

OK. Good morning, Regine.

Good morning, Joan.

It's nice to have you here.

Thanks.

Tell me first the name that you were born with.

In Jewish?

In both languages. Whichever--

OK, so in Jewish, it would have been Rivka Donner, and only one name. But I was very seldom called by that. It was a Regine Donner. And that's the only name I've known.

Uh-huh. Even as a little child it was Regine?

Yeah, mhm.

And when and where were you born?

Born in Sokal in Poland, of which I have no recollection whatsoever. And in August the 26th, '28. And very shortly after that, that's when my mother immigrated with the four kids.

And the situation was that your father had gone to Brussels to--

He came to Brussels. There must already have been some of-- cousins or uncles, whoever. The situation in Poland was horrible. And I think for as much as I can remember, my mother's stories, they were particularly afraid of the Cossacks.

And so he decided he'd go ahead, find out whether he could get a job and have a family come to live, and then he would ask my mother to come with the kids. Well, as I said in my story, one year passed, and the second was starting, and she got just fed-up and tired of being alone with the baby and four kids, three other kids.

So she decided-- she packed everything up, and they had-- I think they had like a little commerce of-- I don't know what they were selling. And she just came. Took the train and came.

And she was in Antwerp?

She was in a Antwerp, yeah.

So essentially, your real memories--

Is Antwerp.

--is Antwerp.

Yeah.

So tell me your memories before the war of your father and your mother. Your father's name was Ari?

Arie we called him.

Arie?

Yeah. And my mother was Sabine. Now, that's all I knew, because I don't know whether you have these same experiences, but Jewish families don't talk much about their family. And that you were asking my age, [INAUDIBLE] from my mother. Because whenever we asked her age, every year she was younger.

[LAUGHS] Each year, she became younger? Yeah?

Every time we asked her. Every year we had a laughing-- standing thing with it.

Right.

Let's ask my mom again. And she would just-- every year, she became a year younger. She never changed.

[CHUCKLES]

And there was always this mystery at home. We didn't talk much about family, and-- I mean, I learned more about her family later after the war, through my brothers, probably because they had the chance to live with my father, who immigrated to Israel. So they had all these years to catch up on the story. But I didn't.

But what is your memory of your father? What kind of a person was he to you as a child? Do you have a clear memory from your youngest years--

Very often away.

Mhm.

He was working hard. But just kind of never made it. So he wasn't that much around at home. It was mother who took care of everything. The kids.

Right.

We're speaking about the kids.

Right.

But kind. I don't think-- you know?

Do you remember eating dinner with him?

Yeah.

And was--

Eating dinner-- and at one stage, when we moved from Borgerhout to Berchem for one reason, I don't know what happened because memories do fade, he was starting to work at home. He had all the machinery for polishing and cutting the diamonds at home, so I saw a bit more of him. But then I have not too many nice memories, because if one of the little diamonds jumped, we were in for it.

So we had to scrape the floor, and lift the Lino up, and try to-- because one little diamond was a fortune for him. Because he had to deliver whichever he had been given, you know? Little packets.

Right.

Yeah.

So--

So you didn't--

--that's as much as I remember. And then, of course, a lot of hard times, arguments, and discussions because this bill would come up, and that bill would come up, and how are we going to meet it. Then as soon as I could, I suppose, leave home and get out of this situation, that's when I was with the Hashomer Hatzair.

Right. But wait, now--

So we had meetings--

Now you're going--

Too fast?

Now you're moving too fast.

OK.

Now, let me ask a little bit about you--

But my mother was always there. She was always there.

And what was she like? Was she warm? Was she humorous? Was she strict?

Not humorous.

Not humorous.

No.

Strict. [? Very young ?] mother, but strict. You know?

Was she warm? Affectionate?

I have no memories that I would say particularly.

Uh-huh.

But I suppose she had to deal with too much the hardships of taking care of four young kids.

So just--

Kind of holding very much to herself because of the barriers of languages. I mean, who did she have to talk with if it wasn't just the Jewish people in the culture and her own kids?

So she spoke Yiddish--

Yiddish. That's it.

--and Polish to her husband?

Yeah.

But she did not know the la-- Flemish?

No.

And she didn't learn?

Didn't learn Flemish, didn't learn French. So that wasn't easy for her.

So your life was not easy. You were rather poor, and this was hard.

A real struggle.

Can you describe some of that, what it was like?

Well, we would never know-- what if the landlord comes and he wants his rent? And if we don't have it, there was this menace that he would throw us out. And as a kid, that kind of leaves a deep impression on you.

We went that-- how will I say? Food was-- to keep us going. OK. We weren't bad in that.

But a lot of it was that I had to go do the shopping, and it was always on credit. Well, I got really upset with those type of things. Well, I suppose I was small. I was cute, as they say.

And the boys wouldn't go, and my sister was out of the picture. I don't know why, but she never took a particularly active part in the family. For one thing, she was a premature child, the first one, and brought up by my grandmother on my father's side. Spoiled. So she was like-- we don't touch her.

Uh-huh.

So there was only me, the only girl-- the only other girl. So I'd have to go and explain to the grocery shopkeeper, we promise we will pay at the end of the month. Please, we need a bag of coal, or-- to heat. Or, could we get this or that?

And so one time, it's OK. The second time, it's-- gets harder. And when you have to do that on a repeated basis-- I just hate these type of things. But that's the way we lived.

Did you feel humiliated?

Yeah, and kind of. This begging wasn't really very pleasant. I will say, as a memory, giving what Belgium was like and Antwerp, the shopkeeper wasn't too bad. I mean, he probably had pity on me, I take it, because he wasn't, like, yelling or screaming or anything.

And eventually, we would pay a part. But then we would still have something in the book which showed we hadn't paid it all. But that was the type of life we had before-- it got better when David started work and when Izzy started work. They both learned the trade from my father, so that helped.

Uh-huh.

Yeah.

So there's Clara, who's the eldest?

Eldest.

Born in 1918, right?

That's right.

Then there's David.

David.

And he was born--

'22, I believe.

Ah. No, that's--

No. Maybe '20.

'20?

Yeah. See, dates were not discussed, as I say.

Yeah.

And then maybe '22 was Izzy.

Izzy.

Yeah. So those two didn't do anything more than their elementary school, grade school. And then they started to work right away. And I believe it was necessity.

Right.

So they started immediately to work with their father. My father was an excellent worker, I will say that. And he had a lot of apprentices because he was so good at the trade. So that brought a little bit of money in.

Right.

But he would sit many an evening with friends in-- I don't know how to say that in English. In Antwerp, they have a center, the books-- what you would call what now? Where the-- tell the up money, the down money for gold, for silver, for diamonds. What do you call that?

Oh, that's-- the stock exchange?

That's right.

Uh-huh.

He would just be there visiting. And it would happened a lot of times that I had to go and bring him back home. And he liked to play cards.

So he liked to gamble?

Little bit. So that was tough.

So then you would not have as much money as you might have had otherwise?

Yeah.

And why are you the one who's going--

That's what I'd like to know. Why was I the one? It was always me that she would send.

Now sometimes, I would say, I had to come. Mom is mad. She wants you to come home.

We need you. This and that. Sometimes he would come. Sometimes he would just send me back.

Mm.

Once or twice I went with Henry, which he probably wouldn't remember, because he was like-- you know? But probably thinking, my mother, that would impress him more to see the little baby with me.

[LAUGHS]

Sometimes it succeeded, sometimes it didn't. But then the situation got the better, as I say, when David and Izzy started working.

Now, are David and Izzy living in the house?

Yeah.

Clara?

Clara lived for a while. Not till the war [INAUDIBLE]. She left before that.

Uh-huh.

So-- she lived-- of course she lived at home, because the two of us shared a room. We even shared the bed.

Really?

Yeah, with a lot of fights, as it goes between sisters, as you know.

[CHUCKLES]

And you're 10 years apart.

Izzy and David shared a room and a bed, then Clara and myself shared a room and a bed. And the youngest one, Henry, when he was born, he shared the bedroom with the parents.

Right.

Because we didn't have that much money to live luxurious, as you imagine.

Right.

None of the Jewish people, except the very rich ones in Antwerp, would have been like that. Now I will say, for example, his sister, who married a shipper, he did better. But he was in business. He wasn't just-- you know? But a lot of

the immigrants who came over had to take whichever trade would be available. So that's how it happened.

What was your relationship like with your two brothers and-- your three brothers--

I was very, very, very close to David, the eldest. We were like-- yeah. And he had a very strong relationship with me.

With Izzy, not so much. He was always the aloof child, different from the others. Wouldn't do anything like anyone else would do. So I wasn't particularly very close to Izzy. Now, Henry is the one that I almost brought up myself. You know what I'm saying?

Right, right.

I was always with him.

And what made you and David so close? What was the--

Probably the Hashomer Hatzair. We went to the same-- and I don't know. We had an affinity for each other.

Uh-huh.

Yeah. Very close.

But you and Clara are very different?

Very. Very different. Yeah. And I only got closer to her and got to know her a little bit more during the war.

See, Clara was different to start with because she had been brought up by her grandmother, who had spoiled her. Probably, as I say, because she was so frail and delicate. First grandchild on both sides.

Mm.

And nothing-- she wouldn't come to any movement or anything like that. More like a-- quiet, shy. I was shy, too. Don't think I was like now.

[LAUGHS]

I changed a lot over the years, I suppose. It took me a while. So we didn't have anything in common. But then when things went very bad was when she got to know this Jacques, for whom she worked for a while in Antwerp.

And I'm almost sure he was a married man with two children. And she eloped. She didn't even tell. So she eloped. She went to Brussels and lived with him.

She got to know him through the job. He had given her a job. I think he was a very good tailor. And he was doing with-- which a lot of Jewish people were doing. One of the trades was fur coats.

Mm.

Sticking the pieces together.

[INAUDIBLE].

So that's how she started off.

This is a--

She wasn't a student.

Ah.

As soon as he finished grade 6, she left school. So that was another thing. So I just went to school alone.

Right.

You know?

So this was Jacques Garfunkel?

Garfunkel.

And you think they got married? Or they didn't get married?

I don't think they ever got married officially.

Uh-huh.

Because what I do remember, if you want memories, I had to tra-- that's the only trip I ever took out of Antwerp with my mother, to Brussels to bring her back. Because she had eloped, right?

And in the Jewish custom-- oh, my mother. That was the biggest scandal in the family that ever happened. So we traveled together because she couldn't travel on her own. Again, with the language, that doesn't work, right?

Yeah.

And it was the most horrible evening I ever spent.

Because it was a fight?

Oh, it was a fight. Jacques, with Clara, with my mother. Tears and fighting. And we came back alone.

Mm.

She didn't follow. And that was it. That's the last memory I have from Clara. Because-- it must have been in '39 when we would still travel a bit. We never traveled anywhere, but at least we went to Brussels and back.

And that's the last memory I have of her before the war. Then the war came, and-- well, we didn't know what happened to Clara. And each one went their own way, and-- but then, for some-- I don't even remember, see, memory does fail me in these type of details, how Clara got my address or got to know about me. And then I found out that she was in Brussels, I went to visit her.

Mhm.

I told that in my story, didn't I? I went-- I made two attempts and never got there. For one thing, I didn't know Brussels. For me, it was like going to Paris. It was just the same type of experience.

And when I got to the street, finally having asked three, four people from Grez-Doiceau that was hiding, you know? And in fear, you can imagine. Then the police would stop me and say, go back from where you're coming.

And you didn't have to say more than that. I was already petrified to start with. So back I came.



And they would ask me, so, what happened? Well, the police told me to go back from where I was coming. Next day, we would know that they had closed up the street on both sides, and they were just running up to Jews in the street.

Mm.

So that man-- policemen saved me. And that happened the second time. So after that, I was kind of hesitant to give it a third try.

And as the family who was hiding me was telling me, you're so Jewish-looking that you don't even have to say. They know. So you're lucky that you were saved. And it wouldn't be wise to--

So I think I went one more time, where I succeeded to be with her one evening. And with Jacques, of course. And I never went back again.

And how was that for you, seeing her? Was that nice?

Yeah, because I have no other family. So it was nice to see her and find out how she was. And she was doing all the running around. There was no way that Jacques would go out in the street, because if I was Jewish, he was 10 times worse.

Mm.

And so he did the work. He was still working, making tailors and things. Suits for ladies, men, for whoever. And she did all the running around. The delivering, and getting the orders in, and doing the shopping, and so--

Did she appear happy [INAUDIBLE]?

She seemed to. Yeah, she seemed happy. Yeah.

Let me go back again and ask you a bit about religion in the family and politics in the family.

Mhm.

David was a Zionist--

Yeah. A staunch [INAUDIBLE] Zionist.

Yes?

Yeah.

[LAUGHS] And preparing to go to Palestine?

Yep.

Yes.

The whole movement.

The whole movement.

And were you, then, because you were so close to him, caught up in this as well?

But I would do the two. I would go to the meetings and I would be following up on all that, but I wouldn't disappoint my mother. So on feast days, I would still go to the synagogue. And I was in charge of Henry, so I would be in and out. You know how it-- I don't know whether you know--

Yes.

--how it went.

[LAUGHS]

And on fast days, she'd be in the synagogue the whole day. And I would be in charge of Henry. Make sure he had eaten, then go back to the synagogue. Make sure that she saw that he was OK and I was OK.

So David was-- [CLEARS THROAT] excuse me. David's not religious?

No.

So he was a pure, secular Zionist? Yes.

[INAUDIBLE].

And you were straddling--

And I was doing the two.

[LAUGHS] You were doing two.

Yeah.

Now, were you very comfortable in the religion when you were a kid?

Yeah.

Do you remember? Did you--

Some of the things, I don't know whether I fully agreed with. I mean, we did every feast day, every Shabbat.

Mhm.

We did all-- [CLEARS THROAT] [COUGHS] we did all the fasting.

You did?

Which I remember, looking back, as a child, I found that very hard. [CLEARS THROAT] The reason being, I was in charge of Henry. So I had to feed him--

And not eat.

--and not eat. And not even a sip of water. And I held out.

Really?

Yeah. Now, my father was a very religious man before he came to Antwerp. But once he got there, he started being lax. And from what I gather, he had started to-- being trained as a rabbi, but gave that up. OK?

My mother in the beginning was so religious. She had the whole thing. The hair shaved, and the wig, and the-- whatever. Everything. That's-- I have memories of that.

Mm.

I didn't approve of it, but that's the way it was. [CLEARS THROAT]

Did she change?

She changed a bit.

Still before--

She adapted a little bit to the Belgian custom of being Jewish woman in Antwerp.

Now, why do you think that she did not learn the language? Your father, I gather, did learn the language.

A little bit. He could get along, yeah.

I see. But she couldn't? Do you have--

And it's not that she didn't have the brain. She was a pretty intelligent woman in other ways. But she just never bothered. But she wasn't the only one. A lot of women did that.

Uh-huh.

Now, we talk about how many years ago, you know what I'm saying?

Yes. Yeah.

I don't know what the role of the woman was that important in Jewish society anyway.

And she stayed within a very small group of people, all of whom we spoke Yiddish?

That's right.

So she didn't feel that there was necessary--

No. And if you have to go to the doctor or the pharmacy, there was always me to go with.

Right.

You know?

So you're, in some sense, a caretaker in this family, aren't you?

[LAUGHS] Very much so. Very much so.

Now, what was school like for--

But then it was important to her that we go to school. Like it was important to her that I not learn Flemish but French. And another thing which I do not understand what the great importance was.

I told you, we started off in a public school when I was six, grade 1. At the end of the year, she had registered me for the French section. Because in Belgium, you had French and Flemish section. In Antwerp particularly, it was mainly Flemish.

When she found out towards the end of the year that I was not in the French section, she moved me. She took me out of that school, then moved me further away in another school that had a French section. And that's what I learned, French. But I spoke Flemish too. I still can speak Flemish with a bit of hesitation after these years.

But you have no idea why?

Why she did that. So in a way, I say to myself, education was important to her. Probably because French was a little bit more cultivated, more prominent. You know what I'm saying?

Right.

But she didn't do that for Clara. I'm not-- as I said, Clara was not a student. So after-- I only went to school with her one year. That's all.

Mm. And you liked school?

I did.

And did you have lots of friends?

Jewish friends.

Jewish friends.

I tried with a few of the others, but as I told you, I have very bad experiences from public schools.

So tell about that. There was a lot of anti-Semitism in your experience as a youngster? Can you give us some examples?

[SIGHS] Some are painful--

Yeah.

--because they go back even to kindergarten.

Really?

Yeah.

Izzy and myself went to the same kindergarten in Antwerp. And I don't remember whether they were mixed. Maybe the very first year, the little ones were all together.

But he wasn't with me. He was in the other section. And there was a lot of antisemitism.

And I got, like, shoved down by one of the teachers a whole flight of stairs, of which I still have marks from. Yeah. And when my mother complained about that, of course, [INAUDIBLE].

And what was the--

I can't remember whether I asked something, or I wanted something as a toddler. Whatever. And she just gave me one shove and I got down the whole flight. Yeah. Oh, I have a big mark like that where it goes-- I really fell badly.

So that was kindergarten. So I was happy to get out of that.

Yeah.

Then I went to public school and teachers were very, very biased. Very antisemitic. We had a whole group. We were like six or seven in the one grade I was, in my level.

Now came Shabbat. We had to leave at a certain time before school was over. But the parents had made this arrangement with the principal of the school, and I suppose the teachers were told. So when time came, we had to go.

Well, there were always mockeries and comments made about the whole group getting up and leaving. Because we had to make it home before sundown to make sure that-- you know? And this was very important to my mother. And I was walking, so it took me over half an hour to get home. So that was one of the signs of anti-Semitism, because the teacher shouldn't have made any comments.

But the teacher made comments?

Teacher made comments.

And the kids as well?

The kids would react. I mean, they had the teachers on their side. Then there would be in public school what you called "inspections for health." So they would look for lice. And we were always singled out.

The first ones to stand in line to be inspected were the Jewish girls. Now, that was the most humiliating thing we went through. I remember that very vividly.

So your thoughts at that time about who Christians were, or certainly in the--

Was poor.

--was very poor and uncomfortable.

Very. Then came grades. And I say that in my story too. I always had very good grades. I must have been a good student and enjoyed school.

So according to grades, I should have been first in the class. And when-- then I went to question, probably instigated by my mother, who kept track of all these things. Then she said, well, it wouldn't be right that a Jewish girl is top of the list in the class, so we put you third.

How am I to answer as a child? So OK, I came back and told my mother. But see, it was really very difficult, because we also had [INAUDIBLE].

In schools in Antwerp, everyone does needlework and handwork. This is part of the program. So one day, you had to bring material for this. Another day, it would be wool for that.

And most of the time, we didn't have the money for it. So that was another big humiliation. Instead of keeping it quiet, I would have to go up to the teacher and say, my mother said I'll have it tomorrow.

Well, she would go verbally off, inflame. You know? So it wasn't easy.

We're going to have to--

Stop?

--change the tape. OK?

OK.