

Rachel Epstein

I am a Holocaust Survivor from France. My family came from Russia.

My story is a bit different. It's the story about an amazing wonderful Christian family that saved my brother and I during the war without thinking about their life and the life of their two children, two boys Rene, 20 years old, and Marcel, 18 years old.

One of the reasons I tell the account of that period of my life is mostly to help those wonderful people's memory to stay alive and for the world to know that such people do exist. Their names are Suzanne and Henri Ribouleau. They lived a floor below, in our apartment building, 17 Rue St. Fiacre, in Compiegne, France.



My parents made a good life for themselves in Compiegne, a city of about 40,000 people, located 40 miles north of Paris. My parents owned a children's clothing business. My father was also a tailor. I was born in 1932 and my brother 1937. In 1939, I was 7 years old and everything was about to change. We lived near a bridge and close to the trains. War was declared. The British were bombing, and they bombed the bridge so that the

Germans could not use it. In our city there was also a concentration camp -- Germans were bringing prisoners into that camp so that is why the bridge had to be destroyed. We lived right by the bridge so in one of the air raids our apartment had crumbled. As the Germans were approaching the street, our family ran away to Paris, never thinking the Germans would conquer Paris.

But soon all of France was occupied. So my parents returned to our city. Some of my family stayed in Paris, others went further. As our home was destroyed, we had to look for an apartment. Lots of people hadn't returned yet, so the town gave us someone else's apartment. The occupants of that apartment returned some months later so we again had to find another apartment at 17 Rue St Fiacre, a little building of 3 apartments. We lived on the third floor. This address brings so many incredible memories.

We resumed a life of uncertainty and fear under the German occupation. We had no idea what was in store for us. The relative calm lasted only a few months. Slowly the discrimination against Jews began. In my father's business, he had to put a sign with a Jewish star and the

word "Juif", Jew in French. That lasted a couple months, after he had to close the business. Jews were not allowed to own a radio a fur coat or a leather coat. Jews had to wear a yellow star with the word Jew. If we went to the movies or on a bus, we had to sit in the back. If we went to the park near the beautiful castle we had in town, we could only sit on certain benches. Anything possible to degrade us, before we were shipped to our death.

Europe was occupied. Wherever the Germans were, they had their own rules, anything that was better for them to kill Jews. This was their main object - kill Jews. In my town, we lived near the Komendatura, the main office where the Gestapo was. It was the house where the doctor lived once, but not anymore. My school was also taken away to be a hospital for the Germans.

It was a beautiful summer day, on July 19th, 1942. At 5 a.m. in the morning there was a knock on the door, my father got up, opened the door and sees two gendarmes (armed policemen) at the door. He greeted them, he knew them, thinking they were there for my father to tailor some clothes... but it was 5 a.m. in the morning. These policemen did not act like they were friends of my father's.

"Mr. Malmed,, you are wanted at the police station." "What, why?"

By that time, my mother woke up, and then my brother and I. Again the policemen barked for my father to get dressed and come with them. No questions. My mother was 29 years old and my father was 35 years old. I was 10 years old and my brother was 5 years old.

My parents screamed at them, "What am I supposed to do with the children?" No response. Those bastards did not care. The cries and questions fell on deaf ears. The policeman had been told by the Gestapo to arrest only my parents and my father's brother and his wife. Only those 4 people that day because they were real Jews, since they came from Russia. In the year 1940, the Germans did not do their dirty work themselves, they gave their orders to the French to do it for them. We never saw our parents again. The commotion woke up our neighbors from down below, they came up to see what the trouble was. My father explained that they were being taken to Police Headquarters and don't even have time to make arrangements for the children. Mr. Ribouleau, a fine man, reassured my parents, "Don't worry it is probably a mistake and you and your wife will be right back." Him and his wife said to my parents, "Mr. and Mrs. Malmed, do not worry, we will take care of your children till you return." My brother and I were crying and hanging on to our parents clothes, not wanting to let go of them. "They're in good hands with us," Mr. Ribouleau said. Little did we know, this was the last time we saw our parents.

So began our new lives as Jewish children hidden by a Christian family who put their lives and the lives of their 2 sons, Rene, 20, and Marcel, 17, in danger of death 24 hours a day, for

the next three years. Incredibly, for the three years, those wonderful people paid the rent of our parents apartment, our of their savings, so our parents would have a place to live when they returned!

There were a few people in the neighborhood befriending the German soldiers and we were in constant fear of being denounced. As the hunt for Jews intensified, people would ask: "Monsieur et Madame Ribouleau, why are you doing this? Why are you risking yours and your sons' lives?" Their answer was always, "How can we not protect these two children? We promised their parents that we would take care of them until they return." In retrospect the enormity of that task is mind-boggling. These well-meaning neighbors made an on-the-spot vow to virtual strangers not only to care for their children, but to protect them from harm. There was no time to think of the potential consequences of such a decision. They did not know it at the time. It quickly became apparent that it was a life-and-death decision for them and their two sons. In addition to the threat of immediate death for harboring Jews, the family's life had to be reorganized. Someone had to stay with my brother at the beginning. There were not enough bedrooms in the apartment, so Rene and Marcel had to move out of the bedroom they were sharing and move upstairs to our parents' apartment while we took their rooms. Food supply was a critical problem as it was scarce and rationed. Since my brother and I were not supposed to exist, we did not have a ration card. The small amount of food that was available for four people, now had to be shared by 6. We had a small garden but winters were long and nothing grows in winter in that region of France.

Mr. Ribouleau would always find a place to plant whatever seeds were available. They also had rabbits and chickens, so we had some eggs and we also could cook the rabbits and the chickens. There was nothing that they wouldn't do for us. There isn't a word in the dictionary to describe this amazing couple and their two sons.

Another horrible day arrived on January 13th 1944. The news wasn't going too well for the Germans, and that day they decided to arrest all the Jews that were left in our town. By a pure miracle, Tante Suzanne (after a while they asked me to call them aunt and uncle), on her way home from work saw that horrible black German truck arresting Jewish people. She said, "Oh my God!" My brother had stayed home from school, he wasn't feeling well so uncle Henry was with him. She rode her bicycle home so fast. Thank God, the truck hadn't been here yet, and as soon as I arrived from school, it was noon and they told me to hurry up, to take a bike, we're going away to hide. "What is going on?" I asked. "We'll explain later," they told me. "Let's run." We rode about 5 miles to the little village where Uncle Henri's sister-in-law lived. She was afraid to let us in, but we pushed our way in and stayed there for the rest of the day, until about 4 pm. Then Uncle Henri said, "I have to go back to see what's happening." He got on his bike and went. As he was arriving around the corner of our home, he saw the black truck in front of our house and his older son Rene going in the truck. What do you think a father is to do? But Uncle Henri did not do anything. He froze on the spot and watched.

I am going to go back a little. The Germans went to the town hall and asked for a list of all remaining Jews in my city. My brother's name and mine were the first on the list. By some miracle, a beverage was spilled on the paper over our names, so the Germans did not notice till after they left. With the dreaded black truck, they started their arrests. As they could not make out the first address, they went on down the list. I was in school, and my brother was at home at noon, when everyone went home for lunch. That is when Tante Suzanne saw the truck. I was coming home from school for lunch with some friends, that's when I was told to jump on a bicycle and run. Now back to my story...

Rene and the truck arrived together at our home. They asked him to step in the truck. By then, all the Jews were arrested. Rene knew them all and they all knew Rene, but no one said a word. Somehow the Germans had gotten the first address on the list and saved it for the last. The rotten Germans took out the list and asked Rene if he knows where the Ribouleau and Malmed children are. Rene said "I don't know anything about them", and they let Rene go. His father was observing all that and saw his son go out of the truck. What a relief. If the idiot Germans would have asked Rene for his papers, he would have been finished and tortured. Hard to believe myself that it really happened, but it did.

We had a little cousin, five years old, that was also hidden by a wonderful couple with two daughters. When the truck arrived at their house, no one was home so the Commandant asked the neighbor, "Where is the little boy, Charles Malmed?", and the neighbor said he is in school. One of the daughters was a school teacher and she used to take my little cousin with her. The Germans went to the school to find him, ripped him out of the class and threw him in the truck. The daughter ran after them, screaming and crying "Take me! I am 19, I can do anything for you, he is only 5 years old... what can you do with him?" The rotten Commandant walked over to her, looks her in the face and said to her "You don't have Jewish blood and that is what we want." The truck left. She followed the dreaded truck on her bike but there was nothing she could do. We learned later the truck full of Jews, adults and children, went directly to the gas chambers. After many incidents, my brother and I managed to survive. After the war, we were the only two Jews left from our entire city.

Our parents left the camp of Drancy on July 29th, 1942 for Auschwitz in a convoy of 1,000 people, 270 men and 730 women. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, 270 men and 514 women were sent to slave labor, 216 women were gassed immediately. Shortly after the war ended in 1945, after 5 long years, we were liberated by The Americans. The first American Jeep that I saw, I ran over to the driver and I kissed his feet. I was 15 years old. With great anticipation, we waited for the return of our parents. It took a long time to accept that we would never see them again. My mother was only 29 years old and my father was only 35. We had lost over 20 people in my family in the gas chambers. All young people.

In December 1949, I arrived in the United States to stay with an aunt. I had to leave my brother behind in France, which was devastating to me. My aunt and uncle couldn't bring two people. Thirteen years later, I was married with two children and my husband and I were able to bring over my brother, his wife and their little two year old boy. His wife was pregnant with another baby. It was one of the biggest days of my life.

We kept very close contact with our French family. We wrote letters, and I went back to visit every other year. We gave them every honor possible:

The Silver Medal in Paris by the Israeli Ambassador

The Medal of the Righteous in 1978

In 1979 we took them to Israel to plant a tree in Jerusalem at Yad Vashem in their honor. This tree will live forever on the Avenue of the Righteous.

We made sure that they always had everything they needed. We brought them to the USA twice, and visited a great part of the US with them. To me they were immortal, but of course they did pass away. They lived a pretty long life and didn't suffer. He was 84 and she was 98.

According to Jewish tradition, if you save one life it is as if you have saved a nation. As long as we live, we will never forget these heroes: Henri, Suzanne, Rene and Marcel Ribouleau, who saved us from certain death. The proper attitude towards the Holocaust can be best summed up with a phrase: **NEVER FORGET.**