

HOLOCAUST
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HUMANITY

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Robert Herschkowitz

I was born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1938, which was neither the right time nor the right place to be born a Jew.

On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded Belgium. That same day, 2-year old Robert Herschkowitz and his parents escaped Belgium and made their way south to Marseilles in Vichy-controlled France. Refugees clogged the roads – everyone was trying to flee. German planes bombed the roads that the refugees were traveling on. During the bombings, Robert’s father would set him in a ditch on the side of the road, and both his parents would lie on top of him in an effort to protect their young son.



Between July and October of 1940, the Vichy government passed a series of antisemitic laws, and at the end of 1942, the Vichy militias, with the help of the Gestapo, arrested Robert's family and sent them to Rivesaltes, the largest French concentration camp. There the family was separated.

Robert and his pregnant mother were sent to a “résidence forcée” (forced domicile), a kind of house-arrest in a small village. Later, his father escaped from Rivesaltes, and was reunited with his family with help from the French resistance.

In 1943, the family fled again, this time with Robert’s newborn brother. Over several nights in September, the family crossed the Alps by foot and found refuge in Switzerland until the end of the war.

Robert and his immediate family were fortunate. Many Jews at Rivesaltes, like Robert’s uncle, were deported to the French transit camp of Drancy, and then on to Auschwitz. The Nazis murdered more than 77,000 Jews from France.

“My aunt, Rosa Schnabel, stayed in Belgium but survived thanks to a Belgian named Pauline Joris-Brouwers. Mrs. Joris Brouwers, who was our family’s cleaning lady, hid Mrs. Schnabel in her house, behind the stove in a cavity. The husband of Pauline was killed by a VI, one of the

numerous German flying bombs which ravaged Antwerpen after September 1944. As a result, our families adopted Pauline and her four children.” – Robert Herschkowitz

In 1997 Mr. Herschkowitz successfully petitioned for her to be declared “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem. Her Yad Vashem gold medal was given to her children by the Royal Princess of Belgium.

“As a child, I spent numerous summer days at her [Pauline Joris-Brouwers] place in Wommelgem, Flanders playing with her children. We treated her as part of our family.”

After the war, Robert received his BS in Marine and Mechanical Engineering in Belgium and served in the Belgian Navy as an officer. He came to Seattle in 1967 to work at Boeing for the next 40 years as an engineer. He served in the US Naval Reserve for 24 years and retired as a Commander.

Robert was a member of the Holocaust Center's Board of Directors and a member of the Holocaust Center's Speakers Bureau. He shared his story and inspired thousands with his story, passion for education, incredible knowledge of history, and humor. Robert passed away on November 17, 2017 at the age of 79.