

Clarín

Mundos Íntimos

The Argentine who helped us escape the Nazis

BY LISELOTTE LEISER. A JEW AND HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR BORN IN GERMANY IN 1919, SHE HAS LIVED IN ARGENTINA SINCE 1947

Making a difference. The Leisers, a German Jewish family who owned a shoe business in Berlin, managed to survive the Holocaust, though they spent a brutal spell in an internment camp. Businessman Alberto Grimoldi safeguarded their assets, which he returned to them as soon as the war was over, and helped them gain entry to Argentina



Recognition. Liselotte got in touch with Alberto Luis Grimoldi three years ago to share with him her wonderful memory of his father. Here they are in her home / EMILIANA MIGUELEZ

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They call me Lilo, but my real name is Liselotte Leiser de Nesviginsky. I'm ninety-four years old, and I was born in Berlin, daughter of a Jewish family that owned a large chain of shoe stores. I came to Argentina after World War II. I am a widow; for over fifty years, I was married to a wonderful man, a worthy companion on life's journey. I have one son, Jorge, who is fifty-eight.

I am also a **Holocaust survivor**. That does not suffice to capture my whole being, of course, but it is one way to get started. I'll explain things one at a time. My family's chain of shoe stores, which bore our last name—Leiser— had over thirty-five branches. In around 1933, **Alberto Enrique Grimoldi**, the well-known Argentine shoemaker, **visited one of our stores**. His father was the one who had founded the family business in 1895. Alberto had come to our stores to learn about customer service, sales, and marketing. I remember as if it were yesterday how, eager to learn every last detail of our

salespeople's technique, Alberto sat down alongside them on one of those low wooden stools that shoe salesmen used back then.

None of us could ever have imagined how important that man would be, how knowing him would change our lives forever.

Years went by and Hitler's dark star continued to rise in an increasingly dangerous and dreadful Germany. In '33, the Leiser chain—photographs of which are now on display in the Montreal Holocaust Museum—was "Aryanized." As a result of that **cruel and racist seizure**, my family was forced to form a "partnership" with a non-Jew so that the business would be in the hand of an "Aryan." In November 1938, the **infamous "Night of Broken Glass,"** known as *Kristallnacht*, occurred.

Starting with *Kristallnacht*, attacks on Jews were relentless and increasingly bloody; we endured all manner of persecution. One immediate example: I had attended a school for girls for some time, when one day—I was fourteen at the time—I was informed by one of the teachers, a cold clinical smile on her face, that I should immediately look for another school; because **I was a Jew I could not continue to study at that school**. It was a warning of what was to come.

When the situation had grown unbearable for us all, my parents decided we should leave Berlin for the Netherlands, a safer and less tumultuous place. I remember every detail that my waning memory permits of that crucial and harrowing moment. We were about to board a plane, I think Lufthansa was the airline. The **SS customs officials made us strip** to make sure we were not hiding jewels on our persons. That's what life was like back then. In Amsterdam, my family had another chain of shoe stores known as *Huff*. It was not as large as the chain in Germany, but it was sizeable and well respected. We were not as lucky as we had hoped in our new home.

In May 1940, the Netherlands was invaded and occupied by the Nazis. When we were faced with the threat of losing the business in Amsterdam as well, Grimoldi once again appeared on the scene miraculously, taking over the chain in the Netherlands pursuant to a simulated deal; **he promised to return what had been handed over to him** as soon as the war was over in what was literally a gentlemen's deal. I also know, though I was too young at the time to follow the details, that while my family was still in Amsterdam **it sent him money after he gave his word** to return it later. And that is just what happened. I am sometimes asked why my family trusted Grimoldi so much. The answer is much simpler than one might imagine: my parents decided to take the risk and grasp onto the promise of a young man who inspired trust in them as their world was collapsing at their feet. It is sometimes necessary in life to make room for **enduring human values**.

What happened next is hard to tell and sad to remember. One day, at six in the morning, I was standing as if lost at the door to our home in Amsterdam; the night before, I was out dancing with some friends at a nearby bar when the Gestapo arrived. I must add that not long before, my family, in a **final and desperate attempt to stave off imminent tragedy**, had bought Costa Rican passports for a considerable sum of money. They were granted by Count Rautenberg, consul for that Central American country at the time. I am not exaggerating when I say that having those documents that made us citizens of a country we had never visited was what **saved our lives**. Had we not had them, our **fate would undoubtedly have been the gas chambers at Auschwitz**. But even with that special advantage, they took us first to a large school where we slept on the floor in awful conditions, and then to Westerbork concentration camp, a place of transit—the same place where Anne Frank was held before being taken to Auschwitz where she would be **killed by the Nazis just as one of my aunts, her husband, and their small daughter had**.

In Westerbork, we slept in run-down barracks; we were treated like animals or worse. Men were taken to one side and women to the other. We would do our business in disgusting latrines, just holes dug in the floor, and wipe ourselves with newspaper if there was any. The beds, stacked two or three high, were made of iron and the mattresses of hay.

In the morning, we would wash ourselves as best we could in the livestock's water trough. I remember one thing from that period that, minor though it may seem, was—for some reason—very important to me. I made myself a **little horse-hair pillow that I would take with me and sleep on wherever I went** for the rest of my life. I still have it. Compared to others, though, I was lucky: a cousin of mine was already at the camp by the time I arrived, and she had become friendly with one of the doctors that worked there. I think his name was Doctor Spanier. He was Jewish as well, and forced to work at the camp's hospital. I worked at the hospital as a cook. I still have the armband and the yellow star we were forced to wear at all times. To feed my parents and others, **I would stealthily gather old potato, carrot, and yam peels** and a few bones I found here and there to make a sort of disgusting soup that, nonetheless, nourished a good many.

What comes next has to do with our much yearned-for liberation. An authority from the German State Department came to the camp and checked the authenticity of our Costa Rican passports. In 1944, we were taken to a refugee camp in France called Bourboule. One week later, the Normandy landing happened. Even today, talking about it thrills me. **We all embraced, weeping, and ran to the barbed wire fences, virtually biting our way through them** as we shouted the word “freedom” time and time again. A new life began for me at that very instant. What I had experienced was unforgettable for me and my parents, as well as for the other victims, Jews and non-Jews, who had, **in the best case, managed to survive a dreadful experience** rather than meet sure death.

Since we had friends and family in Uruguay, we went there, to Montevideo to be precise, where we stayed in a boarding house in the Pocitos neighborhood for some nine months. We wanted to go to Argentina, but that did not seem possible for political reasons: **Argentina was making it difficult for Jewish immigrants to enter the country at that time**. That was when Alberto Enrique Grimoldi, whom we had of course not forgotten, miraculously appeared on the scene for a third time. He had contacts in the government in Argentina, and he personally intervened so that we could come to the country. Apparently, he told officials of the Perón administration in power at the time that our knowledge of the shoe business was fundamental to carrying out his plans for the company. As soon as we arrived, Grimoldi returned to my family the money we had sent him and all the profits from the business put in his name in the Netherlands. My family never forgot that, and it is **one of my most cherished memories**.

What happened—or didn't happen—next is surprising. My husband and I worked in the tourism industry. We organized the first group of Argentine travelers to visit Antarctica. Life went on and **we lost touch with the Grimoldis**.

I did learn, though, that the man who had helped my family so in moments of grave danger had died in—if I am not mistaken—1953. Everything we had experienced was now, it would seem, to be forgotten forever. I am not sure why, but one day my assistant and dear friend, Virginia, and I set out to find the Grimoldis. It was an attempt, in a way, **to tie up loose ends**. We were helped by a newspaper article that described the family and its history in some detail. Virginia, who is more technology savvy than I, figured out how to get in touch with Grimoldi's son, now president of the company.

Thanks to an e-mail we sent him, we got back in touch. I was **invited to a gathering of the whole family at the factory** to explain what Alberto had done for us—it was very emotional for everyone present. What I said that day I will repeat now: if only all men had acted like Grimoldi did. His son, Alberto Luis, is not only the company's president and CEO, but also—I want to make it perfectly clear—a steadfast friend of my family: he never abandoned us.

I am ninety-four years old and, despite everything I have been through, I am glad to still be around. I like life! And if I have to die, I would rather it be sudden and painless, and in the company of all my loved ones.