

Marc Michael Gelles

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to United States

Father: Joachim Gelles, textile merchant: died in 1925 in Vienna from a stroke.

Mother: Rosa Gelles, housewife, lived In Vienna, in 1936 moved Trembowla, Poland.

Siblings:

Joseph: oldest, was first to be killed by Nazis. Died in Kiel, Germany

Salo: died in Warsaw ghetto

Adolf: left for Argentina possibly 1936-37

Julius: lived in Bucharest – drowned in black sea 1942-43

Otto: escaped with his wife from Warsaw ghetto. Lived underground for some time. Returned to Vienna end of the war.

Igo (Isador): was with mother and sister in Poland. Previously lived in Vienna. Moved to Poland in 1938.

Leopold: was with mother and sister in Poland. Always lived in Poland.

Gisela: was with mother, and brothers in Poland. Previously lived in Vienna. Moved to Poland in 1938.

I was born Feb B. 21, 1917 – In Vienna Austria. I am the youngest of nine children, eight brothers and one sister. All my siblings were born in what is now called the Ukraine, formerly known as Poland. I am the only one who was born in Vienna, Austria, a fact which saved my life. I was the only on of the family who could immigrate to the U.S. because the Polish immigration quota was closed.

I was close to finishing my high school education when Hitler marched into Austria and the life of our family changed. We knew we had to leave Austria as soon as possible. I decided to follow my closest friend to Paris, France while the rest of my family decided to return to Poland.

To get to Paris, I had to go through southern Germany. On August 30, 1938, I boarded a train in Vienna to go to the border town of Saarbruecken, Germany. The problem was I didn't have an exit visa to go to France, but I had been told that there was a good chance that I could cross the border into France anyway. When the streetcar I had taken in Saarbruecken came to the end of the line was immediately arrested by the border police and taken to prison.

I was sentenced to five months in prison. During that time the Polish government cancelled my citizenship, and I automatically became a stateless person, which again saved my life because the German government gave me two options. Poland or France. Naturally, I chose France.

On my release from prison the German Border Police drove me by car to the French border and showed me how to get to the town of Metz in France. In Metz I bought a ticket to Paris. When I arrived in Paris, I went to the refugee committee for help. They arranged for me to stay in a

small hotel in the Latin Quarter. While I was there, I met a retired Polish General in exile who could hardly walk. I volunteered to help him with his groceries and other things and he was so grateful that he gave me a letter to the local police to help me get out of France and to America.

By September 1939, England and France declared war on Germany. I was prepared, with my paper, to board the ship in Le Havre. In Paris, at the railway station, the police pulled me off the train because my French papers showed I was a native of Austria, which made me an enemy of the French. I had to spend five months in a French internment camp called Meslay du Maine. Finally, in February 1940, I was able to leave France for America. Fourteen days later I arrived in New York where I boarded a train to California and joined my aunt in Burlingame, California.

When I arrived in California, I moved in with my aunt who had diabetes and had had both legs amputated. After six weeks of staying with her, and my uncle, I decided it was time for me to go to work. As I had no money, I went to the Jewish Family Service in San Francisco for help. They found me a place to live in a boarding house and I enrolled at San Francisco State College from which I graduated in 1946 with a B.A. degree in Sociology and Psychology. While in college I worked as a group social worker at various community centers, including the Salvation Army. After graduation I became a Social Worker at the Public Welfare Dept. in San Francisco. I passed the examination for Probation for the Juvenile Court and worked there. I also restarted my vocal studies, which I had begun in Vienna at the age of 16.

After working for the court, I decided that this was not what I really wanted to do with my life. I tried several different kinds of businesses until one day someone introduced me to the world of Real Estate. I spent my life selling Real Estate, studying music and traveling.

In 1987 I met a woman who had just been widowed, and in 1988 I married for the very first time at the age of 71. My wife and I have been married for 11 years. I continue to enjoy studying my singing and practice every day. I also still enjoy traveling.