

Herbert Lakritz

Photographed with his brother Alfred

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

I was born in Kiel, Germany on September 2, 1936. My family, having been persecuted and having their religious freedom and possessions confiscated, attempted to immigrate to the United States to join other members who had previously fled. All their efforts were in vain because, due to the US quota limiting entry to people from different areas, they could not obtain a United States visa with their Polish ancestry. My mother's brother, Uncle Mike, along with Aunt Ida and their three children, had immigrated to Oakland, California, to be with Uncle Max and the other side of the family. My parents hoped that someday we would all meet. They had no way to envision the path it would take, the loved ones we would lose, and how long it would ultimately take for us to get to Oakland, California, USA.

In September 1939, after repeated unsuccessful attempts to flee Germany and continued harassment and persecution by the Nazis, we were taken from our home, dispossessed and thrown into a cattle cart with other Jews for the purpose of being deported out of Germany. The train was without food or toilet facilities and bulged with Jews being thrown out of the country. Our apparent destination was to be Poland. As the train approached the Polish border, the Nazi invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II erupted. The Polish border was closed and the train was unable to disembark its human cargo. As a result, it reversed direction and crossed Germany into Belgium, where we were dumped. There began our journey as refugees. We were alive and together as a family, for the time being at least.

We wandered from Belgium through France as stateless, starving poor refugees to Marmande, a little French town in Southwest France, a half hour by train from Bordeaux. We lived from hand to mouth; my mother worked as a seamstress for others, and my father worked as a farmhand, hardly the entrepreneurial life he had planned to pursue with his father in the "Schmatte" business in Kiel, or as a member of a religious family, with a grandfather, a rabbi who led the services in his hometown. Now we were my older brother Alfred, my mother, my father and I. We found a permanent residence in the little farm town of St. Perdoux de Breuil, where we were kindly allowed to live in a former chicken coop. The chicken coop, devoid of bathroom facilities or kitchen, had a simple dirt floor, but it was our home. From there, my father was able to work in the field for different farmers. As time passed, however, the Vichy government began cooperating with the German authorities and soon, would arrest my father on repeated occasions, and it began to make our life scary and miserable once again.

When I was five years old, in 1942, my brother and I were sent to a summer camp operated by a Jewish organization. While we were there, my father recognized the approaching danger due to the political changes made by the Vichy government and wrote letters to the camp directors to find a way to protect his sons. He pleaded for asylum for his two children as he recognized that it was moments before he would be taken to a concentration camp, and that we would be

taken with him if we returned. As a result, one night my brother and I were awakened at camp, placed in an automobile with two strangers and told that we would not be returning to our parents, that we were going into hiding, that we had to change our names to French names (mine was Hubert Lacroix). We also had to pretend to be Protestant and never again mention to anyone our Jewish ancestry or identity. Thus began our journey, which would last two and a half years, during which time we had no knowledge of the existence of our parents. We were placed in numerous orphan homes and foster homes throughout southern and Western France.

We did not know that this was sad or unusual. We were with many other parentless and lost children. We realized that we had to conform and pretend to be Catholic, go to church and attend catechism. During the religion class in school, we usually found an excuse to go to the bathroom, where we met other boys who we soon realized shared our secret. However, we were living in fear of being recognized and kept our background to ourselves. In spite of our efforts, it was probably obvious to the nuns and other adults who ran these camps who we really were. Because we were with other children in the same predicament, we hardly noticed the rags we wore as clothes and shoes, and the so-called food we were happy to eat, though the diet was devoid of fruit, fresh vegetables, eggs, meat, or fish.

What incredible treats we had after the liberation of France: to taste white French bread, butter, milk, meat, fresh fruit, sugar, oil etc.; to have a new pair of shoes, clothes from a store which no one else had previously worn; to live without fear of the door being opened by the police or German soldiers.

While we were in hiding, my mother remained in Marmande in hiding behind the walls of a neighbor's farmhouse. She sewed for them and prayed for her lost children. My father had been taken from her. He perished in 1945 in the Auschwitz concentration camp. She never lost hope and grew heavy from stress. Finally in 1944, when I was eight years old, the Red Cross came to my school, found me and reunited my brother and me with our mother. We were sent back to Marmande, where we were shown a woman who claimed to be our mother. It had been a long two-and-a-half-year ordeal for a five-year-old. After the war, we lived with our mother in Marmande, where we first stayed in one room of a 13th century house. Eventually, through public assistance we found accommodations in a flat, where we lived the rest of our time in Marmande. We went to school, made friends and even excelled academically. I was twice honored with "Prix Excellence," the top award from my class, and really was happy with my life. I was happy with my academic success. My best friend's father was the Mayor of the City, and he honored our father by including his name on a World War II memorial monument at the train station, along with other heroes of the French resistance.

My mother never gave up hope to immigrate to the United States and join the rest of her family that had survived the Holocaust. In 1950, she was finally granted a visa to come to the United States with her two children; we were finally going to Oakland, California. We went to Uncle Mike and lived with him and his family for a while. But soon my mother began to sew for the women's clothing store I. Magnin and we moved into a home of our own, first in Oakland and then in San Francisco. My brother and I attended Oakland Technical High School together. I

went to the University of California, Berkeley, and worked as the first white busboy at the Claremont Hotel for free room and board. When we were juniors at Cal, our mother remarried, so that we could move into our fraternity house and have a normal life. I loved Cal. It was the beginning of my childhood, my youth, and my freedom. I am eternally grateful. I graduated in 1957 with a degree in accounting and a ticket to my future. I eventually started a CPA practice, which I ran for twenty years. I was then able to purchase a business from one of my clients, and am now a Toyota Dealer in Novato, California.

I live in a lovely home with my wife, Joyce, and have three grown sons, two of whom are in business with me. I am a father, a husband and a brother. I see my brother and his family regularly. He is an attorney in Los Angeles. I did not marry until I was thirty; perhaps I was paying off my debts, but also catching up on fun. I also feel very deeply about the covenant of marriage and feel lucky to have been happily married for over thirty years, my brother for forty. We are both consumed by love for family.