

Marcel Marceau – the art of mime

Born March 22, 1923 · Strasbourg, Bas-Rhin, France

Died September 22, 2007 · Cahors, Lot, France

Birth name Marcel Mangel

Height 5' 9" (1.75 m)

Marcel Marceau was the legendary Jewish mime artist, who survived the Nazi occupation, and saved many children in WWII. He was regarded for his unique acting style, moving audiences without uttering a single word, and was known to the world as a "master of silence."

He was born Marcel Mangel on March 22, 1923, in Strasbourg, Alsace, France, and was brought up in Strasbourg and Lille. There he was introduced to music and theatre by his father, Charles Mangel, a butcher, who was also a singer and a supporter of arts and music. His mother, Anne, took Marcel to a Charlie Chaplin's movie at the age of 5. Marcel was entranced and decided to become a mime artist. Young Marcel was also fond of art and literature, he studied English in addition to his French and German, and became trilingual.

At the beginning of the Second World War, he had to hide his Jewish origin and changed his name to Marceau, when his Jewish family was forced to flee their home. His father was deported to Auschwitz, where he was killed in 1944. Both Marceau and his brother, Alain, were in a French underground movement that helped children to escape to safety, into neutral Switzerland.

Marcel's stage name was "Bip". During World War II, his skills as a mime artist were valuable for another reason: He used his mime skills to save Jewish children during the Holocaust. Thousands of children were left as orphans after their parents had been murdered by the Nazis. The children were also in danger of being killed, if found.

Marceau was recruited to help the French Resistance by his cousin, Georges Loinger, a commander in the secret unit who was part of a Jewish relief group that smuggled Jewish orphans from occupied France to neutral countries. This organization was credited with saving around 350 children.

Their mission was to evacuate Jewish children who had been hiding in a French Catholic orphanage and to get them to the Swiss border, where they would find safety. But traveling with large groups of children was anything but easy. Marceau had a secret weapon: His training as a mime.

He started doing performances in the orphanage, and through mime, was able to help children heal emotionally from the horrors of war and loss of their parents. As the Nazi army started to move south, it was obvious that a large number of Jewish children in one

orphanage could easily be discovered. The rescue organization had to start preparing children to travel in small groups to the Swiss border. The children had to be trained to appear as if they were simply going on vacation to a home near the Swiss border. Marcel helped with the training and really put the children at ease. Marceau didn't just use his acting skills to make the children feel comfortable: He used them to save their lives. He mimed to keep children quiet as they were escaping.

"The kids loved Marcel and felt safe with him," Loinger told the Jewish Telegraph Agency in 2007, after Marceau's death.

One of Marceau's escape expeditions involved posing as a Boy Scout leader to trick the authorities. He disguised himself in Scout uniform, with 24 Jewish children also dressed in Scout uniforms. He took them through the forests to the border, where someone else would take them into Switzerland. And when he unexpectedly ran into a group of German soldiers near the end of the war, he pretended he was a member of the French Army and demanded they surrender. They did—all 30 of them.

Marceau saved at least 70 children. In addition to his border crossing feats, he also forged identity documents to make Jews look younger so they'd be allowed to flee Nazi deportation.

In 1959, Marcel Marceau established his own school in Paris, and later the Marceau Foundation to promote the art of pantomime in the United States. His "art of silence" filled a remarkable acting career that lasted over 60 years. He was an actor, director, teacher, interpreter, and public figure, and made extensive tours in countries on five continents.

In 2022, speaking of his father's murder in Auschwitz, he said, "I cried for my father, but I also cried for the millions of people who died...Destiny permitted me to live. This is why I have to bring hope to people who struggle in the world."

<https://www.history.com/articles/marcel-marceau-wwii-french-resistance-georges-loinger>

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0545131/bio/>

Questions

1. What is the art of mime?
2. Where did Marcel Marceau live and when?
3. At what age did he die?
4. Why did he change his name from Marcel Mangel to Marcel Marceau?
5. What was the French Resistance? (research this)
6. Describe the mission of rescuing Jewish children, (part of the French Resistance movement)

7. How many children did the organization rescue?
8. How many did Marcel Marceau personally rescue?
9. Why did the children have to be moved from the orphanage?
9. What was Marcel's role in the mission?
10. Why were the children safe once they crossed the Swiss border? (research this)
11. What was Marcel's reflection on his father's death?