

Fourth Interview—Hidden Child

Renee Fink
[REDACTED]

Born December 12, 1937, Scheveningen, Holland
Religious background: Jewish

Date of Interview: October 30, 2006

Location: [REDACTED]

Pittsboro, NC [REDACTED]

Conducted by Marcia Horn

Videographer: Alan Gleiner

Hidden in north Holland (ages 4-8); family who hid her was later honored at Yad Vashem, Israel, as righteous gentiles
Renee's own parents perished in Auschwitz

Renee's birth name was Renate Gabriele Laser. Throughout her life she has had an "odyssey of names": three first names and five last names, reflecting how often she was moved. Renee was an only child. Her family were refugees from Breslau, Germany (now Poland), who left Germany in 1933. Her father had attended University and had originally become an administrator and bookkeeper for large farms. Her mother became a secretary. Her family were originally assimilated German Jews. After fleeing Germany, they settled in Scheveningen, Holland, where Renee was born. Renee's parents were later murdered in Auschwitz, while Renee was hidden. Of her family members, only her grandmother and aunt survived the Holocaust.

In April-May 1940, the Nazis invaded Holland. Many Jews, including Renee's family, fled to Bilthoven. They took in boarders to survive. Renee was so young; she doesn't remember many details, except that life was "deadly dangerous." The first hiding place she doesn't remember. The second hiding place, in Laren, in north Holland, was found by her aunt and uncle, who worked in the resistance. (Renee's uncle was later shot in the street in Utrecht.) One day, in the summer of 1942, when Renee was four years old, her mother, without telling Renee anything, gave her to a stranger on a bicycle who took Renee to a large home and left her there. This home is where she lived until the war ended, and this became her new family. She never saw her parents again. There were eight children, two parents, and Renee. This was a Catholic family who hid her not for any money but because they wanted to help—at terrible risk to themselves. Renee was given a new name: Rita van den Brink. Since this was a Catholic family, Renee learned early about holy water and how to cross herself. She was the baby of the family, in the midst of occupied Holland. There was no electricity. There were cows, pigs, and chickens on the farm, but Renee was told not to get excited, to be quiet. She remembers the bombs. She remembers being sent to kindergarten for three years. She remembers being checked for parasites in school. Since there was practically no paper, she learned to knit to pass the time. She would unravel whatever she had made and start over. She remembers a bombing raid, while she hid with the family's children in the

basement. The mother was dying (and ultimately died) of brain cancer and stayed upstairs during the raid. The father of the family stayed with her. Renee felt very close to this family. She was eight years old when the war ended.

After the war Renee went to live with grandmother in Bilthoven. (Her grandmother had come for her on Renee's birthday.) Renee adored her. For the first time Renee started making friends and playing with dolls. In 1947, Renee's aunt left for the U.S. to marry Renee's father's first cousin, who had served in the army. The following year, at age ten, Renee came to the U.S. with her grandmother on the ship *New Amsterdam*. Renee was afraid because she didn't know how to swim. Her grandmother knew English, but Renee knew just a few phrases. She was met in New York by her uncle, Walter Leipzig, a man she didn't know. He asked her "How do you like America?" Renee was frightened and didn't know what to say. He told her immediately that henceforth her new name would be Renee (not Renate, her birth name) Leipzig.

For the first two weeks she lived just with her grandmother in a posh apartment facing Central Park. But they couldn't stay. From this apartment, she moved to Richmond Hill and then Kew Gardens, Queens,* where she attended P.S. 99 and partly Forest Hills High School for a short time. In high school she was told that her IQ was 70; however, she could not do well on tests because she had never had a chance to master English! She was very unhappy living with her uncle and aunt, and for a while she lived in Forest Hills alone with a kind family, the Drogenfelds. Then she learned that her mother's cousin, Suzanne Schrenk, was living in Chestertown, in the Adirondacks, so Renee went to live there for a while, changing her last name to Schrenk. She kept taking the bus back and forth, sometimes to Kew Gardens and Forest Hills, sometimes to Chestertown. Renee graduated from high school in Chestertown, applied to college, and enrolled in the University of Vermont. She made Dean's List and joined Hillel. But despite some contributions by the Schrenks, she lacked the funds to finish and graduate.

At the University of Vermont, Renee accepted a blind date with a student, and he proposed the next day! She became Renee Fink. They were married for 45 years before he passed away. For 30 years she lived in Bergen County, NJ and left in 1984. Renee became a medical staff coordinator. She and her husband later lived in Martinsville, VA, for four years before moving to North Carolina. Renee is now retired. She has a son and daughter and five grandchildren.

Renee kept silent about her story until a friend, Simone Weil Lipman (see Fifth Interview) told her about the Hidden Child Foundation in 1991, and Renee attended an international conference of Hidden Children at the Marriott Hotel in Manhattan. This friend had sent her a clipping and asked "Could this be you?" Sixteen hundred people came to this conference. Renee found it both "frightening and life-affirming." Ultimately, it changed her life: "We were the lucky ones," she realized. Since then she has been attending these conferences, most recently in Amsterdam in 2005. Renee commented that 80 percent or more of Dutch Jews did not survive the war, that only one-third of those who went into hiding survived. She keeps in touch now with the children of the van den Brink family, the family who had hidden her in Holland during

World War II. This family has since been honored as Righteous Gentiles at Yad Vashem. Renee's foster siblings have passed away, but Renee has stayed in touch with their children, visiting them and once staying in her old room, which she used to share with four girls.

Before 1991, she never told her children about her experiences. She has since given each of her children a copy of her Shoah testimony (recorded in the late 1990's). She speaks to groups and is in special touch with a schoolteacher who has been working on a Holocaust project in Massachusetts. Renee feels now that she has been charged with the mission "to sensitize and to create awareness." She mentioned the importance of avoiding bullies—"so little bullies don't grow up to be big bullies."

*Renee's aunt, almost 91, is still living in Kent Manor, Kew Gardens, NY. The interviewer, Marcia Horn, lived at the same apartment and same address—though at a different time and building—as Renee! She also attended the same high school, though for a short time, as my brother! We discovered these coincidences in a phone conversation before the official interview and then started e-mailing each other. By the time of the official interview, we were especially eager to meet!