

Blitz-Leiser, Myriam
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Four Videotapes
In French

Abstract

Myriam Blitz-Leiser was born in Radomyśl Wielki, Poland on September 16, 1910. She and her father moved to Antwerp, Belgium, where Myriam married a man from Poland and had a daughter. She was active in the underground in Belgium. As conditions worsened for Jews in Belgium, she left with her family and close friends and headed for Aix-les-Bains, France where she helped Jews cross the border into Switzerland. Myriam was able to help many Jews because she spoke French and was also able to procure papers of various nationalities. This allowed her to keep her family safe for extended periods of time. However, her husband was eventually arrested and sent to a labor camp in Lille, France. He was deported to Auschwitz, where he was later liberated and reunited with his wife and daughter. During the war, Myriam's daughter was safe in a children's home in France, while Myriam and her husband were detained in Gurs and then sent to the French Rivesaltes internment camp. Myriam eventually went to Paris and returned to Aix-les-Bains, where she again secured forged papers that allowed her to live in relative security as she continued to hide Jewish refugees and provide them with ration cards, food and identity cards. After the war, she returned to Antwerp.

Oral History

Tape 1:

- 0:00** Myriam Blitz-Leiser was born in Radomyśl Wielki, Poland on September 16, 1910 and lived there until 1933. She lost her mother and brother within six weeks of her birth. She was educated at home by her grandmother until the age of ten.
- 4:42** Another one of Myriam's brothers went to Belgium and married in 1933. She talks about the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland, at which time her brother sent her a visa to come to Belgium. In Antwerp, she studied Flemish and French and lived in the countryside.
- 6:26** Myriam was married in 1934. Her husband worked in the diamond industry.
- 7:14** She talks about her religious practice in Poland. She learned Polish at school and Hebrew and Yiddish in religious school. She specifies that she learned Polish with Jews and non-Jews.
- 10:20** Myriam's husband was from a different town in Poland. He left Poland for Belgium to better his economic condition, like Myriam's brother.
- 11:11** In Belgium, Myriam was a member of a Zionist organization, Betar. By age eighteen, she had already become a leader in the organization.

- 12:20** She experienced anti-Semitism in Belgium before the war. There were pogroms where shops were ransacked and Jews were threatened by dogs. Because of these events, Myriam developed a life-long fear of dogs. She remembers signs in 1933 with statements saying that the Jews should be in Palestine and not in Belgium.
- 14:09** Myriam knew about anti-Semitic activities in Germany from reading newspaper reports. In 1934-1935, German Jews began arriving in Belgium, thinking they would be safer.
- 15:32** In 1936, Myriam brought her father to Belgium. They lived on the first floor of an apartment building and became close with their neighbors on the second floor. One night, there was a loud knock on her door. Schumer, her neighbor, told them that war had been declared. Myriam's husband did not believe the neighbors until he pointed to the planes overhead.
- 16:54** Myriam and her family made plans to leave Belgium. On a Sunday, they travelled to a seaside town in Belgium where they stayed for a few days. They saw members of the Belgian military begin to leave for war.
- 18:18** Myriam witnessed the arrival of the Germans at the Belgian seaside town.
- 18:26** Returning to Antwerp, Myriam and her family rented a car and quickly left. Myriam travelled with ten others, including her daughter, her neighbor, and two other families.
- 19:14** They arrived at the first French town across the border. The Germans arrived shortly after. Myriam and her family took an apartment in town with three other families. However, the Germans would not let them stay long. Myriam was the only French speaker in her group, so she was sent to buy potatoes on the black market.
- 21:15** Myriam and her family stayed in the French town until the Germans told them that they could return home. They travelled by train. Myriam was pregnant.
- 23:06** They made it back to Antwerp, believing that they would be safe. Upon their arrival, the Gestapo attempted to confiscate diamonds from those working in the diamond industry.
- 24:24** Myriam's husband sold diamonds and was arrested by the Gestapo. A German-Jewish lawyer helped free him after five days. A policeman told Myriam and her family that round-ups would begin on their street.
- 25:26** Myriam's husband and a neighbor left Belgium without legal permission and headed to France. However, they were stopped en route.
- 26:19** Myriam's husband and their neighbors were sent to a labor camp in Lille, France.

End of Tape 1

Tape 2:

- 0:00** Myriam's husband and neighbor were beaten in the Lille labor camp. The Nazis were incredibly brutal.
- 2:33** Her husband was in the labor camp for five months. When the camp was emptied, the detainees were sent to Auschwitz.
- 2:42** Myriam's husband and the neighbor jumped out of the train window, and escaped to Nice. She later joined her husband there.
- 3:29** In Antwerp, the round-ups proceeded street by street. A Belgian policeman told Myriam that the Gestapo was coming to her street the following day.
- 3:44** She left her home for another street. She learned that she could pay to go to France and then to Switzerland.
- 4:28** Myriam says people she met in Lyon, France told her that her husband was in Nice.
- 5:21** She was advised to go to Paris where she would be safe.
- 5:42** Myriam went to Paris with her children and a neighbor. However, her father would not leave Antwerp.
- 6:26** Her father was deported from Antwerp by the Nazis with all of the other Antwerp Jews.
- 9:50** In order to cross the border into Switzerland, every group needed children. Childless couples were turned away so many people tried to take other people's children with them.
- 10:05** More people headed to France where there were no border restrictions.
- 10:30** Myriam went to France to look for her husband and lived in a Parisian hotel from 1941-1942. Life in France was easier because there were Italians in her hotel.
- 10:51** The French arrested people with Polish papers.
- 11:40** Myriam got Romanian papers because Romanians were not being deported. Many Romanians wanted to go to Switzerland.
- 12:18** Myriam went to Aix-les-Baines where she was told she would be safer.
- 13:35** In Aix-les-Baines, life was easier. Myriam and her neighbors rented an apartment. Her neighbors had relatives in Switzerland.
- 16:45** Myriam sent her children to a youth camp, but eventually took them out.

- 17:50** Myriam describes the camps where she was held. The first camp was called Camp de Rivesaltes, which was originally built in 1939 as a military camp in southern France in the Pyrénées-Orientales.
- 18:26** She was also held in Gurs, a camp in the mountains.
- 18:42** Myriam spent three months in Rivesaltes, after which the camp was emptied and its inhabitants were sent to Gurs.
- 19:45** Myriam's husband was unhappy in Gurs, where the conditions were horrible and the camp was not organized.
- 20:30** In Gurs, there was a barracks chief for fifty-four people in the camp.
- 21:37** Myriam found a black market to buy food.

End of Tape 2

Tape 3:

- 0:00** Men and women were separated in Gurs. Myriam was in barracks two. The husbands and wives would meet.
- 1:58** Between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m., husbands and wives took walks together to establish some normalcy.
- 3:25** The French police called the women prostitutes when they were with their husbands.
- 4:23** The French police called the Gestapo every two weeks for a deportation. All of the men and women would be taken to a large room where they would dance and the German Jews would play guitar on the last night before a deportation.
- 5:33** Every Sunday, German Jews who were musicians would meet in a library in the camp.
- 6:05** The musicians would play Brahms. Myriam enjoyed the evenings. Everyone would cry because they did not know who would survive.
- 6:56** In the camps, no Jewish holidays were celebrated. However, people prayed.
- 7:15** Everyone would come together on Rosh Hashanah to pray.
- 7:35** On many Jewish holidays, there were deportations from the Rivesaltes camp.
- 8:32** Myriam was interned for twenty-five months. Five of these months were spent at Rivesaltes.
- 9:10** In 1942-1943, Myriam's husband was deported to Auschwitz, where he stayed until 1945. Myriam received a letter from him stating that he would return to take care of their daughter.

- 10:09** After being liberated from the camps, Myriam cared for her six year-old daughter and looked for a teacher to teach her child how to read.
- 10:36** Myriam's father always told her to remember where she came from and she wanted her daughter to know her history. Myriam had French papers in Aix-les-Baines and found a teacher for her daughter.
- 11:46** The teacher was a French Jew who taught Myriam's daughter how to read and write in Hebrew.
- 12:51** She assumed the name Madame Tonre in Aix-les-Baines. Everyone who came from Belgium knew who she was.
- 13:25** Myriam lacked money. She met people who helped her.
- 14:04** She would go to Lyon where she sold items that enabled her to live and to shelter people who came from Belgium on their way to Switzerland.
- 14:18** Many of these travelers procured false papers and ration cards and shared them with her so she could feed people in her home.
- 15:20** Many Belgians headed for Switzerland were turned away if their children were older than four years-old. These Jews would go into hiding. Myriam would then help feed them with her ration cards in Aix-les-Baines.
- 16:10** She helped many people who came to her house.
- 16:40** She made a cake with ingredients from ration cards. In 1945, Myriam received a telegram from a friend that the war was over.
- 17:01** One of Myriam's friends from the camp went to Antwerp. Myriam's neighbors in Aix-les-Baines knew she was Jewish but never said anything.
- 20:21** Myriam describes resistance activities.
- 21:13** Myriam was not a member of a large resistance group, but helped people independently.
- 22:17** A French Jew in Aix-les-Baines helped Myriam hide people.
- 24:50** Nobody ever bothered Myriam. One of her neighbors gave her cheese but she did not need it and gave it to someone in need. She received a telegram that her husband was a prisoner in Germany.
- 26:47** During liberation, the woman who sent Myriam the telegram visited her in Aix-les-Baines.
- 28:09** At midnight, Myriam heard music playing and a neighbor on the first floor explained that the war had ended.

End of Tape 3

Tape 4:

End of Tape 2

- 00:00** Myriam describes her return to Antwerp from Aix-les-Baines. In 1946, she entered a store where she was told she had a telegram about her husband. Myriam went to her daughter's school to tell her about her father. Her daughter was ten years old and she immediately asked Myriam to go to Antwerp to see her father.
- 5:25** Myriam gave birth to a son in 1946. Her husband returned that same year. He later died at age sixty-four. He suffered from high blood pressure.
- 6:29** After the war, Myriam's father-in-law lived with her for fifteen years and he died at her home.
- 8:06** Myriam began her life anew despite many hardships.
- 8:55** Religion was important to Myriam because her father insisted that she always know where she came from.
- 12:40** Myriam was asked about the French resistance. She explains that the French were afraid and did not want to hide Jewish children. Myriam's landlord probably knew she was Jewish and knew who the people were who came to her house. However, Myriam was never asked and never said anything.
- 14:25** When Myriam returned to Antwerp, she was well-received. She remained active in helping people.
- 16:05** She was the president of a group that took care of children in Israel. She remained president for twenty-six years.
- 18:00** Myriam wants to know what the non-Jews think of what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust.
- 19:00** She says that after fifty years, the non-Jews still do not want to know.