

Regine, your mother planned a number of things. And she decided who her godmother would be and who her confirmation godmother would be. Would you tell us who that--

Well, as I said, she kind of had it all planned and all arranged. So, when came the moment of baptism, she said and I want Elise to be my godmother for all that she has done for me. And I told you I felt that she had an affinity with her. They kind of immediately bonded more easily.

But then she added, but I don't want Madeleine to feel left out or offended. I wouldn't want to hurt her. So I thought she could be the confirmation godmother. And she wasn't there. Madeleine didn't come with this. So she was confirmation by absentee. You can do that.

And what I understand is, because your mother was, clearly, dying, that you can do the baptism--

And the confirmation.

--and the confirmation at the same time.

Same time.

And how long does that ceremony last? Is it 5 minutes? Is it 15 minutes? Is it long?

No, it's not long at all.

It's very short.

No, particularly, with adults, so they do ask a few questions. Do you believe this? Do you believe that? And so I would ask, and then she would say yes.

There is one thing, which I didn't particularly like, and I don't think I've ever told anyone, but I'll tell you. You don't have to confess any sins before you get baptized because anything that happened before is wiped out as nonexistent through baptism.

So I told her that. Now, where she got all this information, I don't know who had been talking to her, how she understood it, where she got it. She insisted she wanted to confess her sins, and I said but you don't have to. This is what baptism is all about. It's after that that you start a new life.

There was no such thing. She had to do it, and I hated it. Because can you imagine being the interpreter for your own mother to the priest? No, that was a very, very awkward situation.

And the priest didn't say--

He said she doesn't have to. Just leave it. We minimized it, but she still insisted. And the last thing I wanted her was to be agitated.

Right.

So just to please her.

And did she say things that were surprising to you? Because here this is a very intimate--

I know, and you know what? I must have had the gift of wiping it out because I don't remember what she was confessing.

Really?

Which I'm glad.

Yes.

Very glad.

Yes, I understand that. It's interesting doing such a--

And where she got all this information-- because, as I said, we never discussed religion after that one single day, never, neither the past, nor the present. I mean, we very seldom even spoke about our Jewish religion between us, you know? It was like a different era we were living in. So you didn't come back with all these other things.

She would remember, for example, it's Yom Kippur. It's Pesach. And she'd remind us, and I'd say I haven't forgotten. I know it's today, or it's tomorrow or whatever. So, who gave her all this information, I have no notion.

Because she still didn't have a verbal language.

No, verbal, no. Unless through reading she knew more than what she let me know, that I don't know.

Is it possible she knew how to read more than you thought she did?

Maybe, that could be.

And that what [? her problem-- ?]

And then, if there were like books, Flemish books around, or did she express that to the priest who visited her on her sickbed? You know, you're much more vulnerable and willing to share when you are sick and in pain, and you know you're dying. And did he find what she needed? Because I didn't even know that she had read the story of Our Lady of Fatima, which is one of the things I probably haven't read in detail like she did. But [INAUDIBLE].

Is there any possibility that the priest found something in Polish?

I never questioned that of course.

That's possible, isn't it, that some library may have.

Maybe, I never questioned that. Or in German.

Or in German.

Now, if it had been German, she could read.

She could.

Yeah.

Yes, because of the Yiddish.

With the Yiddish, she would have been able to read in German because she wasn't illiterate, just didn't speak the language, which limited her a lot.

Right, but she had capacity in terms of reading a number of languages. So it's quite possible. But it's interesting that she

did not feel, after what she said to you, able to say anything until she was so vulnerable. There was no--

No [INAUDIBLE].

There was no [INAUDIBLE].

No, and I did visit her several times, but this never came up. She would tell me more living things, how hard it was. She couldn't eat, and we were extremely restricted in food. And anything that had salt or any type of spice were like agony. Really, it was like swallowing vinegar because I'm sure she had sores all over.

And Madeleine tried her best, but couldn't help things like that. So that was the type of discussions we would have, you know, or how dangerous it had been on the road. We were arrested three times or four times. We had to come down, these type of things. But we didn't talk religion until the very last day when the wish came along.

Now Madeleine must have been an extraordinary person to take such a sick woman home she didn't know very well.

No, she knew me through Marie, and she did it for Marie, but that was extremely generous. You would just imagine not even members of family in these days--

Do that.

--wanted to do that.

That's right.

But she did. Plus the risk.

Yes, yes, the double.

And she wasn't very affluent either. She was pretty poor herself, but, whatever she had, she's share.

And how did Marie and Elise keep going? Was it Paul who supported them?

Yeah, he helped. And Marie worked for him. She helped him with the dental prostheses and things like that. And they were well off. Elise had retired from a pastry bakery business, which had been very, very [? fluorescent. ?] And so they could handle it financially. They were OK.

But they were very generous with it too because, all I'm telling you, all the money always came from them, whether I went our own transport, and you can imagine what it cost to bring her in that type of transport from such a distance, but that never was a question. He would have done anything for me, Paul, anyway.

So where is your mother buried? What happened then? Now that she's Catholic, is she buried in a Catholic--

Well, now she's Catholic, but we don't have any papers. We want to bury her, and they refuse because they say she's not registered in Grez-Doiceau. They have no proof of her.

Oh, you only have papers for the other place?

From somewhere in Ghent or Bruges or whatever.

And so you can't be buried in a--

We have nothing to show. If we could bring them or communicate with that place, but we can't. So we battled for three days. They wouldn't give us the burial permission.

And she's in the house?

She's in the house. So I don't know what happened, but I suppose her friend, the parish priest, settled it with the people of the county and said we have to bury her. She died, and she's here. And maybe he even said who she was. And so we got permission to bury her. And she's buried in Grez-Doiceau in the cemetery.

In the Catholic cemetery?

In the Catholic cemetery. That created more problems again after the war.

With the family?

Mhm, but what were we supposed to do? What was I supposed to do?

Right, I mean, where could you have buried her?

Right.

You couldn't bury her in Jewish cemetery.

No. It went very bad, particularly, with Isi. He wanted, actually, to take her out from there and fly her to Israel and bury her in a Jewish cemetery in Israel. But David talked him out of that.

He said, look, if you feel that strongly, and you're that engaged, and you're that furious, it's at your expense. Just do it. I'm sure Regine will have no objection that you take her out from there and that you do your own thing. So he dropped the idea, but they got rid of the plaque we had made ourselves after the war, no cross, God forbid.

There was a-- there was a cross?

Yeah, so we just have a name, her dates, and that's it.

So how did--

She's still there in Grez-Doiceau. And, when I go, I go and visit.

So who gave them permission to change the stone? You just said it's OK, as long as--

Oh, there has been-- I was in Africa when all this happened. And there had been long transactions between Marie and David and Isi. Well, David never put-- David went to the house where I was hiding and talked it over with Marie. Isi never put his foot in that house. He didn't want anything to do with that.

So I think they did straighten it out, and she said, whatever makes you comfortable, feel free. Take this plaque away. Put your own on if that's what you want. I mean, we did what we thought we should do in our time, but it's your mother. And, if it is a big issue, feel free to do what you want to do.

And that OK with you?

And that was OK. Oh yeah, she wrote to me, and she told me what they planned to do. And I said, well, if they feel so strong about that, that's--

It wasn't so important to you?

--no big deal to me. And, if Isi really wants, why would I object that she'd be buried in Israel? That's fine with me. She

is what she is. She's baptized. She's Catholic whether she's here or there, but she's still in Grez-Doiceau with their plaque, which is OK.

Yeah, so did you have a funeral or just the burial?

Oh, no, no, we had a funeral.

You had a funeral. And did Henry come to the funeral? No. There was too much going on.

We had a very quiet one because everything was still wartime.

Right.

So it was just family, a few friends, closed doors because you were still afraid. And we then just went to church to the cemetery, and that was it.

And is the name Sabine Donner?

Reinert, Sabine Reinert.

Reinert. You didn't put the Donner down?

I'm not sure.

Because, at this point, you might be afraid. Donner would be revealing.

Yeah, so, probably, I didn't, just Sabine Reinert, which I think you always do.

You don't put down the married name?

I don't think so. What you can do is say wife of, but I think the person itself you put the name of the person, yeah. Like in French, we would then say Sabine Reinert \hat{A} ©pouse of Donner, but we didn't do that, yeah.

So, at this point, you know that the war is really coming to an end.

Really coming to an end, yeah. Well, look how close.

Yes, August to the middle of September.

August the 3rd was the funeral. And, around September the 6th or the 8th, we were liberated in Grez-Doiceau. I remember very well.

What was that like?

Sad in a way because my main thought was she would have made it. Of course, it was a great feeling, be free again, but still marked by some sadness. She hasn't seen it, and, if they come back, she's gone. That was hard to think of that.

But, of course, at this point, you have no idea whether the whole family is gone, except for you and Henry, or not.

Yeah, Henry.

You had no idea.

No, from the others, none. I sure didn't even think Isi is still alive. This is a long time now. I didn't know what had

happened to my father. I didn't know where David was. So he was--

And David was gone for even longer.

Oh, longer. Clara has been arrested. So it was just Henry and me. And then Henry suffered the second attack in Bastogne where he was very close to. You know the Germans came back a second time again. So he was still-- he had been kind of happy to be free, and then restrictions came back for him again. So that was not an--

And how long did that last?

A few weeks and a lot of people killed.

So you must have been very worried about him at this point because you knew that was happening.

Yeah.

So we're now towards the end of September of '44.

Yeah.

Right? Beginning of October. When is it that you hear that-- and how in heaven's name does your father even find you? Is it the Jewish committee in Brussels who know because they sent you that letter?

I have a feeling that this is-- a vague feeling that some from the Zionist movement knew about me and my whereabouts. And, the minute that David reappeared on the scene, where else would he go, but back to his group, that they told him your sister is there, and we hear she's a Catholic.

I see, OK.

So this news must already have transpired to him. And then I got the news that he was back. And then, I think about the same time-- I don't know how it happened and where they all meet up, but all three were back.

Father was back. David was back, and Isi was back. And I get that news. And Henry is up there in Dinant.

And why would they go to Brussels?

I think they rented a house to be all together.

But why not Antwerp?

Good question. No, that I don't know either. Either Antwerp was too much of a memory in anti-Semitism, and Brussels was less known.

And it could be that David arranged all that through the Hashomer who told him you can have that house, and you can occupy it until other things have been-- oh, and Simon comes back too. Simon is in the picture now, our only surviving first cousin, right? He's in the picture too. He was in Auschwitz too.

And is that your father's side?

Yeah. His mother, his father, and his sister perished, and he survives.

And it's the sister who was your father's sister?

Yeah.

Yes. I mean, the mother is--

The mother is my father's sister. They were just those two. She's a Donner, and she's the one who was on the registers. I found her name.

So they all meet up. And now, somehow, David, as far as you can tell, it's David who knows where you are. So how do they--

So I hear that they're all back now. And I cannot-- yeah, I think that's how it went. And, of course, what do I do?

The first thing is get a message to Henry. They're back. Let's go and see them. Can you imagine? Isi is back and big rejoicing in my mind, right?

This is how many years now? I didn't think I'd see anyone, and they're all back. And I can't even remember where I picked up Henry, whether it was halfway or whether he came to Grez-Doiceau, and we left together. But we set out for this big celebration, and that's when it was worse than you can imagine.

So I ring the doorbell. The one who opens the door is Isi like a wild animal, and I mean wild, and, immediately, bouncing on me, grabbing me by the hand, and we go upstairs. And he starts right away that either I renounce this whole idea of being a Catholic, or this is it. He'll kill me. Oh yeah, that was the talks we had.

So there's no conversation? The minute you walk in--

Oh, no, no, no, yeah, he already knew. I don't know who informed him, but he knew. And so we go upstairs, Harry, and he tells me that. And then there was my father and David and Simon and Henry and Isi. And, when he starts like that, they all leave. Everyone leaves, and they leave me alone with Isi.

So they take Henry away. You're alone in this room with Isi.

And this keeps going, the same conversation. And I keep saying, well, could we at least talk?

Before you kill me.

Yeah, and there's no way I can just like that renounce something, which I believe in. Well, there are no other choices because you are doing to me now what the Gestapo did to me. You are betraying your own brother.

I could understand that, what his feelings towards Catholics were because, I mean, they were non-Jewish. And, in an unbelieving mind, if you are not a believer, Catholic is all the same, you know? And it doesn't have to be that they were believers or not believers. That is it.

So, next, if anything happens, you'll be the one turning against me, and I'll have to leave what I have left now. So it's either one or the other. And he started really-- we were on the upstairs. The window was open. And I was really angled by the window.

And he was ready. He was really-- now don't forget this is only the second day he's back from Auschwitz. So I don't think his feelings even had time to cool down or to settle from what he went through.

But you can also imagine, for me, what it looked like. I mean, I was terrified, just terrified. No tooth, everything broken out, no hair, I mean, he's just back--

So he's--

--looking like a real--

--brutalized.

Yeah, so he's ready to take it out on me because that's what he's just left. Something happens there. I'm alone with him, and it is really going to happen. And I'm ready.

He's pushing you towards--

He's pushing me towards the window. And I'm ready. I'm not going to give up. And I said to myself, well, I've heard about being a martyr, I suppose. I'm laughing now, but I didn't laugh. But that's really how I was thinking.

So you were not fighting him?

No, except maintaining that what I believed is what I believed in.

But not physically pushing him away?

Oh, no, no, he was much stronger than I was, even in this particular condition, yeah.

And what in heaven's name were you thinking that your father-- forget David leaving.

Oh, no, before my father left-- that's why I know what happened. Before he left, he started in the conversation too when we were all there. And, when I said I wasn't going to do that, he tore his vestments.

Like you were dead.

Like I was dead. And he walked out. And they walked out with him. So I had to go through that too. And I knew enough about the Jewish religion that that's the way it goes. So here I am.

So he was doing what your mother said he would--

Yeah.

--she would do.

But he did it.

But he did it, right.

So now I am really waiting the next step because I'm alone, and he's not going to give up. And I'm not going to give in. So there's no other solution. And I'm thinking in my mind what the news is going to be when they here that I've been killed and all of that.

The doorbell goes, and they all come back in. And there is a great commotion. And, of course, no one tells me anything because I'm not in the picture. And they whisper, and it's really something major, whatever happened, which I still don't know until today whatever was this big-- and everyone has to leave the house. We all have to go, all of us.

First, we had to go to the main post office. Either they were sending telegrams somewhere, or there was a real-- it sounded like something their life depended on them, but they didn't want to leave us alone because we would escape. So now we go, David in front, Isi in the back, and Henry and myself in the middle.

I don't know. They didn't trust Henry too much either because they knew he was pretty much attached to me. And we reached a point-- and on the road, as we go, but they never kept their eyes off us. They really were guarding us.

We're walking the streets, and we go to the main post office in Brussels. I have a chance to tell Henry, look, whatever I do, do. Don't resist me, but you realize we're going to have to run away.

And we get to the main post office, and it is one of those rotating doors. That's what saved me. So David goes in. I take another one with Henry and turn it fast enough that Isi can't get in the next one, and we run.

And I must have run in the streets of Brussels-- small, big, big, small, or whatever I could think I could get lost-- until I collapsed. And so that's what we did. And then we jumped into a tram, and I couldn't even talk, but I did have some money because I came from Grez-Doiceau.

And, good enough, Marie had taught, if anything goes wrong, or you can't make it back tonight, here is the address and the phone number of her aunt who lived in Brussels. Just go. Stay there. They'll take care of you, and we did.

When I finished running, and I couldn't any more, and I finally got to her door, and, in two, three words, when I got my breath back, I explained what had happened, and we spent the night there. And so, the next day, we went back to Grez-Doiceau, and Henry went back to Dinant. Well, they were now more than engaged that I had run away and taken Henry with me, but that was a very awful situation.

That sounds horrible.

Horrible.

And nobody was strong enough [INAUDIBLE].

Now you were asking me what type of feelings I sometimes had. I did hold it against my father for many, many years because I thought he should have been able to be a negotiator between the two of us. That was very weak what he did. I mean, he just walked out of the situation, knowing-- he must have seen how wild Isi was, you know?

So that was the end of that episode, and I didn't want anything to do with them anymore. And Henry went back to Dinant, but, of course, they were not going to stay on that episode you will imagine, right? Even if they thought they lost me, they wanted Henry back.

And Henry is how old now?

Well, Henry might be 11 maybe.

11, 10 or 11?

Maybe 10, 11. Yeah, about that, 10, 11. So--

Was he afraid when he saw Isi? It scared him.

It scared him too. And he was on my side. I mean, Henry lived very much the same situation--

That you did.

--I lived-- most adorable parents, brothers and sisters who just absolutely loved him, the spoilt, youngest of the family. Do you know what I'm saying? A life which he had never had before.

They lived on a farm. He loved farm life. He loved the outdoors. He could help. It's strange to say, but he had a nicer experience than what he had had before the war, right?

Yeah.

So, to see this type of reception-- and I was really very honest going back to celebrate that they all had come back. Of course, he was frightened. Well, I, personally, said that is it. I don't want anything to do with them anymore, but, of course, they didn't leave me alone.

David made several, several attempts and came to Grez-Doiceau and wanted to see me and wanted to get me out. And I would talk to him, but, when the family was there, I didn't want to be left alone with him anymore. I mean, I didn't trust David more than I trusted Isi because everyone had just dropped the whole situation, you know? They could, at least, have stood by.

Personally, I said to myself, if they had even just tried-- let's sit. Let's talk. We are a family. Let's see what we can do. Don't expect to come in, and five minutes later, [? I'll say ?] goodbye. I'm no more a Catholic. I'm going with you.

Right, right. And David had that same attitude. You should just drop it in spite of the closeness that--

They influenced you. They made you to do that. This was the war, and now it's different. What have you done with all your Zionism? Don't you want to go to Palestine anymore? And I was an ardent one. So that was a big disappointment to David, but, no, I didn't.

Right.

But he couldn't take it.

Right.

So then we started a new life now with, this time, we were hiding from the family.

Right. So let's stop, and we'll change the tape.