

## BEAR

Fred Lessing was four years old when the Germans invaded Holland. When he was six, the deportations of Jews began.

Fred recalls that his parents knew that at some point they would be deported to a camp, and so a bag was prepared for each member of the family in advance. These bags were left near the front entrance of their home in Delft. One day, a family friend called and told Fred's parents that they appeared on a list of Jews slated for deportation in the coming hours. Fred was playing upstairs when his mother called Fred and his older brother to come down and from the expression on her face, it was clear to Fred that something terrible was about to happen. She put her arms around her children and said to them “You are Jewish children. But if anyone finds this out they will kill you. We are leaving the house now; do not take anything with you, just wear your coats and we'll act like we're going out for a stroll. We don't want to draw any attention”. Although their bags remained by the front door, on his way out, Fred grabbed his teddy bear “Bear”.

For the next three years, Fred was hidden at a number of houses. Each time his mother would pretend to be someone else: once a woman whose house had been destroyed and was looking for temporary refuge for her son; and once as a woman whose husband had been injured in a traffic accident. The story always changed, and Fred would not remain for long in the same place. At some stage his mother would return and take him to another house. “I understood that I had to be the sweetest, the most polite, the most considerate and always ready to help so that I wouldn't be thrown out”. Fred did not stay long in any one place. His mother would always show up and take him elsewhere. “I would talk to Bear all the time, share my feelings with him and cry to him”. Bear was the only one who accompanied Fred as he moved from house to house and family to family, learning each time anew how to act in each home. “He was my only connection to my family”.

One day, Fred became ill with a high fever. His mother suddenly appeared and stayed with him for a while. Before she left, she asked him if there was anything he needed or wanted. Fred held up Bear whose head was torn because it had been bitten by a dog during an earlier period of hiding, “I would like Bear to have a new head”, he said. When he awoke the next morning, his mother was gone but Bear had a brand new head, created from the lining of his coat.

Fred, his parents and his brother survived the Holocaust. After the war, the teddy bear was kept by Fred until Yad Vashem approached him and asked if he would be willing to loan it for an exhibition on toys and dolls during the Holocaust. Fred requested a number of days to

think over the idea of sending his beloved Bear so far away – for him Bear was not just a toy. After careful consideration, he responded to Yad Vashem’s request: “I spoke with my teddy bear and explained that for the first time ever, we were to be parted. The reason I gave was that he had an important mission – to go to Israel to be part of an exhibition with other toys from the Holocaust, and there he would tell our story to children who would come to visit the [exhibition](#).”

Both “Colette” and “Bear” took on several roles at once: normal child’s play that became more significant in a world of isolation, fear and deprivation, as well as a means of helping the adults of the family in their attempts to be saved. The relationship the children developed with the dolls and the roles they played reflected the changes in their lives both in the family dynamic, as well as in the challenges the children faced with various new families. The two survivors had trouble parting from the artifacts and depositing them with Yad Vashem, as they were the only objects that had survived from their childhood – a childhood spent in the shadow of fear.



Fred Lessing's teddy bear which accompanied him throughout his period in hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

Yad Vashem Artifacts collection, courtesy of Fred Lessing, Michigan, USA