

COLETTE

Playing with dolls embodies a great deal of psychological and sociological meaning. Here are stories of two children for whom the role of doll play was pivotal, and who even exceeded the normal bounds of play.

Claudine Schwartz-Rudel was seven years old when she and her mother fled Paris in the summer of 1942 to join her father, who had escaped earlier. The only thing Claudine took with her was her doll “Colette”, which never left her side. “You are no longer Claudine Schwartz”, her mother told her, explaining that from now on, due to the situation, she would bear the assumed name Françoise Marta. Claudine in turn explained to her doll that she could no longer be called Colette, but rather would also need to be called Françoise. “But in my heart I always called her Colette”, she says.

Claudine’s mother told her to always watch her doll carefully. “I didn’t understand why she that”, recalled Claudine.

When they met her father in southern France, he explained to Claudine that she would again need to change her name, this time to Michelle.

At first, Claudine was hidden in a small room that she was not allowed to leave. From time to time, her mother would come in to make sure she was okay, and to bring her food. When her mother left, Claudine would say to Colette, “You see? Mother cannot stay with me, only you stay with me.”

When she moved with her parents elsewhere, Claudine began to attend the local school. Every day upon returning from the Christian school she raced to her bed to find Colette and share with her the events of the day.

“My doll was with me all the time and I told her everything – she helped me through those dark times”, Claudine says. From holding and embracing the doll so often Colette’s clothes disintegrated, and so Claudine’s mother sewed her a new dress with fabric taken from her own nightgown.

In October 1943, Claudine awoke and did not see her doll beside her. Alarmed, she called for her mother. When she entered the kitchen she saw, to her surprise, Colette in pieces and her father fixing it, and didn’t understand why.

Only after the war did Claudine learn that her mother hid several coins wrapped in fabric within the doll as they were about to flee, so that she would have money if needed.



The "Colette" doll belonging to Claudine Rudel (Schwarz), who fled with her parents to southern France following the Nazi occupation.

Yad Vashem Artifacts collection, courtesy of Claudine Schwartz (Rudel), Jerusalem, Israel