

Interviewee: SAMSON, Sonja  
Interviewer: Nora Levin  
No. of Audiotapes: 5 English

Date: June 3, 1985  
Transcript: 1 v. (unpaged)

## SUMMARY

Sonja Samson was born in Aurich, Germany in 1931, into an assimilated but observant Jewish family. In 1936 she lived with her grandparents in Luxembourg until she joined her parents who had moved to France earlier. She talks about her family history and her childhood, and speculates about her parents' reasons for staying in France instead of emigrating to the United States. Her father volunteered for the French army but was interned in 1939.

Sonja and her parents were in Gurs briefly, then lived in Garlin, a village near Gurs until August 26, 1942 when they were rounded up by French police, sent to Gurs and then transported to Rivesaltes in September, 1942. Her parents were deported and her mother managed to keep Sonja from going on this transport with the help of *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE)*. She never saw her parents again and still profoundly resents this separation. She briefly describes conditions in the two camps and her life and schooling in the villages of Garlin and Gurs, including pressure on a teacher to rescind an honor Sonja had earned.

Sonja stayed in a convent and then an orphanage at *Palavas-les-Flots* with other Jewish children, under the auspices of the *Union Générale des Israélites de France (UGIF)* and OSE, then with distant relatives who were in hiding, later in a boarding school in Chambéry, constantly on guard. She mentions a failed attempt to cross the border into Switzerland.

Later Sonja worked as a maid at an inn that was a substation of the *Armée Secrète* (the French underground). She invented a new identity for herself as a non-Jewish war orphan, and participated in Catholic rites to avoid discovery. After she earned their trust, Sonja became a messenger. She relates how her presence of mind foiled a plot by the so-called "Butcher of Grenoble" to blow up the Underground headquarters just after liberation in August 1944. Sonja describes post-war life at the Chambéry boarding school, with her cousins, as well as her search for her parents, and was an active member of *Hashomer Hatzair* in Paris. She describes how she learned what she needed to do to survive, how the loss of her parents affects her to this day, and how her outlook about religion, Jewishness, and Zionism changed as she matured.

Sonja went to the United States from Sweden on the Gripsholm as a war-orphan in 1947, instead of making *aliyah* with her friends. She talks about the difficult adjustment to life in the United States, how she managed to get the higher education she wanted, and post-war trips to Israel in great detail.

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## SUBJECT HEADINGS

Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)  
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945) - Personal narrative, Jewish child  
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945) - Psychological aspects  
Concentration camps - France: Gurs  
Transit camp - France: Rivesaltes  
World War, 1939-1945-Underground movements - French  
Survival skills  
Hiding