

Biography of Léon Placek

Léon Placek was born on August 19, 1933, in Hussigny-Godbrange, Meurthe-et-Moselle, France. His father, Ajzyk Pinkus Placek, known as Paul, was a shoemaker and a committed communist. Born in 1906 near Warsaw, he immigrated to France, where he met Ida Szmul, who was born the same year in Turek, near Lodz, Poland. A devout woman, Ida left Poland in 1926 to join a sister already living in Meurthe-et-Moselle. The couple married and settled into a house with a garden. Léon had a younger brother, Max, born in 1935.

When World War II broke out, the family, living near the Maginot Line, was evacuated to Civrac-en-Médoc, Gironde. Ajzyk joined the French Foreign Legion but was captured in 1940 and sent to Stalag 11B in Germany. In 1942, Ida and her sons moved to Paris to stay with her sister in a small apartment on Rue Pajol in the 18th arrondissement. Léon and Max attended school on Rue de la Guadeloupe and were forced to wear the yellow star. Léon recalls being excluded from public places, such as the Hébert Square.

In 1943, the family was briefly arrested but released due to Ida's status as the wife of a prisoner of war. In February 1944, they were arrested again at their home and interned in the Drancy camp. On May 2, 1944, Ida and her sons were deported on Convoy 80A to Bergen-Belsen. Léon was 11 years old, and Max was 9. In the camp, known as the "Star Camp," they endured the cold, hunger, and deprivation, supported by their mother.

Shortly before Bergen-Belsen's liberation, the family was transported by train to the Terezin camp. After two weeks of wandering, they were liberated on April 23, 1945, in Tröbitz, north of Dresden, by the Soviet army. Léon contracted typhus and fell into a coma for two weeks. Upon waking, he learned of his mother's death, a result of the severe mistreatment she endured.

On June 23, 1945, Max and Léon were repatriated to Paris and passed through the Hôtel Lutétia. They first stayed with their uncle and later moved to Rue Polonceau with their father, who resumed his work as a shoemaker. Léon continued his studies at Lycée Jacques-Decour. In 1963, he married a former hidden child, and the couple had two sons. Léon Placek later joined the Bergen-Belsen association to share his story.