

RG-50.029*0015

Gettner, Helene

Taped on August 1, 1992

1 video cassette

Abstract:

Helene Gettner was born on Feb. 4, 1932 in Antwerp, Belgium, where she lived with her parents and younger twin sisters. Her parents had a men's clothing store. The family was not too involved with the Jewish community, but they observed the major holidays. When Germany invaded Belgium and forced Jewish businesses to put signs in windows, the Gettners moved to the small town, Oray, near Liège. The father was sent to a forced labor camp in France, but was soon placed on a train, which he knew was going to Auschwitz. He escaped from the train and returned to his family in Oray. Villagers were generally protective of their Jewish residents, and the Gettners were hidden when there was danger. The immediate Gettner family survived the war, although relatives were killed. Helene came to United States, learned English, married a physicist, and raised three daughters.

- 1:00: Helene lived in Antwerp with her parents and younger twin sisters. She also had two aunts and their families were in Belgium. Her parents owned a men's clothing store. Life was okay before the war.
- 1:24: Helene did not live in the Jewish part of Antwerp. Before the war, she was not in a concentrated Jewish community.
- 2:16: The family went to synagogue for the Jewish holidays. Only her father went every week.
- 2:37: Helene does not remember anyone saying anything about anti-Semitism before the war.
- 3:16: Before the war, Helene went to a Catholic school for kindergarten, close to her home. In first grade she went to a private French school.
- Helene's mother was born in the French part of Belgium and she was very much a Francophile. She wanted her children to learn French.
- 4:07: She remembers her mother saying that she wished they had gone to France before the war. Helene's mother remembered planes and bombs from the first World War.
- 4:56: Helene's parents told her that the Germans had invaded Belgium. She saw German planes in the sky.

- 5:29: In May of 1940, Belgium was invaded and the war was expected to be over in a few months.
- 6:05: The men among her parents' friends decided that the women and children should be sent to France. France had not yet been invaded.
- 6:19: Her aunt and infant cousin were with Helene. At the border, the Red Cross refused to give her aunt milk because she was married to a Polish man.
- 6:51: When Helene's mother started yelling, "give me the milk," the Red Cross complied.
- 7:24: In Toulouse, the southern part of France, Helene's mother and aunt took an apartment and stayed there through the fall of 1940, when Helene's father got a driver to bring them back to Belgium.
- 8:10: All Jews who had businesses had to put signs in their windows saying it was a Jewish enterprise. Helene's parents knew something worse was coming.
- 9:05: In Belgium there was a law saying that Germans could not do anything to Belgians. However, in 1941, Germans started to go after the Jews. King Leopold was a collaborator and he went to Germany.
- 9:34: In late 1941, the Gettners went to look for a house in a village. They settled in Oray, a half-hour from Liege. They packed up their store in Antwerp and took all their leather clothes to Oray because many people were still wearing leather.
- 11:50: After the Gettners were settled, all the men went to work camps. They were assured that if they went, their women and children would not be harmed. Helene's father was sent to a work camp in Malene, France for several months.
- The men were then told that they would be sent back to Belgium to see their families. They were ordered to take baths and were each given a sandwich. But instead of going to Belgium, they were sent to Auschwitz. Fortunately, Helene's father hid money in his sandwich.
- 14:58: Mr. Gettner knew where they were going. As the train was going through a forest, he decided to jump off in the evening. After getting loose from the guards, he hid in the forest. The next morning, he found a man walking on the road. He then went to the train station and used the money he had hidden in his sandwich to buy a ticket to Oray, where he re-joined his family.

- 18:40: A neighbor allowed Mr. Gettner to hide in the hayloft of his barn where he kept tools and Helene's family could visit him. Their family stayed in their house but slept in other houses for a long time. One sister went to a teacher's house; the other sister went to a veterinarian's house.
- 20:09: Helene went to a Catholic school. On the first day, the children were asked to make the sign of cross. Helene had no idea how to do this. Her teacher, another teacher, and a village priest knew the family was Jewish, but kept quiet for a while.
- Her parents had a store for their leather clothing and sold the clothing in surrounding villages. They made enough money to live on.
- 22: 18: In 1942, her aunt, baby cousin and one other aunt and uncle stayed with their family. Families who were hiding Jews did not get along with other people and were denounced. Their neighbors denounced many people.
- Helene's family was lucky. No one in the village reported them.
- 25:51: Helene's aunt and uncle moved to another village. The Germans took her aunt and uncle and two children. When their eldest daughter came home and found out what happened, she went crazy. She was in and out of asylums for many years.
- 27:25: The Belgians hid many Jews. The town's mayor talked with a priest who knew about a Catholic orphanage. Helene was sent to one for about 14 - 18 months. Her mother would come often. Three people knew they were Jewish, the priest in the village, the Mother Superior, and the director of the orphanage.
- 29:44: Helene remembers that they were supposed to use bathrooms outside before they went to sleep. It was very dark. The director put on bright lights, which made it dangerous because of the Allied planes.
- 31:19: A nun at the orphanage wanted to baptize Helene and her sisters, but their mother would not allow it. The nun was very angry. The director of the nuns was very anti-Semitic.
- 33:01: At the orphanage Helene learned to knit and crochet. There was not much else to do. She noticed at certain times of the day, some kids would disappear. She learned that they were going to choir practice. So she asked to join them and sang at mass, vespers, and in the village on Sundays and holidays.

- 35:17: One day Helene went to a dentist's office and was seen by other people, including a child from Oray who went to school at the orphanage. She "outed" Helene in the orphanage.
- 36:39: From the end of 1942 to 1944, Helene was sent to a boarding school to learn catechism. Her sisters and cousins came there during the summer, but were then sent back to the orphanage. She saw her sisters every day and did everything with them.
- 38:15: In 1944, her mother brought everyone back to Oray. Their house was close to the central train station, which was frequently bombed. One day, Helene's father heard a bomb whistling. He pulled Helene under a door; when everything caved in it saved her life. Eventually their family got out. People were amazed and said that there must be a God of the Jews.
- 39:36: The mayor of Oray always kept in touch with Helene's mother. He had also made arrangements for hiding Jews in other places.
- Helene had no idea where her cousins were hidden. She tried to help her cousin who was insane.
- 45:16: Her parents rented a smaller house for six or seven months. In the fall, American soldiers came, and Helene's mother, who spoke English, sought out American Jewish soldiers and invited them to their home.
- 46:25: Belgium Jews also had Belgian nationality, but the Germans took them towards the end of the war. The mayor of Oray talked with a German officer and convinced him not to round up the Jews in Oray.
- The Battle of the Bulge took place in Bastogne, which was a half hour to 45 minutes away. The Germans pushed Americans back in Dec. 1944, but finally the Germans were pushed back.
- 48:54: Helene's parents moved their family to Brussels. They did not know what her father was doing. They then opened a store in Brussels. Helene went to school and had much catching up.
- 50:08: The Belgians hated the Germans. They called them "Bosch." When King Leopold came back, the Belgians did not want him to take over the throne. Instead his son was crowned in 1947.
- Helene describes how villagers in Oray ultimately knew that her family was Jewish, but they did not tell the Germans.
- 51:56: The major loss for the Gettners was when Helene's aunt and uncles were taken away. That was when Helene realized how dangerous it was to be

Jewish. However, she also remembers how kind many other people were, including the priest, some of her teachers, and the village doctor.

- 55:81: Helene's mother was well liked. The neighbors helped her parents a lot, including hiding their father. The secretary in their town told her mother not to sew yellow stars on their clothes. Everyone was very supportive.
- 58:59: Belgians knew the danger of hiding and helping Jews. After the war, a young woman came into her father's store and said she had been tortured; brain damaged. She had been a concert pianist. Helene's father hired her to help in the store.
- 1:49: Helene also remembered that towards the end of the war, Germans brought Russian prisoners to work on wires near their house. Helene's parents made sandwiches for them.
- 2:47: After the war Helene met survivors including children who had been orphaned.
- She joined a Jewish organization and went to Israel in 1949, where she stayed for two years. But there she was always sick; malaria, amoeba, tapeworms
- 4:11: After two years, Helene went back to Belgium.
- 42:30: In 1958, an uncle in Philadelphia invited her to visit. She came on a six-month visa.
- 5:29: She then got a green card, worked as a secretary and saved money. One sister stayed in Brussels, one sister lived part-time in Brussels and part-time in Israel. Her mother has Alzheimer's and her father died in 1980.
- 7:14: Helene comments on how the Germans were very meticulous record keepers. They had columns of people's names; where they lived, where they were caught, where they were sent, and how they died. A friend got copy of one such notebook. Helene saw her father's name and that he had escaped.
- 9:06: When she lived in Philadelphia, she made friends with a couple who gave her a lot of support. She learned English in school but had little vocabulary. Friends gave her "Marjorie Morningstar." She read it with a dictionary and wrote words she did not know. By the end of the book she had developed a larger vocabulary.

Her uncle's neighbor had a print shop and gave her a job. She lived at the YWCA and was able to support herself. After six months she looked for a better paying job.

11:35: Helene met her husband, Marvin, who was a friend of her friend's boyfriend.

14:35: They were married in six months and then went to Belgium to meet her family. They moved to Boston and he went to Northeastern University. Marvin got his PhD in physics and they have three daughters.

15:52: Anita is an accountant and married. Sonya is getting her PhD at UCSI, and Judy is in Tucson where she has her first job teaching.

Marvin came to work in the Department of Energy in Germantown where they now live.

Helene went back to work and had an antique jewelry store for a while. She gave that up and then became an executive secretary.