Fifth Interview—Resister and Rescuer

Simone Weil Lipman

Born April 22, 1920, Ringendorf, France
Religious background: Jewish

Date of Interview: October 30, 2006 Location: Chapel Hill, NC
Conducted by Marcia Horn Videographer: Alan Gleiner

Recruited by OSE a Jewish Children’s Aid Society, in Rivesaltes, France, to help care for and find homes for Jewish children who were hunted by the Nazis
Worked with the underground, later providing the children with false papers so they could be smuggled to safe homes

Born in Ringendorf, France in 1920, Simone and her family moved to Strasbourg three years later. Her father was a shepherd, who also owned land in Alsace. Her mother was a homemaker. Simone lived with her parents, brother, paternal grandmother and a maid. She attended public school, specializing in classical studies and early childhood education; and Hebrew school, where she had a solid Jewish education—rare for women in that time. Simone was also active as a leader in the Jewish Youth Movement, which would later prepare her for leadership, self-reliance, and caring for others.

After World War II started in 1939, Simone became a nursery school teacher in a Paris Montessori school. But in May 1940, when the Germans invaded France, they soon expelled all inhabitants from Strasbourg and annexed Alsace. After France surrendered in June, it was divided into an occupied and free zone. Simone’s family was forced to flee on the Sabbath and Simone drove the family car. They fled for five days and nights, and luckily located a farm, “Le Noyer” in Dordogne, which was fortunately in the free zone. There her father rented a chateau for Simone’s family and relatives from her mother’s side—twelve in all. They grew their own food, which Simone sold in town. There was no gas. Bikes were the main transportation. Simone helped tutor farm children for about a year.

In 1941, Andree Salomon, a Jewish girl and student leader Simone had known from Strasbourg, contacted Simone, asking her to come to the camp of Rivesaltes, near the Spanish border. Andree was working for OSE (Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants), which was trying to find homes for Jewish children whose families were being held in internment camps. Simone packed her bags and left to help in OSE, a crucial period in her life, the beginning of a long history in social work. She was 21. Rivesaltes was
originally an old army camp with no running water, bare, filthy barracks and separated families. She found both Jewish and Spanish children. Simone's job at first was to organize children's activities, especially for teenage girls, and help in the infirmary. She also found additional food for them. Ultimately, her goal was to liberate the children. Simone found channels to provide children with false papers and helped find Jewish children's homes in south France. Rivesaltes became a deportation center. (In recent years, about 1998-99, Simone attended OSE reunions, and met with some of those children on the deportation trains, who flocked to her.)

In the end of 1942, Rivesaltes was closed. Simone had had jaundice and hepatitis. She got a job near Limoges in Poulouzat, tutoring children and organizing activities. When the Germans invaded, Simone organized homes to take children in non-Jewish settings. In the beginning of 1944, these homes closed, and OSE organized an underground network, led by Georg Garel, for those who didn't look Jewish to place children in Chateauroux, 100 miles north of Limoges. Simone was given the false name of Simone Werlin, along with false papers, and passed for a non-Jewish nurse.

At this point, the help of non-Jews was essential. She lived with Catholic women, attended church with them, and got false papers for children, telling them their new names and taking away all their books with their original names. This was the "non-armed resistance." One third were women; all were young. Simone worked with this team, supervising 350 children. She worked here from the end of 1943 until the liberation of south France in the fall of 1944, assisted by some Catholic and Protestant organizations. (The OSE name was no longer used.) Money came indirectly through Switzerland.

In early 1944, Simone and a friend Charlotte were visiting Limoges and had just emerged from a pastry shop. Two men, with a gun hidden in their books, said "Follow us" and ordered them to go to Charlotte's apartment. Simone realized her danger; the rubber stamp for making false papers as well as a list of her hidden children was sewn into the lining of her coat. She thought quickly and asked to be excused for the restroom. Her quick wits saved her; she flushed the sensitive documents down the toilet and threw some out the window. She had her false papers and was released. Charlotte was arrested. (Years later, Simone found out that Charlotte, who had been imprisoned, had survived.)

In April 1944, the gendarmes had picked up Simone's parents and grandmother; in their fright, her parents showed their real papers instead of the false ones. Her mother was returned the next day. The father was taken away but he escaped and returned on D-Day.

After the war, Simone, who had been Montessori trained, opened a preschool near Paris for young children who had lost their parents; she also opened a training center for teens. Shortly after, she was offered a scholarship by the National Council of Jewish Women in the U.S., and in October 1945, she left her family for the U.S. to study at Tulane University's School of Social Work. She then was offered a scholarship for her
second year at Western Reserve in Cleveland, where she met her future husband, a German engineer. Simone earned a Master's in social work and continued her practice. She has two sons and five grandchildren.

At first when she was in the U.S., Simone rarely discussed her past life. Her parents never came to the U.S., and she visited only one or two friends at first when she traveled to France. Then she began reading Elie Wiesel, whom she found was an OSE child. After she and her husband moved to Syracuse in 1964, she discovered at a National Conference of Jewish Women some children of Holocaust survivors who were trying to integrate Holocaust studies into the school curriculum. This was the first time Simone remembers really starting to talk about her own Holocaust experiences. She helped create a children-of-survivors group, Le Petite Monde. She also started talking with other groups.

After 1983, her husband's job brought them back to France for three years. Simone retired. She reconnected with OSE. Three years later, she and her husband returned to the U.S., settling in Chapel Hill, NC. Simone went from school to school, and to churches and synagogues, telling her story. She read and collected history books and accounts written during the war. Ultimately, she became active in the Hidden Child Foundation, which she also introduced to Renee Fink (see Fourth Interview). She helped to bring Renee out of her own silence. In about 1999, some OSE alumni invited Simone to speak. Simone gets great pleasure from OSE reunions, especially hearing others' survival stories. She has taped her story with the Oral History project at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum at Washington, D.C.

Simone tells children that genocides still exist today all over the world. But in the case of the Holocaust, she states that never has there been a "planned, industrialized killing of a whole people by a civilized country." She advises children to "speak up" when they see any injustice. It takes just "one man to remain silent for evil to prevail."