

Fanny Krieger

Wartime Experience: Hidden in a boarding school in France

My father, Isaac Bienstock, came from Poland on his way to America but got stuck in Paris. My mother, Zisla Neiman, came from Bessarabia (then Rumania). They met in Paris, married in 1927 and I was born in 1929. For the health of my mother who needed to live in the mountains, they moved to Aix-les-Bains, a small town in France, near the Swiss border, known for its therapeutic baths. My little sister Helene was almost seven years younger than me.

Until the war, Aix-les-Bains had only three Jewish families. My parents worked in the markets of surrounding towns selling men's and women's sweaters, which they bought in Paris. Every morning as early as 5 o'clock, they left first by trains, later when finances were better, by car traveling to different towns each day of the week to work. It was a very hard life and my sister and I were left in the care of families who took children in to supplement their income. We only saw our parents for a couple of hours once a week.

When the war started, my parents stopped working such long hours every day and took us back to live with them. It was a wonderful time for us (especially my sister and me). Many Jewish families from Paris sought refuge in our town. It was then that we really understood our Jewish identity. First, we had the Italian occupation. We hardly knew that the Italian soldiers were there; they were very friendly. Then in early 1943, the Germans took over and for a while maintained a very low profile. One night, November 14 of that year, they came to a house my parents had rented outside of Aix-les-Bains just to spend nights there and took my family away. A collaborator had informed the Germans in return for a money award. My sister was seven years old then and I was thirteen. I had gone to spend the night at my aunt's apartment because a cousin of my mother had come to visit. He was taken in my place and was killed in the camps.

I spent the rest of the war hiding out in the boarding school in Aix waiting for the end of the war and the return of my family. I survived. My parents and sister never came back. I later found out that my mother and my sister were killed in Auschwitz and my father died during the march of death from Auschwitz in January 1945, just days before the liberation by the Americans.

In 1947, at the insistence of a friend of my parents who had escaped on the last boat to America, cousins of my father made papers for me and I landed in New York. I was seventeen years old and a total stranger. There I grew up, learned the language and work skills. I also learned to deal with big city folks.

Five years later I moved to Houston, Texas, where I met Mel Krieger who introduced me to romance, love and fishing. His passion for fly-fishing moved us to San Francisco, where he pursued his hobby and eventually turned it into a vocation. He has become sort of a guru having written a book, done videos and conducted seminars on Fly Casting. For me, it has

become a deep avocation. I am one of the founders of the Golden West Women Fly fishers, a Bay Area club with over 150 members.

Our daughter Sharon, our son Jan, his wife Karen and our grandson Kale along with Mel are now my only immediate family and they are keenly sympathetic to my survival background.

I still have the red cover photo album, which I hold in my portrait. I found it in our apartment on the floor after the Germans came. We look at it. All those pictures are so happy. One was taken at the beach in 1939, with the whole family and a picnic basket.

"I can see that picture even when I close my eyes...Soon there will be a day like that when our family packs a huge picnic lunch in a basket and goes off together to the beach. I know that there will be a day like that, and sometimes, in the darkness here, I can feel the sunshine on my face." (This is a quote from a children's book "A Pocket Full of Seeds", written by Marilyn Sachs based on my childhood before and during the war in France.)