

■ HIDDEN CHILDREN ■

RENÉE HIDES WITH A CATHOLIC FAMILY

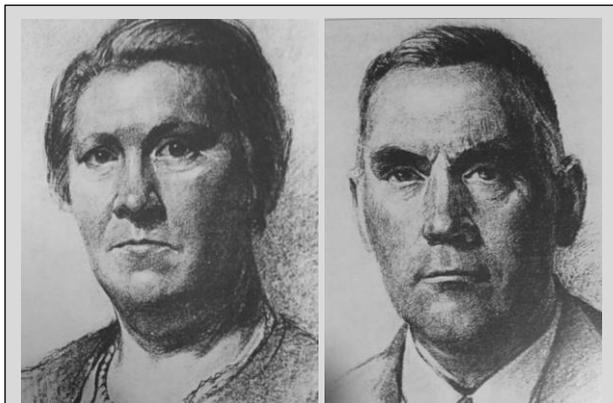
Renate Laser was born in Holland (the Netherlands) in 1937, the only child of her German parents who left Germany in 1933 when Hitler gained power. After the Nazis conquered Holland in 1940, life for Jewish residents became increasingly dangerous. Many went into hiding like the family of Anne Frank. In 1942, before Renate's parents went into hiding, they arranged through the underground to place their daughter with a Christian family. Renate became Rita van den Brink, "hidden in plain sight" until the end of the war. She never saw her parents again.

We were lower than dogs or cockroaches. Little by little [after the Nazi invasion], all our freedoms were taken away. Jews could not practice professions. Lawyers couldn't be lawyers. Doctors couldn't be doctors. Children could not go to public school. We were not allowed to be in public places or parks. We couldn't shop for groceries or necessary things except for very prescribed hours during the day, but by that time all the goods would virtually be gone. And at that time things became extremely bad and dangerous for Jews. We either had to go into hiding or be picked up in what were called razzias—the raids.



Renate with her parents, Fritz and Edit Laser, in the late 1930s. (She was given the name Renée by an uncle when she arrived in the U.S. after the war.)

But the Dutch underground was extremely active, and proportionately there were—if you keep in mind that Holland was such a small country—there were more what is called “righteous among the nations” or “righteous Christians” than in a lot of other countries. And at the same time, there was a tremendous number of collaborators known as NSBers* who were very sympathetic to all things German and were more than eager to work with the Germans. There was a lot going on, and with the help of the underground, which may be more commonly known as the Resistance, two hiding places were found. I went into one hiding place for a short time, which I know nothing about. And then the van den Brink family was found, and we stayed together for the duration of the war.



"Mama and Papa" van den Brink

There are books written about what motivated the righteous Christians in Holland. This family was Catholic and they had a very strong idea of humility and doing the right thing. And for them it wasn't very complicated. That is the only way that the two people I came to call Mama and Papa looked at the world. It was the only right thing for them to do. And they were in total disregard of any danger that was posed to them and eight of

* NSB: Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging—the National Socialist (Nazi) Party of the Netherlands.



The van den Brinks and their eight children, aged approximately 10 to 24, lived in the left side of this duplex house in Laren, Holland. Renée joined them as a four-year-old Jewish girl whose parents feared it was the only way to save her life. (The painting was commissioned by Wilhelmina van den Brink, the oldest child, as a gift for Renée.)

their children. And it posed—I mean, to say “great danger” is such an understatement—they were all risking their lives to place even one little person like me for whatever length of time I ended up being there. So imagine, if they did the right thing, they had no idea if it would be a week or a month, or six months, and it ended up being from 1942 until well into 1945—May 4th.

I came to the house one day on the back of a stranger’s bicycle. I didn’t know who the stranger was. I did not have the first inkling of why I was on her bicycle. Neither would I ever have realized until I was older what it meant to my parents to see me off on this bicycle with a very nice woman who obviously was one of the underground workers. So I came—

I don’t know if it took many hours for the trip; I don’t remember those details, at age four.

Knowledge was dangerous, and that’s why going back to the woman who took me on her bicycle, knowing now the way the underground worked—everybody was a cog, a tiny cog in a very large machine. For them not to know anything beyond what they were doing was the only safe way, whether it was delivering a child from one address to another, or printing a flyer, or doing any number of hundreds of jobs. They were tiny jobs and that person only knew what he was doing. Everybody had false names; therefore you couldn’t give anyone away.

After I got to this house, there were no more explanations, and I was just, kind of, in some kind of a survival mode. I lost my tongue and my appetite, and I was very homesick. I grew to love every one of these siblings. Five brothers and three sisters. There was a lot of love, but in a very stoic non-demonstrative way.*

The Germans kept such incredible records that they knew who was Jewish and who wasn’t. Holland was such a topsy-turvy place, you know, after the bombing of Rotterdam, between the 10th and the 14th of May in 1940. There were a lot of non-Jewish people also displaced, because they had been bombed out of their houses. So you had people looking for shelter, and Jewish people on the run looking for hiding places. And Germans coming and making house searches. Where I lived they were constantly searching. I was Jewish, and I was putting everyone at terrible risk, and their sons were conscript material [eligible for the military draft]—they were the age when the Germans would have taken them.



* Bert van den Brink was ten years old when Renate arrived. In a letter to Renée in 2014, he related how he learned that someone was joining their family: “One day my Dad took me aside to speak to me. I thought, what have I done wrong now? But he said, “Tomorrow we are going to have a little girl come here and she is going to be your little sister and her name is Rita, and if anyone ever asks you about her you must always say she is your sister.” [Prism, June 2017]

And then in addition to those major fears, the Germans took whatever they wanted. And if you were caught with a radio or anything that was contraband [forbidden], you were in grave danger, too. There was a little bit of panic each time. I think they really had to get rid of me into some little corner of the house. With enough warning I was tossed into a bed upstairs in one of the bedrooms; they'd cover me up with blankets. And my hair got covered that way, so it wouldn't raise questions about my appearance. They would point to me and start coughing and say "TB" [tuberculosis], and the Germans ran. It never failed. My hair was covered up, because in some cases Jewish children had their darker hair dyed so that they looked a little bit more Christian if they were not looking like the family.

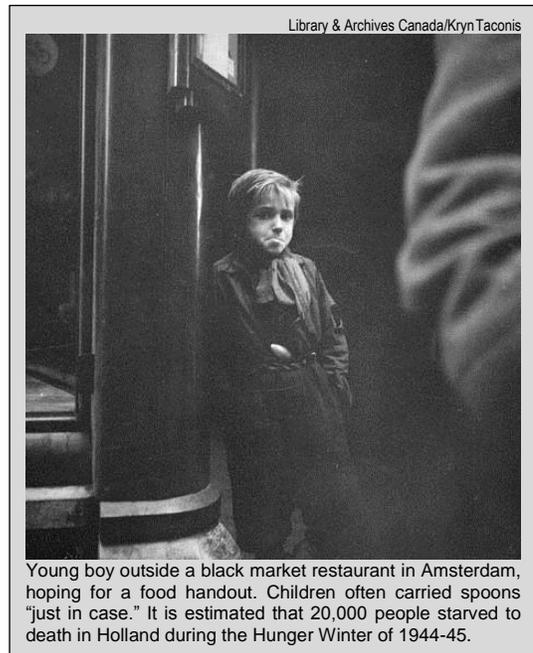
My aunt and my grandmother were hiding, and they were on the run. They spent some time on the run together, and then they separated. My aunt and my uncle were working in the underground. My uncle said to my aunt at one time, "We're dead, either way, so we might as well make our lives count for something," and they joined the underground. So they did that. My parents went into hiding together and they were betrayed.*

I'm telling you about my grandmother's visit. One year while I was in hiding and she was on the run—she must have been in the east of Holland at that particular time. She spent two nights walking in the dark and hiding in the day so that she wouldn't be picked up. We were not free and had to have ID papers. [Jews had to wear the yellow star, and their ID papers were stamped with the letter J.] Certainly you couldn't be Jewish without being picked up and sent to the camps. So she appeared on my birthday. She didn't stay long, but it was unforgettable.

I remember going to bed hungry every night.† And along with missing my parents, I was just wishing for food and thinking a lot about being hungry. We had some fake foods like bread. Now I call it "ersatz bread," but it may be better known as "wartime" or fake bread, just like "ersatz coffee." But every day we must have had a loaf of something that was called bread. And every night I went to bed thinking—and keep in mind, it was always exactly cut into the number of family members—11 of us, 11 equal slices. Somehow the heel seemed a little thicker. And so we each got our turn at the heel of the bread. And I would go to bed at night thinking "tomorrow is my turn to get the heel."

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There were people starving and they came—endless knocks on the door of people begging for food, just to survive. And every time there was a knock, my oldest Catholic sister answered and gave something to whoever was begging. This went on for a long time, and they always shared. Now, modesty and humility were a big part, so I know we shared proudly, but it



Young boy outside a black market restaurant in Amsterdam, hoping for a food handout. Children often carried spoons "just in case." It is estimated that 20,000 people starved to death in Holland during the Hunger Winter of 1944-45.

* Renée's mother and father were murdered in Auschwitz. Her uncle was shot and killed on a street in Utrecht. Her aunt and grandmother survived the war and reunited with Renée.

† More than 20,000 people died during the Hunger Winter of 1944-1945 in the Netherlands, caused by the severe winter and the Nazis' stopping food shipments to northern Holland after the Allies and Dutch resistance liberated southern Holland. People had to survive on 400-800 calories a day.

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The fact that I appeared suddenly in this town, in this household, must have been the source of constant fear. Your neighbors could turn you in. Those were days we lived with fear on a level that is not easily explained. So when I say they risked their lives every day—anyone could've turned them in at any time. And that's one reason they took their chances: they did it, they took me in. But they couldn't send me to public school; that would have raised a lot of questions. Church, I guess, wasn't an option: we went. But I never got to go to school. I never learned to read or write [during the war].

I'm going to tell you a little about different ways of hiding. My hiding experience was true for me. Other children were also hidden. Some went from house to house. Many were abused physically, sexually. Some were made into little slaves. I mean, there are horror stories about hiding, and they didn't all get families like [mine]. I was so incredibly fortunate. In some cases tiny hidden spaces were created behind walls.

My hiding was what I personally call a kind of open hiding, because Anne Frank comes to the minds of many people. She was what I call in a closed hiding, never to be seen or heard by anyone outside those walls. I could go outside at certain times, yet one of my brothers used to think back and feel sorry for me that I didn't get to come and go in the house as freely as the others. But I personally don't remember that.

Some little babies were pushed into bureau drawers, which were closed if there was a danger of being discovered. Others hid in barns, in haystacks, in chicken houses. One of my friends was thrown into a coal bin, underneath all the coal, at the age of two, his parents hoping he would be discovered in time, because Germans would come and poke with bayonets. Other children were thrown out of moving trains when possible, [their parents] thinking that was no worse than certain death. And some frantic Jewish

was never mentioned. Yet I knew what was going on because it was always visible.

Then came the day there were knocks at the door, and Zus didn't answer, because we didn't have food to share. That would have had to be, I realize now, what was called in Holland the Hunger Winter, the winter of 1944-45. It was one of the coldest winters, and the food supplies had really run out. We were reduced to eating flour mixed with water, and sometimes we had smushed or mashed-up tulip bulbs, and we ate that.



Aaron Jedwab was born in hiding and taken immediately to live with a Dutch Resistance leader who told neighbors he was an abandoned child. When he was reunited with his parents after the war, a "sister" lived with them for a time to help with his transition.



Susie Grunbaum lies in the barn attic storeroom where she and her mother hid for two years, protected by a Dutch Christian family.



Marion Kaufmann, a hidden child (right), with Rie Beelen, daughter of the Dutch Christian family who hid Marion until liberation, when she was reunited with her mother.

parents carrying infants desperately offered them to strangers on the street or in train stations. Hidden children were very good and very quiet and very well behaved.

Some parents paid money to families to take their children. That's another special quality about the van den Brinks—they did not do this for money. But in too many cases there was money involved, not only in Holland, but especially in the east [of Europe]. And when money ran out, children got kicked out into the street. And there are some pretty awful stories about little children on the run, and feral children running in the woods.

After the war, I want to make it clear that, in the case of too many child survivors, our lives fell apart then and in the years that followed. I think for us, the toughest part was surviving survival. My grandmother knew where I was, so we were united, eventually. I desperately wanted to stay with the van den Brinks, but I went and lived with my beloved grandmother. And then before I knew it, I was told that we were going to America.

We survivors are speaking for many reasons. We must make sure the world never forgets and repeats. We must respond to Holocaust deniers and revisionists. We must speak for standing up for one's beliefs and having the courage to do that. I can easily respond to any questions about deniers and revisionists. We have the Germans to thank for that. They kept impeccable records. They were crazy for recording all the details, all the numbers, all the timetables of the trains. And if that's not good enough for people, then we can thank General Eisenhower for having his soldiers document through film and still photography what they found in the camps. There are all sorts of records. And I can say to students, if you come across such people, tell them you've met me.



Renée, ca. 1949



Renée on her wedding day, 1957

Renate and her grandmother arrived in the U.S. in 1948 due to the efforts of Renate's father's cousin, Walter, who had emigrated from Germany in the mid-1930s, and who had married Renate's aunt after she arrived in the U.S. in 1947. Walter gave Renate another new name—Renée—because he thought people would mispronounce her name. Renée graduated from high school and attended the University of Vermont, where in 1957 she met her husband, Edward Fink. They were married for 45 years and had two children and five grandchildren. They moved from New Jersey to North Carolina in 1988.

In the 1960s, Renée reconnected with "Papa" van den Brink and the children ("Mama" had died during the war). In 1972 she and her family made their first trip to visit them. In 2014 she joined over 50 members of the van den Brink family to celebrate a reunion in Holland. In 1987, Johannes Gijsbertus and Maria van den Brink-Zoon were formally recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel, and by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.



ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Renée Fink (source of excerpts presented here): “On the Back of a Stranger’s Bicycle,” 2014 (Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education of N.C./Holocaust Speakers Bureau, Chapel Hill, NC)
 - ◆ Video: 24 min. www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJAiC7fJXSo
 - ◆ Lesson and Power Point www.holocaustspeakersbureau.org/videos.html
- Oral testimony of Renée Fink, 2006, video: 110 min. (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
 - collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn607950
- Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Israel
 - ◆ Righteous Among the Nations www.yadvashem.org/righteous
 - ◆ Entry on the van den Brinks db.yadvashem.org/righteous/family.html?language=en&itemId=4043113
- Nancy Lefenfeld, “Memory, Knowledge, and Family Love,” on Renée Fink’s experience as a hidden child and her life after the war, *Prism: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Education*, Spring 2017, 25-34.
 - www.scribd.com/document/343887648/PRISM-2017

Excerpted and adapted from the narrative of Renée Fink, “On the Back of a Stranger’s Bicycle,” 2014 (Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education of N.C./Holocaust Speakers Bureau, Chapel Hill, NC), at youtu.be/eJAiC7fJXSo. Reproduced by permission of Renée Fink and Sharon Halperin (director, Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education of N.C., www.holocaustspeakersbureau.org). Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Family photographs reproduced by permission of Renée Fink.