

Obituaries

ANNETTE HERSCOVICS, 70 » SCIENTIST

McGill professor survived Holocaust as one of the 'hidden children'

With her mother, she fled the Nazis and Vichy police and went from one French town to another until finding refuge in a village where all but one person turned a blind eye

BY PHILIP FINE MONTREAL

It was 1942 and Annette Nejmman was living in a small French village near Toulouse, going to church and dreaming that she would have a beautiful first communion like all the other Catholic girls. In fact, the four-year-old with the Shirley Temple curls had assumed a false identity and was actually a Jew eluding capture by the Vichy police.

She went to school, attended mass and played like any other child while every day the Nazi-controlled Vichy police rounded up Jews and sent them to concentration camps.

Known as one of the Holocaust's "hidden children," she would survive the Second World War to become a professor at McGill University in Montreal. Decades later, she discovered that the actions of one courageous individual likely made the difference between life and death.

Annette Herscovics was born in Paris one year before war was declared. Her parents, Gersz and Frajda Nejman, were newly arrived Jewish immigrants from Poland who had met in Paris. When the Germans invaded first Poland and then France, her father fought on the side of the Polish army in exile. When France surrendered, he was interned in a labour camp for foreigners. By 1941, he was writing letters home, heartbroken over the situation that had begun to take over France, where close to 80,000 Jews would eventually be killed.

"The entire world is trembling," he wrote. "People, fortunes of people created over many years, are disappearing." In 1942, he was sent into the countryside to work for a farm wife whose husband was a prisoner of war. In mid-July, Frajda and Annette left Paris and made their way south to Chaillac, where the farm was located. Unbeknownst to them, the Paris police days later helped arrest 13,000 Jews in a notorious round-up that came to be called *La rafle du Vel d'Hiv*.

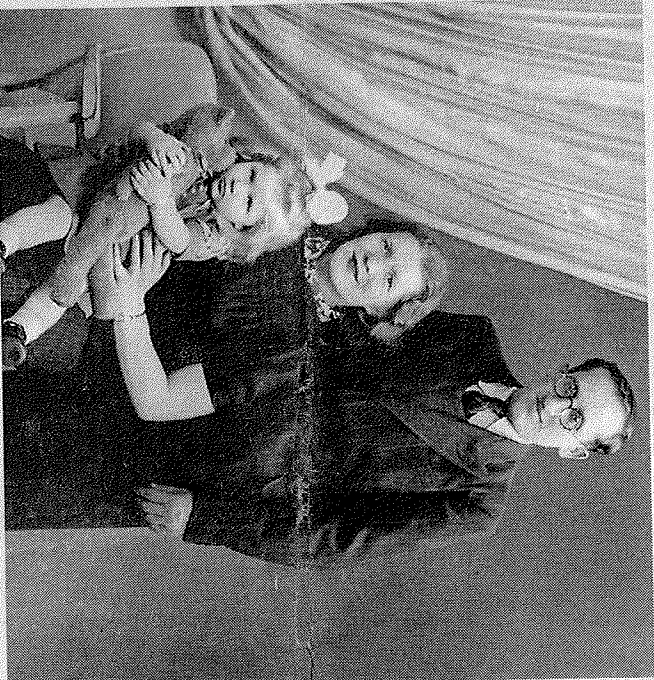
In Chaillac, the family was happily reunited - Annette later remembered playing barber with her father, combing his hair - but not for long. "One night, August 27, 1942, the French police woke us up and took my father away," she wrote as part of a testimony she gave to the Shoah Foundation in 1996. "We never saw him or heard from him again."

For the next few weeks, her mother desperately tried to get to the bottom of things and, with Annette in tow, regularly visited the police station. Eventually her persistence annoyed the police. "You stop bothering us, or you're next," warned one gentleman.

That night, mother and daughter left Chaillac and made their way to the main road. They boarded a bus and travelled about 250 kilometres south to Cahors, where they



Annette Herscovics in 1943, the first year she was in hiding from the Nazis. With her parents Gersz and Frajda Nejman, below, in about 1940. She was a graduate of McGill University, bottom. FAMILY PHOTOS



joined other refugees being sheltered by a sympathetic French order called *les Soeurs de Nevers*.

In Cahors, her mother found work as a seamstress and left Annette to spend each day in the convent with the other



Annette Herscovics, circa 2005.

believed the little blonde girl and her mother were Jews in hiding.

The teacher, Mme. Fabre, did something that likely saved the lives of Annette and her mother. She told him that if he refrained from reporting them to the Nazis, she too would keep quiet and not reveal his true identity to the French Resistance. He never mentioned them again.

After VE-Day celebrations in May, 1945, Annette and her mother returned to Paris, praying that Mr. Nejman was still alive. They searched for his name among the lists of concentration camp survivors, but eventually accepted that he would never come home. (Years later, Dr. Herscovics learned he had been sent to Drancy, a major transit camp run by the French, before being shipped to Auschwitz on Sept. 16, 1942, and that he likely died in the gas chambers upon arrival.)

After the war, her mother went back to work as a seamstress and they attempted to resume a normal life. Reminders lay everywhere. When her mother took her to the movies and newsreels revealed wartime atrocities, she covered Annette's eyes with her hands.

By 1951, her mother remarried and the new family joined thousands of other European refugees heading to Canada. They arrived by ship in Montreal and took up a temporary address in well-off Outremont, which meant Annette could be registered at Strathcona Academy. The middle-class school was bereft of refugees and was filled instead with "very fashionable-conscious nouveau-riche type girls," she wrote in her memoirs.

For four years she felt like an outcast, a misery that was relieved only by her love of music. She had met a violin teacher named Joseph Berljas-ki, a Holocaust survivor from Vienna who normally charged students \$15 an hour. At the time, her stepfather was earning only \$20 a week, so Mr. Berljaski offered to teach her for free. As a compromise, she insisted he accept \$5 - her entire earnings from a part-time job at Woolworth's.

She adored the lessons, practised four hours each day and at last received the attention her mother had been unable to provide during the long years spent preoccupied with their survival. She also thrived academical-

ly. She quickly mastered English, devoured books and earned top marks. She planned either to be a scientist, or go to teacher's college so that she could earn a living quickly and help her family financially. In her leaving exams, she scored third in the province and won a scholarship to McGill University. She had to make a difficult choice: be a teacher, or follow her dream of becoming a scientist? To her later regret, she chose science. "For a long time I never forgave myself for that decision, as my mother died that same year."

Even so, she pursued academia with a fervour. After undergraduate studies, she earned a doctorate in biochemistry in 1963 from McGill. By that time she had married Nicolas Herscovics and had a son, Philippe André, in 1965. Two years later, McGill offered her an academic appointment and in 1971 she was hired by Harvard Medical School, where she worked for 10 years.

During her time in Boston, she came upon an article in *The New York Times Magazine* about Holocaust survivors. Her mother had never talked about the war years, and she was ready to explore what had happened during her childhood. She joined a group of child survivors and in 1976 took her family on a pilgrimage to Marcelliac-sur-céle. Her memories had remained true. Marcelliac-sur-céle appeared untouched and everything looked the same as it had in her childhood. It was during her stay that she learned of Mme. Fabre's courage. She also learned that her teacher had doubled as secretary of the town council, meaning Mme. Fabre likely was indeed in close contact with the Resistance.

In 1981, Dr. Herscovics returned to McGill to become a full professor and pioneer a field known as glycobiology, which is the study of proteins and sugars at a cellular level. "Her insights into this very fundamental process have paved the way for developing treatments not only for cancer but also for infectious diseases," said Dr. Albert Berghuis, Canada Research Chair in Structural Biology.

Her research continued without relief for the next 27 years, interrupted only by treatment for several bouts of cancer. She continued to work even at the end, and chose not to tell anyone how sick she really was. She died the day after she finally decided to close her lab.

ANNETTE HERSCOVICS

Annette Herscovics was born on June 29, 1938, in Paris and died Sept. 6, 2008, in Montreal from metastatic breast cancer. She was Herscovics and three grandchildren, Max, Alex and Zara. Her marriage ended in divorce in 1976.

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