

Regine, you just recalled another story that something happened to you in kindergarten, in the same vein about this antisemitism.

I do remember that I came home one day and said to my mother, they call me dirty Jew. And I looked down. I had this spiffy white dress, a little black shoes. They were shiny types, you know, a white bow in my hair.

And I couldn't understand it. Why did they call me dirty? I don't think I'm dirty.

And so my mother, she-- actually, that's the one time she took me on her lap, because we weren't sitting too much on laps of each other. And she explained commission that it had nothing to do with what I looked like. That they just didn't like the Jews, so they called them dirty Jews.

See, it goes back really in the beginning of memories. But we had no choice as to [INAUDIBLE] Jewish schools organized and recognized for educational purpose. So we just had to suffer through that.

So you went to Jewish schools--

That was [INAUDIBLE] on the side.

On the side, after--

To make sure that they got the Jewish religion, literature. We were learning Hebrew. Oh, that was very, very important to her that I keep the Jewishness. And so there were special schools was where you could go on Sundays and Wednesday afternoon. And I was very faithful to that, up till the war.

Right.

Yeah.

And these experiences of antisemitism, did it make you feel ambivalent about being Jewish, or just angry at these people? Do you [INAUDIBLE]?

More angry, and not understanding, really, what had to be done to deserve to be called dirty Jews. I mean, it's like singling us out for inspection, you know. And those things were not-- I don't think in a country like here, anything like that would ever, in any era that I can remember, be accepted.

In the front of a whole class, they start examining your hair and all of this type of thing. Then of course, you come back to your desk, oh, you see, no one wants to sit next to you. So those are hard things to accept as a child, you know? Very hard.

Did any of the kids in school befriend you who were not Jewish?

A little bit. A little bit, but never very close to us, you know?

So you felt as if going to school was going to a hostile atmosphere?

Yeah, just that you were meeting your own Jewish friends. And a few-- but teachers no. We never got close to any teacher, because-- actually I intended, but I haven't succeeded.

When I went back, as I told you, in '98, and I wanted to show one of the girls who I call my niece, really-- the one who I was hiding with, the school I went to. And I said to her, if this school is still open and there are still some teachers in there, I think I have enough courage to go in and tell a little bit what they had done to me as a child, whether they even realized as educators how detrimental that had to be. But the school wasn't a school anymore, so-- it would have been

worth it, you know, because as an educator myself, I know the impact that things like that have on students, on kids, on whatever age.

So I thought I would have the nerve to share. And I speak French and Flemish enough to tell them. But my chance wasn't materialized, because it was a no more a school. But that school particularly, I really suffered. I think the accumulation of it, you know?

And I don't know whether I should tell you the next story, because being myself a Catholic and nun, it doesn't make much sense if I tell you the rest of it. But on my way back from school-- I told you I was walking, I must have been really intrigued by it and wanting to find out when I stopped at the church. I wrote that in my story. Did you read that?

No.

No? Stopped at this church that I was passing on a daily basis. And I got curious. I just wanted to find out what it was.

So here I go, up all these steps. And the door was open. But before I even had a chance, they were boys who really ran after me with stones. And they started the yelling, and the Jews, they killed Christ. And I ran for my life.

And I was so terrified by a whole group of young boys, you know, like 10 years, 11 years old. And they kept really yelling and screaming like that, that the Jews killed Christ, and let's stone her. I never went that route anymore ever. Never attempted to even find out what a church was like.

[LAUGHS]

This is all before the war, of course. But that was another of those fascinating experiences. No, Antwerp was extremely anti-Semitic. It was extremely.

I mean, I don't even remember any other place that would have been. Brussels wasn't as bad as Antwerp. Antwerp was the worst. Maybe because there were more of them, and more had agglomerated in quarters, yeah. It still is like that, you know?

If you go back to those quarters-- like, even last year I went still back. I don't know. There's always something that attracts me to go back and see.

I went back even to the stock market, where I used to go to get my father back home. And it still is-- all the Jews are agglomerated there. The shops, the baker, the jewelers. I'd even question one or two and they say they are OK.

Were there any particular books that you like to read as a kid?

No.

No?

That wasn't something we did at home. The one thing I did learn in the Sunday schools was to read the Bible. So whenever we went to visit my grandmother, she knew that I could read the Bible. So she had the great [INAUDIBLE]. I was her favorite in that sense because I was able to read it.

In Hebrew?

In Hebrew.

And so you went back and forth to Poland to visit your grand--

Never. Never. She was here, remember? Yeah, that's my father's mother.

Your father's mother. I see.

She immigrated with her daughter. And so we went on a regular-- Shabbat would be one of the days he would go and visit her.

Did David and Isi--

No. They had no interest in those things.

But they went to Jewish school, but they didn't learn this?

No.

Or remember it.

I don't think they wanted even to be. David definitely not. No, Isi might have been a bit more conforming. Isi was more conforming because the one example I have for him for which I am actually really grateful to him, he's the one who insisted to have a last Seder before we all disbursed.

So we had the Declaration of the war in May. I don't know whether Easter came in. But just before that, he insisted he wanted to have it. He said for appearance's sake. And he organized almost everything.

Now, David was rarely home. He didn't kind of participate too much. He was totally immersed and involved in Zionism-- totally.

So did you hear stuff about what was going on in Nazi Germany, even though you were a little kid? You heard--

We started hearing, yeah.

And was there any fear that there would a war?

Not really. No, not really, because it was like-- I do remember the day the declaration was official. I had gone down right before going to school, very early morning-- 6:00, something like that. Again, who will go, me, get the paper from my father. Probably because he was following the politics of which I have no notion at those young years.

So I went to get the paper. And then I heard all these planes over us, and I started running. And when I got home, it was already on the radio that Germany had invaded Belgium.

Right.

And so we didn't go to school, of course, that day.

You didn't go that day.

No. And that was the end of schooling.

And what do you remember of the first things about the occupation? Do you remember troops coming in?

Troops coming in. A lot of the planes bombing over us. When we left the second residence, we had turned back, and we were very close to a military base. So that was really pretty scary and awful.

Then once we heard that the Germans had invaded, and there were already rumors of what they would do and how things would go-- but see, again, they would talk about these things between them, the parents, and half of it in Polish.

So we would only know whatever we could grasp here or there. We then decided that we'd run away-- that we'd go away. That we tried to go over to France. I don't know why we thought France would be that much more better.

So my father got together with his sister, my aunt and uncle and their kids. So then there was Isi, myself, and Henry. Clara was in Brussels. David had left the three of us and our parents, and then his sister, [INAUDIBLE] her husband, and those two kids. We all went.

How did you go?

Foot.

By foot?

Mm-hmm. As far as we could go one day. We had no vehicles, and any public transport was for the military. It wasn't for the public.

And we would sleep in ditches. And we all took some backpack. And as reached another place, we would drop something because it was too heavy.

Can you imagine walking? We did that for at least 10, 12 days easily. We got as far as Dunkirk.

It's a big walk.

We slept in ditches or in some empty houses or whatever. And when we got to Dunkirk, we intended crossing and going over to France. The bombing was so fierce, there was no way going anywhere. So we all gathered-- I don't know how many people, up to 40, 50, in cellars of empty houses that people have abandoned by the coast. And it never stopped, bombing, day and night.

And that's what I wrote in my story. Then on the road, going to that house, there were some dead bodies on the street. And of course, my mother got hysterical and thought she had recognized David. So once they got settled in the cellar, I had to go with my father to see whether, yes or no, that was David.

So we came back. It wasn't him, but that was another traumatic thing to go into. And we stayed three days and three nights in that cellar, till finally, the bombing stopped. We couldn't move.

And what did you eat?

Whatever small thing we had with us. The water got short. And then Belgium capitulated after three days of this horror.

So end of story, Belgium capitulated, France capitulated. Where were we going to go? So we came back home, knowing that this time, we didn't know what would happen to us.

So again, you walked back? There must have been lots of people trying to do this, right? So you weren't alone in one respect.

No.

It didn't make it any easier--

Oh, no, no. And on the way back, there were some appeals-- if I remember well. I might be wrong, but I'll just say what I remember. That anyone able-bodied should report for-- military?

So the only one of age was Isi, and he was the only boy with us. So he went, but they didn't take him. So he came back, running back afterwards, because they didn't take him.

Why did your mother think that that might be David? Did she have any idea where he went?

No, but she thought that she had seen a resemblance.

Did you have any idea? I mean, did he tell you anything of what he was doing?

Not really. Once the war was declared, no. He would-- and not even after. Then he came back. When we got back home, then he went back to Berchem, to our house, wherever.

And David came, made appearances, yeah. But he would be always the busy man, and very, very important. They're doing this for the Hashomer, doing that for [? Hashomer ?] had to go for a meeting, had to organize this. Apparently, he was trying to see how to save Jewish people-- how to get out, how to get away.

But I have very little recollection of that, because when we came back, it started, all the rules and regulations. We had to hand in all valuable things. We had to hand in the radio and things like that, and [INAUDIBLE] my father would take it, and go and deliver it to whichever center the Gestapo had indicated to bring it.

Then he went and got all our Stars of David, which we all had sewn on. The only one who refused to do that was David. And he got us in terror day and night, because he would still make appearances at home, leaving the house with nothing on him. What if you he were arrested?

He was a blond. He was tall, he was blond. He looked like an Aryan much more. He and Henry could have passed like that. But at the same time, we felt like he was jeopardizing the safety of the whole family.

So I think-- and then we would be watching from the window. Did he turn the corner? Is he OK? Did no one arrest him?

And as I tell you, we were by a military base. So there probably was a more movement of Germans and whatever. I think at the end, we told him not to come because we were more terrified each time he came and left us, not knowing what would happen to him. So he stopped coming home.

That must have been difficult for him, and for you [INAUDIBLE].

For me, definitely. He had so many friends, and he had a whole group of-- it was a big organization, a big movement in Belgium, the Hashomer Hatzair. Yeah.

What did you assume would happen to you if you didn't put on the Jewish star-- the badge?

Oh, I don't think I would have-- I suppose I was always a person following rules.

[LAUGHS]

So I don't know. I think if-- probably thought if they arrest me, and they find out that I am Jewish and I'm not wearing it, they'll probably beat me up to death right there on the spot. I might as well follow the rule. So that was another thing.

And my father, one thing gave everything, radio and everything. So that was the end of that. Then came the rule, we had the curfew. But that's what made it so difficult with David, because he didn't follow the curfew either. So that really became--

And the curfew was what, 8:00?

8:00, we had to be in.

7:00 in the morning.

Mm-hmm.

And he would leave at 8:00. Well, that's too late, and so we would be begging him. Then we had-- school, we were thrown out right away. Jews were not to go to schools anymore.

Then the signs started appearing. We couldn't go on any public transport. No Jews allowed.

Restaurants, movie theaters had the [INAUDIBLE] sign. No dogs, no Jews allowed. The dogs were before this.

The dogs came first in the sign?

So we stayed very much home until he told me. Then there came, like, an edict that if you were going to work, you would not be arrested. But Isi had already left. Isi is the very--

Because you remember about when he left?

I think he left in '41. No, or winter '40. And he's the very first one, he got his letter from the Gestapo. They would send out letters at random, you're supposed to report that such and such a day, such a time.

Is this the Arbeit [GERMAN] Befehl? It's the report for work order.

Yeah.

Now, as far as I know, they started somewhere in '42.

No, they started before that.

You don't remember-- uh-huh.

Isi got that before that.

And so--

'42, I was already well in hiding. I'm amazed that you see. I'm not even-- it was for Arbeit. I think so, because then he was to report-- there were two places, and I think Isi was Breendonk, which is a little bit before Maline, right?

Yes.

Mine was in Maline. He was Breendonk.

So he got this notice that said he should report To Breendonk

Yeah, and he went.

And he--

Said goodbye and went.

Did you think to yourself-- I mean you are still a young person. You're 13 years old. Why is he going? This is a letter. Nobody's coming and coming him.

I know that card, it said we'll never see him again. But no, I wouldn't question it, because again, stupid rule. If they say you have to go, you have to go.

Uh-huh.

So he had already left when I was told to tie that. And I still know the village I went back-- and that's another thing I did. I went back in '98. We circled and toured around the whole area.

Where I had been to this agricultural school, there's no trace or sign of it at all. I only know the name, Laramie. And there must have been 50, 60 youngsters in there doing gardening and agriculture, hoping we would be safe like that. But after three months, I got my letter, too.

Right. So let me ask you something. David is so different--

Yeah.

--from all the rest of you now. Now Henry, we can't talk about. He was a baby.

Oh, he just was with mother.

But you is Isi are very-- OK, they sent a letter. I'm going. David is completely different.

Yeah. Very rebellious.

And you were so close to David. But this is not a part of David that you acquired at this time, yes?

I did, because remember, I went to the agricultural school

Right. That's true. Right.

Then--

And you did that after Isi had left?

Yeah.

OK.

So I thought I'm safe now, right? Then I get the letter, and it's my parent to force me to come back home. Remember that?

All right, so you're at the school, and you get this letter that tells you to report to Maline.

Yeah, I find out that there are many others in my case. I'm not the only one.

In that group? And they're taking very young people. And you think these are arbitrary letters. I mean, they're not--

I think it's at random, whichever letter or name, or whatever they picked out. That's my feeling.

So did you--

And I had the feeling that that letter came home, not to the center. And so my parents contacted me and said, you've got your letter. You've got to come home and you have to go. Because if you don't go, they'll take us and Henry.

So off I went from Laramie. Took a train, went home, packed some. And that's when my father took me to the station.

And told you you had to go.

And told me I had to go.

So what did this do to you inside?

Oh, that was a hard one. Very hard. But that said, the terror overcame any other feeling.

The terror?

Of course, I imagined anything and everything. And particularly as a girl, I was so terrified of what they were going to do to me. But my parents told me to go. I suppose I've always obeyed them in some way.

So as a girl, you were afraid they would rape you?

Mm-hmm.

So you were not just afraid that--

No, not just that. Everything.

Everything. Had you heard things?

Probably.

And did you feel angry or upset with your parents telling you to go, do you think?

I can still see myself in the train. My major concern was the Gestapo at that particular moment. Afterwards, I was-- yeah, I had hard times with my parents. I've questioned a lot of times why did they force me to do that.

And I've even questioned it with some of our sisters and with real close friends. And everyone says, you know, fear makes people do the most incredible things. But still, you would wonder, how come did that fear not apply to their daughter.

Right. You know what I'm saying.

Yes. Do you think they thought that--

They must have thought that, obviously, they wouldn't take them and Henry. Maybe they were naive enough to think that, because you had a lot. But how much could you credit what you heard? And I have never seen that-- never had a clarification on that type of path in my life.

And then I decided, well, why keep it against them? I suppose they didn't know what they were doing. I suppose it is true, fear makes you so different from what you normally are, because I do think they loved us all.

Yeah. Is it possible that they were really ignorant--

I think so.

--about what was going on?

Mother, definitely, because for someone who has no communication with the outside world, it's only what it would come into her lap, right?



Right.

Now, how much my dad knew, I don't know.

And do you recall that both your mother and father said to you you should go? Mm-hmm.

Yeah, I'm not making it up, because to take me from the home to the railroad station in Antwerp, you know? It's still the same railway station. I went in '98, I told you, with my niece there. I said, here is the famous place where he got me on the train.

Did you see other people you knew who were going on the train?

Oh, I don't think I even looked at any of them.

I see.

Remember, I had my big Star of David here, Jew, Juif, Jude, terrified petrified. And if it hadn't been for this unknown man, again.

Yes, this is interesting.

See, this is-- yeah.

You're on the train, and what happens?

I suppose the terror was just all over me. And this man before Maline-- between Antwerp and Maline, he said don't do it. Go to the bathroom. Take off your star.

Wait for the Gestapo to have come on the train, and leave the train. Then come out of the bathroom, lock yourself in. Here is me, I go. I do what I'm told to do.

[LAUGHS]

So I did. I was able to tear off my star. I stayed there because they checked. At every station, they could check. And then when we passed Maline. Particularly in Maline, they checked.

Then I came out, and the train went on to Brussels. The stop was Maline, but it goes on to Brussels. And there was a man waiting. And he said, meet me, which just opposite the railway station at one of the big hotels-- The Metropolitan or something like that, which still exists. And I met him there.

[INAUDIBLE] I didn't know where I was going. So I met him there. It was just across the street.

And then for some reason or another, I got suspicious. I got frightened. I got suspicious. And he went to make a call or something, and I ran away.

I didn't know, was he going to hand me in? Was he going to rape? Was he going to-- what was he going to do? Why would he be interested in the girl just that he met there on the train?

So I ran away. Where did I run to? I ran back to Laramie to the same school.

I didn't go home. There was no point. My parents had told me to go.

I see. So you are actually terrified to go home, I would imagine, yes?

Yeah.

But let me-- I wanted to ask you, then we're going to have to stop the tape. But on the train, why did this guy say take off your-- did he think that you were going to Maline? Did you tell him?

Mm-hmm.

You had told him.

That was the route. You had to star, and you were coming from Antwerp, that's the only route that you were going. So it's Antwerp, Maline, Brussels.

Yes. So he knew. But it's interesting what your instincts were doing. You somehow trusted him enough.

But not all the way.

[LAUGHS]

Particularly that he offered me his room. And that did it. I said no.

All right, let's stop and change the tape.