

Anytime. OK.

Regine, later on you found out some things about the parish priest that made you think that maybe your mother had some added difficulties. Tell me about that.

Yeah. He definitely was different. Like, a bit silly, or a silly attitude now and again, not very organized. So he would let things just pile up. He would come some weeks, and there would be stacks of newspapers, and he didn't want to throw them away-- kind of little petty things, which he had, like, a different streak, you know? Celibate, whatever, which they all are, but they're not all like that. He was different, but very kind.

He was kind. And he certainly was taking a chance.

Very kind, and took a chance, and really loved my mother-- thought she was a great person, in spite of all of these little things beside. Yeah.

And in spite of no language between you.

And no language. Yeah. When I would go, he would tell me what he wanted me to tell her, and she'd tell me what she was worried about or whatever, because she did realize that she had limitations and wouldn't always grasp what he wanted. So she was waiting for me to clarify these things. So it was a really a tricky situation.

And where would you speak-- because you speak in Yiddish to your mother, and she's speaking Yiddish to you-- where would you speak? Because nobody could hear you except him. I mean, you had to be very careful when you came and spoke with him.

In the house, yeah.

In the house.

Yeah.

And it was his house?

His house, yeah-- the presbytery.

So it was--

Yeah. And we were OK.

Did anybody get suspicious of your mother since she never spoke? Because it's odd.

You know what I think? Some might have known, but no one asked questions, and no one said anything. So she was safe. And she was very gentle and very reserved, so that helps in type of a-- this type of context of a presbytery. So there were no indiscretions and no things said about so-and-so or so-and-so, which happens a lot in small villages where everyone knows everyone. So on that side, I'd say, they felt safe.

Hmm. So if you would see your brother and your mother together in the monastery once every couple of weeks?

Mm-hmm.

And you would see your mother once a week pretty much?

Yeah. That I did pretty much. Yeah.

And for how long do you think you were doing that every week? Months?

Months.

Months.

Mm-hmm. Maybe even a year. But then things became more dangerous, and I would kind of go every two weeks, because as the war progressed, the years going by, everything became more tight. Now, obviously, when-- well, we get to that when I have to tell them about Clara being arrested, who had to announce it was me.

For a while, we would just distance a little bit because of this silly card we received from Marlene that no one was safe about. And I only stayed once a week for two, three weeks. And that's when we got the message that we had to come immediately because she was so sick. And I couldn't believe the change in her, in that short time.

Now, let me ask you something. When you would go back home after seeing her, would you feel depressed because of her situation, or would you feel glad? Or, I mean, was it difficult for you to be seeing her in some ways?

I was always happy to see her and help her. And I would probably tell Marie that it wasn't easy for her, but we did the best we could. And I wish she could be with me, but that was an impossibility. We all knew that, because we couldn't take that risk. One, it's dangerous. But, two, it's obviously asking for.

So you know, we kind of reasoned that-- we talked about it. We would talk, of course, all the way back and all the way going and how happy she was to see us. And she did like the Hanquet family because she knew what they have done for all of us, so she particularly had more affinity with the mother, probably because of an age group there. I don't know. But it wasn't easy. And Marie realized that.

Yes. And you must have been torn--

Yeah.

--going back and forth.

Going here and there. Yeah.

So as you are living with the Hanquets, and you experience their religion, and you start becoming closer in some way to Christianity, especially to Catholicism, how does that happen? Can you-- I mean, can you-- do you understand it even?

I suppose it came along with going to mass every single day and reading the gospel. And then, of course, being what they were, both of them, more than just good Catholics, but real religious people. We talked a lot about it at home, too.

Like, we would discuss the reading of the morning, for example, or the gospel. And in my young thinking mind, I would make comparison and say to myself, they really live what they read. Do you know what I'm saying?

Yes. Yes.

Like, a glass of water given in my name, it's to me you have given it. Well, that would take enough for me to sink in and compare in the living situation how things were. They weren't saying one thing and doing another. They were applying what they really took out from the Gospel reading and the readings at Mass.

So that impressed me. And I started thinking-- now, I'm not saying that we didn't discuss religion. That's not true. Being that they were-- and very enlightened people. I would say Marie was very much of ahead of her time, even before Vatican II came along.

And she was extremely well-read in the Bible. She knew more about the Bible readings in the Old Testament than I did, because I only knew what my mother told me. I wasn't particularly going to pick up the Bible at home and read the readings. I would do it-- listen to her, and when I visited my grandmother, just to please my grandmother who was so proud of that.

So she knew a lot. I mean, she would tell me things about the Old Testament which I didn't know. And I'd be like sitting there saying, how do you know all that? Well, there it is. Look at the Exodus. Look at this. Look at that. So we had a lot of interaction like that.

Now, one thing I didn't like, for example, when we had had some discussions like that in the beginning, and she'd say, see, I'm more Jewish than you are. I said, what? That I didn't like. Because it was like taking away something from me, but I knew what she meant. I was just being by birth, but I wasn't really living the thing. So we had a lot of those things going on.

And how did you put that together with all of these Catholics that you met as a kid who were so mean to you.

Yeah. We discussed that, too. And, as she said, that was totally false understanding of religion, that Christ himself was a Jew. How could you then deny and persecute the Jews for something which they hadn't done, just that they happened to be born Jews? And that there are bad eggs in any situation, in any religion, in any society that you go, which is true.

Because I only needed to know from my experience as anti-Semitism, that that was so true. But what I was living right there with them day by day was a total different way of looking at that. And they had the highest respect from the Jewish people, as I said, because they couldn't be closer to Christ than to the Jewish people. As they said, there wouldn't be a Christ if there wasn't the Jewish people.

So see, all these things were like for me puzzling, questioning, enlightening. And if it hadn't been for the living example, I would never have reached that stage. But as I saw it being living on a daily basis, I came to the conclusion, well, there must be something to it. So I started more questioning myself--

As to where you were.

Yeah. And then I didn't even go to instructions like some people do in the Catholic Church, because I had it all there with Marie and Elise, so I was very much prepared for it.

Right.

Yeah.

So how did you question yourself? What did you ask yourself when you were by yourself?

When I was by myself? Like on which topic, now?

On this topic. When after you'd have all these conversations, and you'd see who these folks were, and you realized they were living--

I was starting to say, well, it's just OK to be a Catholic. It is actually the fulfillment and the continuation of the Jewish religion. We stopped. We stopped at waiting for the Messiah, and we could be waiting forever. And he came. We haven't just recognized it. So why should I be blinded like anyone else when I see different?

So it came from me. I said that I wanted to be baptized. Of course, by then I have heard through the church and different offices that I went to, baptism, confirmation, that that was done at Easter, that people were prepared for the child. And then I was at the baptism of all the small girls-- Paul's girls. When I arrived, it was only the eldest, Matt. Then came Lucie. Then came Marie Jean. Then came Cecile.

I was there for all of them, and I really loved these children. I almost brought them up, like I did with Henry when he was small. I have had good training, so I continued with the others. So I got very familiar with all of that, so I asked myself to be baptized.

And they did tell me then-- it started off that I went to, what they call in the Catholic Church, mission-- a week of mission-- where they invite priests from outside the parish to talk on different topics to prepare people a little bit deeper for Easter. And I was very impressed by this Redemptorist who came to talk. Because he brought up all the value-- and this is in the middle of the war, now, we're in-- all the values of the Bible and quotations from the Old Testament and of the Jewishness, and that having get where we are, we had to go through the Jews. There was no denying of that.

And I do remember the one sentence that really struck me then. I must have already been pretty far in searching, that what does it help to gain the whole universe if you lose your soul? Well, that did it. That was my converting phrase. So I said, well, that is true. What am I gaining? So I just would like to be baptized. But that's when the war started again, as you know.

Right. So did you-- the first people you told was Elise and Marie together?

Marie first.

Marie first.

Yeah. I was very close to her.

And was she surprised, or did she say you're too young to know? Did she say--

She said she could feel me change, and she could see it happening. Of course, she was very pleased. And I said, I don't know how this is going to be taken in the family. And she reassured me saying, but don't think that you're losing anything. You'll always be Jewish.

I mean, that has nothing to do with it, which wasn't some type of language which very few Catholics can speak about, because it's either this or that. And one doesn't go with the other, including my family in the beginning. I mean, I wasn't a Jew anymore. I had to work hard to make them reconcile with that idea, that I was still Jewish, which I've had the pleasure to hear David tell me before he died. Because that was a hard one for me to take.

Yes. So that must have been so important to you.

That was very important that he said. I can't deny it. You're as Jewish as you've always been. I said, I told you that. Didn't we have the same father and mother? So how could I be the different? But he said that even through my talking, I hadn't lost whatever heritage I had received. That was still there. But that took hard work.

Did you-- I mean, in a way, this is a stupid question. But you are now 14, 15 years old. Did you think that you needed more understanding of Judaism, that you really didn't know enough about Judaism?

No. That I didn't feel. No.

You didn't feel that?

No. I thought I had been very much brought up in the Jewish religion to know enough about it. Because I really mean, they might not have had the same experience I had at home. But my mother was a real Hasidic Jew. I mean, between the kosher, and running with the pots and pans to the rabbi because the milk had spilled off. We had a [INAUDIBLE]. And of course, no one would go. So I know all the ins and outs of it. So I didn't feel that I had been deprived in that way.

But the belief structure did not feel as comfortable to you as the Catholic belief structure, right? There was something that you gained there that you hadn't gained--

Hadn't had from the-- no. There was never any particular teaching. It was just the example in the living room from my mother.

Right.

Because my father wasn't so synagogue-going as he should have been, which was painful for her, too. As I told you, he started off being instructed to become a rabbi. But when he came to Europe as [INAUDIBLE], he lost a lot of it. And then she was always the one initiating and telling him, we have to go to synagogue, and he couldn't miss this, and he couldn't miss that. And just to please her, he would go there.

So how-- once you've said this to yourself and to Marie and then to-- was Elise as happy as Marie was?

Oh, yeah.

She was?

Both of them.

So they were all very-- so here, you have two Catholics who think this is great, and this is a wonderful thing for you. How long does it take you before you decide you're going to tell your mother, which you know is going-- whatever, it's not going to be easy.

We talked to it to the parish priest first.

Which one? Yours?

Mine.

Yours, yeah.

It was so. And he said, well, you'd have to have your mother's permission.

And you said, oh my goodness.

That was the biggest stumbling block. I said, oh, my gosh. He said, yeah, you really need to have her permission. So you'll just have to-- you'll have to tell her.

Now, did he question you about your doing this at all?

He did, but I suppose he was well informed, having seen me go into it, and go to meetings and to different prayer services, and really getting into it totally, and knowing the family I lived with, he had no too many questions on that, because he knew how they were-- very dedicated, and helping in any fashion any way they could, and--

Right.

He might have asked me a few questions, but he knew I was ready for it, that I had really left it already before I even pronounced it to be official. But that was the biggest thing, though, I mean, to get my mother's permission. I said, I don't think I'll ever get it. He said, well, you'll just have to try.

And permission had to be up until the age of what?

Normally, it should have been till 18.

And you were 15? 14?

Yeah.

We're talking '43 now. So you're 15. No. Yes.

Am I already 15? Or was I going to be 15? Doesn't matter-- one year.

Doesn't matter. Somewhere around 14, 15. Right.

So you must have been scared to death.

Well, that was a-- oh, I was totally scared to death. We went over one evening, my normal visit. And I said, I had something to tell her. And I was left alone with her.

Marie leaves.

Yeah. Well, Marie stays in the house, but she's not assisting in any way. But there was no point, because it might just have aggravated the situation more than anything else. And I didn't want her to take it out on Marie, because it had nothing to do with her. That was my wish.

So it went very bad. Real bad. Now, my mother was very good at-- sorry I have to tell you that-- at cursing. So I got every malediction that the Jewish language has. And I felt so bad.

What did you say to your mother? Did you just say, mother, I want to be baptized?

I want to become a Catholic. I want to be baptized.

And then she started swearing at you.

And she said-- and how could I do that? And no one is around. And how would David feel? Well, that was always-- he was my idol, so that was number one to come forward. How could I betray him like that? And what would-- if he ever hears about it, if he's still alive and-- well, the last thing was she would disown me. She didn't want me to be her daughter anymore if I do that. And I left on that. There was no other thing to do.

Were you crying?

Mm-hmm.

You were crying.

I mean, to be told by your mother you're going to be disowned, you know? That was very hard. That went on quite for a while. Then I said, I still want to do it. And they asked for some dispensation. And I was going to be baptized at Easter, when came the famous card from Clara.

This is April-- March, April '43.

Yeah. So where did that card come in? I don't know. But anyway.

But didn't you-- you got a notice from the Jewish.

That's right.

First, right, before you got the card. So the card must have come later.

Later. So everyone decided it was too risky. If I was baptized at Easter, and then I was arrested, how would I live my Catholic religion? Would I be strong enough to be faithful to it? Could I really live it? So wouldn't it be better to wait to be a little bit more secure, because it is a serious thing. You don't just convert, become a Catholic, and then you can do it.

But was that the reason why they were worried about your being baptized at Easter? Or were you also worried because they thought that you might have been found out?

Mm-hmm.

So is it both things?

Both. Because if I was found out, they would come and arrest me, right? Well, there was no way I could live anything anywhere.

Right.

So we waited and we waited, being very worried, as I told you before. And then finally I decided, well, whatever. I think I would have the strength to just-- oh, yeah. They did tell me to-- see, this is something I didn't know. I'm still very new and young in this religion. And I had the baptism of desire. And that would be enough to be saved if I was arrested. It was my desire was more important than the actual ceremony or whatever you want to call it. So I kind of settled for that. That was satisfying to me. At least in God's eyes, I wanted to be baptized, so it's as if I had been.

And then we waited. But then finally, and probably I insisted again, and I just went ahead. I said, I won't even let my mother know that I'm going to do it. And so that's when--

But you weren't 18.

No. But we had dispensation.

You had dispensation.

With special circumstance.

That's August 6, '43, right?

That's right.

Now, you've told your mother--

Before that.

--before that, for months. So all these months, you don't see her?

Yes, but we don't talk about it.

But she's willing to see you.

She's willing to see me, but no baptisms. And I'm not yet baptized. So I still go and see her, the usual thing.

OK. So as long as you're--

And we don't talk about it.

Right. And as long as you're not baptized yet. And she doesn't say, are you, or are you not?

No. She's not asking. She probably thought to risk a terrain, we won't talk about it. And maybe she also thought if I hadn't said it, it hadn't happened yet. She might have thought that the way she had reacted to it--

Stopped you.

Plus, all the threats of the whole family, who would know, that it had stopped me, and if I wasn't talking about it, it hadn't happened. That's how I interpret it up till a certain time, because then things changed for her, too.

But how does it make you feel to go see your mother after she's yelled at you like this? Did you just try to forget it?

I understood that from where she was coming there was no way she was going to be able to accept or understand that. Now, that I was, let me say, intelligent enough to understand that it was going to be. Well, I knew that I just had to do it as a formality, but I knew there was no way that my mother was going to be able to understand or accept something like that.

That's a very adult response, don't you think, for a 15-year-old?

Yeah. But I knew how-- how will I say-- how fanatic she was in her own belief. Maybe it wasn't fanatic, but it was such a conviction with so many superstitions and all the things from which I had distanced myself already.

Now, don't forget, I was also in the Hashomer Hatzair, which was totally ungodly in any way or shape. So I had taken some distance there, which I had broadened my understanding of religion altogether. So that helped. And we were studying the-- we thought we were studying-- Darwinism and what have you. We really thought we had the answer to everything. You know how that goes, right?

So did you feel in conflict taking on Catholicism with respect to what you had learned in this secular--

No.

--group. No, you didn't?

No. Funny enough, I was able to tear myself away totally from the Zionist movement.

You were?

Yeah. That was never something that I questioned or that I thought, what will they say, or how come I'm not-- no, I wasn't attached to it. It was like something easy brought in, easy taken off.

No, I didn't mean the group itself or the politics, but the fact that you were in such a secular, non-religious group, and you took on these ideas. Did you feel they were in conflict with what you were now believing as a Catholic?

Oh, they definitely were in conflict. But I thought, this is a total unbelievable group. So that--

So it didn't matter.

It's got nothing to do with anything else.

So now you're going to tell your mother something really terrible about her daughter, and is this after you're baptized? Do you think that you went with the card August, September? After [BOTH TALKING].

Very shortly after that, yeah.



So what did you do?

I think she was kind of expecting for her to come and visit. Now, let me think. Either it was before or it was after. But I think it was after. Which year was Clara arrested, now?

Well, we don't know. I think it was May. It may have May. No.

July.

July, yes. She was denounced--

July-- which year?

Because she-- '43.

So it is after.

Like, July 8, I think, or something. So Clara was also going to visit your mother during the--

Very, very seldom.

Seldom.

But she would go now and again. Come to Grez-Doiceau, bring my mother over, and they would have a little visit in our house. And then they would each go back in their own directions. No. Clara never went to the parish priest's house, no.

I see.

First of all, it was too difficult. It would have been coming from Brussels to Grez-Doiceau, then go on foot to visit her, then come back to Grez-Doiceau, then get some transport to get back to Brussels. So we simplified it. There was like the middle house where we would meet.

Was this dangerous to do?

Oh, yeah. Very.

I would think. So would you do this in the evening also?

No. Clara would come during daytime. Because she would only come a day trip and back. She wouldn't leave Jack alone.

I see.

And she-- as far as I remember, really, Joan, I think she only did it-- if she did it three times, that's a lot for her. She wasn't one to move. I was the one running around.

Now, nobody's writing to each other. So she's not writing to you [BOTH TALKING]?

Very rarely. Very rarely. And see, if there was any writing, I would probably do it for my mother. She would write in her book in Jewish expression. But we didn't exchange much. I don't think it was safe either to have addresses flying here, there, and elsewhere, and which name were we going to give, you know? So it was more talking.

Was there a telephone?

No.

No telephone. Nobody. Nobody. Not even the parish?

There wasn't even a phone in the house. We weren't as fast getting phones as America. I think Marie got her first phone early '60s, late '50s. So you see, there was no-- no. And anyway, you couldn't use phones. It would be tapped and all that.

All right. We're going to stop the tape, and so we'll change the tape.

Good.