

Hedy Krasnobrod

Wartime Experience: Hid using a false identity

I survived the Holocaust; I was not in a concentration camp, but I am as scarred by the Holocaust as camp survivors. Even though my sufferings may not equate with that of camp survivors, I have experienced a lifelong trauma. With the progression of time, I gained more insight, more understanding, and a certain perspective, which allows me to describe the events more distantly.

My name is Hedy Krasnobrod-Springer, born in Vienna, Austria, on May 29, 1921. My parents were Ludwig and Jenny Springer, both born in Vienna.

My childhood was peaceful and protected, centered around school, family and friends. My parents were great nature lovers, and passed this love on to me. My happiest recollections are our pleasant hikes through the beautiful, majestic Alpine forests.

I attended elementary and middle school in our neighborhood, which was predominantly Jewish. Austria was economically suppressed and politically unstable; anti-Semitism was ever present. The Socialist government was defeated during the Civil War in 1934. The Christian-Socialists under Dollfuss, Prime Minister, were the leading party; Dollfuss was assassinated by Nazis a few months after he took office. Schuschnigg succeeded him. The Nazi-Party became steadily stronger. The insecurity of the political situation affected us all; it was frightening and very worrisome. I started high school in 1935, in a different district; Jewish students were in the minority. I encountered many anti-Semitic acts. Ninety percent of the faculty and student body were active in the underground Nazi party.

What we feared most happened on March 12, 1938. Germany annexed Austria. I very vividly remember the first hours after Schuschnigg's forced abdication, which was broadcast over the radio: The Austrian Nazis carrying torches, chanting Nazi slogans, storming over the bridges towards the Jewish district.....starting their destructions. Schools were immediately closed to Jewish students. Businesses were destroyed or taken over by Nazis. Professionals could not practice any longer. Persecutions, arrests, tortures.....life became a nightmare.

They wanted us out, but it was practically impossible to leave. It was obvious; nobody wanted us. Like so many others, my father joined the lines to the various consulates, only to find doors closed. It was a pure miracle when my Father finally obtained the visa for Belgium. The departure date was set for September 27, 1938. The farewells were heartbreaking. We had a large, close-knit family. Only two cousins escaped; the rest of the family, sadly, did not make it.....

We found shelter in peaceful Belgium. I started nursing school at a community hospital. After Kristallnacht, news from Vienna was very, very sad. Our lives and hopes were again shattered when, on May 10, 1940, our deadliest enemies, the Germans, invaded Belgium. The majority of

the Belgian population despised the Germans, never forgetting their atrocities committed in Ypres and the end of WWI.

My schooling had again to be interrupted. The German measures against Jews became stricter; life became more and more difficult. Every day brought new restrictions. With the introduction of the yellow Star of David one could not circulate freely any longer. Officially called "Work Camps" the Germans, with the help of the Jewish collaborator Jacques, arrested young Jews in the streets, public places and homes. The Jewish Community office was obliged under force to submit to the German authorities lists of all Jews residing in Belgium. German notices were mailed to all Jews to appear at a certain office – never to be seen again. We did not know at this time what really happened.

There were no more incomes; Brussels, as occupied city, was dead. As long as it was possible, I worked for a few hours from time to time for a Jewish podiatrist, as an assistant. This did not last long. There were no more patients, as one could not circulate any longer. The situation became worse with each hour. Constant fear: fear to live, fear to die. There was always hope, in the darkest moments. As long as some of our friends could visit with us – I remember it so well – one told each other jokes, and we laughed, and laughed and that helped us.

It was the beginning of 1942; I had, up to this time, not received the German notice; I could neither go out, nor stay home; danger was everywhere. To gain some short reprieve, the podiatrist for whom I had worked referred me to a Belgian surgeon. He accepted me as a patient in his hospital. I was under observation for an inflamed appendix. Tests were done and X-rays, and after about two weeks in the hospital, Dr. Flamand, the surgeon, told me that the appendix had to be removed. I agreed to the appendectomy; it would give me an additional two weeks. My healthy appendix was removed. My parents could not come to see me. Sidonie, the manager of the building where we rented our apartment, came to visit with me. She was a wonderful, helpful lady; she gave me the news, that my mother was trying to help me.

My mother was determined to save me. Endangering her own life and safety, bridging the greatest difficulties, she was referred from one person to the next, and finally she came to a Belgian princess, who received her well. Mme. de Launois listened to my mother's plight and was very sympathetic and understanding. She referred my mother to her young niece Denyse Ponteville de Launois who went with my mother to the nearby hospital which was owned and run by the Sister of the Sacred Heart. The Reverent Mother, Sister Lelarge, and the Director of Nursing, sister Ferraille, accepted me as a nurse's aide, au pair. The only condition was, I had to have "false" Belgian identification papers. As my mother returned safely home, she contacted the Underground, and within a few hours my false papers were delivered: my identity from then on was: "Helene Spirlet".

Sidonie brought me all the necessary papers and information to the hospital where I recovered from the appendectomy. She assured me that she would do her utmost to help and protect my parents. And indeed, she was our savior and benefactor; she hid my parents for over two years. She was the kindest, most remarkable, thoughtful person.

As soon as I received my medical release, I was on the way to my hiding place – I walked for many hours, as Jews could not take public transportation. I reached: La Faisanaderie – Hopital des Dames Hospitalieres du Sacre Coeur, located on the outskirts of Brussels. I was received by Sister Ferraille who warmly welcomed me. For security reasons, she put all my identification papers in the hospital safe. She gave me a brief orientation, showed me to the nurses' quarters and the next morning, I started on my job as nurse's aide. Wearing a veil, my features were somewhat altered – nevertheless my fear was constant, of being recognized, denounced, endangering my saviors - the nuns.

My roommate was a Belgian princess. We never exchanged any personal conversation – we were all so afraid of the almost daily German visits. They searched for spies, for Jews, for allied parachutists, which were grounded in air-battles.... fortunately, their searches were in vain. I had to attend the various, daily religious services. The nuns were very respectful of my Jewish religion, and I was never approached concerning conversion. I had my seat in the back row of their chapel. In the spring, when the windows of the chapel were open, it gave me so much joy, to hear the song of birds, and to see new leaves on the trees lining the hospital. During my years of hiding, I was never in the street. I put in very long workdays, and sometimes nights. During bomb attacks, the patients had to be evacuated into the shelters. Some nights, this happened several times. The Sisters I worked with and who knew my background were all kind to me. There were serious shortages of food, and thanks to the gracious intervention of the King's mother, Elizabeth, we received some staple foods from the Red Cross. I lived in hiding for 2 ½ years. For all this time I could not see my parents, but I had occasional news through one of the nuns who brought some food for them to Sidonie.

The miracle happened and I was allowed to live, to enjoy the happiest of all days: the Liberation of Brussels, on September 4, 1944. What a feeling it was, to see the defeated Germans leave and the Allies arrive!! The day of the liberation was a day of joy for all. Chanting and dancing in the streets – a happiness for all to share. When I saw the first British tank, I asked to be allowed to touch it – I wanted to be sure that it was real.

What a great joy it was, to see my parents again. Sidonie, selflessly, in the most devoted way, had taken care of my parents, as well as it was possible, for all these many months...What a reunion it was, and what a celebration! The most remarkable, courageous, selfless people risked their own lives and safety, and that of their families – to save our lives. That my parents and I survived, that we were reunited – was a gift of destiny.

I was fortunate to find work shortly after the Liberation, as a trainee in Medical Technology, in a private hospital in Brussels. By taking courses at the Free University in Brussels, I was able to obtain a degree in 1952. The same year I got married to Stanley Krasnobrod. Luckily, my father was still able to attend our wedding; he died shortly afterwards after a long battle with cancer. My mother was also in poor health, suffering from cardiac disease. Sidonie cared lovingly for her, till my mother's death in the winter of 1957. Years of fear and worry, the sad news, that nobody of our entire family survived was too much for my poor mother.

My husband's brother, sole survivor of his whole family, had survived the various Death camps through the Joint Organization; he came to Denver, Colorado. My husband wanted to be close to him, and so we decided to move to Denver. We left Brussels in December, 1953. A few days after our arrival in Denver, I found work in my field in a general pathology laboratory. My son Michael was born in Denver, in December, 1954. My husband had suffered very much during the Holocaust, and his health was not good. Denver's altitude did not agree with him, and we decided to settle in San Francisco, where we arrived in the spring 1958. Shortly after our arrival I started to work in my field and continued till my retirement in 1995 after 51 years in medical technology.

We bought a house in August, 1958. My husband enjoyed gardening and created a beautiful backyard that gave us all much pleasure. My husband worked for many years as medical photographer until his death in 1979. He had suffered for a long time with a cardio-vascular disease. I continue to live in my house, which I am so fortunate to share with my son and family. My little grandson gives me so much joy and the courage to carry on.... I find pleasure and solace in gardening, which is my favorite pastime. The garden is a peaceful, beautiful oasis, which my family and I enjoy very much.

Of all the wonderful people who helped my parents and me survive the Holocaust, only Denyse-Marie Ponteville de Launois is still alive. I am glad that I was able to have her declared a Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem. We remain good friends, exchanging news and photographs of our grandchildren.