

Adolfo Kaminsky: Forger for the Good

Argentine-born French Jew Adolfo Kaminsky suddenly found himself in the vortex of 1930s anti-Semitism. Arrested along with his family, he was providentially freed and able to return to Occupied Paris, where he began a remarkable career as a master forger and counterfeiter. His aim was to help those without documents escape arrest and deportation. His actress and author daughter Sarah has written a book that tries to put the quiet heroism of his life in perspective.

by *Marina Gersony*

Sarah Kaminsky was born in 1979 in Sidi M'hamed, Algeria, and has lived in France since she was three years old. She's a professional actress and the author of screenplays. Her unique beauty – amber skin, emerald eyes and dark curls – is the result of a mixed marriage. Her mother, Leila, a southern Algerian Tuareg, is the daughter of a progressive imam who studied law at the University of Algiers. She championed the decolonization of Africa and became interested in contemporary art and photography. Her father, Adolfo Kaminsky, an Ashkenazi Jew of Russian, Ukrainian and Georgian origin, is a streetwise teacher who helps young delinquents right their lives by finding them work and teaching them photography.

At least that's what Sarah Kaminsky believed (not without a few doubts) for decades. That is, until she came across a newspaper article headlined: "A Counterfeiter 'Remakes' His Virginity." Part of the text read: "An old forger now teaches youth the meaning of morality... A former supporter of the Algerian FLN against France helps rehabilitate young offenders in the Maghreb."

A counterfeiter. Who would have ever imagined, Sara thought to her incredulously, determined to investigate her father's enigmatic and mysterious past. She spoke to

him in search of an explanation. Suddenly, she was no longer was she dealing with her adored, mild-mannered father, now an old man – he is 86; she is 32 – but an entirely different figure, one she would soon discover had spent a lifetime in the service of noble causes.

"I remember seeing letters addressed to you," she told her father, "and one in particular aroused my interest. The writer expressed thanks for your work in spying and counter-espionage for the French army in 1945."

"My father was a secret agent," she says. "So, depending on points of view, he was a forger, a partisan, a hero, a traitor, a spy, an outlaws, a Mudjaid [Islamist]..."

Sarah soon dedicated herself to reconstructing her father's story, one "of secrecy, passion and political action, anxiety and fear." She spoke to him at length and tracked down his old friends. She combed through archives, documents and conducted countless interviews. The result was her 2009 French-language book, "Adolfo Kaminsky, une vie de faussaire" ("Adolfo Kaminski: The Life of a Forger," translated into Italian in 2011). "Mortality, and the passage of time, suggested to me why I had to write this book, and quickly, before it was too late. Before he was gone, and with him his secrets, his history. I didn't want the puzzles of his life to remain without explanation."

So who is Adolfo Kaminsky, this man who lived a double, triple, perhaps quadruple life? His story began long ago and has much in common with many 20th century Eastern Europe Jews. It involves escapes, violence, sudden departures, and exile, often forced.

Adolfo's parents, both Russian Jews, met in Paris in

Adolfo Kaminsky.



1916. His mother had escaped the pogroms and his father, a Marxist sympathizer and journalist for the newspaper of the Bund, was forced into exile in France. When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, the French government ordered the immediate expulsion of all the resident Russians believed to have Communist affiliations.

As a result, the couple immigrated to Argentina, where Adolfo and his brothers were born. Later on, Kaminsky, now an Argentine national, returned to Europe, first to Paris and then to Normandy, where he lived with an uncle. His family soon joined him. The events of 1938, including the annexation of Austria by Hitler's Germany and the anti-Jewish witch hunt, events that suggested war was around the corner, helped facilitate the reunion.

Not yet 14, Adolfo began working. His only education had been primary school. His first job was with his uncle. After that he worked an aircraft factory, making plane dashboard. He finally responded to an ad seeking an apprentice dyer of cloth and paper. Thrust suddenly into the world of colors, tints and cleaners, he became fascinated by formulas and chemical processes. At night, he conducted private experiments, gradually teaching himself and eventually perfecting the art of counterfeiting. He soon became interested in how and why ink discolors. Of that time, he says simply: "I found my calling."

Adolfo put aside his earnings and soon opened a small laboratory. At the same time, the pro-Nazi Vichy state had begun issuing its first anti-Semitic decrees. Jews could no longer hold bank accounts. Life turned hard. Obtaining basic work necessities and supplies became increasingly difficult.

Thanks to his lab, Adolfo could now make shoe polish, which he distributed free. He also made soap with sodium carbonate and paraffin candles that were exceedingly useful given the frequent power outages. Meanwhile, his mother had died under mysterious circumstances, possibly murdered, while the rest of Kaminsky family was forced to flee their home, which had been requisitioned by the German military.

From that day forward, in addition to distributing soap, candles and salt, Adolfo began to produce more dangerous products destined to assist the French Resistance. He created corrosives to damage telegraph and telephone lines and rust railroad tracks. He even built s-

mall explosive detonators. "By being a part of these sabotage efforts," he recalled, "I felt for the first time just a little less helpless in the face of my mother's death. At least I could go through with revenge. I felt proud. I was in the Resistance."

Soon after, the Germans arrested him along with his younger brother, both caught in the act while counterfeiting documents. They were forced into a truck where they were reunited with the rest of the family, also detained. They were sent to Drancy, a cornerstone transit camp for Jews arrested on French soil (located on Vichy-occupied and run territory). Over four years, the barbed-wire concrete block compound was the grim staging area for some 70,000 Jews of many nationalities, an estimated 67,000 of whom were deported to what the Nazis called "work camps," namely Auschwitz.

The Kaminsky family survived only thanks to the letters written at the last moment by Adolfo's brother, Paul. Separate letters came in for each member of the family, with salient details, insisting that the Argentine government sought their release.

After three months in prison, Adolfo found himself in increasingly anti-Semitic occupied Paris, devastated by survivor's guilt. "In Drancy, I discovered Jews and their diversity," says Adolfo. "I loved them. I loved through them. I felt Jewish, and I never lost that sense of identity." Despite his convictions, he resisted immigrating to Israel after its formation in 1947. "I had imagined a secular country. I couldn't stand it that the new state had decided to identify itself with religion and individualism."

In Paris, Adolfo never wore a yellow star. His documents spoke for themselves. He could couldn't walk into hotel, return to Normandy or even buy food. Everything was forbidden to Jews. Freedom was illusory. He was arrested and released on several occasions, leading him to forge his first identity card. This marked the beginning of a brilliant career as a master forger.

Adolfo put his skills to work for those he considered needy and helpless. He assisted Jews against the Nazis, Holocaust survivors who needed documentation to move to Israel. Later, worked on behalf of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in the Algerian war of independence against colonial France. He assisted revolutionaries in Latin America and opponents of the dictatorships of Francisco Franco in Spain, Fernando Salazar in Portugal, and the Greek junta. He was active in helping or-

ganizations seeking decolonization in Africa. He helped American Vietnam draft-dodgers and even forged a document to allow West German student radical Daniel Cohn Bendit, known as "Danny the Red," to speak at a 1968 rally. He helped create fictitious identities for those who needed them to escape violence, oppression, war and injustice.

To make ends meet he worked as a photographer, since producing false documents wasn't rich man's work. Then again, Alfonso had never valued money as an end unto itself. "What I really wanted was to ensure that people had access to freedom of movement," Adolfo told his daughter. "Maybe that's because of my childhood, or my family heritage, and all the years of exile that my parents had been forced to endure. Those years taught me the true meaning of the word 'document,' this meaning of these pieces of paper, which for a family like mine, wandering from one exile to another for decades, were so very difficult to obtain."

"Good forger" Adolfo is probably responsible for saving countless lives. He worked tirelessly in clandestine labs to produce his fakes, while advertising himself as a legitimate photographer. Most of the work was done in solitude, in darkness, amid dyes and inks. He'd copy, lighten and darken, meticulously producing precise work that no one would question. He worked in constant fear of being found out and trusted only a handful of accomplices. Even then, he couldn't be sure of their loyalty. Double-dealing was commonplace. Not even his family knew what he did on the side, since he feared that even the slightest error could jeopardize his work and the lives of others."

"Was I scared?" he asks himself rhetorically. "Yes, at the time I was. But I was also under threat by doing nothing.



Train tracks leading to the extermination camp at Auschwitz.

At a certain point I decided it was best to act. The risk was high but worth it for something more important than the risk itself. I'm not a hero. I just couldn't stand not doing

anything when so many people were in harm's way." Adolfo recalls a time when the Nazis prepared a huge raid that involved simultaneously emptying out three children's institutes over the course of three days, some 300 children. He immediately went to work. "The trick was to stay awake as long as possible. To ward off sleep at all costs against sleep. In an hour I made 30 fake documents. My thought process was, 'If I sleep an hour I am responsible for the deaths of 30 people.' After two nights of painstaking work, my eyes endless glued to a microscope, my worst enemy was cumulative fatigue. I had to hold my breath so that my hand didn't tremble. Manufacturing false documents is a meticulous un-

dertaking, like the work of a true goldsmith. What always most worried me was making some small technical error. A second of distraction could be lethal for the holder of the forged document. Again, I had to constantly remind myself that each document was a life or death matter involving a human being."

Today, Adolfo Kaminsky is an elderly man with a white beard and a broad smile. His tired eyes maintain a seductive allure. France would eventually acknowledge his role. He has been awarded the Croix du Combattant, the Croix du combattant volontaire de la Résistance, and recently the Médaille de Vermeil de la Ville de Paris for his acts during the Resistance.

Not surprisingly, his story has been mentioned as potential film material (a documentary, "Forging Identity," was made released in 2000). "I decided to tell my story," Adolfo concludes, "because I think it is important that young people become aware that you can do something, even in the most dire situations." ●