my mother and said " Hitler is here". I said, " What are you talking about? Don't you know we are ~ewish?" She said , "I know, but they don't mean you~ She was ignorant. These are the people who must be educated.