

HOLOCAUST ARCHIVE PROJECT

Name of Interviewee	DINA LEISER		
Name of Interviewer	Carol Tobin	Date	8/8/84
Name of Abstractor	Michelle Heyer	Date	5/10/89

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Dina Leiser was born in Paris. Her parents had emigrated to France from Poland to escape anti-Semitism. Both worked extremely hard as tailors, but the family was quite poor. Because they were so busy, Dina and her younger brother grew up on their own.

The family was non-religious; nevertheless, Dina experienced anti-Semitism on the part of her schoolmates. They often called her a slang name for Jew. Most of Dina's friends were gentiles, and she recalls that she wanted to be identified more as French than as a Jew.

Each summer, Dina and her brother spent several months on a farm in a village called Souil as part of a school-sponsored program. The children became very close to the farm family with whom they stayed, calling them "grandpa" and "grandma."

Just before the war broke out in France, Dina's father had gone to Belgium to work. As a foreign resident of France, he was not drafted, but he enlisted in the army anyway.

Dina and her mother were in Paris the summer the war began. Her brother was at the farm, and as the situation in Paris worsened, Dina was sent to join him. The farmer's son worked for the Paris police force, and in July 1942, he warned Dina's mother of an impending round-up of Jewish women and children. She briefly went into hiding, then she obtained false papers and went to Souil.

The villagers of Souil knew that Dina's family was Jewish, and they were very protective of them. They were the only Jews in the village, but others were hiding in nearby villages. Life in Souil was not as restricted as in the cities - the residents could listen to the BBC and Free French radio, and Dina's family moved about freely.

They remained in Souil for the duration of the war. They could not return to Paris immediately after liberation - they had to wait for transportation - however, they were able to return by October.

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In Paris, they learned that Dina's father had been deported, but they did not know where. In fact, Dina discovered only one year before this interview took place that he had been sent to Auschwitz.

After the war, Dina studied shorthand and typing and found a job. But she experienced anti-Semitism at work, so she left and went to work for the Jewish firm.

Life in Paris was bleak for Dina. Her paternal grandfather was living in the U.S., and she and her brother immigrated in 1947. Her mother, however, was restricted by Polish immigration quotas. She eventually emigrated to Canada, and came to the U.S. five years later.

Dina began night school to study English, but the other students spoke Yiddish constantly, and Dina found that her English was not improving. She quit school and taught herself English by listening to the radio and reading. Within six months she was proficient enough to start working.

In 1949, Dina's brother was drafted into the U.S. Army. He showed her picture to a fellow soldier, and he began writing to Dina. They married after his discharge, in 1952.

Dina and her husband settled in University Heights, Ohio. She has one son and a grandchild. A daughter, born handicapped, died 12 years before this interview. Dina works for the Jewish Federation, and she manages to visit France every two or three years.

ABSTRACT

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PRESENT LIFE

Works at Jewish Federation. Married, has son, 29, who works in family auto wrecking business. Has one grandchild. Lives in University Heights, Ohio.

DINA IS 12 YEARS OLD, LIVING IN PARIS WHEN WAR BREAKS OUT, 1939

Was on school vacation. Returned to school that fall, despite war.

DINA'S FAMILY. PARENTS ARE POLISH EMIGRES

Has one brother two and one-half years younger. Both born in Paris. Parents came to France after marriage. Both worked as tailors. Family was very poor.

PARENTS COME TO FRANCE TO ESCAPE ANTI-SEMITISM IN POLAND

THE FAMILY LIVES IN A ONE-ROOM APARTMENT, MOVES TO A TWO-ROOM APARTMENT

THEY DO NOT LIVE IN A JEWISH NEIGHBORHOOD

DINA'S EARLY EXPERIENCES WITH ANTI-SEMITISM

Most friends were gentile. Dina wanted to be French more than she wanted to be Jewish. Remembers definite anti-Semitism. French slang term for Jew - children often called her this name.

DINA AND BROTHER GROW UP ON THEIR OWN. PARENTS VERY BUSY

THE FAMILY IS NOT RELIGIOUS

Didn't celebrate Jewish holidays. Parents came from very religious homes.

CHILDHOOD ACTIVITIES ARE MOVIES, SCHOOL-SPONSORED VACATIONS

Went to movies often. Every summer spent several months on a farm through school program. These were best times of Dina's childhood.

FAMILY LANGUAGES

Dina's first language was Yiddish. She translated for her parents.

DINA GETS A FREE MEAL AT SCHOOL EACH DAY

Was skinny, undernourished.

DINA READS A LOT, HANDLES CORRESPONDENCE FOR PARENTS, WHO CANNOT WRITE

DINA IS SHY, RESENTS PARENTS' ACCENTED FRENCH

She had no time to make future plans

WAR IS DECLARED, SEPTEMBER

Most Parisians away on vacation, so city was calm. Given gas masks at school. Had air raid drills.

GERMAN JEWS ESCAPE TO FRANCE, WARN THEM WHAT IS HAPPENING

FATHER ENLISTS IN FRENCH ARMY

Had gone to Belgium to work. Foreign residents of France not drafted, but he volunteered. Dina relieved that her father was fighting, as all friends' fathers were.

ANTI-SEMITISM NOT RAMPANT

Jews and gentiles had Germans as common enemy.

GERMANS APPROACH PARIS, MAY 1940

Most people fled. Dina's family was only one left in their building - they had no place to go.

GERMANS ENTER PARIS, JUNE 1940

Dina was 13 years old.

LIFE UNDER GERMAN OCCUPATION

Summer was quiet. Returned to school in October. Food scarce.

JEWISH MEN ROUNDED UP, 1941

Families could visit them on weekends.

JEWS MUST TURN RADIOS IN TO POLICE

JEWS MUST WEAR YELLOW STARS, MAY 1942

Printed with "Juif " - French for "Jew." Each person got three stars. First day Dina wore a star to school, classmate called her "dirty Jew."

DINA IS CONFRONTED BY A GERMAN SOLDIER

Leaving school, German asked to see her papers. When she replied that she had none, he told her to come with him. Dina began to cry, Teacher came over and asked German to leave Dina alone. He let her go.

MOTHER SENDS DINA AND BROTHER TO LIVE IN THE COUNTRY

Brother was staying with farmers from school vacation program. Mother sent Dina to join him. Took stars off their clothes.

FATHER RETURNS TO BELGIUM. THEY HAVE NO NEWS FROM HIM

FARMER'S SON WARNS MOTHER OF IMPENDING ROUND-UP

Dina and brother were very close to farmers - called them "grandpa" and "grandma." Their son worked for French police in Paris. July 16, 1942 he warned Dina's mother that Germans were planning to round up women and children.

MOTHER GOES INTO HIDING

Germans went to arrest her, sealed off the apartment.

THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARRESTED ON JULY 16 WERE SENT TO DRANCY

MOTHER OBTAINS FALSE PAPERS, JOINS THEM ON THE FARM

THERE IS NO ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE FARMING VILLAGE

All villagers determined to protect them.

THEY LISTEN TO BBC, FREE FRENCH RADIO

RESTRICTIONS ON JEWS IN PARIS

Jews could not shop until evening, when most merchandise was gone. Restrictions were advertised in newspapers, posted on walls.

A GENTILE FRIEND STICKS BY DINA

Gentile girl went walking arm in arm with Dina, another Jewish girl, even though they were wearing stars. She held her head high.

DINA DOES NOT KNOW WHY JEWS ACCEPTED THE RESTRICTIONS

Perhaps they were too busy concentrating on survival.

THEY LOSE CONTACT WITH FATHER

THE FARMING VILLAGE IS CALLED SOUIL

50 kilometers from part of La Rochelle. Dina's family are only Jews in Souil; there are others nearby.

GERMANS SEARCH VILLAGE - NOT FOR JEWS BUT FOR FOOD

DINA SPENDS TIME HELPING FRIENDS WITH CHORES, TRYING TO BLEND IN

Nevertheless, Dina felt fairly safe.

AMERICANS LAND, JUNE 6, 1949 [sic]

Dina knew about invasion, felt happy.

ABLE TO RETURN TO PARIS BY OCTOBER

Apartment was empty. Paris liberated earlier, but they couldn't find transportation to the city until October.

LIFE IN PARIS AFTER LIBERATION

Dina excited to return, but life was difficult. Most friends were gone. Had no lights, food and shoes rationed.

THERE IS BRIEF FEAR THAT GERMANS WILL PUSH AMERICANS BACK

THEY LEARN THAT FATHER WAS DEPORTED, BUT NOT WHERE

A friend was going to Belgium. Asked him to search for father. He learned that father was deported in October 1942. Dina learned where he was sent only one year before interview.

STREETS ARE FULL OF AMERICANS. THEY ARE ROWDY, BUT FRIENDLY

Tried to speak to Dina, but they spoke no French, her English was quite bad.

DINA STUDIES SHORTHAND, TYPING, FINDS A JOB

SURVIVORS BEGIN TO COME HOME

Some of Dina's relatives had been in camps. Dina's best friend was in hiding. They didn't talk about their experiences.

DINA CAN'T BELIEVE AMERICANS DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS HAPPENING

DINA FEELS VERY LUCKY. KNOWS HER EXPERIENCES CAN'T COMPARE TO OTHERS

Still, feels cheated of childhood years.

MORE ON PARIS AFTER LIBERATION

SURVIVORS GATHER AT ONE SPECIFIC HOTEL

Some go every day to look for relatives.

A COUSIN WHO SURVIVED VISITS THEM

He had been in a camp; wife and child were killed.

FRENCH JEWISH POWS NOT TREATED DIFFERENTLY THAN GENTILE POWS

DINA RECALLS D-DAY

One of the happiest days of her life. More important than actual end of war.

DINA EXPERIENCES ANTI-SEMITISM AT WORK

Was a secretary in a carbon paper/typewriter ribbon firm. Felt they were anti-Semitic so went to work in a Jewish business.

DINA'S GRANDFATHER IS IN THE U.S.

He was father's father. In America since 1913. His first wife died, he remarried and went to America. Left Dina's father with first wife's family.

DINA DECIDES SHE SHOULD GO TO AMERICA

Life in Paris too bleak. Had no family there, so wanted to meet her family in America.

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MORE ON COMING TO U.S.

DINA ALSO HAS AN UNCLE IN AMERICA

Father's brother. Began writing to him.

DINA AND BROTHER COME TO U.S. IN 1947

Mother was treated as Polish by immigration laws, Polish quota was filled. She planned to join them later.

They travel to America on the Queen Mary. Grandfather and uncle met them in N.Y.

DINA LOOKS FORWARD TO LIFE IN AMERICA, BUT IS TEARFUL LEAVING PARIS

MORE ON THE VOYAGE ABOARD QUEEN MARY

THEY HAVE THANKSGIVING DINNER IN N.Y.

Dina appalled to see corn on the table. Considered it animal food.

SHE FINDS CLEVELAND DREARY IN COMPARISON WITH PARIS

DINA ATTENDS NIGHT SCHOOL TO LEARN ENGLISH, BUT QUILTS AND LEARNS ON HER OWN

Went to class for immigrants at John Hay High School. But everyone spoke Yiddish, her English didn't improve. Quit school, learned English from radio, books.

AFTER SIX MONTHS SHE GOES TO WORK FOR CASHMERE CORPORATION OF AMERICA

Worked there three years.

THROUGH A JEWISH AGENCY, DINA AND BROTHER MEET A COUPLE WHO TEACH THEM ENGLISH

DINA JOINS A GROUP OF JEWISH NEWCOMERS

Didn't make friends - others were all Eastern European.

BROTHER IS DRAFTED DURING KOREAN WAR, 1949

MOTHER EMIGRATES TO CANADA. COMES TO U.S. FIVE YEARS LATER

DINA'S LIFE VERY UNSETTLED UNTIL SHE MARRIES

UNCLE OWNS AUTO WRECKING YARD

DINA MEETS HER HUSBAND

In army, brother showed Dina's photo to a friend. They began corresponding. Married in 1952, after his discharge.

DINA DOES NOT BELONG TO A SYNAGOGUE

GRANDFATHER VERY PROTECTIVE OF HER. DIES IN 1956

HUSBAND HAS FAMILY IN DETROIT , BUT THEY SETTLE IN CLEVELAND. SON IS BORN IN 1955. DINA'S MOTHER LIVES WITH THEM

Also had a daughter, but she was handicapped, died 12 years ago.

WHEN DINA VISITS FELLOW SURVIVORS THEY TALK ONLY ABOUT HOLOCAUST

HUSBAND DOESN'T WANT TO KNOW ABOUT HER EXPERIENCES

DINA LEARNS OF FATHER'S FATE

Went to Brussels one year ago with a friend. Went to a camp outside Brussels. Father deported from there. Read in a book that all Jews from that camp deported to Auschwitz. Relieved to finally know. Found his name on a monument there.

DINA'S MAIDEN NAME IS ROTHSTEIN

DINA RETURNS TO FRANCE EVERY TWO TO THREE YEARS

SHE DREAMS ABOUT HOLOCAUST

Often dreams about how father might have died.

SHE IS ANGRY, BUT DOESN'T HATE GERMANS. STILL, SHE REFUSES TO ASSOCIATE WITH THEM

BROTHER IS VERY PASSIVE ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCE. DOESN'T TALK ABOUT IT

MANY PEOPLE ARE UNINTERESTED IN HER EXPERIENCES

Son is aware and interested, but no one else.

SHE FEELS SHE CAN NEVER ADEQUATELY THANK THOSE WHO HELPED HER

Sharing her experience is a way to begin thanking them. Wants to show that not all French collaborated.

THE HOLOCAUST MUST BE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS

SHE RECALLS HAVING TO WRITE TO HEAD OF FRENCH GOVERNMENT DURING THE WAR

All school children had to write. Dina asked why Jews were being deported, got a form letter in response.

HOLOCAUST WAS ON A LARGE SCALE, BUT ANTI-SEMITISM HAS ALWAYS BEEN WITH US

DINA HAS NEVER EXPERIENCED ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE U.S. SHE HAS SEEN ANTI-SEMITISM IN CANADA

SHE RECALLS ANTI-JEWISH POSTERS IN THE PARIS SUBWAY

MORE ON GROWING UP DURING WAR-TIME

SHE IS DRAWN TO MOVIES SUCH AS "SOPHIE'S CHOICE"

SHE FEELS THERE SHOULD BE AN ANNUAL DAY FOR REMEMBRANCE

Glad that her father's name appears on a monument, and that there is a museum in Washington.

SHE IS GLAD THAT HER SON DIDN'T GROW UP THE WAY SHE DID