

By Jeanette Ringold

Since Nelee's death I've thought about her more than ever. That has been a pleasure, but mixed with much sadness. At her bedside during her last illness I was finally able to put faces to the many names she had mentioned to me over the years. Her family and friends were there, talking and laughing, surrounding her with love.

Although Nelee and I first met in 1976 when both of us taught French at Stanford, that was not where we became good friends. In the summer of 1991 I called Nelee to ask her if she might be interested in coming to a meeting of the Bay Area Hidden Children, a group that had just been started after a conference in NYC a few months earlier. She immediately accepted my invitation and started coming to meetings accompanied by Gavin and continued to be a faithful member of the group until her death.

The group's members are people who as children were hidden to escape being caught by the Nazis. Our members are Holocaust survivors from France, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Bulgaria, and Holland. We meet approximately every other month in the home of a member: there is always a potluck lunch followed by a meeting. Nelee's standard contribution was cheese and crackers – cooking was not one of her interests.

In almost 20 years, our group has become like a family. We started out by telling our stories to the group. That meant recounting what happened to us and our families during the Shoah. It made us focus on events of 50 years ago. It meant that we had to research our own pasts - not an easy task and often painful. For many of us, including Nelee, it was the first time that we had delved into that part of our lives. All our stories were different. Some of us had been hidden in convents or schools, others, like Nelee, with more than one family. Most of us were separated from our parents at that time, and many of us lost one or both parents. It was amazing and exciting to hear what people could still discover after 50 years. One of the more

moving discoveries was Nelee's finding the Béraud family again after so many years. The parents who had taken Nelee and Mina into their home had died, but the children were still alive, and this led to an incredible reunion – she learned more about her and Mina's time with them and the impact they, in turn, had made on the Béraud children.

Telling these stories to the group created a profound bond between us. For many of us it was the first time that we had told the entire story. Listening to one another made us feel closer, and we always knew and still know that the others would understand what we were talking about. We decided that we should write down these stories for ourselves and for our families and make them into a book. This book "Our Stories," was completed in August 2001 in time for the 10th anniversary of our group.

In 2006 we compiled a second edition of "Our Stories." There were new details to include– Nelee added details about her second reunion with the Bérauds. More stories were added by new members and by some of the original members of the Bay Area Hidden Children. But this time we also wanted to involve the next generation. We asked our children to write down (in a page or two!) how the wartime experiences of their parent or parents had affected them. Their statements were quite moving, and I felt that I got to know my friends even better through their children. This certainly was true for Debra and Jennifer's contributions.

Nelee's story seems happier than many because her nuclear family - her parents and her sister - survived, even though the rest of the family was murdered. But during the war Nelee felt responsible for Mina, and she also understood what was happening better than a younger child could. This affected her in a way that I gradually came to understand.

In 2002, Nelee and I had one of our coffee dates and talked about possible projects for her sabbatical. She knew that it would somehow involve her time in hiding and the people who had helped to save her and her sister. Eventually the project turned into the wonderful DVD, which was finished earlier this year and which ensures that her story will continue to be told.

After Gavin's death, Nelee and I drove to the Hidden Children meetings together, and sometimes we'd go to other lectures and events. We never ran out of things to talk about on our way to places from Cupertino to San Francisco, to Berkeley, and places in between! Nelee was unassuming and may at times have seemed uncertain, but she always knew the right thing to do, from raising two daughters, to building a career, to helping when there was a need, to being a wonderful friend. Nelee was beloved in our group whose members considered her gentle and thoughtful, compassionate, warm, and outgoing. The essence is that she loved people and they loved her. I'll miss her company.

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