

Simon Jeruchim

Simon Jeruchim was born on December 25, 1929, to Polish Jewish immigrants. His older sister, Alice, was born on February 18, 1928, and his younger brother, Michel, was born on April 4, 1937. His father worked as a watchmaker in Paris, France, and the family lived nearby in Montreuil. At the onset of World War II, Sept. 3, 1939, the Jeruchims were vacationing in Richebourg, a little village in the countryside of Normandy, France, about one hour by train from Paris. It was decided that Simon and Alice would remain in the countryside until it was safe for them to return to Montreuil, and Michel would return with his parents. Simon and Alice attended school in Normandy until December 24, 1939, when their father arrived to take them back home.

After the German invasion of France in 1940, Simon, Alice, and their father began an arduous journey south to Orléans, France, by foot and used bicycles, which Mr. Jeruchim had purchased for the trip. Hampered by the large flood of refugees on the road, the three traveled on the back roads only to learn that the road to Orléans was blocked because of bombing by the Germans.

The three had planned to be reunited with their mother and Michel in St. Savinien, France, but upon their arrival there, they learned that the two had not yet arrived. They remained there for two months before learning that Mrs. Jeruchim and Michel had returned to the family home in Montreuil.

In November 1940, the family, except for Michel (the youngest child), had to report to the local police for new identification cards stamped with the word "Juif." Round-ups and deportation of Jews to internment camps began, but the Jeruchim children were still able to attend the local school. Shortages of food soon brought new challenges to Simon; his parents entrusted him to travel to Richebourg, France, where they used to spend vacations, in order to replenish their meager food supply.

On July 16, 1942, Simon's mother learned of an impending round-up of French Jews. The family hoped to find hiding places, but, though the children were spared, the parents were among the 12,884 Jews who were seized in Paris and sent to the Vélodrome D'Hiver. From there they were sent to Drancy transit camp and then to Auschwitz where they perished.

Simon eventually learned about this while living in the first of several hiding places where he was sent in September 1942. After the round-up, Simon stayed with the Huguenot family Bonneau who were friends of his parents until they arranged a hiding place for him in a remote area of western Normandy. In September 1942, Simon was sent to the farm of Mrs. Huard and soon became a full-time farmhand. For a year and a half he awakened at dawn to partake in all the farm chores: bringing water to the house, chopping wood, starting the fire, and taking the cows to pasture. Inadequate clothing in the winter made these chores more difficult. At first Simon was forced to live in the barn, but he managed to convince Mrs. Huard to let him move into the house.

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Members of the French resistance realized that he was in a situation which was much too difficult for a young boy, and he was transferred to another home in April 1943. Though his new home, owned by Mrs. Prim, was much smaller and more crowded than the previous farm, Simon had fewer chores and more freedom. Simon readily helped with other tasks since Mrs. Prim had an arthritic condition. He also was able to see his sister, Alice, occasionally. Both children learned Catholic rituals, and Simon attended Mass at the Church of Savigny-le-Vieux. Mrs. Prim had two children in her care already when Simon arrived there; Simon suspected that they were Jewish as well since they were not familiar with the Catholic prayers.

On one occasion when Mrs. Prim could not attend a school meeting, she sent Simon in her stead. Realizing that he was not a local child, Mr. Crochet, the schoolmaster, saw how curious he was and offered to lend him school books from the library. Looking at a reproduction of a painting depicting farmers gathered in a field at sunset; Simon remembered seeing it in his Larousse at home. Trying to impress the teacher with his artistic knowledge, Simon told him that he thought it was *L'Angelus* by Millet. He also told him how much he would like to draw again. This revelation prompted Mr. Crochet to leave the room and return with a wrapped package, declaring "Voila un petit cadeau pour vous." In the package, Simon discovered a sketchpad and a watercolor set. To show his gratitude, he promised that he would draw something special for Mr. Crochet. Simon used these art supplies to depict his life in hiding including the farmer who rescued him, the home of Mrs. Prim, and the church that he attended in Savigny-le-Vieux. His sketches brought him praise throughout the village.

Simon later moved to a larger house in the hamlet of La Renouardiere where he befriended his neighbors, the Geslins. (Father and Mother Geslin as they liked to be addressed). Their house became Simon's refuge, and he often escaped there when his chores were done. He discovered that Pere Geslin had an illegal short wave radio which enabled them to follow the news of the impending Allied victory.

On August 6, 1944, American soldiers first marched into La Renouardiere and were welcomed by the Geslins who treated them to fresh well water and toasts of "A nos amis Americains." A full convoy of American soldiers arrived a week later.

Soon after liberation, Simon returned to Paris on foot, determined to start a new life. He stayed with the Bonneaus and enrolled in his last year of school. Michel and Alice remained in their respective homes until a later date when they were finally reunited with their brother in Paris. Upon finishing high school, Simon enrolled in art school and remained in Paris for three years while he finished his education. In the interim his Uncle David, who had survived the war, became the children's guardian and arranged for the three siblings to emigrate to the United States in 1949 or 1950.