

Paul Ryzman

Wartime Experience: Hidden

I was born, January 27, 1938, in Paris and my parents declared me as a French citizen. My father Lajzer, born in Poland in 1909. He had left Poland under the quota for Jews and came to Paris to study law. Once as a poor student, he had to make do with a kilo of sugar cubes as his only food for one week. He became a legal advisor. My mother Feiga was born in Romania in 1906 and immigrated in 1929 with her parents, a sister and three brothers. The latter obtained French citizenship while their mother remained Romanian. Her father who was very religious worked as a pawnbroker. Beautiful but poor and without a dowry, she was 31 years old when she married

Summer 1942 Paris rue de Menilmontant- Someone has just knocked at the door. The answer to my mother's question sets off panic. My father ran to hide in a closet. When my mother opens the door, I am next to her: two inspectors in civilian clothes are at the door. I am four and a half years old.

"We have come for Mr. Lajzer Ryzman. Is he here?"

"No, he went to work" says my mother

"Well, he must be here tomorrow to go with us"

Without understanding the generosity of this reprieve which allows them to escape the roundup at the Vel d'Hiv, my terrified parents leave Paris that same day and we cross the demarcation line into the "Free Zone" during the night. I remember my father fording the river in his shirtsleeves and losing his glasses in the water.

We were fleeing. I did not know it at the time, but since the Nazi victory, we were less than game to hunt or parasites to destroy. I understood this years later when I read the Metamorphosis by Kafka. We had a brief reprieve during the grape harvest in Toulouse. While my father worked picking grapes, I devoured the ones that had fallen from the vine. We went on bicycle tours with me perched on the baggage carrier. There were also carefree games with other children my age. But suddenly, the German army reappeared. There was no longer any free zone since the allied landing in North Africa. We left for the area occupied by the Italians who were reputed to be more tolerant. We were near Grenoble when my sister Jeanine was on June 6, 1943.

There were several months of tranquility. Then Mussolini's bad luck brought about ours as well; the Nazis invaded the Alps. Roundups by the Gestapo and the French paramilitary forces intensified our fear. We lived on the ground floor between the street and a courtyard. My father gave me a little painted wooden train with which I played with the neighbor children. I turned my back to go and have a snack and when I returned the train was gone. I got into the

neighbors' house, found my toy, and took it triumphantly to my father. He took it from my hands and gave it to the thieves. "This train does not belong to you" The injustice burned within me then I understood the fear of denunciation and I tried to forget my disappointment.

From the window which opened onto the street, I sometimes saw the occupying forces pass by. They smiled at me with my blue eyes and blond hair. Each morning a happy group of three teenage brothers left to get washed at the fountain. One day they did not come back. A German patrol recognized them as Jews, made them take down their trousers and shot them on the spot.

December 1943- Suddenly one afternoon in mid-December 1943, a motorcyclist stopped in front of the house. He came to warn my mother. My father had just been captured in a raid in Grenoble. My maternal uncle Victor had just left my father and had seen the drama from a distance and had us warned thanks to a network of French resistance fighters that he knew through his girlfriend Paulette. We were on the road again. My mother in tears pushing my sister's baby carriage, me walking at their side towards Grenoble where my mother's parents lived. We were reunited with them that evening, but around the table one seat remained empty. It was the festival of Chanukah, but misfortune had struck us like lightning.

At the post office there were two letters addressed to my mother. She guessed that her husband had been forced to draft the text where he invited us to meet him at the police station. The trap was enormous, but nevertheless there was a debate because this might be the last chance to see my father. For a moment they even imagined sending me alone to find him. I felt the fear of the lamb ready for the sacrifice. But logic prevailed. We did not give ourselves up to the Jew hunters in order to reunite the family.

We took the bus to Allevard, where the Villots, a farming couple of about forty years of age agreed to hide us. They risked their lives in order to lodge us with them. My mother entrusted them with our destiny. She still had some savings in order to pay for our board. But for how long? From now on there was no longer any question of attending school. It was too dangerous for anyone named Ryzman. I stayed at the farm. Under the winter sky I had sledding parties with the two daughters of the house. There was no shortage of food thanks to the rabbits and hens and the poor pig slaughtered with horrible cries of agony one winter morning.

Spring 1944- Shots resounded in the valley. The "Maquis" or resistance fighters rose up and the Germans searched all over the countryside. Danger was closing in. The farm would be burned along with its inhabitants if they found us here. The Villots directed us to a village higher in the mountains a few kilometers away where friendly farmers waited to hide us until things calmed down. We walked alone along the small road which divided the meadows from the sound of shots. Fastening my sister in the carriage, my mother trembled at the idea of being checked by the SS when I would be betrayed by the mark of circumcision under my trousers. Unaware of her agonies, I held her hand.

Finally, we arrived without incident. We were greeted with open arms. I climbed up a ladder to the hay in the barn. I stayed there for two or three days fed with delicious bread and cheese with a few worms in it (a definite proof of quality according to the French. I regretfully left this warm family to return to Allevard. They showed so much love for perfect strangers and carriers of misfortune such as us in this climate of terror. I did not realize until much later the courage of this brotherhood of happiness and honor.

August 1944- Excitement on the farm, faces brighten. Men wearing shirts with the badge of the Forces Françaises de l'Interieur (FFI) arrive victoriously to announce the Liberation. The improbable, the impossible has come true. We are once again men like the others. We will be able to move. My mother goes to the Civil Service without fear to look for work. We will find my grandparents to exchange news. Are we perhaps going to see my father and the others who are gone? We leave our saviors with inexpressible gratitude. They have kept us alive. We have lived in the healthy, loving part of France whose incorruptible citizens stood up and attempted to overcome feelings of shame and to honor the true values of the French republic. Much later, my emotions and gratitude will go to all the unknown who died in order to give us back our human dignity.

Returning to Grenoble, where the liberating armies animated the cafes during their leave, I discover chewing gum and begin my schooling in a joyous atmosphere. But the crushing question of those who are still missing weighs down our spirits. It will be long months before the camps are liberated. Finally in the springtime of 1945, my two maternal uncles appeared. I see them for the first time. Taken prisoners of war in 1940, they each experienced a different story. Henri succeeded in hiding his "Jewishness" by cleverly avoiding the medical examination at the beginning of his captivity. Much later he told me with nostalgia about the beautiful years he spent working on a farm under Wehrmacht guards who were without reproach and his closeness with some German farm women. Jacques, in a prison camp for French Jewish soldiers, did not have this beautiful life but he did not suffer too much, except for hunger, benefiting from the protection of Maréchal Petain. He came back in good health without hatred for his guards. What a paradox for us to see these two uncles return from the jaws of the monster, who knew nothing about our condition as the prey destined for the extermination camps.

And what about my father? On the radio each day we heard the list of names of survivors and we scrutinized the lists published in the newspapers. My mother searched everywhere for information. Time passed. And it was necessary to give in to the evidence. Lajzer Ryzman had vanished. His last day in France had been that of his departure from Drancy to Auschwitz in January 1944. A surviving witness later told us that he had lived six months before dying of typhus. As for his family, I will never meet them. As with all the Jewish community of Poland sent to the executioner, only the memory remains.

The shocking toll left us prostrate. Six million dead Jews! How could we believe it? Twice the population of Paris, starved, humiliated, destroyed. The Nuremberg trials revealed the meticulous organization which had allowed the secret perpetuation of an unbelievable number

of perfect crimes with the precision of a German watch. The handful of guilty captives concealed themselves in an unbearable way behind their sense of discipline for their leader.

They followed orders. Hitler freed them from all prohibition. Yes, one could crucify six million Christs. Yes, one could rape and burn six million Joan of Arcs. It was enough if they were Jewish. Yes, it was necessary to shoot six million Dreyfus' and collect their gold teeth and their hair. And first, gas the children. And they followed orders. Hitler's heritage would have been hard to bear, the cold war made it lighter, the German troops being useful for each side. The six million murdered would be compensated by absurdly low settlements. A small monthly pension relieved the German people of its responsibilities toward us.

Overcoming her sorrow, my mother turned her life around. She wanted to build a future for us – to find her home again and to recreate a family. The apartment at Menilmontant, emptied by the Gestapo, was illegally occupied. It took months of trials and exhausted her last resources in order for us to regain our home. To give us a family structure, we had the good luck that my mother's destiny crossed that of Isaac Brenner, one of the rare survivors of Auschwitz. He endured six months of hell after having been rounded up in July 1944 in Lyon, where he had accomplished acts of resistance. Arrested by two inspectors, one of the two had said to his colleague hesitating to take him away at the time that France was being liberated "I need to arrest my one Jew each day"

Papy Jacques as we called him made a happy couple with my mother. With the modest income from his exhausting trade as a tailor, he filled the role of father with delicacy, tenderness and perseverance for my sister and me, suffering from the irreparable loss of my father and first companion, Lajzer Ryzman. He allowed us to achieve the wishes of my mother: that her son should become a doctor and that her daughter should marry a Jew and continue the family tradition. Survivor of the Horror, he kept silent about his tortures the telling of which would be as unbearable for others as for himself. I only heard indirect echoes overheard while listening from a distance as he told them to a friend one day at the beach on vacation. When he returned from Auschwitz, he learned of the total loss of his remaining relatives in Mlava in Poland. But he received help from his brother Sol who immigrated to the United States in the 1920s. Uncle Sol made us a part of his family with whom we wove indestructible bonds.

A miraculous surprise occurred after the fall of the Berlin wall: his brother Moshe whom he had left in Mlava at the age of four years, reappeared in Israel near a cousin who had been a pioneer settler there for a long time. Prisoner of the Red Army in 1939 he ended up seeking refuge in Siberia and starting a family. In Israel, a new life began for him in Jerusalem when the two brothers had a joyous reunion after seventy years of separation. I recently had the pleasure of receiving his daughter and one of his granddaughters in my home.

After these hard ordeals of initiation what kind of Jew had I become?

My life began in the misfortune of being Jewish. I knew fear, flight, the disappearance of my father in the smoke of the Nazi death camps. My mother told me about the Pogroms in her city

of Kichinev. My uncles taught me that at school there, the Jews were despised. The holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover gave a rhythm to the years after the liberation. But only my grandparents observed the weekly Sabbath. A mezuzah was at their front doorway and their library contained only Hebrew prayer books. My grandfather covered with a prayer shawl, always gave thanks to God. Since I did not know Yiddish, his only language, I never could really communicate with him. Two of his sons married non-Jewish women, causing him irreparable torment.

At thirteen years of age, a little after the death of my grandfather who was so religious, I had my Bar Mitzvah during which I sang a section of the Torah by heart. It should have been my turn now to take over, to assume the role of a Jewish man. But it would be without conviction because all during that time my spirit was nourished by the teachings of secular schools.

Non-Jews, Jews – I never liked this opposition between the “chosen” and others. There are so many people who believe that they were chosen by a supernatural, protective power in order to give them strength through life.

Without a state, the Jewish religion carried us like a vessel without a crew throughout history sometimes towards shipwrecks according to the benevolence or the covetousness of the powerful. Since the end of the Enlightenment, we participated brilliantly in the progress of civilization so far as to cause a mortal jealousy. The courage and the sacrifice of the democracies, at first unaware of the fatal danger for everyone, saved us from total disaster and finally a Jewish state arose through its own power.

A Jewish state! For the Jews in Israel and throughout the world - what pride, what joy, what relief! A French Jew, born into a refuge family in this country, orphaned, adopted by France, aware of the history of these two peoples and fond of all the details of their cultures, I felt a part of the literature and not just of the Bible. In the ranks of the Republic, I stand with my brothers in the world, with their laws and their duties, retaining a special sensibility regarding my origins.

Coming of age, passing beyond religious prohibitions, and despite the pain inflicted upon my mother, I married a Frenchwoman Marie-Thérèse Agostini. It was fate which led me to this meeting and nothing else mattered. We have been happy for twenty-seven years and have two sons, Benjamin and Valentin. They were raised in a non-religious environment with the awareness of having a Jewish father and are proud of all their roots.

Medical studies led me to the specialty of ophthalmology, which I practice near Paris. I thank my parents, my adoptive father and my wife for all the love with which they have surrounded me, and which has enabled me to achieve this success.

Paul Ryzman

Des dossiers du Mémorial de la Shoah–Paris

Paul RYZMAN né le 27/01/1938 à PARIS 19ème de Lajzer RYZMAN (POLOGNE) et Feiga GURFINCHEL (ROUMANIE)

Enfant caché

Fils de déporté convoi n° 66 du 20/01/1944 de DRANCY pour AUSCHWITZ

Eté 1942, rue de Ménilmontant à PARIS 20ème. 2 inspecteurs de police viennent dans le bût d'arrêter mon père. Aussitôt mes parents décident de passer en zone libre. TOULOUSE puis GRENOBLE. Décembre 1943 mon père est arrêté, nous ne le reverrons pas. Nous quittons GRENOBLE pour nous cacher à ALLEVARD chez des fermiers les VILLOT. Printemps 1944 nous quittons ces fermiers pour nous cacher quelques jours dans un autre village d'altitude. Retour à ALLEVARD. Août 1944, libération, nous rentrons à GRENOBLE, puis à PARIS où nous retrouvons notre appartement occupé illégitimement et vidé par la gestapo. Plusieurs mois de procès pour le récupérer. Plus tard ma mère rencontrera Isaac BRENER qui sera pour ma sœur et moi un père de remplacement que nous appellerons « Papy Jacques ». J'ai épousé une fille de France, Marie-Thérèse AGOSTINI. Nous sommes heureux depuis 37 ans avec 2 garçons élevés dans la laïcité, fiers de leurs racines.