

MY STORY

By Judith Koeppel Steel

The following story is adapted from Judith K. Steel's book, Love Brought Me Through the Holocaust.

On Kristallnacht, the night of November 9, 1938, some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps. My father was one of those men. During his incarceration, my father was informed he would be released on the condition he leave Germany within 8 weeks, or he and his family would be arrested. I was 14 months old when my parents and my grandfather managed to book passage on the luxury ship M.S. Saint Louis bound for Havana, Cuba.

Despite the difficulties, my mother Irmgard and father Josef Koeppel, along with my grandfather Jacob Koeppel, focused on their infant child Judith who brought them joy. Aboard the ship they felt safe and secure. They wined, dined, and danced, not knowing that the M.S. Saint Louis would become a large prison whose 937 passengers would not disembark into Cuba or any other country in the western hemisphere. My parents' world was quickly changing. The fear on my mother's face was clearly evident. Our ship stayed 10 days in Havana Harbor and only a few souls disembarked. According to government officials our visas were invalid, and we were turned away.



Left: Irmgard and Josef Koeppel, with Jacob Koeppel holding Judith. Right: The Koeppels with another passenger on the M.S. St. Louis. Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, photos # 65630 and 65466, Courtesy of Judith K. Steel.

We tried to enter Miami, but again were told to move on because according to the U.S. State Department we were in violation of U.S. Territorial laws. It wasn't until 2009 that the survivors of the M.S. Saint Louis received an apology from the U.S. State Department. After pleading with other countries, including Canada, and getting rejected numerous times, we had to go back to Europe and an uncertain fate. The ship finally returned to the Port of Antwerp, Belgium, where we had to choose a country that would give us refuge from the Nazis. My parents and my grandfather (Opa) chose France, where we rented an apartment in a town called Nay, in the Pyrenees. We stayed there together until September 9, 1942.



Judith Koeppel leans against the legs of her grandfather Jacob Koeppel while hiding in Nay, France. C. 1942. Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, # 65625; Courtesy of Judith K. Steel.

I remember the landlady, Elletta Carapezzi Enard, whom we called “Maman,” as a tall French woman with movie star looks. My parents and my grandfather rented a small apartment above a furniture factory that belonged to Maman.

Early one morning, or in the middle of the night, there was a knock on our door. It was the Vichy police coming to arrest us — because we were Jews! I remember my grandfather in his bed, crying uncontrollably. At that time, I didn’t understand why. I just tried to console him as only a four-year-old could. I said “Good-bye” to him and went with my parents. I recall seeing my mom whisper something to Maman before we were taken by the police. I’ve often wondered what my mother said to her. What could she have said?

We were taken to a detention camp in the south of France called Gurs, then we were moved to another camp called Rivesaltes. Although I was only four-and-a-half years old, I have certain vivid memories of Rivesaltes. From Gurs, I only remember soldiers standing with machine guns. In Rivesaltes, there were longhouses with two lines of barracks where the children slept. I recall a family, a mother and her three children, that were across from me. I thought they were the most beautiful family in the world! They were the Gutmanns.

One day, as my mother was playing with me, she said with a sadness in her eyes I cannot forget, “Judy, Mommy and Daddy have to go away, and we don’t know when we will be back.” Of course, I could not comprehend this, and we continued to play. But the sadness remained. Later that day, my father said, “Judy, let’s take a walk.”

“Okay!” I replied with delight. My mother gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and cheerfully told us to have a good time. Her kiss actually meant, “Goodbye”.

My dad and I walked into the darkness until we came to a lit room where someone greeted us. They gave me something warm and sweet to drink. Maybe it was hot chocolate.

I held my dad’s hand with my left hand. He pointed to my right side to distract me and said, “Look over there Judy!” I looked to my right, and then I heard him say, “Just a minute.” Then, he let go of my hand.

My hand was picked up again by someone else. My father was gone, and I never saw him, or my mother, again. In that one instant my life changed forever.

I just remember screaming inside a room along with many other children who were also screaming for their parents. That night I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, or maybe because of the hot drink I was given earlier.

The next morning, I woke up to find the Rivesaltes barracks empty. Papa Enard came for me and brought me back to Opa at his apartment. All the prisoners were put onto trains to Drancy and then to Auschwitz. My parents were told by the mother of the “beautiful family” not

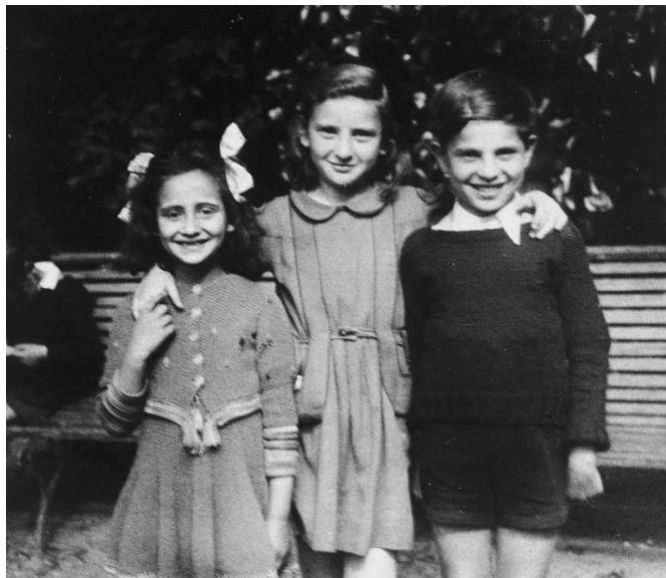
to take me on the train with them since Auschwitz wasn't a work camp. My mother was so right to listen to her.

Now, I can't help but to visualize how my dad returned to my mom after dropping me off to the OSE (Oeuvre de secours aux Enfants). How they must have clung to one another, supporting each other and praying together. I hope and pray that they stayed together until the end. I know how much they loved each other. I always imagined they would hold hands, lovingly gazing in each other's eyes and finding their inner strength through one another. They knew that somehow, I would survive.

I was covered with sores. Maman had to douse the sores with iodine, and I do remember screaming from the sting of the medicine. Later, Maman sent for a doctor who said I suffered from malnutrition and he wasn't sure if I would survive. I believe Maman's loving, healing hands helped me to recover. I loved hearing Maman sing to me in French, Spanish, and Italian. Often, I tried to imitate her lovely voice, and I strived to be as beautiful as my Maman.

It is only now, since I decided to tell my story, that I realize what my mother whispered to Maman. My mother must have asked Maman to take care of her child. Maman did this, risking her life and the lives of her family in order to keep me alive and safe. Without her, I would never have survived. As she attended to my sores, dabbing them with the iodine, she was also healing my broken heart by loving me unconditionally.

Shortly, after arriving at Maman's, my grandfather suffered a major stroke and was hospitalized. I visited him in the hospital once before he passed away. I believe he died from a broken heart.



Judith Koepfel, left, poses with Suzy, the daughter of her rescuer, and another child. Nay, France; June 1946. Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, photo # 65626, Courtesy of Judith K. Steel.

I soon became a little French girl who went to school and church. I sang hymns and made the sign of the cross. It was wonderful to be part of a family that made me feel safe and loved. Out of respect for my Jewish background, they never tried to convert me to Christianity. From time to time, I would ask Maman, "When are my mother and father coming back," but unfortunately, there was no answer.

I became part of the Enard family. I remember one day in particular in 1945, when I was wheeling my Maman's toddler son Jackie in his carriage down Côte St. Martin. We were heading toward the center of town, when suddenly I heard gunshots. As the shots kept getting louder, I jumped with each pop. Everyone ran for cover into

a jewelry store that was near the house. During the shooting, Maman came running to us, taking us back home to safety. We stayed in the house for a few hours with Maman's friends. When the

gunshots subsided, I decided to go back out and play, however I was chased back inside by another loud pop. I never ran so fast in my life. The shots were happening right in front of me.

The next day, our home and the furniture factory were taken over by the Nazis. Maman feared they would discover that I was Jewish because I had big ears. Back then French people thought having big ears and a big nose were Jewish characteristics. Therefore, Maman made sure that I was dressed like a little French girl. She pulled my hair over my ears and told me not to speak. She feared that I would give myself away since I had a German accent. German was my first language, so when I saw the soldiers I would only smile, and I didn't utter a word. As a matter of fact, one of the soldiers told me that I was so pretty, just like my Maman. That made me very happy since Maman was very beautiful. What a compliment for a seven-year-old child. After he said that, right away I ran to her, repeating what he said adding, "You see, you are really my Maman!"

Today I look at my early childhood with much gratitude. I am thankful for the love I received from Maman, and of course, the love I received from my natural parents. This is how I survived during the Holocaust, only through their love and the love of God. My natural parents protected me the first four years of my life as much as they possibly could, never imagining that life in Berlin would become so devastating and their whole world would change so dramatically.

God bless the Enard family for helping me. Amazingly much later, I found out about more Jewish refugees in Nay. There was one Nay refugee that I met much later in life.

The war ended when the Americans liberated France. It was a joyous time. Unfortunately, this also meant that I would have to leave the home I was loved in for four and a half years. The Enard home protected me and kept me alive. I wanted to stay with Maman. She was the only mother I knew outside of my real mom.

I stayed with Maman for another year and a half. I kept on asking her when my parents would return, but still there was no answer. Where were my real parents? Who knew what happened to them? There were so many unanswered questions. Then the time came when Maman had to take me to Paris to the OSE headquarters.

The OSE saved many children during the war, but I wanted them to leave me with Maman. On the day that I left, it was dark and rainy. Maman and I checked into a hotel and she put me to bed chanting a beautiful lullaby with her sweet voice. The next day, she took me to the OSE. I was so young and wasn't aware of the danger the Enard family took on by keeping me as their little French girl. I didn't know the Nazis would have killed me because I was Jewish, and they would have killed Maman and her family for hiding me.

Once, Maman told me that I got lost in a cornfield and I wasn't found for five days. They thought the Nazis caught and killed me. I have no recollection of the trauma since I was only five but until this day, I am petrified of the possibility of getting lost. Maman and her family's love sustained me through the most horrific time of my life. I came to Maman with a doctor doubting my survival. It was Maman who loved me and took care of me as if I were her own child. Thinking of my life without her was unimaginable, I couldn't fathom it. She did try to prepare me, but I was now an eight-year-old who didn't understand the concept of leaving her.

When we got to the office of the OSE, Maman told me she had to leave me there. The news made all my fears of abandonment and rage resurface. It was the same feeling of my father giving me away four and a half years earlier. I held onto her hand, begging her not to leave me and with Maman holding onto mine; it took two to three people to pry me away from her. Eventually, I was snatched from her grasp. I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Please Maman! Don’t go! Don’t abandon me!” The pain of it all was happening again.



Judith, second from right in front row (wearing hat) with other children at the OSE home in France. August 1946, before boarding ship to US. Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, photo # 65467; Courtesy of Judith K. Steel.

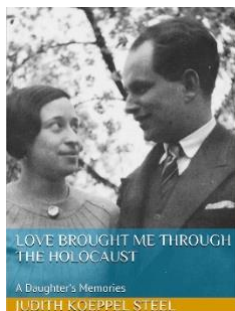
The next day, I was taken to an OSE orphanage called Villa des Glycines, where I stayed with other war orphans until the OSE was able to book me on a ship to America. I was told that I would live with my aunt, uncle and two cousins, who were “very rich.” But it didn’t matter to me. I wanted to stay in the only home that I knew, where I was very much loved. I didn’t know much about America, except that the streets were “paved with gold.” Through all of this, I kept the hope that Maman would come to get me. When I saw her years later, she told me how she could not stop crying, how she felt her heart breaking that day, and how life was never the same for her.



Judy with Maman Enard in 1992



Judy celebrates a recent birthday with her daughter, Alyson Irma Steel, and son, Gary Joseph Steel.



Cantor Judith Steel is an Interfaith minister and an active speaker for various organizations, schools, and many places of worship. Her recently published memoir, "Love Brought Me Through the Holocaust, A Daughter's Memories," is available at www.cantorjudithsteel.com.