

-TITLE- MARIET-HENRIETTE CEULEMANS
-I_DATE- AUGUST 3, 1988
-SOURCE- CHRISTIAN RESCUERS PROJECT
-RESTRICTIONS-
-SOUND_QUALITY- FAIR
-IMAGE_QUALITY- GOOD
-DURATION-
-LANGUAGES- FRENCH
-KEY_SEGMENT-
-GEOGRAPHIC_NAME-
-PERSONAL_NAME-
-CORPORATE_NAME-
-KEY_WORDS-
-NOTES-
-CONTENTS-

Mrs. Ceulemans was a nurse who, in 1936, became the director of a creche (child-care center) in Brussels. The creche cared for children from newborn through three years old during the day and also overnight, if necessary

In 1942 a priest asked her to take Jewish children to live at the creche under assumed names. She received the approval of the creche's board of directors, and began to take Jewish children whose parents were deported by the Germans. Some Belgians helped by bringing children, rations, or false papers. Others helped by overlooking letters sent to city hall denouncing the creche, or by warning the Ceulemans about such letters.

In 1943, the creche placed the children with Belgian families, because Mr. and Mrs. Ceulemans believed the creche might be raided.

Throughout most of the interview, Mrs. Ceulemans speaks in a matter-of-fact manner and describes her motivation as simply a "normal" desire to help. In dramatic contrast, however, she weeps near the end of the interview when asked what she would like children to know about the war years. "Just be human," she cries. (times are approximate)

0 min. -- She was born in 1912 to the Feremans family. Her father's family was from Malines in Northern Belgium. She studied nursing in Brussels. Her father and his six siblings lived from the income from the land owned by her grandfather; none of them had to work. She has no siblings. Her mother lived in a small town.

4 min. -- Her parents taught her "moral lessons." When he was 45 her father was paralyzed as she is now. (She appears to have had a stroke.) She was six years old at the time. Her father lived until he was 69 years old, and was able to walk with a cane.

6 min. -- Her parents were Catholic. Her mother was observant, and her father wasn't. She was observant; this was very important to her. She went to school in Brussels, where she was born. Her parents lived in Brussels from the time they were married.

7.5 min. -- Her parents had no Jewish friends. Neither did she -- "not especially." She started to train as a nurse at 18 years old, and finished her training at 20 or 21. She worked as a visiting nurse, doing social work with poor people.

9 min. -- She hadn't seen her parents help the poor in this way, but she'd always wanted to become a nurse and take care of children. She became director of the creche in 1936.

10 min. -- Working parents would leave their children for the day at the creche. The creche served two purposes: to take care of young children, and to help single mothers. Children who were found wandering in the streets, or sleeping in the train station, were brought to the creche. To respond to this need she arranged to transform the creche from a day nursery to a day-and-night care center, which was later used for Jewish children.

12 min. -- She was married in 1934. Her husband was a broker in the Brussels stock exchange. They met in France when they were six years old.

13 min. -- The creche cared for children at night even before the war. In 1942 a priest came and asked her if she wanted to hide Jewish children.

14.5 min. -- She exchanges pleasantries with another resident of the old-age home in which she lives.

15 min. -- She first knew of Hitler's policies at the beginning of the war, when all the doctors and nurses received a notice forbidding them to take care of Jews.

16.5 min. -- Her motivation to help came from her own feelings, rather than her religion. She's always wanted to help. She felt that nursing was a vocation for her.

18 min. -- The priest who asked her to help was named D'Avignon (?). He came from a commune (a church) in Brussels. He was imprisoned in Breendonk, a prison in Belgium, during the war. He was deported to Germany, and died there.

19 min. -- She was aware of the risk she was taking. She knew she could go to prison if this was discovered.

20 min. -- When the priest asked her whether she would care for the children she couldn't answer for herself. She asked the committee in charge of the creche, and they agreed that she could do this. Jewish children came to the creche after the Germans had burst into their homes in the middle of the night, taken the Jews by truck to Malines and then to Germany. The Jews would give their babies and young children to neighbors, or whoever they could find. These people knew she would take care of the children, so they would bring them to her. Some were very small, and some were a little bit older.

21 min. -- Her husband knew of her work. They both lived at the creche, so they were both taking the same risk. One day, at the stock exchange, someone told him to be careful, because people were talking about his activities.

22 min. -- She was denounced many times by a nurse, and there were signed letters from some neighbors. A letter was sent to the commune in town.

23 min. -- Her husband joins her in the interview. She jokes with the interviewer that she should have dressed up for the filming.

Her husband tells that once, at the stock exchange, someone came up behind him, told him not to turn around, and cautioned him to take precautions, because his wife was being denounced. This took place in 1943, he thinks. He never recognized the voice or knew who had spoken.

24 min. -- The president of the national association for children was giving them food. Everyone was suspicious because they were asking for sugar for the children.

25 min. -- She kept a list of the children's real names along with the false names. The false names were used on ration cards so they could get food. The people at the ration card office understood what was going on. A lot of people helped one another during the war.

26 min. -- Sixteen children lived at the creche. They came a few at a time, as their parents were deported. The creche was normally for children from newborn to three years old, but her children and the employees' children were there also, and some were older. Her children were born in 1934, 1938, and 1942.

27 min. -- They had to find homes for the children quickly in 1943. One baby was placed in a home on the day it was born. Many of these families adopted the children after the war.

28 min. -- The interviewer asks the couple whether they recognized various names.

29 min. -- She met Madame Juspa (ph) when she came to the creche when she was taking care of the children.

29.5 min. -- The children were moved from the creche in 1943 not particularly because of the warning the husband received at the stock market. Generally, 1943 was the worst year as far as Jews were concerned. There were many arrests.

30 min. -- "It was normal" to take such risks. One must help. They were against the German occupation.

30.5 min. -- One time the Germans came to the creche. They came, not for the children, but to go out on a date with one of the women working there.

It was frightening, because at first she didn't understand why they were coming to the creche.

31 min. -- In their opinion, the Germans never came to take the children from the creche because the people working at City Hall, where the denunciations were received, were good people, too: they did not pursue the issue.

31.5 min. -- A city employee came to warn them. He was not inherently a bad man, but he was part of the fascist movement, the "New Order." He said, "Listen, I know there are a lot of Jewish children here." He said to be careful.

After receiving this warning, they began to evacuate the children. They didn't trust the New Order.

32.5 min. -- She was receiving money from England, and receiving stamps and cards directly from the [minister or ministry] to feed the children.

33 min. -- A friend or relatives arrives and visits with the couple .

34 min. -- The children never returned to the creche. Some mothers came back and asked for their children's clothing or shoes, but she couldn't give them because she was using them for the other children. After the war, the children were too old to return to the creche.

35 min. -- [Did they feel they were doing something important?] -- "No -- normal."

[Was it a time of fear?] -- "Yes, fear -- like everyone."

35.5 min. -- Not many of the parents returned. Mr. and Mrs. Ceulemans did not keep in touch with any of the children after the war. The Jewish children living at the creche were 15 days old through three years old.

36 min. -- She was busy during that time. It was difficult because they didn't have enough sugar, gas, or other supplies. Only one small stove heated the whole creche. Every day, she rose at 6 a.m. to prepare the milk.

37 min. -- After the war, they continued to operate the creche until 1946. Then she became a hospital nurse. She worked in two different hospitals over the years.

37.5 min. -- [Do you think of the war as a special time in your life?] -- "Yes, of course."

38 min. -- They knew the Germans were exterminating Jews.

38.5 min. -- [Did the war teach you something about yourself, or about people?] "No, I don't think so."

There are good people and bad people in time of peace and times of war. The only difference is that in war, there are collaborators and members of the resistance, but that's all.

39 min. -- It was a very difficult time for everyone. There was not enough food. It was a very nervous time; you had to struggle to survive.

39.5 min. -- [Did you experience any physical symptoms after the war?] -- "No."

She thinks about the war often, but not about particular children.

40 min. -- [Why do you think you were able to do this?] -- "Simply to help others. I just always wanted to help."

40.5 min. -- Her daughter is an oncologist. Another child is a businessman in Zaire, Africa. The third works for a charter company.

41.5 min. -- [In writing a book about this time, for children, what would you like children to know?] -- She pauses and begin to cry. (The camera is no longer directed at the Mrs. Ceulemans at this point.) -- "Just to be human."

Mr. Ceulemans says that even though his wife thinks she experienced no emotional effects from the war, she's been more tense since then, because of the tension during that time.

43 min. -- [Was it a time of great tension and fear?] -- Mrs. Ceulemans weeps, and cannot answer.

43.5 min. -- She tells about her daughter in Brussels.

44 min. -- The camera shows photos and paintings in the couples room.

48 min. -- The interviewer helps her to arrange a shawl over her bathrobe before being photographed for the children's book.

49.5 min. -- Audio ends, and video ends soon afterwards.
.END.