Nelee Langmuir

Wartime Experience: Hidden with her sister in the south of France

My parents were born in Lithuania. My father studied electrical engineering in Germany. He came to France in 1924. His first job was in Lyon. My mother, whom he had met earlier in Kaunas, came to Lyon to marry him in 1929. Shortly after their marriage, they moved to Paris where I was born in 1931 and Mina, my sister, in 1935. Our last name was Rainès-Lambé. We lived near the Bois de Vincennes and went to a small private school for boys and girls nearby. We had a relatively comfortable life.

Then came 1939, the declaration of war and a year later, the exodus. In June 1940 we fled Paris by car, soon to be pursued by the Germans. We returned to Paris. My parents tried to gather all the papers necessary to come to the United States but they didn't get them in time. Late in 1940 Jews had to register at the Préfecture de Police. My parents argued. Mother thought we shouldn't sign up. We didn't live in a Jewish neighborhood, we didn't belong to a synagogue, and we had a rather French sounding name, she said. But my father didn't dare not to register us, fearing that the consequences could be more catastrophic if he didn't do it. In the end we were signed up. In June 1942, The Germans required the Jews to wear the Star of David. My father went to the Préfecture and got us stars. I sewed them on our outer clothes. Each star cost one coupon of our monthly clothing ration. The first day we wore this yellow star in school, the director, Madame Chastel, assembled everyone and gave a moving speech, saying how heartbroken and ashamed she was to see what France had become, and insisted that she would not tolerate any discrimination from anyone.

The world, if not particularly school, closed in on us. We could only ride the last car in the métro, and shopping was limited to certain hours. I remember one shopkeeper putting aside some produce for my mother, since the choice during our "special" hours was quite poor. We were not allowed into public places, movies, theaters, or restaurants, and there was a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. We couldn't own bicycles any longer and I stored the beautiful bicycle my father had gotten for me a few months earlier at a friend's house. I don't remember if I ever saw my bike again. Our fears mounted, as there were more and more roundups. My heart pounded every time I heard the elevator door open or close when we were not expecting anyone at the apartment.

Then came July 16, 1942. Late that morning the French police rang our doorbell. When Mother opened the door, the police told her that they wanted to talk to her husband and check his papers. My mother acted surprised and told them that her husband was at work at that time of the day. They promised to come back in the evening. It was rumored later that the wife of one of the policemen knew my mother and she had asked her husband to be kind to us. My father was not at work. Neighbors had hidden him in their apartment. We had been warned the night before that there would be a roundup the following day. The police visit demanded quick action. With the help of friends, neighbors, and our concierge, we were able to leave the

building. The major obstacle was the concierge of the next building, who was pro-German and had already denounced some people.

A friend from work picked up my father in the company car. He was driven to the home of a French policeman, André Chauliagon, who worked for the underground. My mother, my sister and I, after tearing the stars off our lapels, walked to the home of a wonderful woman named Marcelle Vié. She owned a knitting shop not far from where we lived. My mother would go there from time to time to buy wool, and I would sometimes walk to her store by myself to get leftover bits of wool to knit clothes for my dolls. Marcelle had befriended us, and on that 16th of July, when she realized what was going on in the neighborhood, she had called and offered to help.

She gave us her bedroom and at first we more or less barricaded ourselves in it. Mother kept in touch with my father by phone. A week or so later, arrangements were made for my parents to try to get to the unoccupied part of France. They left Paris in a meat truck, lying in a wooden box, under a false floor--a rather risky operation. As for my sister and me, Marcelle would keep us. She took us to her mother's small farm near Orléans, where we got acquainted with a totally new way of life. We also felt less in danger being in the country. But we missed our parents and worried about them. A few weeks went by, and we finally heard that they had reached the unoccupied part of France.

Now Marcelle had to find a way to have us rejoin our parents. She left us at the farm and went back to Paris to see what could be done. She contacted Madame Chastel, our school director, who earlier had said she would try to help, and she informed Marcelle that if she could take us to Angoulême, her brother, Monsieur Béraud, would be able to take us through the demarcation line. He was a dedicated résistant who owned a shoe factory in Charente and had a special permit to travel between occupied and unoccupied France. Marcelle rushed back to the farm, and we were on our way to Angoulême. There we met Albert Béraud, a veteran of the first World War, who wore a patch on one eye, had part of his face burned, and a couple of fingers missing. He seemed rather impatient and wanted things done quickly. He expected us to be ready to leave town that afternoon to get to his house in Chabanais before dark. He said that he could not take Marcelle with us (it would be suspicious at the demarcation line), but he promised that once in Chabanais, he would put us immediately in contact with our parents. Somewhat frightened and very hesitant, we said good-bye to Marcelle, who was very reluctant to let go of us. My little sister cried. I tried to be strong and reassuring. We sat in the back of the car. M. Béraud sat in front, next to his chauffeur. We drove off, and an hour or so later we arrived at the demarcation line and stopped. M. Béraud introduced us as his two daughters to the German soldier standing at the military post and handed him a parcel. (I learned later that Monsieur Béraud had given him a few pairs of shoes for his family). The soldier thanked him and let us go through. Before dusk we arrived at his home and met his wife Marianne and their five children, Claude, Geneviève, Françoise, Colette and Alain.

We stayed with them a few days. Then a very close family friend, living in Limoges at the time, whom we very lovingly call "Tante Alice," came to get us and took us by train to Thiviers, a small

town in the Dordogne, where my parents had ended up. Tante Alice, a strong-willed Strasbourgeoise, now 95, was the wife of my father's childhood friend. She, not being Jewish, could circulate more freely, and traveling with her made us feel safer. Her daughter, a close friend of mine who married a survivor of the camps, lives in Texas, and Tante Alice until recently came there every year to visit her and her family so we were able, besides visiting her in France, to see her in California and in Texas.

In November 1942, not long after we had settled in Thiviers, all of France was occupied. For many months we lived in a hotel near the train station. We finally found somewhat safer lodging in the upper floor of a small house at one end of the town. We had no kitchen, only a small wood stove in one of the rooms, and no bathroom. Downstairs lived our landlady, Mademoiselle Léonie Jardel, with her two cats and several birds. Her fiancé had died in the First World War. She hated the Germans, "les Boches" as she used to say, with a passion. She was a rather difficult person, but she liked us. She took great pleasure in talking about the past, and I spent many evenings in her living room, looking at pictures and listening to her stories.

I went to the public school a few blocks away. At first, I felt very awkward there. I didn't think anyone criticized me for being Jewish, but it took a while before I made friends. Half a century later, I am still in touch with a couple of them.

There had been several arrests in town, and we were again living in fear, but it wasn't until April 1944 that my parents felt that our arrest was imminent, and that something had to be done. Earlier on, M. and Mme Béraud had told my parents that they would welcome my sister and me in their home anytime, if it became necessary. A painful decision was made. On my sister's ninth birthday, we left our parents and went to Chabanais to live with the Bérauds. My parents stayed in Thiviers. My father hid in the attic of the house. My mother stayed in the apartment, keeping a low profile. Mademoiselle Jardel watched over them. We suspect many people knew of their whereabouts but kept it quiet. The police inquired about M. et Mme Rainès-Lambé, but Mlle Jardel told them that they had left town.

The Bérauds received my sister and me warmly. They had cleaned the storage room, painted it, and made it into a comfortable bedroom for the two of us. Having met the family earlier made our moving in easier. My sister went to the Catholic elementary school with the two young Béraud girls. (She did very well in catechism and was given a lovely rosary.) The older Béraud girl, Geneviève, who was my age, and I had private lessons with the nuns. They taught me some of the prayers, but never suggested conversion. Madame Béraud made dresses out of the same fabric (a pink print) for all of us girls, and on Sundays we all marched to church dressed alike. The Béraud children went to confession and communion. Mina and I didn't. I still wonder what went through people's mind. But silent they stayed.

The Béraud house was also the headquarters for the underground of the region. Many activities took place in that house and there was a lot of coming and going day and night. We had a password to get on the property. In July 1944, the Germans went through Chabanais as they were retreating. They set fire to one part of the town and ransacked others. The Béraud

house was pillaged. On the 24th of August 1944, I was in the village square when the church bells started ringing. Paris was liberated. We all embraced and cried with joy.

We soon heard that our parents were safe. We stayed in Chabanais until October. Many bridges had been destroyed and our parents couldn't get to us earlier. When they finally came, they went to thank the nuns and asked them what they owed them for our schooling. They would not accept any payment. The Bérauds too refused any reimbursement. Tearfully, we bade good-bye to the Béraud family and went back to Thiviers. Sometime in 1945, my father returned to Paris to start working again, and since everything we owned had been taken away, to find an apartment and get some furniture. We joined him a few months later.

Not long after our arrival, we received the horrible news that most of our parents' families had perished in ghettos and camps in Lithuania and Poland. This, I think, precipitated my parents feeling that they should leave Europe and come to the States, where we had some extended family. They also thought that we, the children, would have a chance for a better life. Our papers were reactivated, and after a long wait and many visits to the American Embassy, we received our immigration papers. By then, however, we had resettled in Paris. I had just passed the Baccalauréat, had many friends, and the thought of leaving France made me very sad. We left Paris on the l6th of December 1949. We sailed on the Ile de France and arrived in New York a few days before Christmas.

The city, all lit up, with its impressive skyscrapers, overwhelmed me. After visiting friends and relatives in New York and many other cities along the way, we arrived in California where my mother's uncle, who had sent us one of the affidavits for our visa, lived. Our other affidavit had come from my father's cousin who lives in Pennsylvania. But my parents had decided to come west and we settled in Sacramento. My parents struggled, for they were a little too old when they came to the States and it was difficult for my father to find work. My sister and I, on the contrary, adjusted very quickly. Mina thrived in high school and loved her college years at Berkeley. Recently she retired from a long and very successful teaching career in Maryland. The French government awarded her the Palmes Académiques. She and her husband live in Gaithersburg, and their older son, Marc, is nearby. Their younger son, Todd, a captain in the Air Force, is stationed near Frankfurt, and now oddly enough, my sister finds herself going to Germany to visit him and his family.

I started college in Sacramento. I married at 19. I had my first daughter, Debra, while in school there. Then we moved to Stanford, where my husband started graduate school. Our second daughter, Jennifer, was born when he received his Ph.D. We were divorced a few years later. I went back to do graduate work at Stanford. In 1972 I married Gavin and that same year started teaching at Stanford, where I am still working. Gavin has retired but continues to write on prejudice. My older daughter and her husband live in New York, and they have a daughter named Margot. My younger daughter and her husband live in San Francisco, and they have a daughter named Cara. My mother spent the last four years of her life in a nursing home in Mountain View. We had moved her close by, so I could visit her every day. She died in 1987, at age 86. My father stayed in Sacramento at the Albert Einstein Residence where He thrived

enjoying helping others and being recognized for his good work. He was named Mayor of the Albert Einstein Residence and he loved it. He died at Stanford Hospital in 1996, two weeks short of his 96th birthday.

My war experiences were certainly less traumatic than for many. That our nuclear family survived does seem to be miraculous. It is certain that there was an element of luck, but had it not been for the many people who risked their lives for us, we wouldn't be here. I often wonder if I would have their courage. I was very thankful to have had the opportunity to see many of our rescuers after the war and to be able to express my immense gratitude to them,

I was still searching for the Bérauds up to 1998. I made many attempts to locate them, but to no avail. Three years ago, a tenacious young colleague of mine who had heard my story, offered to do a search and with the help of the Minitel, found a Doctor Claude Béraud in the Bordeaux area. He was the Claude I was looking for!

Faxes, phone calls, letters followed, and a joyous and emotional reunion took place in Bordeaux in August 1998. My sister and her son Marc, my two daughters, their husbands and daughters, Gavin and I, we all flew to Bordeaux to meet with the Bérauds of my generation, their children and grandchildren. Sadly, but not surprisingly, Monsieur et Madame Béraud had died, and one of my regrets is that they and my parents will never know of this almost miraculous encounter. It was a week-long celebration, with banquets, a reception at the City Hall of Latresne where Colette's husband is the mayor, and Claude's son-in-law the vice mayor, private visits to two famous wineries and a "pilgrimage" to the house in the small town of Chabanais where Mina and I had lived with them in 1944. Fifty-four years had gone by, there was a lot of catching up to do, and we did do a lot of reminiscing. Colette still remembers the pink dresses that were made for all of us. She, being the youngest, wore those pink dresses as hand- me- downs forever, she said.

A reporter from the Sud-Ouest newspaper came to interview us at our hotel. The article appeared at the time of the Papon trial. It did, I hope, counterbalance somewhat the atrocities talked about in all the media. There were some French men and women one could be proud of, and Albert and Marianne were two striking examples.

After a glorious week, we had to say good-by. But we knew then that we had found again wonderful people and that we would remain close. My sister and her husband (who had not been able to attend the first reunion) went to see the Bérauds in Bordeaux last year. And their son Todd met some of them recently. I talk to many of them on the phone quite often and hope it won't be too long until me meet again. We couldn't be happier now to have this extended family in France.

Now I am delighted to add that in the fall of 2003, we saw the Bérauds again, and this time filmed them.

Thanks to a sabbatical year and the generosity of Stanford University (the Division of Literatures, Cultures and Languages, Jewish Studies, the Dean's Office and the Language Center), I was able to fly to France and go to Bordeaux with my sister. There, the Béraud family received us again very warmly and where we filmed them and gathered their testimonies of times spent with them, first in 1942 and again in 1944.

Mina and I also went to Thiviers for a couple of days, where we also did some filming, reconnected with the people we knew when we lived there and gathered more information about the Resistance during those war years.

Two young French friends of mine, Claire Maerten and Isabelle Servant, who had spent a few years here at Stanford but who are now back in France, living in Montpellier, joined us when we first arrived in Bordeaux. Claire, whose hobby is photography, did the filming. She also worked with me in the planning of my project. Isabelle, who helped with a large part of the shooting, is the tenacious woman who had offered to do a search of the Bérauds 6 years ago. We had a wonderful time being together and doing the interviews.

I came home very moved, very excited and with a lot of footage. Sally Rubin, who received this June here at Stanford her Master's in filming, is at present doing the editing. Soon we hope to have a short DVD documenting the Bérauds' remembrances and reflections on the time we lived with them, as well as my sister's memories and my own.