

Regine Donner

Regine Donner is the daughter of Arie and Sabine (Reinert) Donner. She was born in Sokal, Poland, on August 26, 1928. When she was only a few years old, her family moved to Antwerp, Belgium. Regine had four siblings: Clara, Israel (Isi, b. 1922), David (b. 1920), and Henry (later Zvi, b. 1933). The family was quite poor and frequently in debt. They lived in an Orthodox Jewish working class neighborhood. Regine's father, and later the two older boys, worked cutting and polishing diamonds. The boys attended Jewish schools while Regine and Clara went to public schools and received Jewish religious education twice a week. Even before the German invasion, Regine experienced anti-Semitism both from fellow students as well as teachers.

After Germany's invasion of Belgium in May 1940, the family tried to flee to France but only got as far as Dunkirk, France, and had to return home. Soon after their return, the family was separated. Isi was arrested and sent to Malines concentration camp. From there he was deported first to Auschwitz and later to Buchenwald. David fled to France and later escaped to Switzerland. After Isi was deported, Regine joined a Hashomer Hatzair agriculture school. A few months later she received a letter telling her to report to Malines. She and the other students attempted to flee to Switzerland only to be turned back at the border. On their return trip, they openly discussed suicide as their only alternative. A sympathetic woman overheard their conversation and told the children to get off the train with her. She then gave each child a slip of paper with a name and address on it.

The address on the paper led Regine to a dental office in Jodoigne, Belgium. The dentist, Paul Hanquet, took her to Grez-Doiceau, Belgium, to the home of his mother and sister, Elise and Marie Hanquet, who agreed to care for her. Then, in February 1942, Regine received an upsetting letter from her mother begging her to come to Paris, France, to help her and her younger brother, Henry. After the German invasion of Belgium, Regine's parents and youngest brother fled to France. They had given all of their money to a man who had promised to guide them to safety. However, once in Paris, he refused to take anyone but Arie whom he later abandoned in southern France. Arie survived World War II hiding in the forest of Grenoble, France, where he was dependent on the charity of farmers to stay alive. Sabine was left in Paris without papers, money, or knowledge of the French language. In early spring 1942 Regine brought her mother and brother back to Belgium, and the Hanquets found them hiding places with other Catholic families in the region. Henry went to live in Dinant, Belgium, and was hidden and cared for by the Alardo family who treated him like their own son. Sabine went to live as the housekeeper to the parish priest of Gottechain, Belgium, a small village near Grez-Doiceau. Regine went to visit her mother once a week at night accompanied by Marie Hanquet.

While in hiding, Regine became close to the Hanquet family. Moved by their Catholic generosity and spirit of self-sacrifice, Regine decided to convert. But since she was underage, Regine could only do so with her mother's

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permission. Her mother became furious when she heard Regine wanted to leave Judaism and threatened to disown her. Regine, determined to become a Catholic, decided to proceed with the conversion. Meanwhile, however, she learned that her older sister, Clara, had been arrested. Sabine was already ill with liver cancer, and upon hearing news of Clara's arrest, her health deteriorated further. Clara could have found a hiding place, but she did not want to separate from her lover. Clara and her lover were denounced by the man's wife and taken to Malines. In 1943 they were sent on Convoy XXI to Auschwitz where they were gassed. Regine delayed her plans and converted on August 6, 1943, the Feast of Transfiguration without her mother's knowledge.

When Sabine became too ill to continue to work as a housekeeper, Madeleine Strebelle, another friend of the Hanquets, offered to take her in on August 1, 1944, one day before she succumbed to cancer and three months before the Americans liberated the town. After the war, Arie, David, and Isi, who had survived the camps, returned to Belgium to find Regine and Henry. They were furious to learn that Regine had become a Catholic and refused to have anything more to do with her. Henry ran back to the Alardo home, but since he was a minor, he had to go with his father. The father and the three boys all immigrated to Israel. Regine joined a religious order in 1958, and after working as a missionary and teaching in Burundi, Uganda, and Nigeria, she immigrated to the United States in 1985. Regine reconciled with her father after 26 years shortly before his death.