

So I went back to La RamÃ©e. That's where they were staying.

Now, I also want to know something. When your father put you on the train, is there money? Do you have to pay for a ticket?

He bought the ticket.

He bought the ticket. So when you run away from this guy, who, clearly, whatever he was going to do, and we don't know anything--

No.

--maybe he was going to be absolutely fine-- clearly saved your life by giving you the directions of locking yourself in a bathroom.

Right.

And when you were in that bathroom, were you frightened?

Oh, was I frightened, because what if they broke the bathroom open.

Right.

And what if someone--

Which could have happened.

Right. And suppose someone wanted to get in-- did anybody knock?

No.

Nobody knocked? So is it possible that many people on that train, that same train where the bathroom was, knew that this guy had told?

Probably other people noticed, maybe, you know, because he did talk to me. He wasn't particularly, I suppose, not yelling or screaming, but enough for me to hear.

Right. So other people may have heard?

May have heard, yeah.

And he may well have told everybody, do not go into the bathroom.

Yeah, could be because no one knocked at the door. And when the train started again after the stop, and I'm sure a lot of them went down because it was a full-packed train, then I came out the way I was told, and he was there.

And then it's a very short trip then from Malines to Bruxelles, to Brussels.

How long do you think you were in that bathroom?

I have no idea.

No idea?

A half hour? An hour?

No, not that long.

Not that long.

Not an hour. Oh, definitely not an hour.

OK.

No.

So he saves you, but you get very suspicious because in the middle of the day, he's giving you his own room.

I know.

[LAUGHTER]

I think if he hadn't done that, I would probably kind of waited and see what he was going to suggest or what he was going to offer maybe. But that did it.

Yes. So how do you go back to the school? You go on the train? So you have a little bit of money to get a ticket.

Yeah.

And you still have your little bag?

I still have my little bag, and I get back.

OK, so you get back to the school, and what happens?

And after a few days, they told me there was no way, I couldn't stay, because I was putting everyone in danger. See, we had all these false ideas, thinking they know where you are. They know where to find you when you're not reporting in Malines.

I don't know how much they would trace every detail of every person, but we were reasoning like that. So they will know that you are deserting. You haven't reported. It's too dangerous for everyone here. You have to go. And we were four like that. So we left.

You were four Jewish kids?

Mhm.

So you just left.

We left. So part of it we did on foot. Part of it we did on little bits of train, wherever we could catch one. And we made it. I think it took us close to four days, five days, to reach the Swiss border. We crossed France.

You did cross France?

Well, yeah, we had to because how we get to Switzerland. We slept in barns. We slept outdoors. It was summer, kind of warm, May, June. I don't know exactly the dates anymore.

Some farmers would feed us, and we finally made it. We crossed the no man's land. We reached the Swiss border, and we were told that they closed, and they wouldn't accept anyone anymore.

We told them who we were and that we just couldn't go back. We would be arrested and sent to concentration camp. No, nothing. They wouldn't take us.

And you're all like 13, 14, years old.

We were in total despair. There must be one or two maybe 15, but not much more, 15, 16. So we all had the voice. There were three of them, I think, had been in the Hashomer Hatzair, at least two for sure, me and another.

And so if they won't take us, they won't take us. What's next? We got a big carton. We walked. We took part of a train. Now we were really getting closer feeling we are getting back to Belgium. Where shall we go now?

We then started considering, well, let's make an end of our life. And that's what's been discussed in the train. But, see, you are so frightened. You're so terrified. You think you're so careful. We were whispering. So we thought no one can hear us.

Here are the four in this little compartment. And we are deciding which way we're going to end our lives rather than hand ourselves over to the Germans. What other choices did we have? Home was finished. School--

For all of you, home was finished?

Yeah, I think so.

[BOTH TALKING].

No one was going to go home because we all knew the reprisals what it would be once you got that letter. I mean, you see, in parts, we were innocent too. We didn't reason fully on the impact of all these things except from hearsay.

The school, we couldn't go back. We had just ran away from it because we put everyone in danger. So you had a choice either to report to Malines and, say, here I am, or none of us felt like doing that.

So once said, let's just throw ourselves under the train. Well, that was, for me, horrifying. I said, look, that is too violent. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. If we're going to do it, let's take a mild way. I go for gas.

You have to be kidding.

No, see, I did tell that. Didin't You hear?

Gas?

Yeah, well, then you just go to sleep. That's all.

But it's an interesting choice, given what was going on that you didn't know about.

Right. So I said, if we're going to do it, you guys do whatever you want, but I'm going for the gas because at least we open the gas. You go to sleep. You won't even know that we are passed away.

And as we are discussing all of this now reaching nearly the Belgian borders, we're at the end of the North of France, we hadn't even realized that there were other passengers, and he said, that's what I'm telling you. You can get caught up in so much of your fear and despair. The lady was sitting at the other section of another little compartment, but it's all open. You know how those trains are.

I see. This was not an enclosed compartment.

No, no, no.

So you were like in the--

Yeah, four seats. And then you have four and then four and four. And she was there in that corner. She had heard the whole thing going on.

So she moved over, and she said, don't do that. Don't do it. Look, you probably don't know where I'm going to get off, and it's true. We had no clue.

I mean, I didn't know much about Belgium except Antwerp. What else did I know? Wherever the train stops, and I get to follow, I'm going to give you a name and an address. These people will help you.

That's all she said. She didn't say how, what, which. But don't do it. That is really not the way to go. Go to the different places I will indicate to you, and you will get help.

And I happened to get the address of the dentist in Jodoigne. And she went down in Jodoigne. So, for me, that was the closest by, and then she vanished.

So wait a minute. Did she give you these names before she got off the train?

Yeah, on the train.

And she said-- on the train.

Yeah, just follow me. And I stopped, and the train stops. And you see me go down, get all off. And then you'll find yourself-- the directions and indications where to go because they were all within the ranges of 3 miles, 4 miles, you know?

It's all villages.

Now did she sit with you? Or did she say this-- give you the name?

She gave me the name. I went back to our seat.

And went back.

So there wouldn't be any suspicion, I believe, for herself.

But did the four of you start talking like, what is she, a crazy person? I mean, you trusted her.

We trusted her. We kind of look and said, well, we have nothing to lose. Let's give it time. And very shortly, after that, it was a last-minute thing. The train stopped. She went down, and we all went down.

Do you know her name?

No.

You never saw her again?

No.

Isn't that extraordinary?

It is extraordinary that none of us had-- that's what I'm telling you, when you panicked like that, it's the weirdest things you do know. None of us even asked her name. Do you know what I'm saying?

Yeah.

But she knew the dentist very well. She lived in Jodoigne. And she knew the family very well. So she knew who she wasn't trusting me to, at least that's happened to have been my case.

And so that's where how I got to look at the door, and it was, like, 2:00 in the afternoon or something like that, early in the daytime. And he opened the door, and then he said-- I explained my story.

Now you can imagine, you know, you stutter and stammer because one minute, you were considering to make an end of it, and here is this stranger when you've got to tell them what you come for, well, this lady met us on the train, and we're hiding, and do you think you could give me some shelter, something like that.

So he took me in, just in the kitchen a few minutes, and he said, if I keep you here, you'd be in danger because I got too many patients every single day. So hiding here wouldn't be a safe place at all for you.

But what I can do is give you the name of my mother and sister, who lived 12 miles away, and you can take my bicycle. And he didn't know me and never seen me. You can bike there-- because there were no public transport. Trams and all of that had stopped for the Germans. And I'm sure you can do something for you. So that's how I started off to Grez-Doiceau.

A 12-mile bike trip? In a country--

Gave me some directions.

Yes, but you'd never been there.

Never been on the road. This is, to me, totally unknown lands, like you would put me now in Virginia and tell me, here is the bike and go where to. Do you know--

You knew how to ride a bike.

Yeah, I knew that. Thank god. I couldn't now, but I knew then. And so I got there. I found it a little bit difficult to find that house just by the river.

And as you have noticed, the house that was the front, but then there was the site where he had the patients coming in because he had two cabinets. He had one in Jodoigne, where he lived with his own family, but then he came twice a week to Grez-Doiceau, where he also was taking patients--

In the same house?

Yeah, with the little section for his dentistry. So I knocked on the side door for and didn't get an answer. I was already terrified.

And what time is it now? Is in the evening already?

No, not yet.

Not yet.

Because, no, I made it in a decent time, like, you know? And I was already terrified that there was no one maybe here, and what am I going to do. I'm going back to Jodoigne.

Well, anyway, I kind of looked around, and someone in the street made a sign that to take around the house, which I did and got to the front door. And Marie appeared.

OK, and I tell my story, again, right? I'm coming from your brother and this and that, and do you think you could save me?

And, of course, we all had the same story, and we believed it. The war was going to be over pretty soon, sure. That's what's in our minds, you know? So it won't be too long that would save me from the Gestapo or something like that. I can't remember which little pitiful story I had to tell.

She was very friendly, very warm, very sympathetic, but she couldn't give me an answer right away. So she said, I'm sure it's going to be OK, but my mother isn't here, and I have to have her permission.

So if you can wait a bit, until she comes back, she's due back on the next time away that went from this village to that village. She went for some business. They had just moved in the house and all that.

So I did, and they agreed to see whether they could keep me.

So you're about 14.

Mhm.

And Marie is in her 40s.

Yeah.

With children?

No.

No children.

She never married.

She never married.

No.

And that's Marie, and then Elise--

Elise, yeah. Those two live together.

Right. And the mother is in her 60s or something.

Early 60s.

Early 60s.

Yeah.

So the mother comes back and sees you.

Yeah, and Marie explains--

Right. And the mother said--

--that Paul had sent me.

Right.

And they discuss a little bit, and then they said, well, we are going to give it a try, yes. You can stay, you know? So I said, well, what I do with the bicycle. Well, don't worry about it.

My brother will come for Tuesday or Wednesday, whichever days he was coming, and we'll see what we can do. She did tell me later on that in the first few weeks, they had considered sending me to an orphanage.

A lot of Jewish people were saved that way to where orphanages are kept by nuns and things like that. But then after a few weeks, they got so attached to me that they didn't have the heart to do that. But that I only knew after.

Afterwards, yes, of course, they [BOTH TALKING].

No, they wouldn't tell me that, no.

No.

And where did you stay in the house. What was it like in that house?

Oh, they gave me the most beautiful home of all.

Really?

Yeah.

Marie moved-- there was like a master bedroom. She moved out of that and gave me the master bedroom, and she moved into a smaller room. I was, like, I didn't even dare moving. I mean, I hadn't been used to anything as beautiful looking as that, although it was things which she had rescued from the bombing, put together, because I told you the whole house was bombed, and they lost everything.

It was a very, very beautiful bungalow, nine months old, which was totally destroyed by the bombing. But she still gave me the most beautiful room. And then they really took care of me because all I had was the dress you see I'm wearing.

Right, you had no--

--a little backpack. I don't even think I have anything much to change. So they clothed me, they fed me, and they were on stamps because no one could have any food without stamps. So that's how we started our saga in Grez-Doiceau.

So this is the first time you have your own room, and it's in a complete stranger's house.

Mhm. And then, of course, what do I notice, actually, a crucifix here, a crucifix there, another way, because they were very, very Catholic, yeah.

And, of course, they know you're Jewish. And do you have any idea why they put you in the master bedroom, the best room in the house, as opposed to-- it wouldn't have been anything wrong--

It wouldn't make any difference. No.

--in the smaller room?

I don't know.

You don't know?

Was she just kind of hostess to do the best when you receive some guests, you know what I'm saying?

Right.

Yeah, she was very artistic person. She could do anything and everything. I've never seen someone so well-rounded.

This is Marie?

Marie.

Marie.

Her own clothing, her own hats, her own shoes. She could do anything during the war.

Really?

Yeah. Because the coat that you see me even after the war that I'm walking the streets of Antwerp, she made that from some other coat that she reversed and made it to my size and made my hat, and it was just incredible. Yeah.

I was very lucky to have--

Absolutely.

--been accepted in a family like that one.

But now your experience, not only from what your mother tells you about Christians or Catholics in particular, but your own experience, is not a very good one. So you're walking into a house that's going to save you with all these crucifixes and this--

Yeah.

Well, of course, in the beginning, I'm like a little bit weary about all that, but then safety comes first, right? And I kind of say, oh, well, that's what they believe. So that's what they believe.

And then they were the type of people they would go to Mass every single morning, a very well-known family in the family for generations and particularly very, very staunch Catholics. So they went to Mass every day. So, of course, the first few days, I am just there, and we don't know what we're going to do, and how we are going to handle this whole situation.

And they did inform the parish priest what they have done, and they were very close. And he said he would help to try to get me some false papers, at least to have some document of some type.

And she did explain to me, Marie and me, gently that being that they were so well-known in the family, they had to kind of, for the outside world, come up with a story-- where does this person appear suddenly? And in villages, everyone knows everyone.

So they made up that I was a distant cousin, who had come from the Flemish part of Belgium to learn French, and so



then they explained to me, but being that you are part of the family. You will just have to come to Mass with us because it would be very strange to the whole village that we take someone in who doesn't believe and doesn't go to Mass every day.

So I decided I have no choice. What else will I do? I'll just have to go.

In the beginning, it was traumatic.

I would imagine. Could you talk to them about it? Did they ask you about your own tradition and your experience?

They asked me that I was a believer. I said my mother was very, very Jewish, and I used to kind of go with her. We had our traditions and things like that.

Now, of course, the more I got to know them, the easier I found to talk about it, and I would then share things which I did find ridiculous or questioning to my young mind then, like, my mother was really, like, fanatic. If we were walking the streets of Antwerp and see a priest on the other side of the street, she had it that you had to turn your button to avoid any malediction coming on you, and I did that because I was brought up like that. You see, she really had a lot of, what you call it?

Superstition.

Superstition. A lot. And I think a lot of Polish Jewish were like that.

So you shared this with Marie?

I shared that with Marie, and we laughed about it.

Yes, of course.

Because here I was seeing the priest on the daily basis. I was trying to help.

Right.

Very friendly, very welcoming, same with them. So I felt at this to share with it.

Did they, before you-- before you started going to Mass, did they tell you what you should do when you were at Mass so it wouldn't be complete-- because you've never been in a church before.

Never.

Or did you just imitate that?

I imitated. They said, well, just do as we do. Well, I found that very difficult. Genuflecting was out of the question. This is the beginning here. No, I couldn't do that. I wouldn't do the sign of the cross on me either because I felt very uneasy about it. So she did it for me.

How did she do it for you?

Well, she would just take the holy water and just do the sign of the cross on me.

Oh, I see, right, right.

So that was OK. I could handle that, as long as I didn't have to do it with myself. We're speaking the very first few days of this new existence here. So, genuflecting, no, I didn't do that.

But then she kind of said, you know, try as much as you can to do what we do. So I practice in my room because I found that so difficult that I said, rather than look ridiculous and dumb, let me first give it some practice here. So I practiced all by myself.

So you practiced genuflecting?

Mhm.

And did you notice that you were supposed to do it in a certain way, left to right, right?

In the beginning, I let her do it. It was just as easy.

Yes.

And I didn't particularly like the idea of this holy water either. So I let her do it. But then after a while, yes, I practice. I said, might as well go with it because it's the only way to be safe.

But it had a very difficult feeling. Being such an orthodox upbringing with so many superstitions and, you know, on the young mind, she had impressed me very much with it. I think I must have been the one who probably got most of it from my mother.

Most of what she believed about other people.

I don't think she worked so much on the boys as she did on me, and I don't know why.

Well, clearly, you were a target in that family for a number of things, yes?

Maybe that's the way Jewish mothers do. They're closer to their daughters than their sons?

Maybe. Except she wasn't that close to Clara.

No.

Yeah, Clara didn't allow it either, see? I must have been an enabler.

Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

Probably. But then, eventually, I got to do it, and I had no problems with it.

And it was no problem.

Then it was fine. And I had a missal because, in those days, everyone had a missal. And that was a nice distraction because I could read.

And a missal is a book of prayers, yes?

Yeah.

Where you have the dated prayers for the Mass. So that was nice because it kept me busy. I could follow. I could read. I could see what was going on, you know?

And it was in French?

Yeah, French. And I thought what it had to say was rather nice, you know? So I had no problem with that at all.

Did you then start reading the New Testament?

A little with the family, with the mother and Marie.

Yes.

Yeah. But then not long after that, I received this panicked letter from my mother.

OK, wait. One second. Hold that. Hold that for one minute. I want to go back to something. When did you get false papers? The parish priest got the false papers?

Pretty fast. He got me false papers. I had a different name. I was born in Ghent, which was a Flemish part, so it justified the story that went along with it. Apparently, and I didn't know that, I was still making quite some Flemish mistakes like gender. I would mix the masculine and the feminine because every word, of course, in the French language has a gender.

So it really fit the story that they had made up, and they would sometimes, which was funny, refer to it, see, she said [? au ?] for [? un ?], but that's why she's here. So that worked.

It worked. And do you remember what your name was?

Yeah, Marie Gosens.

Marie Gosens.

Gosens. Born in Ghent. Actually, I went even to Ghent in, I can't remember, in the '70s, 1970s, which some of our sisters, I went to the cemetery. I wanted to find out whether this name existed. And there were a lot of Gosens.

So maybe I got the name of someone who had died, but maybe not declared or whatever. So I was Marie Gosens, born in Ghent.

Now the fact that you looked very Jewish, according to you--

Yeah, I did.

--people in the little village did not say, what do you mean she's a part of your family? Nobody questioned it?

There were some who would question. Some that I was told, be very careful of what you say or what you don't say. Rather, then, say, you don't know, and wait for us to answer.

And we had some neighbors who collaborated with the Nazis, and we were very, very aware of that and in great fear. So I tried to keep indoors as much as I could, not mix.

But, obviously, there were other people who were--

Oh, no, others were very--

Very good. very good.

Yeah, very good with it.

The sisters in the parish knew, the parish priest knew, there was some nobility that lived in the parish, a baron and baroness, and they were staunch Catholics, and they knew. So that was OK. But you have to be careful, very careful. So I didn't go out much. I didn't mix much.

So you didn't have young friends? No. And no school, obviously.

Oh, no, no way.

Nobody had school.

For some reason, Henry went to school with his siblings.

[INAUDIBLE].

No, I didn't go to school. No, that was too dangerous. Yeah. Maybe because our place was smaller, and everyone knew everyone, and they were afraid of what would be asked.

And, actually, I don't think there was a high school. I would have been more for going already to the beginning of high school or the eighth grade or something. It only went through sixth grade in the village.

I see.

So there was no point. No, I never went to school.

All right, we're going to now break.

OK.

When we come back, we will talk about this famous letter that you received

From my mother.

Yes.