

Interview with Mr. Georges BRANDSTATTER on October 24th, 2019 in Brussels, Belgium

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Georges Brandstatter was born on November 24, 1939 in Berchem, a small commune outside of Antwerp, Belgium. He was called “JoJo” from an early age.

His father, Israël Brandstatter, was born in Tarnov, Poland in 1915. George explains why Israel’s father, Berish, a chazzan, fled the country with his wife Tauba (née Muschel) and settled in London around 1930. Israël and several sisters were sent to Antwerp, where an uncle was to teach Israël the upholstery trade. Israel spoke Yiddish, Polish, French, Flemish, and could read and recite Hebrew. He later opened a small custom upholstery and furniture business in Antwerp.

His mother, Ileana or Ilona Jakab, born in 1917, was from Cluj, in Transylvania, which was a Hungarian territory (until 1918) when her parents were growing up, so she and her parents spoke mostly Hungarian. The whole family immigrated to Belgium in 1929 and she later became a seamstress.

The couple married in 1938. They respected the major Jewish holidays, but were not religious. They spoke French or Yiddish together.

The Jewish population felt that if they respected the laws after the Germans occupied Belgium, everything would be alright. In 1942, things changed. The Jews were identified on a local register and had to wear the Jewish star.

Israël sensed things were not going well and put his affairs in order and decided to flee towards France, by train in August, 1942. When their papers (they only had Polish papers) were checked on the train, the family was arrested and sent to the internment camp in Gurs, in southwest France.

The Quakers (American Friends Service Committee) were active there and negotiated with the local authorities to allow all children under 3 years of age to be released, with their mothers. However, many of the people released had nowhere to go.

Luckily, Ileana’s sister Betty lived in near-by Pau. Betty had converted to Catholicism and married a Basque named Lucien Cazale, and had 2 daughters. Georges and his mother could stay there briefly, but Lucien found a couple of farmers in the Haute-Garonne village of Andoins (about 20 kilometers from Pau) to take Georges in. “Tante Elise” and “Tonton Raymond” took care of him, he thinks, until August of 1944.

Georges has happy memories of his time there, running after the hens to gather their eggs and playing with a little girl there. He remembers that he learned to say prayers in Latin and knelt by his bed to do so. He also wore a black robe when he sang in the choir.

A short time after Georges and his mother were released, the *Organisation Juive de Combat* was able to get his father out, too, and Israël promptly joined the Jewish resistance.

One night, while he was visiting Georges in Andoins, Tante Elise woke them brusquely in the middle of the night, telling them to flee because the Gestapo was on its way. Israël grabbed Georges and fled, without his shoes, up into the hills where armed men in basque berets took them in. Georges seems to think that they did not return to the farm afterwards because they had been denounced.

After the war, the Mayor of Andoins was tried for singling out Elise and Raymond and telling the Germans that they were hiding a Jewish child. He was found guilty and stripped of his civil liberties.

Israël joined the *Milice patriotique*, a French army formed by the Communist Party, which planned to take over France after the war. It lasted 5 months, for De Gaulle put a stop to it. (Georges has a scan of his father's official card from that organization). From August, 1944, on into the spring of 1945, the reunited family found lodging in a place at 11, rue Petit-Saint Sylve in Toulouse.

All the Belgian Jews who had survived the war were grouped together and sent back on a crowded train that stopped at dozens of places along the way. The passengers called it "Josephine", in imitation of the huff-huff that the steam engine made every time it started up again. When they returned to Antwerp, they slept on blankets on the floor of a large auditorium.

Israel's three sisters, their husbands, and their children were deported and never returned. [see list at the end of this summary]. Ileana's father was arrested on the street when he left the apartment to do an errand and never returned. Years later, Georges found out what happened to him....and why the Jewish barber, Fleischer, who did return from the same camp, would never tell Georges' maternal grandmother, Margaretha Jakab (née Hirsh), what had happened.

From 1946 to 1947, Georges attended the Takhémoni School in Antwerp, where there was religious instruction as well as general education.

From 1947 to 1949, he attended an Orthodox religious school, where he was chided for not wearing *payot*.

In 1949, the family immigrated to Israël. Georges describes the train to Marseilles, a great adventure for him, and the boat rechristened the *Hatsmaout* ("Liberty") which took them to Haifa. They settled in Holon, "Rasko Bet", where he learned Hebrew quickly and did well in school.

In 1955, a "serious issue" made it imperative that they return to Belgium. Israël left the country on a tourist visa, Ileana and Georges followed later.

Back in Antwerp, Georges could not resume his studies again in the Belgian system because Israeli education was not the same. He entered an ORT school to learn a manual profession, but had to repeat his first year in general studies.

At 16, he opted to become a Belgian citizen and signed-up to do his military service for 3 years, where he would learn a useful profession. He became a proficient welder and was asked by his officers to sign up for another 3 years.... when his father died suddenly at the age of 44.

Georges had the opportunity to learn how to become a diamond cleaver, which he seized. It was a profession where he excelled and was well-paid. In the evening, he took classes in painting and drawing at the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and also became an artist, in a classical style, with an affinity for land and seascapes and a certain type of misty atmosphere, reminiscent of Corot.

He met Paulette Horn at a Jewish social get-together and they were married in 1970. Their son, Israël, was born in 1972. Georges now has 5 grand-daughters.

Georges says that around 1969, he realized that older men often spoke to him about the war and what they had done, what had happened to them and their families. Perhaps, they felt comfortable speaking to him, rather than their own children.

He was curious because his own parents never spoke to him about this time and he was reluctant to bring up the subject, sensing the pain it caused them.

He started recording their stories on a miniature recorder with cassettes and later purchased a Sony camera. Between 1998 and 2012, he devoted himself completely to this task.

He has published two books in French, one about Jewish resistance fighters in France and Belgium, another about Jewish volunteers in regular armed forces during WW II and the fight for Israeli statehood. He has been asked to present his work at many conferences and associations in Belgium and in France.

He now divides his time between Israel, where his son and family live, and the seaside town of Knokke-Heist, in Belgium.

Relatives arrested and deported during WW II

Israël Brandstatter's 3 sisters and their families:

- Sarah and Samuel Deutcher and their two boys, Raymond and Emile (see photo with Georges)
- Eva and Avraham-Schmuel Gonska
- Deborah and Charles Gabiner

Ileana's father Ferdinand Jakab, was deported to Auschwitz on August 17, 1942.