

Interviewee: Lea Kleiner

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Interviewer: Sonia Brodsky

Lea Kleiner was born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, on March 16, 1929. Mother, Bertha Haas was born in Czechoslovakia and father, Marco Kleiner, was born in Poland. They met in Czechoslovakia and they went to live in Yugoslavia, where her oldest maternal aunt was already residing. Lea and her sister were born there, and lived there until 1939. They lived in an apartment house, which faced a huge garden. Lea and her friends in winter were exposed to ultra violet light in order to make up for the lack of sun. The cousins from Czechoslovakia would come to visit. There were 5 sisters on her mother's side, some of whom lived there. On father's side there were also 5 siblings the oldest of whom emigrated to the US at the beginning of the century. Lea and her sister went to a Jewish school. It was not a religious school. They learned Hebrew and Yugoslavian (in Cyrillic characters) and at home they spoke German, Czech and Polish because of the grandparents, and they had a Hungarian nanny. Mother came from a very religious family. Her father had been a leader of his community. In Lea's house, Shabbat and holidays were observed. Lea's father was not so religious so that their strict observances diminished. Father was a successful merchant. He funded his older brother law school in Vienna. The father managed to send that family to Israel, and they survived. But, most of the rest of the family in Czechoslovakia did not believe that the situation so dire. His other siblings died in the camps. Lea's father decided to liquidate all the businesses at the beginning of 1939. Father, an ardent Zionist, visited Israel twice in 1933 and 1936. Lea always ponders why they did not move to Israel instead of Chile. Parents continued working for and supporting Israel in Chile as well.

In March 1939 the family left Zagreb for Paris. They lived there for a couple of months, then in Deauville. The plan had been to put the children in a boarding school in England. The war was about to break. In Deauville they were witnesses to aerial attacks. They were not allowed to stay in England, even though they entered with Yugoslavian passports, which sported the appropriate visas. They spent a night in jail and next day they were returned to Paris under heavy escort. Upon their return a friend of Lea's father asked them why not to go to Chile. The typical answer was: "where is that"? Mother managed to find visas to Chile. They went to Genoa from where they departed to Chile by boat. First stop was Marseille, where the passports were examined. They were travelling in first class but those Jews travelling in third were taken off the boat and interned in camps in France. Lea thinks that this is a little known fact. She also says that the passengers that had been taken off her ship were later freed and took the next boat. Lea remembers taking the left-over food from their meals to the third class passengers that were travelling in dismal conditions. Arrival in Valparaiso, Chile, greeted by acquaintances. Moving to Santiago, where they shared an apartment with another family for a while. Going to an English school but feeling very alien. She finally asked to be transferred to a local high school. Father never overcame the shock of the immigration, and did not master the language.

Parents would receive correspondence from Europe, but never shared the information with the daughters. Most of the maternal relatives died in Auschwitz.

Lea married a non-Jew from whom she is now divorced. She had two children and has 3 grandchildren. Only at the age of 50 she felt she was Chilean.

Giving refuge to children, victims of the dictatorship in Chile. Her message is to never forget. She thinks that a better world keeps being just a dream.