

Surviving the Holocaust
Guests Interview by Sharon Ann Soudakoff

Escaped At Last Through An Underground Tunnel

Joseph Schertz

This is part of an ongoing series of interviews with deaf survivors of the Holocaust during World War II. This personal interview took place in early 1994. It's based on a recollection by Joseph's daughter, Jackie Schertz.



Joseph, who is better known as Joe Schertz, was born in the southern part of Poland in a town named, Przemysl in 1933. Due to a fall that caused an injury to his head, he lost his hearing and became deaf when he was a year old. He came from a well-to-do family. His father was a well known cantor. They lived in a mansion before the World War II. Their possessions were taken away by the Nazis, they went from being riches to rags overnight. Joe's father was separated from the family; put on a train with the statement "that he would be sent to work. He never came back. He was killed in the camps.

Joe, his mother, and two brothers were not in the camp. They lived in the ghetto for about five years. They had to wear the infamous yellow star of David. In the ghetto, Joe's mother bartered her sewing and cooking skills for food and supplies so that she and her family could survive. Toward the end of the war, the people in the ghetto heard a rumor that it would be their turn to be killed next, so they built a underground tunnel that would enable them to escape to the Outside world" out of the Ghetto.

Mothers had to sacrifice their own babies and young children because they knew that they would have to be very quiet in escaping through the tunnel. They knew that if the Nazis heard any babies crying or any other noises, they would be suspicious and find out about the secret tunnel. Then, that would mean immediate death. Joe along with his mother and two brothers walked through the tunnel in a "line" fashion.

They stayed in Poland, hiding in a farm house owned by non-Jews. They let Joe and his family hide there for about a year. They hid in the attic, cramped into what amounted to crawl space. Then, they were afraid that they would be found, so the farm house owners let them go. They went from there to Paris, France. They lived there for about a year. During this time, Joe's mother contacted her brother in law who was already in America and asked him to help them to come to America.



When they arrived at Ellis Island, they ran into difficulties because the administrators wouldn't let deaf people into America, and Joe is deaf. Joe and his mother went to Venezuela, South America for three months before they were finally admitted into America in 1947, under the Hispanic quota.

When they arrived in America, they found out that Joe's aunt and uncle also survived the war. Prior to this, they thought that they had been killed like other family members.

Being deaf, he communicated by using gestures, and pointing. He never had any formal education in Europe. When he came to America, he had much to learn. He received one-on-one instruction for six months in Urbana, Illinois; then he joined the rest of his family in New York City. He went to P.S. 47, and graduated from New York's High School of Printing.

Joe passed away in 1995. He has two deaf daughters, Jackie and Brenda.



Back Row: L to R - Brother, Mother, Father
Front Row: Brother, Joseph

