

A Reader's Theater Script for
Odette's Secrets
Written by Maryann MacDonald
Script Adaptation by Betty Potter, TBA Committee Member

Readers:

Odette

Chorus of 3-5

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Chorus: How many secrets should one small child have to keep?

Narrator 1: In November 1934, Odette was born in Paris to Jewish parents of Polish origins, Berthe and George Melspajz. Odette's parents had no idea that they lived in the gateway of history.

Narrator 2: Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party had come to power in Germany in the previous year. Jews in that country were beginning to be excluded from public life.

Chorus: Heil Hitler! (Hail Hitler!), Heil, mein Führer! (Hail, my leader!), Sieg Heil! (Hail victory!).

Narrator 1: When Hitler invades Poland, France and England declare war on Germany, Odette's Papa joins the French army.

Odette: I helped Papa pack his things--his gray socks, his striped underwear, his razor, and his favorite book, his big blue dictionary.

Narrator 2: In the summer of 1940, Germany defeated France and installed the Vichy government to collaborate with the Nazis.

Chorus: (loudly, angrily) No Jews allowed! No dogs or Jews! No Jews served! Jews get out! No Jews allowed!

Narrator 1: At last a letter comes from Papa...

Odette: My papa, a prisoner of the German soldiers! Mama barely has money for food, but we buy train tickets to go see him. Rows and rows of French prisoners march past, loading into boxcars to be taken to Germany. “Papa!”

Narrator 2: As Odette’s papa turns toward her voice, a rifle butt slams into his back. In a moment, he is loaded and gone.

Chorus: (marching feet as Odette speaks)

Odette: Everywhere we look now, we see soldiers in Paris. They all wear huge black boots and stiff uniforms belted with shiny buckles. Some have lightning bolts on their collars.

Narrator 1: Fear is in the air. What’s next? The first large-scale roundups of Jews take place, but only men are arrested. They are kept in camps in France.

Odette: Mama tells me two big secrets. She has joined the secret fight for France. She gets money for guns to fight the enemy soldiers. She helps find hiding places for children in trouble. Sometimes visitors come. They whisper secret passwords at the door. If the soldiers find out, it will be the end of her. I promise her I will never tell anyone. She tells me that she and her friends have made a plan to keep their own children safe. If it gets too dangerous, I will go with my friends on the train to a safe place in the country. But how could I ever go away and leave my mother!

Chorus: (a thunder of footsteps, a fury of knocks at the door, cabinets and doors banging)

Odette: It’s the middle of the night and I am awake, but too frightened to move. I pretend to be asleep. Soldiers are here to arrest Mama...and Papa too! When Mama shows them the papers that prove Papa is a prisoner of war, they finally leave. If my father weren’t a soldier, would they have taken Mama away and left me alone? I can’t ask anyone because they think I am asleep. In the morning, we both pretend it’s just another day.

Narrator 2: In June 1942, Odette learned how they would identify Jews. All French Jews over the age of six were required to wear yellow stars on their clothing for everyone to see.

Odette: (quietly) My star is too bright. It screams “Jew!” I shouldn’t cover it up with my school bag because I can get into trouble, but I am frightened. Suddenly, two huge soldiers loom in front of me! One soldier grabs my school bag and throws it to the sidewalk. Will he beat me? Kick me? Arrest me and send me away? Things like this happen to Jews every day now in Paris. The soldier and his friend just laugh and stagger away. When I can

breathe again, I walk to school. There is nothing else to do.

Chorus: (cruel laughter) Jew!

Odette: Even at school I am not safe. On the playground, children attack me. A teacher comes to help and, after that, I stay close to her, but still these children hiss at me:

Chorus: “Coward! Jew! Teacher’s Pet!”

Narrator 1: In July 1942, nearly thirteen thousand foreign-born Jews are arrested in Paris and deported to death camps. Odette and her mother barely escape. It is time for Odette to escape to the Vendée.

Odette: You’ll come with me, won’t you, Mama? (scream) Mama! Don’t leave me!!

Narrator 2: After a lengthy, fear-fraught train journey with a stranger, Odette and three friends meet Madame Raffin and her family. Many Catholic families accepted Jewish children into their homes in country villages to hide them from the Nazis. The children would be well fed and safe, but must learn to live as Christians.

Odette: I must never forget that I am a Christian here. This is easy. I am used to keeping secrets. I wonder what Mama would say if she knew that once in a while, I almost forget who I really am...

Narrator 1: In January 1943, the first roundups of French-born Jews begin and Odette’s mama escapes Paris and joins Odette in hiding in the country.

Odette: I don’t want to move to a new village, but Mama says it is better to go somewhere else where no one knows we are Jewish. We will change our name and never, ever talk about Papa because his name is foreign. I do not tell Mama that I have almost forgotten about Papa, anyway.

Chorus: You thought you could fool us! We’re not stupid! You’re a Jew! Get out of this village! No Jews here! Get out! Get out! We’ll tell the soldiers about you!

Odette: But that doesn’t happen this time. The village mayor, a freedom fighter, like Mama, tells our neighbors he knows us from Paris and we are not Jews. Because he is the mayor, the villagers pretend to believe him. Mama and I pretend to forget what the villagers have done. I keep all my sadness and anger inside with my other secrets. It is safer that way.

Narrator 2: Odette and her mother live in fear, pretending, until the Allied Forces defeat the Nazis in France and liberate Paris in August 1944. They return to Paris to pick up their lives again. But they can't, not as before. The war has changed everything and everyone.

Odette: I lie awake in the night trying to remember who I am. I belong to my family, of course, and I am a child of France. But, more than these, my heart tells me now I'm a child of my people. I am a Jew. I don't need to hide anymore, and I don't want to keep any more secrets.

Narrator 1: Finally, in May 1945, Germany surrenders, death camps in Poland are liberated, and surviving Jews begin to try to return to their homes. George Melspajz is released from prisoner of war camp in Germany and returned home in July, 1945.

Odette: I was only a little girl when my father went away. He doesn't know me and I don't know him. How can I be sure he's even my father? This man begins to tell me stories and I begin to remember the man who read stories to me so long ago. The man says, "I have a present for you." It is a fine leather notebook--not a diary, there is no lock and key for keeping secrets. I'll write my story here in the most beautiful words I can find--I must!

Chorus: The story of bombs and broom closets, of stars and soldiers, of cats and cousins, of heaven and hell.

Odette: The story of all the secrets I kept...

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