

The unlikely coincidences of historical research

First Person

Was it bashert?

By Ron Schwarz

Yom HaShoah is April 24

I grew up hearing my father's story of Holocaust survival. Every Sunday in the car on the way to my grandparents' for lunch, I'd say to my father, "Dad, tell me that story again. Tell me again." I never stopped asking, and he always complied. Car ride after car ride, he would share it with me. As I heard his story, I came to understand that his survival was due to a mix of courage, resilience and bashert — the Yiddish term for fate.

A little over 15 years ago, when I was 52, I visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum for the first time. It wasn't my first visit to a Holocaust museum, but this experience was different. I was there on a mission: seeking information about my father and grandparents. I stepped into the elevator and pressed 5 — just a random floor. I remember thinking, "I just have to start somewhere."

The elevator opened into a large room filled with hundreds — maybe thousands — of three-ring binders lining the shelves. Each binder had a label down the spine identifying its contents. A reference librarian sat behind a desk, and I asked her, "What is this room?"

She responded with a question of her own: "Well, who are you?" I explained what I was doing there, and she asked if I had searched the museum archives on the computer. I had, but I hadn't found what I was after. I again asked what this room was. She told me the binders contained photographs collected mostly by donation and organized by category.

I asked if I could look at a binder. She stood up, pulled one randomly from a shelf and placed it on the table in front of me. I read the label on the spine: "La Guette." The anticipation in me rose, and I started to tremble. My father had been a hidden child in France for three and a half years during World War II, and his first stop after escaping Germany was a place called Château de la Guette — La Guette.



Ron Schwarz found this photo of his father, Charles Schwarz, 13 (circled in red), at La Guette, circa 1939, at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photo: USHMM

I opened the cover and began turning the pages. I stopped dead in my tracks. There was a photo of my father with some other kids from around 1939 at La Guette. I recognized his 13-year-old face from pictures I had seen. I sat there and stared, at a loss for words. Eventually, I resumed turning pages and quickly came to a second picture of my father.

In disbelief, I started crying — in front of a complete stranger. What were the chances that of all the binders, she would randomly select one that was relevant to me? I finally composed myself and told the librarian it was a picture of my dad, as a boy, in 1939 France. I asked her for copies. She bent the rules and made them for me, despite a copyright policy that said she shouldn't. I'm so grateful. These photos are now part of my regular presentation about my father.

My father had passed away about four months earlier. What were the chances something like this would happen?

Almost eight years later, in 2015, the Dallas Holocaust Museum began developing a speaker series featuring children of Holocaust survivors. The survivors themselves were aging, and without their children stepping forward, their stories risked being lost. The museum invited me to visit.

I met with one of the historians, and she asked me to tell her my father's story. It spilled out of me — the car rides I had shared with my father decades earlier had made the story stick. I told her about my father being sent away from Germany to France as a 13-year-old boy. I described the various places he lived as a hidden child until he escaped into Switzerland in 1942.

She listened intently, then excused herself. Moments later, she returned, plopped a manuscript on the table, opened it to a specific page and said, "Read this." The manuscript was her Ph.D. dissertation on the French resistance during World War II. The section she indicated was an interview with Georges Loinger, a Frenchman who had saved hundreds of German and Austrian Jewish children during the war.

In the interview, Loinger described how he contacted German parents in the late 1930s, offering to get their children out safely. He said he initially brought them to La Guette, where his wife was a teacher. When La Guette closed, the children were dispersed to other locations. This mirrored my father's exact path. He never knew who had taken care of him in France — who paid for his food, clothes and shelter. I now know it was Georges Loinger and the Organisation de Secours aux Enfants (OSE — Children's Relief Organization) who contacted my grandmother and ensured my father's safety in France.

Of all the people and all the archives in the world, this was the man who not only changed my father's life, but saved it — and by extension, mine.

This meeting began my longstanding relationship with the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum and its staff. Without that historian, would I have ever learned this? I still wonder about the probability of meeting one person with the exact expertise to help me understand my father's survival. Had that meeting never happened, would my journey have continued?

Soon after that introduction, I became a regular presenter at the museum. Around the same time, I launched a personal quest to gather documents about my family from the 1920s, '30s and '40s. I spent considerable time in Europe visiting libraries, archives and museums, asking questions and requesting documents.

During one trip to the Mémorial de la Shoah, the Holocaust memorial museum in Paris, I was on the fourth floor archives researching my father's time in France. I had already searched the museum's computer system and was telling the reference librarian about the six months my father lived in Clermont-Ferrand from January to June 1942.

A woman nearby had overheard my conversation. She approached and asked if I knew a man named Jean-Michel Rallières. I didn't. She explained that he wasn't a Holocaust historian, but an expert on Clermont-Ferrand. She gave me his email and urged me to reach out.

I met Jean-Michel at the end of 2019. He couldn't have been kinder or more helpful. As chance would have it, he knew a great deal about my father — not just about his time in Clermont-Ferrand, but his entire three and a half years in France. He mapped out every place my father had lived — some I knew, some I didn't. He even sent me original documents from my father's time in Clermont-Ferrand.

I don't know what to make of all these events. I've shared these stories with friends. Some say, "It was divine intervention." Others say, "Your father is still watching over you" or "He wanted you to find these documents." Maybe they're right. Or maybe I was just in the right place at the right time. Could it all just be coincidence?



Ron Schwarz

The Law of Attraction — a New Thought spiritual belief — suggests that positive or negative thoughts bring corresponding experiences. Had I simply put myself "out there" and been rewarded? That might explain one of these moments, but all three?

I guess I'll never know. But if nothing else, the universe aligned for me.

Sharing my father's story has become my way of honoring him as we lose more of the generation who survived the Holocaust. Keeping their stories alive feels urgent — a responsibility passed from them to us. These stories are reminders not only of what was lost, but of the resilience that endured.

The more we tell them, the stronger we are against the rising tide of hate. Research shows that people who learn about the Holocaust are far less likely to harbor antisemitic beliefs. That adds another layer of urgency to the telling.

My father survived through a mix of courage, luck and bashert. He made it to France, reconnected with his parents in London after the war and built a new life in New York. Like so many others, his story deserves to be remembered — not as a headline, but as a life. The responsibility is ours to ensure that happens.

Ron Schwarz lives in Dallas and part-time in Park City, Utah. He speaks around the country at museums, synagogues, churches, schools and universities, sharing his family's story of survival. He has two children — boy/girl twins — one in Dallas and one in Chicago, and two grandchildren. Ron recently published his first book, "The Quiet Strength of Resilience," a family memoir documenting their story of survival.