

Paul Schwarzbart

Photographed with his sons

Wartime Experience: Hidden in a Catholic Boys School

Born in Vienna in 1933, Paul Arthur Schwarzbart enjoyed a loving and sheltering family life until the tragic events of the Anschluss and Kristallnacht. That winter of 1938 he and his parents, Friedrich and Sara, then fled Austria, smuggling themselves into neutral Belgium to await entrance visas to the U.S.

On May 10, 1940, prior to the imminent arrival of German troops, Friedrich Schwarzbart was arrested by the Brussels police as an undesirable Austrian and shipped off to several Vichy concentration/labor camps in the French Pyrenees. These years of incarceration in France are documented in some 99 letters to his wife and son who meanwhile eked out an existence in the Belgian capital under stringent German occupation. On August 26, 1942 he was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz (Jude No. 179475) and ultimately put to death three years of hell later at 05:30 on Sunday February 18, 1945 in the infamous camp of Weimar-Buchenwald (Jude No. 124951) coming from Gross-Rosen.

Meanwhile in Brussels on 12 May 1943, with his mother's heart wrenching consent, Paul was secreted away by a young resistant from the Comité pour la Défense des Juifs (CDJ) and hidden in a Catholic boys' school in the Ardennes forest near Luxembourg, in the small village of Jamoigne s/Semois. At the Home Reine Elizabeth, among the 125 boys aged 5 to 14, he was known as Paul Exsteen and spent two very long years as a Belgian Catholic. He became an altar boy and cub-scout leader and was eventually baptized in secret shortly before the liberation in late 1944. Maintaining a happy façade throughout that most difficult period, he was all the while painfully aware of his own true identity and predicament and agonized daily over the unknown whereabouts of his parents and extended family.

Liberated by American troops in the fall of 1944, Paul made his way back alone to Brussels where he actually ran into his mother Sara on a crowded street. Then began the futile wait for Friedrich's return. After the end of WWII (May 1945) they reapplied for visas to emigrate to the U.S. and, following the obligatory three-year delay, they reached San Francisco in early 1949. Paul eventually graduated from the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) and subsequently joined the faculty of Tamalpais High School in Mill Valley, where he taught for some 29 years while concurrently serving on the San Francisco Alliance Française and UCB Extension faculties.

In 1969, he met and married Gail Denny, a San Francisco Symphony violinist for 29 years, whose untimely death in 1996 saddened the entire community. They had two sons, Marc and David, born in 1974 and 1975 respectively.

Paul is very actively engaged in Holocaust education, speaking in California and Nevada schools and colleges. In 1988, he at long last discovered that the Home Reine Elizabeth, under the strict guidance of Major Émile Taquet and his wife Marie (Paul's godmother) had been a secret haven for some 87 Jewish boys and that he had indeed *not* been the Lone Jew in hiding there - as he still believed at that time. The documentary film about Paul's life, *SHATTERED DREAMS A Child of the Holocaust* was subsequently updated as *A CHILD OF THE HOLOCAUST*. The reunion of "the hidden children of Jamoigne" in 1988 was a milestone in all the boys' lives, as shown dramatically in the film.

In the Belgian archives, Paul unearthed his father's tragic camp history as well as those of other family members. He even discovered the secret notebooks of the CDJ and found that his personal code had been #896 (the Home's was #611.) Some of them met again in New York in 1991 (The First International Gathering of Hidden Children) and many more gathered on the campus of the Université Libre de Bruxelles in the spring of 1995, on the occasion of the Third International Congress. His story has also appeared in a number of books, such as *La Patrouille des Enfants Juifs*, *Les Enfants Cachés*, and *The Triumphant Spirit*.

Gail, his beloved companion of twenty-seven years, died suddenly in the fall of 1996. The entire San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, her colleagues, played at her memorial service. The 1997 re-release of his documentary was dedicated to her memory. Sharalee "Sharry" Sharona Springmeyer joined the Schwarzbart family, becoming Paul's wife in 2000.