Alfred J. Lakritz

Photographed with his brother Herb

Wartime Experience: Hidden in the south of France with his brother

My brother Herb and I were two of the relatively luckier children of the Holocaust. We were both born in Kiel, Germany, I on June 1, 1934, and he on September 2, 1936. We had the good fortune to be born of two good and loving parents. Our father, Simche Lakritz-Weber, died, as best we know, in the horror of the Majdanek (Lublin) Concentration Camp in 1943. The French police had arrested him for a second time. This time they turned him over to the Nazis at the Drancy Transit Camp near Paris. It was the reception area for arrested Jews in France, from where they could then be turned over to the Nazis for their elected treatments. My mother received an "Adieu" postcard from him a few days later. He wrote "courage;" "adieu" was his last message to us. His pain and horrible death can only be imagined. He was in Auschwitz and then transferred to Lublin to die.

I would describe our mother, Marjem Lakritz, with natural reservation, as a saint. I realize that the exaggeration is the product of a loving, grateful and respectful son. She survived the horrors of the Holocaust in great part thanks to her tremendous will to live and her wish to see her two sons again. She also survived thanks to the help of giving and caring people. The Ross and the Berny families especially helped keep to her hidden and gave her the means of survival while her children were, for two and a half years, in places unknown to her, alive or dead, and while her husband had been arrested and shipped to Auschwitz.

After our arrival in France in May 1940, little by little my mother developed skills of survival. In this foreign land, without knowledge of its language and with extremely limited ability to obtain employment, she learned and improved her skills as a seamstress. While she had her husband and children, she developed and depended on her ability to sew new clothing and do alterations for men, women and children. She was at times hidden and housed at different farms where she worked. Her skills also provided some emotional support during her agony of hope and fear about her husband and her children. When danger from the local gendarmes threatened our mother, she was hidden while on the Ross farm in the owner's chateau, in a concealed closet in the bathroom, where she had to stand because there was no more room. The Ross family were Italian immigrant tenant farmers. After the war, Herb and I would spend most of our vacations from school with our mother on the Ross's farm. This was a wonderful time.

I witnessed with my family the Nazis coming and burning the prayer books in our grandfather's synagogue. I remember very well the events that I now describe. I remember living in Kiel in what was like a family compound. We lived in the upstairs apartment of the front building. Our grandparents lived in the building behind. Beside their home was a warehouse. My grandfather was a wholesaler of schmattes (rags). He sold them as part of the German conservation for industrial purposes. Our grandfather had contributed what I remember to be

a large loft for use as a synagogue for his fellow congregants, to replace the one that the Nazis had burned.

We lived in Marcande as a family from May 1940 to sometime to the later part of 1941. I believe that at that time we and other Jewish families were ordered to vacate Marmande to live in a little hamlet called St. Pardoux du Brueil a few kilometers away. This hamlet had a nice church, a bar, a two-room schoolhouse, a blacksmith and farms. Its charms remain today. The blacksmith is no more, but his family is still there. We were able to exchange the use of a barn for my father's labor right across the street from the blacksmith. We lived in this barn for some time as a family; fear and horrible separation would soon follow. My father was able to obtain day laborer jobs for the local farmers from the blacksmith. Father would till and grow gardens of vegetables for different people and do other laborer's work. I remember once bringing him lunch; I was rewarded with his kiss.

I attended the schoolhouse. There I learned the basics of counting. In the schoolyard I was tied by other children to a wire fence and cursed as the Christ killer. In the summer of 1942, our parents were able through a Jewish agency to send us to a summer camp somewhere nearby in Southern France, possibly in the Dordogne. I remember very well being called to the office of the director. He explained to my brother and me that our parents wanted us to stay there while most of the other children were going home. None of that was real to me. This could not be. Our parents loved us. Of course, unknown to me, since I was only eight years old, was the fact that my parents feared being arrested at any time. They wanted to protect us. They did. Because of this sacrifice, my brother and I survived the war and the Holocaust. The pain that this must have represented to my parents is something to reflect on.

In the months that followed, we had no news from our parents other than that they wanted us to stay with other children, whose parents wanted the same. That somehow made it ok. The people who cared for us saw to it that we had the necessities and also that we observed Jewish festivals and holidays. I remember that we were visited by some people, and that there was talk that we would be shipped to America or England. That would have been a welcome relief for me. I had become a constant bed wetter. The other children picked on me. I was suffering a great deal of anxiety. We did not get to go to either England or America. For me it was the second time that safety in the Golden Land was denied. Instead, we were moved from that time on to various hiding places throughout France until after the Liberation at the end of 1944. We went to Creuse, other places, then to Haute Savoie. In Evian we were housed in a pension with only Jewish children. Next door to us were housed some German pilots. I remember one time that we had a snow fight with them. We put rocks in snowballs to throw at these German pilots. Later, we were moved to different hotels. There were children everywhere. However, this was a time of tremendous anxiety for me.

As the older brother, I accepted the responsibility for both of our lives to the extent that I could. I demanded that we were not to be separated from each other in any manner. In Lourdes that was to happen. We were brought to a place with thousands of other children, who also were victims of the war. In the fall of 1942, our name was changed to Lacroix and

remained so throughout the war. After some time of living in hotels formerly occupied by pilgrims, I was separated from my brother for the first time. I was housed in the convent on the grounds of the Basilica of Lourdes. I think I was the only Jewish child in the care of nuns and the priest. I was forced to go to Mass every Sunday. I remember protesting that fact to the priest. Jokingly he said to me, "At least we don't make you go to catechism." The nuns were nice to me and so was he. It was nice living on the grounds of the Basilica . I was a nice place to explore. However, it was a challenge to my Jewish faith. On Sundays , hundreds, maybe thousands of people came. Many were German officers. How ironic that while they and their nation were perpetrating the most horrible crimes committed against human beings by human beings in history to date, some of them were praying for their own souls.

Sometimes during that time, local residents were encouraged to take in an orphaned child for a family day. By some unbelievable luck I was given a single Jewish lady. After many pleas by me, she agreed to also have my brother on each Sunday. I remember her as well as the nuns, with thanks and love. I believe it was in October 1944 that a lady came to visit me. We had been transferred, my brother and I, to Tarbes, another city near the Pyrenees. We lived in a foster home. My brother remembers that they were not nice to me. That must be true because I do not have a very good memory of that time. However, our liberation came too. I remember sitting across from a visiting Jewish welfare worker. She was staring into my eyes as she told me that our mother had found us. She said that our mother must have moved the earth to find us so quickly. What a moment it must have been for this woman to give me this news.

Very shortly thereafter, Herb and I returned to that same railroad station where I remember my last sight of my father standing on the quay waving goodbye to us when we went to summer camp. Now my mother stood on that same quay. It goes without saying that these years of grief and separation changed her. At that moment I guess I also realized, for the first time that I did not have a father anymore. The hope that he had survived the camps was maintained by inquires by our mother. These were of no avail. Today my father's name is inscribed on the war memorial just outside the doors of that railroad station. His name is among the French citizens of that city that were killed during the First and Second World Wars.

Our mother had been given a one-room apartment in an old building in Marmande. This beautiful old building, of mud and wood, dates back to the Middle Ages. We lived in a one-room apartment. By some weird coincidence my father in 1940 had conducted the High Holy Day services for his fellow Jews in Marmande in that very room. It was a few months later that we moved to the apartment across the warehouse, where we lived until we immigrated to the United States.

After our reunification, our mother again made an immediate application for immigration to the United States. We were stateless. We had nothing but each other. Our entry visa to the United States took five years in coming, the longest time required under U.S. immigration law for immigrants. I remember that there were Germans on the boat crossing to New York. I discussed the question of their visa applications. It had only taken them six months to apply and obtain an entry visa. Maybe this was a quirk, maybe not. My mother had been born in

Austria, in an area that was ceded to Poland at the end of World War I. Because of her birthplace, our quota was Poland. Poland had fallen behind the Iron Curtain. The United States treated us as less desirable than Germans. Maybe this is ironic to you?

During the five years that we lived in Marmande, my brother and I became Boy Scouts and went to school in hopes of a life in America. I did not have much education during these years—in fact, hardly any. The fine people that we knew in Marmande include our very close friends, the Rindzinskis and the Alcos--good people. They were supportive and caring to our mother while she was struggling to maintain us. Our humble conditions, losses and privations never were an excuse. We learned that we had to overcome in spite of those facts. We did.

We arrived in New York, and then Oakland, California, in 1950. I was sixteen years old. In September, Herb and I were registered at Oakland Technical High School. Three years later, we graduated. I had the good fortune to have become the head yell leader, and Herb was one of my assistants. I served on the student body council. Within six months after our arrival in America we both knew how to speak English. Herb and I were very, very lucky. We were able to enter and graduate from the University of California, Berkeley. Herb became a C.P.A. I entered Boalt Hall, the University of California's School of Law, and graduated in 1960. Herb has three sons and now a brand-new auto agency. I have practiced law since 1961. I am lucky that I married Judy, who put up with me from 1959. We have two children, Jennifer and Gary. Luckily we also have four grandchildren, Brian, Jessica, Matthew and Sarah.

Herb and I survived. That survival is a testament to other people. They protected us from all possible major ills. Some risked their freedom and maybe their lives to insure our survival. They are the righteous. Others acted out of other motives and needs. They can be viewed by the times, circumstances, and their choices. Herb and I are proof of the fact that all is not good nor all bad, but that humans are capable of much good. If it were not so, we would not have survived the Holocaust.