

Rachel Michelle Sommer

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Born alone – for the best marriage in the world

The story of a Romanian Holocaust survivor

By

Rachel Michelle Sommer

Born Alone is the 21-page spiral-bound typescript written by Rachel Sommer, a child-survivor of the Holocaust in Romania who, after emigrating to Melbourne in 1949, found solace in her loving marriage and family.

Pages 1-8 provide an overview of her family history and upbringing in Huși and Budapest. Pages 9-15 briefly recount her wartime experiences and subsequent emigration to France and Australia. Pages 16-21 describe her second marriage, extended family and friends in Australia and Israel.

Rachel Sommer was born on 15 September 1931 in the town of Huși in the western Moldavian region of Romania, the second child of Esther Silberstein and Herschel Haimovici. She had one older brother, Mayer, and three younger siblings – brothers Marcel and Aurel and sister Rivka and was raised in an Orthodox Jewish household. Due to financial difficulties, at the age of three Rachel was sent to live in Bucharest with her maternal grandparents – Riva and Julius Silberstein – who raised her as their own. Her grandfather, a devout and scholarly man, ran a successful business.

In September 1940, a fascist regime led by Ion Antonescu came to power in Romania and instituted harsh antisemitic measures. Jewish schools and businesses were seized and her grandfather lost his livelihood. As the war progressed, food shortages worsened. Although Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star, Rachel did not wear one.

In January 1941, a brutal pogrom was carried out by Iron Guard legionnaires. Although no one in her family was killed, four men broke into the Silberstein home. They dragged ten-year-old Rachel from her bed, hurling antisemitic insults at her, and tied her grandparents to chairs before beating them. After this incident, the Silberstein's rarely left the house, as many Jews were assaulted on the streets and rounded up for forced labour. They remained largely confined indoors until the end of the war.

After the war Rachel, then aged 14, joined the Habonim Zionist youth movement and began work as a dental assistant. With a group of friends and her then-boyfriend, Louis Haber, she journeyed to Hungary by foot – walking at night through the forests from Bucharest to Budapest. After crossing the border into Hungary, they were caught by police. Without valid documents, they were arrested and jailed but were later rescued by an unnamed Jewish organisation and transported to Paris.

In Paris, they were aided by the JOINT, which in mid-1946 placed them in a children's home in Versailles run by the Jewish humanitarian organisation Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE). A few months later, Rachel returned to Paris with Louis where she remained for eighteen months, supported by the JOINT and working as a nanny while awaiting emigration to Israel. In November 1947, their plans were disrupted by the civil war in Mandatory Palestine and they emigrated to Australia.

Rachel and Louis departed from Genoa aboard the *Cyrenia* and arrived in Sydney on 6 March 1949 where they were given accommodation and employment by the Jewish Welfare Society. Shortly after their arrival, the couple married and she quickly found work in the jewellery trade. Under her employer's mentorship, she became a skilled jeweller, selling her pieces to major Australian department stores. During this time, her maternal grandparents – and the broader Silberstein family – emigrated to Israel.

In the mid-1950s, Rachel separated from Louis and later met her second husband, Levy (Lee) Sommer while visiting fellow Romanian Holocaust survivors in Melbourne. In 1958, Rachel closed her Sydney factory and relocated to Melbourne to marry Lee. The couple shared a loving marriage for forty-seven years until his death and had three children – Anthony, Steven, and Dianne. Rachel later sponsored her brother Marcel's migration to Australia.

Born Alone is a short and impressionistic autobiography recounting the author's life and experiences of the Holocaust in Romania. Rather than a comprehensive record of the wartime years, the memoir is a personal testament to the redemptive power of love and family. Shaped by personal memory – with some vague details and typographical errors – the narrative is told in a simple and at times fragmented style that conveys the emotional weight of childhood trauma, the lasting impact of persecution, and the sustaining importance of family. It was written and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community Library's *Write Your Story* program and is available as a spiral-bound typescript in the library's collection.