

# Children in the Shadows

"Quiet, and never tell anyone you are Jewish."

Renee Schwalb heard that a lot as a young girl. She heard it from her mother, who tried to keep Renee safe from the **Nazi**<sup>1</sup> German soldiers who killed and enslaved European Jews during World War II (1939-1945).

She heard it from Madame DeGelas, who hid Renee's family in a small apartment in Brussels, Belgium. She heard it again from the Catholic nuns who concealed Renee when it became too dangerous for her to live with Madame DeGelas.

Finally, she heard it from the Protestant teachers who took Renee in until the Americans arrived and **liberated**<sup>2</sup> Belgium.

"[Everybody] told me *Jewish* was a bad word," Renee Schwalb, now Renee Fritz of Bloomfield, Connecticut, told *Senior Edition*. "They did it for my protection as well as theirs."

## Life on the Run

Renee's story of being a Jewish kid growing up in war-torn Europe was part of an exhibit on display in the early 2000s at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. The exhibit "Life in Shadows: Hidden Children and the Holocaust" is no longer on display at the museum, but a transcript and photos of some of the exhibit's displays can be found on the museum's website as an online exhibition. The exhibition reveals the stories of Jewish children who escaped the Holocaust. The Holocaust refers to the killing of 6 million Jews and others whom the Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler, thought to be **inferior**.<sup>3</sup> The Nazis killed about 1.5 million Jewish children.

Thousands of Jewish children, however, survived by concealing their identities or hiding out in attics, cellars, barns, and sewers. Like

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<sup>1</sup> **Nazi:** a member of a German fascist party controlling Germany from 1933 to 1945

<sup>2</sup> **liberated:** set free

<sup>3</sup> **inferior:** of little or less importance, value, or merit

## Reading Passage

Renee, many children found refuge with Christian families. Others sought safety in churches and orphanages. Some played a dangerous game of hide-and-seek with the Nazis, moving from place to place to avoid capture.

The exhibition includes photos of many pieces of everyday life that tell extraordinary stories. For example, there is a photo of a sweater worn by 8-year-old Krystyna Chiger, who hid in the sewers for more than a year. Visitors to the site can also view a photo of a light-blue dress worn by Sabina Kagan when she hid from the Nazi death squads.

Also in the exhibition is a photo of tiny "toy soldiers" Jurek Orlowski and his brother fashioned out of wood scraps. The brothers played with the soldiers in a flea-infested basement because they were afraid to go outside.

## Church of Hope

To make sure that others know his story of survival, Leon Chameides, of West Hartford, Connecticut, donated several photos and an oral history to the museum.

Just before the war, the Russian army forced Leon and his Jewish family to move from Poland to the Ukraine in the Soviet Union.

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Leon's father asked a priest to take care of Leon and his older brother. The priest separated the brothers, hoping that at least one would survive the war. Each went to a different **monastery**.<sup>4</sup>

At the monastery, Leon had to pretend to be a Christian. He changed his name and learned a new language.

"I had to pretend I was someone else," Leon told *Senior Edition*. "That was an enormous burden to place on a 7-year-old."

His brother also survived the Holocaust.

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<sup>4</sup> **monastery**: a place where a community of monks or nuns live and work

## Lost Childhood

Before the exhibit opened at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Leon was looking forward to seeing it. As for Renee, she said people should visit the museum to learn about the Holocaust.

Renee donated photographs and her mother's trunk to the exhibit. Madame DeGelas had kept the trunk and all its belongings, hoping to return it to Renee's family.

"[Now] I get to do something for **humanity**,<sup>5</sup>" Renee said.

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<sup>5</sup> **humanity:** human beings, both present and future