

Interview with Sara LAMHAUT BOUCART on July 10, 2019 Brussels, Belgium¹

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Sara Lamhaut was born on May 24, 1931 in the commune of Saint Gilles in Brussels, Belgium, to Icek Leib Lamhaut and Chana Laja Lamhaut, maiden name Goldwasser.

Icek Lamhaut was born into a religious family in Krasnik, Poland, in 1901. His father was killed in a pogrom when he was a boy and a year later, he lost his mother and youngest sister. He attended a yeshiva because Jews could not attend public schools in Krasnik, according to Sara. She explains how he ended-up in Belgium after trying to find his brother and uncle in the United States. In order to obtain a resident's permit and be able to work legally, he worked in a mine in Charleroi for 2 years. He later worked as a tailor, for garment manufacturers and at home.

Chana Laja was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1905, the eldest of 3 daughters. Her father died when she was 8 and she had to leave school and help her mother, who sold textiles of some sort, at outdoor markets. She immigrated to Belgium with a Polish passport in 1920 and found a job taking care of the children of a Jewish family who owned a shoe store in Brussels. Despite lack of formal education, she was a voracious reader. According to Sara, she was more interested in political activism than her husband.

The couple married on December 6, 1930 at the mayor's office in Saint Gilles. Because their residents' permits were accorded for short periods of time, the family moved often. Sara remembers that they lived in the communes of Anderlecht, Saint Gilles, and Brussels. The family was not religiously observant.

At home, Sara spoke Yiddish, Polish, and German with her parents. At the age of 5, she was sent to a Jewish kindergarten nearby to learn French. At the age of 6, she started the local public school (rue de Siston, 7) and at the age of 8, she obtained a prize in French.

On May 10, 1940, Belgium was attacked by Germany and the country was at war.

Sara knew that her parents were involved in resistance activities. Her father even made her a leather jacket with a secret compartment for clandestine press publications, which they all distributed. Her father explained that if he or her mother were arrested, they would not return.

In 1942, anti-Jewish laws were put into effect and Sara and 3 Jewish friends were no longer allowed to attend school. She speaks of them in the interview.

On May 26, 1942, her mother was arrested. Both her parents were taken to Gestapo headquarters on the avenue Louise for questioning. Her father was released and came back to the apartment to tell Sara that her mother was not going to return. Chana Laja spent 6 months in the Saint Gilles prison. She sent one letter in French, another in Polish, to her husband and daughter, from there.

¹ See supplementary pdf in French, written by Sara, for more details about her parents.

Sara tells how she went to the authorities to get the written authorization to send a package to her mother, putting on a yellow star to obey regulations. Not much could be sent – no sugar, no butter or oil, not much was permitted.

After a short time in the transit camp, the *Caserne Dossin*, in Malines, she was deported to Auschwitz on Convoy 16.

This was the moment that Icek Lamhaut decided to join an armed resistance movement, *l'Armée Belge des Partisans armés*.

He entrusted his daughter to people in the Jewish community who were hiding children. Sara mentions the names of Andrée Geulen and Ida Sterno. They were well-known members of the Jewish community who worked with Yvonne Jospa, a social worker, who coordinated the efforts of several Jewish associations, united under the name *Comité de Défense des Juifs*.

Jews were not allowed to address requests to the royal family, so a non-Jew made an official request to the Queen Elisabeth, the mother of King Leopold III, who had chosen to remain in Belgium when the elected government fled to England. She promised to personally protect Jewish children, so a series of church institutions were asked to play a role in hiding them. Usually, only the Mother Superior of a convent or other institution knew the true identity of each child. Sara benefitted from this network.²

This is not mentioned in this interview, but information given to the Museum in 1997 indicates that from September to December, 1942, Sara lived in a private home. She was then sent to *Les Soeurs de Sainte Marie*, a convent nears Mons for a short time with several other Jewish girls, where she stayed till the spring of 1943. She was shuttled around, living under the assumed name of “Jeannine van Meerhaegen”.

At one point, she was sent to “Belgian Luxembourg” to a castle of the “Princes de Ligne”, in the Bois d’Arlon. Young women from aristocratic families were put in charge of the girls, not all of whom were Jewish. Sara describes how one of them harbored a grudge against Sara and took her aside, declaring that she knew that her real name was not Jeannine and that she was Jewish, which Sara denied. As soon as she could, she went to the director (a member of the resistance) and described what had happened. He promptly fired the young woman and her colleague, but there was now a real danger that these young women take their revenge by telling the German authorities that Jewish children were being hidden there. The entire group of girls had to leave for another convent near the train station, before being sent elsewhere.

She had the premonition that she might never see her father again and so left to spend several weeks with him in Brussels during the summer of 1943. The last time she saw him was when he took her to the station in Brussels, the *Gare du Luxembourg*, and he put her on a train for the Ardennes. From September, 1943 to her liberation in September, 1944, Sara stayed at the convent school in the

² There are documents on this specific rescue effort in a private archival collection given to the USHMM in 2017 by the *Institut des Etudes Juives at the Université Libre de Bruxelles*, catalogued by Peggy Frankston. This referenced in the finding aid #2 for the Max Gottschalk Collection, page 6. Queen Elisabeth’s altruism and benevolence is put into question by the historian Lieven Saerens.

village of Wezembeek-Oppem (or “Ophem”), where she received her First Communion. [Madame Lamhaut donated photos of this event and a prayer book to the Museum in 1997.]

After the Liberation of Belgium in September, 1944, Sara was sent to the Convent of Saint-Pierre, near Brussels, for 7 months, but she chafed under the harsh regime and wanted to leave. She knew that her father had been arrested in July, 1943 and that she was totally alone.

By chance, she ran into one of the daughters of a friend of her parents, who invited her to stay for a while. Mr. Debaene, a non-Jew, ended-up becoming her legal guardian and she stayed with the family for 7 years. The family did not impose any religious practices on Sara. She admits that she had no knowledge of Judaism and that to this day, she is still better-versed in the Catholic religion than Jewish practices.

Sara does not remember exactly how the girls were clothed and fed while in hiding, but she does not remember having gone hungry. She also remembers that she always felt different from the other Jewish girls because her parents were in the resistance. They were recognized as having fought for the liberation of Belgium, honored as armed soldiers, and their names are inscribed on the Belgium Memorial to Resistance Fighters [see photos of family documents]. She was given a special statute as “pupille de l’Etat”, which entitled her to a pension. Her legal guardian’s family benefitted from this.

At the age of 16, Sara asked to receive the Belgian nationality. She describes the exam and the rather exacting questioning she went through to gain her citizenship papers.

At one point, Sara joined a Jewish youth organization, but when she commented on how poorly-groomed and dirty everyone seemed, the group expelled her, calling her an “anti-Semite”.

Her guardian’s wife did not want Sara to stay in her home any longer than necessary and would not let her enroll in the university. Sara would have liked to take care of young children, but the school to train for this was private and not paid for by the Belgian state, so she enrolled in secretarial school.

She describes how she found her first job and how, once she was working for the European Commission, ironically, she owed recognition of her work and the promotions she received to the German members. She continued to work for 47 years.

Sara describes how she met her future husband, a parachutist who was often away from home on missions far away and some of the difficulties she had with his family. They were married in 1955 and had one daughter, Anne Boucart.

Sara finally connected with her father’s brother, who had changed his name to “Lambert” in the United States. This encounter eventually led to Anne’s marriage there.

Sara attended the first reunion of hidden children in the United States in 1996.

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