

Twelfth Interview—Hidden Child

Nathan Kranowski



Born September 26, 1937, Paris, France

Religious background: Jewish

Date of Interview: August 1, 2007

Location: Blacksburg, VA

Conducted by Marcia Horn

Videographer: Alan Gleiner

Both parents lived in France, were rounded up and murdered in Auschwitz

Nathan sent by aunt to live with a Christian family in Brittany

Nathan in OSE orphanages after WW II ended

Arrived in NY in 1948 (aunt's sister lived in New York City)

Nathan's mother and father, Mala and Wolf Kranowski, both born in 1907, were Polish. In 1936 they married and moved to an apartment in Paris in a Jewish immigrant neighborhood. Nathan was born a year later. In 1937 France was still the Third Republic. Anti-Semitism was already strong. In 1940, the Nazis occupied France, and France surrendered in June. France was divided into two areas, the free zone and the occupied zone. The French Marshall Petain cooperated with the Nazi occupation in establishing the Vichy government. Petain believed Germany would win the war. He also believed that the Jews were expendable. In October 1940, every Jew was required to register at the French police station. Each one was issued a "J" for "Juif." In 1941 the French police, headed by René Bousquet, began arresting men and non-French Jews. The Germans were very clever; they hid behind the French police and let the French make the arrests for them. This strategy minimized resistance from the French people, who were more likely to trust their government than the Nazis.

Nathan's father was arrested by the French police in 1941 and taken first to Drancy and later to Auschwitz, where he was murdered. (In July 1941, gas chambers had first begun to be used in Germany.) Nathan remained with his mother in Paris. In July 1942, the French police knocked on the door of their apartment and arrested Nathan's mother. Like her husband, she was sent to Drancy and subsequently to Auschwitz, where she too was murdered.

To this day, Nathan does not know why he wasn't taken from the apartment along with his mother. (He thinks that perhaps at this point the Nazis weren't yet taking children away very often. Or, he speculates that perhaps the arresting office had felt sorry for him.) Luckily, Nathan's aunt lived in the same apartment complex, across the courtyard from Nathan's family. He remembers that he either ran to her apartment or someone took him there. Nathan stayed with her for a while, but she wasn't able to care for him and sent him to live with a Christian family in Brittany, who had a small farm with no children. (Nathan believes they had probably been paid to keep him). He was given a false identity; his new name was Pierre. He went to church and learned the catechism.

At this age he didn't really realize what being Jewish or Christian meant. He was only eight years old when the war ended.

On the farm, Nathan had a relatively pleasant life. He remembers riding a cow that found its way back to the barn. He remembers vividly a German soldier who came to the farm, wanting eggs. The soldier was quite polite, took the eggs and left. (German soldiers at that time were told to behave well to keep the French passive.) Although Nathan never attended school while living on the farm, somehow he taught himself to read. He stayed with his family for three years, from 1942-1945, and returned to live with his aunt. But at the end of the war his aunt had a nervous breakdown and couldn't keep him. After the war, Nathan remembers spending time in orphanages run by OSE (Ouvre de Secours aux Enfants, a group which focused on saving children and took in orphans during the war). He was able to be traced and learned that his aunt's sister lived in New York City. Nathan was put on a boat, the S.S. Sobieski, and arrived in New York on May 4, 1948.

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A year earlier, in 1947, Nathan's cousin Jack, whose parents had also been taken away and murdered in the Holocaust, came to live with Nathan's aunt. Like Nathan's parents, Jack too had been forcibly taken from his home and moved with many others in a huge roundup to a huge cycling stadium in Paris, the Villadrome d'Hiver. Jack was taken there on July 16-17, 1942. More than 13,000 Jews were held in this stadium. Jack would have been sent subsequently to Drancy and then to Auschwitz, were it not for his developing acute appendicitis (or some life-threatening illness). He pleaded to be taken to a hospital. His wish was granted, and he spent time in the hospital, thus avoiding the trip to Auschwitz. His life was saved in that moment.

Once in New York, Nathan went to live with his aunt and uncle Esther and Paul Turlletsky. (Jack had come to New York live with them a year earlier, but was no longer there when Nathan arrived.) Nathan's uncle had an embroidery business. He and his wife were Jewish, but not particularly observant. They did not know French, and this was the language Nathan grew up with. Nathan was placed in the third grade at P.S. 47 in the Bronx, with a teacher who had been a French major in college and was supposed to have known French well, but Nathan spoke too quickly for her! He resorted to carrying around a dictionary, which helped her—and it helped him to learn some English! Nathan was Bar Mitzvah later on; he had simply been given a portion of the Torah to read and memorized it. Later he attended City College and earned a Ph.D. in French Literature at Columbia University. For 14-15 years Nathan taught French at Rutgers University, and then, after moving to Virginia, at Hollins College. He later earned an MA in Accounting and became a CPA until he retired. Overall, he was a college professor for 40 years.

When Nathan was a young man, he married his wife Muriel, an observant Conservative Jew. Nathan himself had not felt he was strongly religious, but especially after their first son was born, those feelings changed. At this point, while in his thirties, he felt compelled to start investigating what had really happened to his parents once they had been taken from the Paris apartment and were ultimately sent to Auschwitz. Nathan found a book that was vital to this inquiry, Serge Klarsfeld's two-volume study, *Vichy Auschwitz*, published only in French. This volume meticulously described the names and

dates of the Jews who were deported from France between 1942-1944. Nathan found that between 1942-44 in Paris, 75 trains (cattle cars) went to Auschwitz, with 1,000 Jews in each convoy.

In this book Nathan not only found the names of his parents, but also the step-by-step process which had led to their deaths: his mother Mala's arrest in July 23, 1942; the time spent in the concentration camp at Drancy; the 2 ½ day train trip by cattle car to Auschwitz, arriving July 31; and her murder in Auschwitz on August 3, 1942. He found out that his father, who had met a similar fate earlier, was among the first to be killed in an Auschwitz gas chamber, July 24, 1942. Most of Nathan's relatives perished in the Holocaust. (He is, however, still in touch with Jack, who now lives in Massachusetts.) Overall, Nathan commented, some 75,000 French Jews were killed in Auschwitz. Years later, his mother and father's names were inscribed on the Mur des Noms, 1942, at the Musee de la Shoah in Paris. *

For a number of years now, Nathan has attended lay-led services regularly among Blacksburg's Jewish community. Nathan, his wife, and his oldest son presently take turns leading these services.

Nathan states, "I am Jewish for my parents' sake." His personal mission is as a witness. He never refuses any group that wants him to speak. The lesson he thinks is most important is for the Holocaust not to happen again, though he notes with sadness the recent genocide in Darfur and in other places in the world. He repeats the warning of the philosopher Santayana: "If we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it."

* On August 23, 2007, I visited Paris, determined to visit the Musee de la Shoah and find Nathan's parents' names. I found them on that wall with their birth dates listed: "Mala Kranowski 1907. Wolf Kranowski 1907." I took a photograph and sent it to Nathan. He has since told me that he framed this photograph and has it hanging in his home, beside a stone rubbing which he made of this same place in 2005, when he last visited this museum.