

CHILDHOOD BEFORE THE WAR

"I WAS VERY PROUD TO BE JEWISH"

Muguette Myers was born on December 5, 1931 in Paris, France. While the city is often known to be "the city of love," Muguette's life features both love and hate. She is a Holocaust survivor. Readers, do not romanticize the story, remember it.

Muguette's parents, Bella and Abraham Myers, immigrated from Poland in 1926 after her father faced an anti-semitic attack. She recalls that they were engaged and worked on the streets of Warsaw. One day, three men ran to her father, and hit him in the head with a broken bottle. Both parents reported to the police office and were shortly released, but it served as a warning.

"We can't stay here anymore because it's going to get far worse from now on," Muguette recalls her father saying.

They decided to move to France due to rumors of happiness. Her father began work tailoring with his cousin. However, he was not a trained tailor because he had gone to university in Berlin and learned agronomy, the science of soil management and crop production, there weren't many openings for a Jewish agronomist in Paris.

"My father had a gift, whatever his eyes see, his hands could do," Muguette said. "So even though he never touched a needle or a thread, he started working with his cousin... and then he could do it."

His hard work paid off, and he sent for Muguette's mother. Together, they lived and worked alongside many other Jews.



"My father was making the garments for his cousin and my mother was sewing the linings and buttons," Muguette said. "Then my brother (George a.k.a Joseph) was born, and six years later, I was born."

Muguette recognized that she and her brother were not extremely close during their childhood.

"When we were young, six years difference was a lot... but later on, the past 10 years of his life, so we became quite close," Muguette said.

Although her mother's family was very religious, her father's family was Atheist. As a result, they rarely went to synagogue growing up. In fact, she recalled with a laugh that when a friend asked her if she was going to listen to Kol Nidre (Yom Kippur service), and Muguette responded, "Who's that?"

However, when asked if she still identified as Jewish, she said, "always."

"We spoke Yiddish. I spoke Yiddish with my grandmother and with my mother," Muguette said.

Muguette explained that her mother spoke six different languages: Yiddish, Polish, Russian, German, French, English, and she understood Hebrew. She recognized her great intelligence, even though “she did not go to school until 10th year.” She described her personality fondly.

“She [my mother] was a very strong person,” Muguette said. “Also she was very capable. She was very honest about everything she did... and very loving.”

At three and a half years old, Muguette’s father died. She recalled that at the time, she was not allowed to go to school. However, her mother went to the school with a request.

“She spoke with the principal, and I was allowed to sit with the five year olds,” Muguette said. “We were sitting on little white benches. And on the back of the bench was hanging a bag, and there were books in there. That's when I learned how to read.”

From that moment on, Muguette loved to read: “Reading is my passion, my cigarette, my opium. It's true, I can't resist a book.”

In Paris, Muguette recalls being around other Jews. At school, there was another Jewish girl and on the street where she lived, “there must have been about four or five Jewish families.” Muguette, her brother, and mother were all good friends with the other parents and kids, forming a tight-knit community. They were also very good friends with their non-Jewish neighbors.

“My brother and I, we played with the kids,” Muguette said. “We played hopscotch... we played tag.”

Although Muguette did not feel prejudice against Jews at the time, one conversation with a non-Jewish friend stuck with her.

“One thing I remember is that I always played with all the girls and kids. So one of the girls said, ‘if I was Jewish, I'd convert right away to Catholicism.’ She was Catholic, of course... I told her that ‘if I was Catholic, I'd convert to a Jew,’” Muguette explained, expressing that she was very proud to be Jewish.

Aside from that, Muguette does not recall any serious instances of anti-semitism in Paris before the war. She recognized that, through books, she learned that France had a very liberal government in 1936.

Soon, everything changed. The first warning came from her grandmother in 1939, when Muguette was only seven years old.

Muguette said, “Before the war, my grandmother was reading newspapers from Poland and learned what was happening to the Jews.”



CHANGING TIMES: SEPARATION, HONESTY, AND SIGNS

In the year 1939, World War 2 began, and Muguette's happy childhood came to an end.

The French government, and everyone that was necessary for the war effort, evacuated from Paris because they were going to be bombed.

"I was evacuated with my school. We ended up in a little town called Sens in Burgundy. We were about 50 kids," Muguette recalled. "We were laid down in a gym hall in one of the schools, and we slept on straw mattresses."

Muguette described the straw mattresses as potato sacks filled with straw. They were also given a blanket. Muguette did not know any of the other kids, and they were only supervised by a couple of monitors. It was very poor conditions.

"We were always very hungry, but we were told not to touch the blue pieces of bread on the shelves, because they were put there to kill the rats," Muguette said. "We were very unhappy, all the kids."

She explained the anxious environment that formed because no one knew where their parents were, and their parents didn't know where their kids were.

During this time, Muguette's mother was evacuated with her grandmother, aunt and brother to a little village called **Charlotte**, about 150 kilometers southeast of Paris. There, they put the whole family in a "big, beautiful home that belonged to a retired sea captain" with another family.

The mayor instructed them to take care of the elderly man who lived there, Mr. Bezien, and remind him to take his medications due to his poor memory. Since the man neglected to clean the house often, Muguette's mother decided to clean it up with the lady from the other family.

When cleaning the house, they found a small chest in the kitchen cupboards. Inside was money, jewelry, and artifacts that the captain brought back from the sea voyages.

"The other lady said to my mother, 'we are rich.' Mama said, 'What do you mean? We? Does that belong to us?'" Muguette recalled.

While the other lady wanted to take advantage of the old man and his poor memory, "that didn't sit well with my mother at all." As the honest woman she was, Muguette's mother fetched the mayor, who happened to be cousins with Mr. Bezien. He took the chest for safekeeping and was very grateful to her. To thank her, he named her honorary citizen of the village, and if she ever needed anything, was encouraged to come back. This was proved to be a very important resource later on.

When asked if her mother's behavior in the house was a smart move, Muguette immediately responded, "very."

After at least two or three months of separation, Muguette and her mother were reunited. She used her network of both Jewish and non-Jewish friends to help find her daughter. Ultimately, her outspoken friend Madame Jambiola went to each ministry and "wasn't afraid to ask questions" and found where she was.

“When my mother found me, I was in a sorry state: my head was full of lice and on my calf, I had a big sore,” Muguetta said.

Then, her mother took Muguetta by train to join the rest of their family in the abandoned Champlost village. It was only the five of them: “the family was together.”

Muguetta recounts the frightening moment of seeing the Germans with great detail. One day, she was home from school because they had a day off.

“On Thursdays, kids don't have school in France. When I heard a noise coming down from the top of Champost, I looked out the window, and that's when I saw the first German motorcyclists coming down the hill,” Muguetta said. “There was also a tank that was coming down, and the tower was open, and there was a man standing in the black uniform with half of his body out of the tower. And he was going with his gun. He was just moving his gun back and forth, back and forth. Then, the whole German army came down in trucks.”

Right away, she called for her mom to tell her what she saw. Together, they began closing the shutters.

“In France, on the windows, we have wooden shutters that you can close at night so the moon shouldn't bother..., but those shutters have openings on top: round, squares, triangles. So my mother and I were both on the chair to reach the opening, and we saw the German army coming down,” Muguetta said.

Muguetta recalled another moment with a German soldier in Champlost that really stuck with her, a story she had never shared before. Somehow, it was known that her mother spoke German. A young soldier came upstairs where they lived and sat down.

“My mother didn't know what to do, so she was sitting with him. I think she offered him milk, because we had in the house,” Muguetta said. “I was passing by behind him, and I touched him, and I recoiled. I was seven, eight years old. I understood his German, of course. He took out his wallet and showed me that he has two little girls, also my age, and he told me not to be scared... I was terrified.”

He didn't stay long, and soon left them. Despite these frightening moments, Muguetta recalls everything being “quiet.”

“It was very quiet at that time the Germans came in, and then there was a war, but nobody was fighting; they called it ‘the phony war,’” Muguetta said. “There were soldiers on both sides, but everything was quiet. Nobody was fighting.”

Due to this lack of noise, Muguetta's mother wondered why they were staying there. In 1941, they decided to go back to Paris.

They walked six kilometers with luggages to the train. However, shortly after the train started, it unexpectedly stopped. After asking a train worker, they found out that the French military blew up the bridge that crosses the Seine to stop the Germans. They ditched the train, and went to cross the next bridge, made of rowboats hammered to big planks.

“We made it, but you could see in the water, luggage floating that some poor people had dropped,” Muguetta said. “We then drove into Paris, and life started again until...”

GERMAN OCCUPATION & THE FIRST MIRACLE

In 1941, Paris was changing. Under German occupation, the home Muguette knew and loved was different.

"The Germans started making laws that the Jews were not to go in the cinemas and the restaurant and the zoos and, you know, all kinds of the things that everybody enjoys," Muguette recalled.

Aside from limiting recreation, access to health services were limited. The gentile doctors were not allowed to minister to Jews, and the Jewish doctors were not allowed to practice. Most importantly, the Jews were being systematically monitored.

"When we went back to Paris, the Germans made laws that every Jew had to register at the police station closest to their homes," Muguette said.

Her mother received a stamp card that had to be presented every time one bought something. More infamously, she was given an identification card and a piece of yellow cloth in the shape of a Magen David, or Jewish star. These items identified Muguette and her family as Jews, distinct from the rest of the community.

"Those [the Magen David] had to be sewn on our clothes, outside the garments, and it was forbidden to hide it with a book or with a purse," Muguette said. "And that at first, when I was wearing it, you know, I felt like a leopard. Why? Why me? Why do I have to wear that?"

Due to these strict rules and regulations, there was no hiding being Jewish. As a result, Muguette felt varying levels of welcomeness in the city.

"When we walked in the street, some people smiled at us, other people just looked away," Muguette said.

However, she felt kindness and camaraderie with her neighbors, even as the only Jews in the building.

"They [the neighbors] were all very nice," Muguette said. "The neighbors hated the Germans. Everybody was sympathetic to us."

In fact, Muguette remembers her Christian friend Marguerite was making her First Communion. Muguette waited outside the church to see her walk out. Although Marguerite's parents were much closer than Muguette, she did not go to her parents first.

"She came to me and kissed me," Muguette said. "It didn't bother her that I was wearing the yellow star, I was her friend."



*Pictured:
Muguette at
Marguerite's
family
wedding in
1942*

Overall, Muguette and her family did not feel a sense of urgency to leave until one night, her mother had a powerful dream. She regards this moment as the first of many miracles encountered on the path to survival.

She dreamed that her mother, who passed away a few months prior, was knocking on their window, although they lived on the seventh floor. In Yiddish, she said, "Bella, Bella, run!"

In the morning, they took the dream as a serious warning. They packed up a suitcase and approached their downstairs neighbor asking to stay with her. This neighbor was an elderly neighbor who hated Muguette and her brother for their childish behavior and messes. However, Bella asked politely and explained her fear, so the lady let them stay.

"The next morning, seven o'clock, they heard the Germans coming up, and the French police coming up," Muguette said. "If my mother hadn't had that warning, she would have been dead."

Muguette expressed immense gratitude and awe for the moment.

"It's a miracle," Muguette said

SADNESS WITH FAMILY, KINDNESS FROM STRANGERS

‘YES, MY CHILD, THERE IS A GOD’

On July 15, 1942, circumstances progressed for the worse. Luckily, Muguette and her family had a warning.

At nine o'clock at night, past the Jews' official curfew, there was a knock at the door. It was Muguette's aunt. Although she was Jewish, she appeared to be the "perfect German type" with blonde hair and blue eyes, so she worked undercover as a secretary at the German headquarters, or Kommandantur. Due to her job, she had insider information: she warned Bella, and said that they had to leave, because tomorrow they are coming to get the women and children.

Sure enough, on July 16, a big roundup known as La Grande Rafle du Vel' d'Hiv' in Paris took place and Jews were packed in a sports arena in terrible condition for weeks without the sanitariums, without food.

Muguette and her mother were safe because their non-Jewish friend, Madame Dumas, was there that night and offered to host them. In order to get to Madame Dumas's house, they had to take off the yellow stars. They cut up the stars and hid them in their brassieres. Then, since nothing distinguishes them as Jews, they could go to a non-Jewish car (Jews were only allowed in the last car) and conceal their identities.

In France, the seats face each other so the knees touch. Madame Dumas and my mother found a seat across from Germans sitting on the other side. Muguette went to sit alone by the door at a "strapontin" folding seat.

"Across from me, on the other seat was an old gentleman, and he was staring at me and staring at me. I was 10 years old. What does he want? And then he caught my eyes and looked down," Muguette said. "And then I looked down to see what was so interesting. And I was horrified to see that on my beige coat, the yellow thread delineating the yellow star. I remember I put my left hand on my right shoulder, and I started pulling the threads. The old man smiled. He got up at the next stop, and I never knew who he was."



Pictured: the yellow "Juif" star Jews were required to wear

Muguette does not think this man was Jewish, but just another person looking out for Jews. She recalled that in a lot of villages and cities in France, people hid Jews in convents, churches, and farms.

The morning after staying at Madame Dumas's house at the other end of Paris, Bella wanted to go and warn her mother and her sister, because my aunt and my grandmother were living in Paris.

"Before the curfew was lifted, she started running in the streets to get to her mother and sister in time so they could hide before the Germans came," Muguette said.

She finally got to the building where they lived and began running up the stairs to the third floor. On the second floor, "she saw my aunt, her sister, going down with two French policemen. He wasn't a German. He was doing the dirty work with the French."

"My aunt didn't speak French. She spoke Yiddish. She told my mother in Yiddish, 'they're taking me away,'" Muguette said. "My mother didn't answer, because my mother figured, if she answered, they'll see that she's Jewish too. They're going to take her. What is she going to do? She has two kids at home. My aunt was assassinated in Auschwitz.

Bella kept running to the third floor to get to her mother, Muguette's grandmother.

"My grandmother was sitting on the chair, and she was crying. It's terrible to see a mother cry. And then she was always very weak, her heart. She had a heart attack," Muguette said.

Although the gentile doctors were not allowed to monitor to Jews, and Jewish doctors weren't allowed to practice, their family doctor came because he had known the family for a long time.

He called an ambulance, and they kept Muguette's grandmother in the hospital for three days. Then, the doctor said they had to take her home.

"My mom said, 'She's an old lady. She's sick, Can't you keep her another day?'" Muguette recalled. "Cynically, they told her, 'you're lucky, we're not giving you up.'"

Complying, Bella half-dragged and half-carried her mother back home, carried her upstairs, and put her to bed.

"My grandmother had always been very pious," Muguette said. "She went to synagogue every Shabbat, she went every Jewish holiday. She tried to keep the apartment kosher."

However, Bella was an atheist, a complete non-believer, so when she put her mother to bed, Muguette recalls her crying and asking questions: 'Is that your God, the mean God, that does things like this? It's not a good God. It's a mean God. Besides, there's no God.'

"My grandmother, in her last breath, said, 'yes, my child, there is a God.' And she passed away," Muguette said.

A MIRACLE IN THE VILLAGE

*“I HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA WHY THE
GERMAN POLICE LET US GO”*

After the funeral, Muguette’s mother went back to the little village. Madam Dumas took Muguette to a cousin of hers in Normandy on a farm. She remained there for nine months.

“It was wonderful, wonderful people. I was treated like a member of the family,” Muguetta said. “I ate at their tables. I slept in their linens. I went to school there.”

It was a family of seven kids, but only two were left on the farm. One was two years younger than Muguette, and the other was two years older.

On Thursdays in France, there is no school, so everybody had a chore to do. Muguette’s role was to take the cows to the fields. She had a dog named Bulu who was supposed to help prevent the cows from eating the corn and wheat instead of the grass, but Bulu was a lazy and uncooperative dog.

“I tried to push him, but he turned out completely. I thought he was going to devour me, so I was the one running after the cows,” Muguette said. “But I don't mind, because I was alone there in the field. So I spoke to myself in Yiddish to get closer to my grandmother. I sang to myself some Yiddish songs that they taught me.”

After nine months, Muguette’s mother came to bring her back to Champlost.

“We were walking along the road because there was a train station there,” Muguette said. “A car stopped alongside us and two fellows came out speaking perfect French. One of them just showed his lapel, Gestapo, the German police.”

He asked Bella what was in the suitcase. She explained that Muguette was on vacation on the farm and she was taking her home to Paris.

They opened the suitcase, and inside was not only her clothes, but also a freshly cut chicken, cheese, and ham. Bella was bringing these items back to Paris to sell on the forbidden market. The other man demanded to see her identification papers

“My mother thought to herself, if I show them my identification paper with the Juif (Jew) stamped on the picture, we’re done,” Muguette said.

Bella hesitated and did not know what to do. Before she said anything, the other man spoke.

“The first one said, ‘you don't look like like murderers. You can go,’” Muguette recalled. “They went back into the car and they left. I think it's the first time the German police let go of somebody they were holding.”

To this day, Muguette regards this event as a miracle.

“I have absolutely no idea why the German police let us go,” Muguette said.

LITTLE MARIE: MUGUETTE'S DOUBLE IDENTITY

Muguette and her family left Paris, taking multiple trains over two days.

“And then life started again,” Muguette said.

Her mother was sowing in the farms, earning most of her wages in the form of farm produce. Her brother was working in the fields with Mr. Basile, where he was staying.



The Basile/Roy family, who sheltered Muguette's brother during the war, circa 1940

“He milked the cows,” Muguette said. “He never saw a cow in his life, but he still milked the cows. He also went in the fields to plow.”

Muguette returned to school where she was taught by the wonderful Madame Bérault. She learned both academic knowledge and real-world skills.

“She was the most extraordinary woman that I've ever known. She knew everything. Not only did she teach us to read, to write, to count, but also things that we will need later on that would be interesting to us,” Muguette said.



Madame Bérault, Muguette's favorite teacher, circa 1942

The town priest l'Abbé Tallard often visited the family for Bella's sewing skills and lively conversation..

“My mother had left school when she was 10 years old, but she had read a lot, so the priest was always able to have a good conversation with her,” Muguette said. “One day, he told her, ‘you know, Bella, with a name like yours, when the Germans come and check the registers, they will see right away, who you are.’”

To disguise their Judiasim, they switched their family name from Szpajzer to Bella. Muguette's mother began going by Isabel Bella.

“The priest also told my mother that in order to be like all the other kids, I have to go to church and do Catholicism, because if I walk around by myself on a Sunday when everybody is in church, they're going to know,” Muguette recalled.

Muguette was registered to join the priest's Catholicism class under the name Marie. She recalled liking the Catholic religion because the story of baby Jesus with the animals "speaks to a kid." She remembered learning the prayers quickly and being proud when the priest was happy with her.

When asked about her feelings towards her double identity, Muguette said, "It was like a game to me, especially because I learned very fast."

Soon, the priest reminded Bella that Muguette wasn't baptized, so she would not be able to make her First Communion like the others. The people in Champlost had even gotten together to get Muguette an outfit for the occasion.

"The priest asked my mother all the time, 'Madame Bella, when are we going to baptize little Marie?'" Muguette recalled. "How to say no to a whole village who was sheltering us? Nobody said a word; everybody hid us. Even the kids knew we were Jewish. The Germans weren't far away, so how can my mother refuse?"

Muguette did not end up getting baptized thanks to her mother's clever delaying tactic. At the time, Muguette's stepfather was a prisoner of the Italians in the south of France. He was in a very strict camp created when the Germans invaded France. Bella explained that for such a momentous occasion, it would be nice if her father was here. The priest understood.

"She wanted to retain our Jewish identity," Muguette said. "When my father came, it was almost the end of the war and I was never baptized."

Overall, Muguette recalled that everything was quiet in the village. They were aware of the German's presence in France, but they didn't come very often.

Radio and newspapers portrayed Germans as good people.

"We didn't believe any of it. It was all under German control," Muguette said. "We didn't know what was going to happen. See, the Germans were controlling the newspapers and the radios, and there was no television at the time, so we didn't know there were victories all over."

LIBERATION

“...AND THEN, LIFE STARTED AGAIN.”

One night, Muguette was walking over to one of the farms to pick up milk. While on her walk, she saw a small German car in front of a cafe. She recognized it as a German car due to its camouflage coloring, yellow, green, and brown to blend into the autumn forest. After seeing the German car and three young men next to it, she kept on walking.

“When I came back, I saw my brother speaking to those men. Whatever my brother did always interested me very much,” Muguette said. “So I went over to see the three men were wearing armbands that said, FFI, Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur (French Forces of the Interior), the underground resistance.”

They had confiscated that car from the Germans, and said the Americans were coming from Champlost, six kilometers away, any minute to liberate the village.

“Of course, that night, no one slept, but no one came. The next morning, we heard a rumbling coming again from the top of Champlost, going down,” Muguette said.

As mentioned previously, Champlost was built on a hill, so you can hear someone coming down into the town. This was where Muguette first saw the Germans coming in.

“This was the Americans, and everybody started screaming and yelling, and everybody was in the streets. First there were the American motorcyclists, and then there were Jeeps coming down at great, break neck speed. I’ve never seen anyone go that fast,” Muguette said.



*The American liberation of Paris,
August 1944*

Then, the trucks arrived with the soldiers.

“The soldiers were throwing us candies and chocolates and chewing gum and sardines and tins of meat and cigarettes and soap and everything that we hadn’t seen in so long,” Muguette said. “When the trucks stopped, we wanted to climb there and to kiss and hug them. They went down and they parked themselves where the Germans had been before, and then life started again.”

FAMILY REUNIONS AND STARTING OVER

Once the war had ended, Bella decided to move back to Paris with her family.

"We said goodbye to everybody in Champlost," Muguette said. "We took the train and we arrived in Paris, and then life started again."

Bella worked and Muguette and her brother went to a commercial school.

Bella had a winter coat that belonged to her mother. She wrote to her late husband's mother, Muguette's paternal grandmother, to see if she needed a good winter coat. She said yes, but it needed alterations since she was much taller than the original owner.

In order for the coat to fit her, she opened the hems. Inside, she found American money and two letters from Bella's brothers. With the return address, she knew they were living in Canada. Bella wrote to them immediately.

"And of course, they were overjoyed, because knowing what had happened, because the German concentration camps had been open, knowing what happened and having not heard from us for five years, they thought we were also perished," Muguette said.

Muguette suspects that the letters had been in the coat for three or four years.

Right away, Bella's brothers made arrangements for them to come to Canada. One was living in Toronto and the other was from Montreal. They decided to go to Montreal, because they speak French there: 'you'll be understood,' he said.

"They spoke French in Montreal, but we didn't understand a word they were saying," Muguette said. "It was just very frustrating. We didn't understand what anybody was saying. My uncle spoke Yiddish with my mother and I, but the kids in the school, there was no one."

It was more than a 24 hour trip, with a faulty plane, and stops in London, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, Gander, and Boston.

During their stop in Boston, they stayed at a hotel due to a snowstorm in Montreal. There, Muguette experienced culture shock in the way Americans serve food. In France, each course is served on a separate plate. In America, this was not the case.

"Everything was on the same plate... There was a piece of meat with some peas and carrots rolling around the plate. My mother pushed me with her elbow. 'They're crazy, those Americans. It's the middle of winter, and they put ice in the drinking water'" Muguette recalled.

The next morning, they took a train to Montreal where Muguette's uncles greeted them and took them to their new home. Muguette met her aunt and her younger cousin: "a little, one year old, adorable little girl." She also met her aunt's mother: "we called her Bubby, right away. She was a delightful lady." Muguette, her mother, and brother ended up staying with Bubby in her "enormous apartment" where each of them got a bedroom.

Once settling in, Bella wanted Muguette to continue her studies in French. However, at the time, the French school was run by nuns and priests and fathers. Bella called the school and asked if Muguette would be able to enroll. The school asked right away if they were Christian. After responding that she was Jewish, they said there would be a charge to go to the French school.

"My mother didn't have the money," Muguette said. "So I went to Protestant school."

Muguette's aunt had three little cousins that went to school with her and even spoke some Yiddish. They were named Bernice, Etta, and Helen Cohen.

"I was able to converse with them," Muguette said. "In school, almost nobody spoke French except the commerce teacher."

After telling the teacher she knew how to type, the teacher sat Muguette in front of the typewriter to show her her skills.

"Now in France, I learned how to type blind. That means that the paper is there and I type here. So I started typing. She stopped me after a couple of phrases, and she pulled out the paper," Muguette said. "She said, 'You sure you know how to type?' Of course, I know how to type. She showed me the paper. It was gibberish. The French keyboard is not the same as the English keyboard."

As this story shows, Muguette found it difficult to get used to this new school, "to learn again." It was especially difficult because of the language barrier.

CANADIAN BEGINNINGS: LOVE IN THE FACTORY

Eventually, Muguette's brother got married. This meant a loss of a salary coming into their household, so Muguette went to work with her mother.

"I was working in a factory that was making men's clothing," Muguette said. "There were almost only men working there. We worked from eight o'clock in the morning to six o'clock at night."

Muguette's job was to be a ticketer. She labeled the type of cloth, item, and size.

Muguette described that there was "a cafeteria down in the basement where we worked." The other young lady who worked there went around every morning to ask the men whether they needed something to eat and she would deliver it to them. However, Muguette never ordered anything because her mother only gave her 25 cents for the bus and 25 cents in case she wasn't feeling well to go eat.

"One day, I found a Chocolate Cherry Blossom on my desk," Muguette said. "So when she came back, I told her, it's not for me. I mean, I never ordered it. I don't have any money."

The other girl explained that it was from a young man who was also working at the factory. Muguette went over to the gentlemen, thanked him and told him she couldn't accept.

"I can't accept things that I don't pay for myself. Besides, I didn't know him. He understood," Muguette said. "Two weeks later, he hadn't understood because the cherry blossom was back on my desk. So I went again to thank him and told him that I don't need it. I don't want it. Then, he asked me whether he could walk me home after work. Okay! He walked me home, and two years later we got married... End of story."



Muguette and her husband Philip

Muguette's husband was named Philip, and he grew up in Montreal. She worked in the factory for three years until she found another job as a bookkeeper in a small jewelry store.

Although she had never done bookkeeping before, Muguette saw an ad in the newspaper and went for it.

"I went back [in the book] to see what the girl before me had done, and I copied approximately the same and I worked there for about three years," Muguette said.

Muguette liked that job better than ticketing because it was "more challenging."

To help Muguette further acclimate to Canada, her uncle took her to the Y to meet people her age.

"As I was sitting, I heard three or four kids speaking French, not the Canadian French, my French," Muguette said.

This was how she met her friend group of four kids. They used to get together every Sunday at Muguette's house.

"We wanted to go to a movie. I never had any money," Muguette recalled. "So everybody put their hand in the pocket to cut what money they had, and we counted, do we have enough to go to a movie?"

Muguette felt at home with these friends who spoke her type of French because, "the other French, I didn't understand."

Since Muguette was only 15 years old, her mom received much of the burdens of moving.

"She also didn't understand their French, but she went to work in a factory as a seamstress," Muguette said. "She was sewing. There, she met a few people. She made friends."

Overall, Muguette was often unhappy because she left all her friends in France. She also missed her favorite French foods: baguettes, crusty bread, and cheese. Overall, it was a very difficult adjustment.

LOOKING BACK

"I FORGIVE THE GERMANS. I WILL NEVER FORGIVE THE NAZI."

Muguette has returned to her hometown in France many times.

"The first time I went back, I'd been in Canada for 23 years, and I went to France and I went to my village, of course. I was lucky enough to meet my teacher who was still alive, Madame Bérault," Muguette said. "Oh, it was absolutely wonderful. And also, the girls I went to school with were still there."



Muguette and her school friends, circa 1942

Muguette had kept in touch with her friends there for years through letters and holiday cards. She did not find it hard to go back at all.

"It was a pleasure. You know, my heart was beating very hard when I saw the village again... very exciting," Muguette said.

Muguette tries her best to practice forgiveness.

"I forgive the Germans. I [will] never forgive the Nazi," Muguette said. "The bad guys weren't the soldiers...The poor soldier, he's doing his job. It's the guys that were operating them telling them what to do."

While Muguette forgives, she never forgets and does her part in promoting Holocaust education.

She submitted many of her belongings to the Montreal Holocaust Museum. This includes a vest her grandmother crocheted for her, which was also worn by her daughter and "other little artifacts like this. Whatever I find in the house, I gave to the museum."



*Pictured:
Muguette
with the
crocheted
vest she
donated*

However, there is one thing Muguette chose to keep in her possession.

"The only thing that I kept for me, I didn't give them, is my yellow star with the Juif stamp on it. That, I still have," Muguette said.



*Muguette's school picture
wearing the Juif star, circa 1942*

When asked why, she explained it was, "just some remembrance, you know, something that I just wanted to keep something from my past, and I already told my daughter that [when it] comes to her, she's not to dispose of it."

On the topic of family, Muguette reconnected with as many members as she could.

“My aunt, my father's sister, was in Paris, and in the later years, I used to go and visit her at least once every two years,” Muguette said. “Otherwise, my mother's sister Dina was assassinated in Auschwitz.”

Muguette’s experiences have deeply influenced her.

“I suppose, it has to be. You don't go through something like this, especially when you're a child that doesn't stay with you,” Muguette said. “For a long time I used to be afraid of policemen, here in Montreal.”



Present-day Muguette holding a picture from her past

Although Muguette is not extremely religious, she is a strong believer.

“G-d knows whether you're praying or not. He knows who you are if you're a good person,” Muguette said.

In her free time, Muguette enjoys reading. Recently, she read a historical fiction book called “Barman of the Ritz.” It is about the occupation of France as seen through the eyes of the Jewish barman of the Ritz Hotel.

She also loves listening to music, especially classical. She explains that her uncle on her father’s side was a violinist, influencing her love for the classical genre. He played the first violin with big orchestras in Paris, Hawaii, Argentina. Muguette has some musicality herself as she can play the harmonica.

The group Peter, Paul, and Mary are among her favorite artists with “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” earning the title of her favorite song. She appreciates how music can put you in a good mood.

“Even when it is on full blast, it's still calming,” Muguette said.

A MESSAGE TO THE FUTURE

“SPEAK UP. PROTEST. MAKE YOURSELF HEARD.”

Reader, I thank you for your engagement over this important series of articles. However, we must also thank and recognize the heart and soul that tells this story, the incredible Muguette. With strength, grace, honesty, and wisdom, she has been sharing her story for the past 10 years, thanks to a meaningful visit to the Museum of the Holocaust in Montreal.

“About 10 years ago, I remember my brother and I, we were coming out of the Museum of the Holocaust, and we were speaking French to each other,” Muguette recalled. “There was a young lady that came over to me says, ‘Oh, you speak French. You’re from France?... Have you written your story?’”

Upon responding no, the woman recommended her to go to the Azrieli Foundation, where she had written her own story. While Muguette had already written down her story on the computer, it had never gone anywhere. She felt that it was haphazard and disorderly, but the Azrieli foundation helped her put it together. Her book, [“Where Courage Lives”](#) was published in 2015.



*The cover of Muguette’s book,
“Where Courage Lives”*

[“I’ve always written it \[my story\] down. You know, as soon as I remember something, I put it down. I didn’t want to forget,”](#) [Muguette said. “My mother was urging me to write. But of course, when your mother tells you to do something, you’re not ready to do it. It’s too bad, because she passed away before I wrote the story.”](#)

Muguette was proud to see her book printed, in both English, French, and audio formats. For the audiobooks, Muguette did the voiceovers herself, spending multiple days reading the book in French and English collectively.



Muguette in the present day

Muguette has met other Holocaust survivors when visiting and speaking at the museum.

“There are quite a few of us, thank G-d, still alive,” Muguette said.

She finds an immediate bond to fellow survivors of the Holocaust due to their shared experiences.

[“It was as if we found ourselves brothers and sisters, and because most of us lived the same thing, not quite at the same time, not quite at the same place, but we really lived the same thing,”](#) Muguette said.

Muguette has children, great children, and great grandchildren to carry on her legacy. She spoke to her kids often about her story when they lived with her. Recently, Muguette spoke at her daughter's synagogue where she introduced her to the congregation, including her grandkids.

Since her great grandchildren are only seven-years old, 5-years old, 3-years old, and eight months old, she has not yet shared her story with them. However, she is very grateful to have such a long lineage after all she has been through.



Muguette with her husband and two kids

Muguette greatly enjoys going to conferences and does not find it difficult to share her story: "Who doesn't like to speak about themselves?" she shared with a laugh. The best part of giving presentations at schools is when children write her letters to thank her. She especially enjoys when their parents thank her because "it shows that the children remembered something."

When complimented on her efforts she humbly responded, "I'm not the only one. There's a lot of us. Thank God, there's still some of us that go to conferences."

Muguette travels around Canada to do conferences and utilizes Zoom to share her story to America. She often speaks multiple times in one week, whether it be at schools or at the Montreal Museum of the Holocaust, where it all began. She explains that her main takeaway to kids is resilience and tolerance.



Muguette at a conference telling her story

"After I speak to the children, I tell them, I said, later on, you will be in power. You will make the law. Be tolerant, tolerant of people who don't look like you, don't dress like you, don't talk like you, be tolerant," Muguette said. "I also tell them, if you see that injustice is being committed, speak up. Protest. Make yourself heard."

Muguette does not feel that her outlook on life has changed because of her experiences.

"I'm an incurable optimist. I always think that things are going to be better. It could, it could always be worse. G-d forbid," Muguette said.

Regarding current antisemitism, Muguette has a lot of hope.

"I always go back to my French history book. France and England fought for 119 years, and look at now. They're the best of friends. I have a lot of hope," Muguette said. "I'm sure that sooner or later, there'd be somebody making peace everywhere."