

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Josiane Traum on Wednesday August 26, 2020. Thank you very, very much, Mrs. Traum for agreeing to speak with us. And I'm going to start our interview from the very beginning. And we'll develop and build on the story from the first basic questions. So the very first one that I'd ask is can you tell me the date of your birth?

Of course, it's March 21, 1939.

OK. And where were you born?

In Brussels, Belgium.

OK. And what was your name at birth?

My name at birth was Josiane Aizenberg.

Josiane Aizenberg. OK.

Yes.

Can you tell me, do you have any brothers and sisters?

I do not.

OK. So you were an only child.

Yes.

And tell me the names of your parents.

My mother's name is Fanny Aizenberg.

How do I spell her first name?

It's actually her real name from Poland is Fajga But she was called Fanny when we came to the United States. And that's F-A-N-N-Y.

OK. And your father's first name. My father's first name was Jacques Aizenberg.

And was your father from Poland or was he from Belgium?

Yes. No. Both my parents were born in Poland and came with their families as children to Belgium.

So do you know approximately what year this might have been that they left Poland?

Let me see, my mother was born in 1916. She was, I think, six years old.

OK, so this was in the '20s. Early 20s.

In the '20s, yes. So they actually grew up in Belgium, went to school there.

OK. OK. So that would explain why your father's name is Jacques, a French first name rather than a Polish version of it.

Right. Exactly.

Do you know what his name was in Poland?

I do not. I have, not a certificate, but a booklet of when they registered their marriage and my birth. It's actually written on there. So let me find it. And I can actually read it to you.

Sure.

If I can find it.

And if you can't, it's OK.

OK, but there is a difference in spelling. I think your--

OK.

I'm sorry.

That's OK. Not to worry. Not to worry.

OK, while we're talking, I can actually walk around and look for it. I know I have it.

That's the way things are. At the moment when you think of them and you think they're right at hand--

I know. Yes.

But, you know, Josiane, we can--

Yeah--

We can come back to that.

OK.

OK?

OK.

It was just a curiosity on my part, because you did know that your mother was Fajga originally. And I thought maybe you'd have the same at your fingertips type of knowledge about your dad. What was your mother's maiden name?

Her name was Orenbuch.

Orenbuch. OK.

Yes.

And--

O-R-E--

Yes. Go ahead. How do you spell it?

O-R-E-N-B-U-C-H.

OK. And do you know what part of Poland they came from?

Yes, my mother came from the Lodz.

OK.

And my father came from Radom.

Oh, Radom. OK.

Yes.

And they met in Belgium.

Of course, because they were children when they left Poland.

OK. And what year did they marry? Do you know?

Um, actually, I just found the certificate.

Oh, OK, wonderful.

Perfect. Hold on. OK, my father's, actually his Polish name was-- it looks like I-S-E-K. Isek.

Isek.

Yeah.

OK. OK. So it was spelled I-S-E-K. But we would know it is I-S-A-A-C or something like that.

Something like that. And--

[PHONE RINGING]

We can pause if you want to answer that.

No, it's OK. It's a call from Israel.

OK.

So I'll call them back. I'm seeing here this is actually-- it's one of these registrations for marriage and a birth of a child actually in French. It's a certificate. It says from my father born in Radom. [FRENCH] Polonais, you know, Polish. He was born January 23, 1911.

OK.

And then it says he's the son of-- it mentions his parents' names. And let me see if it says when they got married. Actually, it doesn't say when they got married. I'm sorry.

That's OK.

You know--

That's OK.

I just found this booklet, by the way, the other day.

Oh, you hadn't known of it before?

No, I didn't know of it. And I needed-- I don't have a birth certificate because the war broke out a few months after I was born. And I don't have any documents or papers. So I went to the Belgium embassy to try and get a birth certificate. And they're actually sending away for it for me in Belgium.

Oh, wow.

Yeah, which is really something. I mean, you know, I don't have any kind of notification.

It's interesting-- I mean, how would you get citizenship without that?

I know. I think I got it on behalf of my parents.

Ah, OK.

Because when we came here, I was 10 years old. And I think I waited-- you have to wait five years in order to become a citizen. And I became really under my parents.

OK, OK. So both your parents had some sort of documentation. And because you were a minor, that sufficed for you at that time.

I believe so.

OK.

I'm trying to see if there's anything about their marriage. It just actually tells-- this booklet records the fact that I was born in 1939. And that really doesn't talk about their marriage.

OK, so what kind of a book is it?

It's called actually in French-- let me see-- [FRENCH] carnet de livret. It's in French. It's a little notebook. I guess when you go and register for marriage for recording your children, they give you this little booklet.

So is it sort of like an official document from the Belgian authorities?

Yes. Yes, it has the Belgian consulate, or the office-- it's in Flemish also, which I can't read. You know Belgium is bilingual.

Yes. Yes.

So once I left, I didn't speak Flemish anymore. Yeah, it doesn't-- it's just civil-- and gives you the commune or the suburb where I lived.

What was it?

Anderlecht

And that's a part of--

A-N--

OK, please spell it.

It's [INAUDIBLE]

Excuse me--

It's a suburb. It's a suburb of Brussels.

OK. And how do you spell it?

A-N-D-E-R-L-E-C-H-T.

Anderlecht.

Anderlecht.

Yeah.

Yes.

OK.

But I was actually born in another suburb part of Anderlecht, which was is Ixelles.

Uh, huh. And how is that spelled?

I-X-E-L-L-E-S.

I see. And were you born at home or were you born in a hospital?

In a hospital.

In a hospital.

In a hospital, yes. The hospital, the name of it, is by a famous English nurse. The name of the hospital was Edith Cavell, which is French. But it's Edith Cavell--

Oh, yeah--

She was a very famous--

Oh, yeah.

You've heard of it?

I've heard of her. I don't-- I mean it's very faint. It's not like Florence Nightingale where you know immediately who she was. But her name, Edith Cavell, has crossed-- I've heard of it before.

Yes.

OK. So that was the hospital you were born in. OK.

Right.

So let's go back now to less sort of factual demographic questions.

OK.

Tell me, do you have any first memories that you can recall?

Well, you know, I have recollections of or images, I should say, of my grandmother.

Mother's mother or father's mother?

Maternal.

OK.

I was-- my paternal grandparents actually died before I was born.

OK.

And I was actually very close to my maternal grandmother.

Do you recall her name?

Yes. Rivka Leah.

Can you spell that for me?

Well, Rivka would be, let's see, in English--

Oh, Rivka. Excuse me, I am doing this because this because sometimes in an audio, the letters don't sound. So it would be R like--

Of course--

Rachel, I-V-K-A.

K-A?

V-K-- yes. And Leah.

And Leah, OK.

And Orenbuch would have been her name, yes?

No. It wasn't. It was Aspis.

How do I spell that?

Are you talking about my maternal grandmother?

Yes.

OK. Her maiden name was Aspis, A-S-P-I-S. And she married my grandfather, who was Orenbuch.

Yeah. OK. Was your maternal grandfather alive when you were born?

Yes.

And what would have his first name been?

You know, I have it here because it says my mother is born to--

OK.

His name was-- my grandfather's name was Benjamin Orenbuch.

OK.

And Rivka-- actually, I was wrong. It says Saja, which is [? salino ?] Rivka Saja nee Aspis.

So it's not Leah?

No, I'm very sorry. I thought it was.

Not a problem. Not a problem.

Yeah.

So is there a second name be besides Rivka?

Rivka Saja. But you know it's spelled in Flemish or in French, which is S-A-J-A.

S-A-J-A, interesting.

Yes. I know. And Rivka is R-Y-W-K-A.

Ah, well, the W sometimes in some languages was pronounced as a V. Right.

Yeah.

There are so many spellings sometimes for the same names. It makes it hard for genealogists or people to try and determine whether it's actually the same person that one is talking about. But good, we have we have both your maternal grandmother and grandfather down as what their names were. And so you say you have some images in your mind of your grandmother.

My grandmother, because we lived with them.

OK. Once the war started, we actually lived with my maternal grandparents in an apartment.

In Brussels.

In Brussels.

And your father, did he-- before the war starts, just when you were born, it's a half a year before because the war starts on September 1 and you were born March 21. So we're talking about five or six months. But before then, when life is still normal, how did he make a living?

He actually-- my parents owned an apartment building with four floors, an apartment on each floor. There weren't like many apartments in one floor. There was a floor for each apartment. And it was four floors. And on the bottom, on the street level, was a tailor shop.

My dad was a tailor. And he sold material, bolts. And people would come in and order-- it wasn't like today where you buy anything ready made. People who would come in choose a bolt of material that they wanted for a suit. And he would have several fittings and make a pattern and actually make a suit.

So it was custom. What we call custom.

Yes, it was. In those days, it was.

Yeah. So in the British term, which always sounds so very fancy to me, was bespoke. That kind--

Oh, I've never heard that.

Uh, huh, bespoke tailoring. Yeah. So did you have any memories watching him do this or not?

I didn't. He left to Belgium when I was 13 months old.

Oh. All right, so let's talk a little bit-- I mean, these early years that we're talking about, of course, you're an infant. And children don't have memories on their first couple of years.

Right.

For the most part. I have not heard of somebody who would have. It would have been things that people tell you later.

Right. In fact, a lot of my memory or images are really what my mom told me, because what you say-- I mean, I was so young.

And is there a reason why they left this apartment building and the tailor shop to move in with your maternal grandparents? I think it was because of the Germans having come in and taken over. And I think-- I'm sure it was for economic reasons and just being together, family support.

OK. Now, did your mother and father have brothers and sisters?

My mother had two sisters born also in Belgium.

OK.

And my father had several siblings. I only know of-- I knew one. And the other one was actually deported and murdered.

I see.

He also a sibling who came to the United States prior to the war.

OK, so he had a sibling that came to the US. He had another--

It was a woman. Yes. And another brother who came with us when we moved to the United States.

So there's one who came before the war to the US.

Yes. A woman.



Yeah. And that was the sister of his.

Yes.

OK. And do you know her name?

Yes, Pearl.

Beryl. Pearl, P-E-A-R-L. Pearl, like a Pearl.

Oh, Pearl. OK.

I say Pearl because that's what she was called.

OK.

And my father had another brother who came actually to the United States, I believe, in the early '30s and settled in New York.

OK. Did you know him?

Yes, after we came to the United States I met him.

And what was his first name?

Wolf.

W-O-L-F?

Yes.

OK. And so as you say, several siblings and--

Yes--

Two that we've talked right now who were in the US before the War.

Yes.

One who accompanied you with your parents when you came to the United States after the war.

Right, with his family.

How do I spell that?

His family. With his wife and two children.

With his wife and two children, excuse me. And so what was his first name?

His first name was Ben.

Ben?

Ben. Like his father? No, like excuse me, I got confused, never mind. It was Benjamin then?

I don't you know-- I'm not really sure. I only know him as Uncle Ben.

OK. OK. And then there was the relative who was deported and murdered.

With his family.

This is your father's family you're saying, yes?

My father's brother, the wife, and two children. He had a boy and a girl. They were all deported to Auschwitz.

OK. And that brother's name was what?

Reuven.

Oh, that would be like R-E-U-V-E-N?

Yes.

OK. OK. So we've got four siblings down right now.

Right.

Do you know if there were any more?

There were, and I think they died when they were children.

OK. OK. That also was very common at that time.

Of course. People had many children and not many children survived.

And your mother, what are the names of her two sisters?

Rose. And the other one is Terez.

And they both survived the war or did they not?

They did. They both survived the war.

OK. OK. I do not recall from my own knowledge of history when Nazi Germany marched into Belgium. But--

May 10, 1940.

May 10, 1940. So at that point, you are about 13, 14 months old.

Yes.

Is this around the time-- did you say that your father left when you were 13 months?

Yes. My parents were listening to the radio. And apparently the BBC was asking for volunteers for men to come and volunteer in England.

But my father decided to go with his brother, his brother Ben.

I see.

They both went together.

And your mother then was staying with her own parents and you.

In our apartment, in the attic apartment, yes.

In that same house that your parents owned?

Yes.

I see. So let me get this straight. They owned an apartment-- they owned a building. And on the bottom floor-- hello?

With a shop. Yes, yes, with a shop.

With a shop. On the bottom floor was a tailor shop, which your father used. It was his shop.

Yeah.

And was it then-- that building was owned by your mother and your father or your mother's parents?

No, no, but my mom and dad, by my parents.

And when he left for Britain 13 months later after your birth, your mother stayed in that building, but in the attic apartment. However, her parents--

Yes.

So it was really your grandparents joined your parents rather than your parents went to join them.

Exactly. We lived in the apartment building. Behind the shop was one apartment also. And we used to live in that bottom apartment. But once the Germans came-- and I don't quite know the reason-- once the Germans invaded, we all, myself, my mom, and my maternal grandparents, moved to the attic apartment.

OK. OK. And when I asked you about first memories, you said you had some images of your grandmother Rivka.

Yes.

Can you describe those to me?

Um--

Are you OK?

Hold on.

Of course.

You know, it's hard to know-- I have a picture of my grandmother holding me.

I see.

And so, you know, whether they're images or it's because I look at the photographs, but I remember her and just holding me. But I was very close to her.

And what happened with your grandmother Rivka? She was deported with my mother.

I see. And did she survive?

No. She was murdered immediately.

And they were deported to where?

Auschwitz. Actually, before going to Auschwitz, they were at what they would call like a retention camp. They stayed there about week or two till they had enough people, I guess, to fill a train.

Do you know what name of that detention camp?

I do. And it just slipped my mind. There's a whole museum there, because they contacted me. They wanted some material.

Is it in Belgium or is it in the Netherlands?

In Belgium. It's in Belgium. I'll probably think of the name before the end.

That's OK.

It'll come to me. But she was there for about a week or two. And then they put them on trains.

Well, she could have been still a young woman when this all happened.

She was. Oh, she was. She was in her 20s.

You're talking about your mother.

My mother.

Yeah.

Oh, I'm sorry, my grandmother.

Yeah.

My grandmother was very young.

Yeah, I could-- I mean, she could have been in her 40s--

She could been in her 50s.

Yeah. Yeah. But that was old enough to not be-- well, the odds of surviving we're much lower.

Well, also, when you first got to Auschwitz they had a selection because they had a labor camp there. And I think they felt you were too old or not able to do any labor, you were useless for them.

Yes.

And so you were killed immediately. My mom I think survived because she was young.

Did your mother ever tell you, because they're deported together, was your grandfather Benjamin also--

No--

Deported together with them?

No, he was deported, I think, several months before.

I see. OK. OK. And I take it he did not survive.

No.

OK.

And what year were they deported?

They were deported in 1942. Deportations in Belgium, even though the Germans were there in 1940, deportations began in '42.

OK. So for the first, shall we say, a year and a half, two years, if they march in on May 10, 1940, your father leaves-- does he leave before that occupation, by the way?

Yes. He left at the same time as Dunkirk.

OK.

It was a whole British-- or, actually, well, they all left and went back to England. And my dad although he wasn't part of the Dunkirk leaving, he was kind of one of the boats that went at that same time.

OK. So it wasn't-- was he evacuated together with some of the soldiers, or was it that a similar type of boat?

No, I think, it was a similar type of boat. But he and his brother went at the same time on the same boat and got to England. And my mom actually never knew whether he ever made it or not.

Oh, wow.

Because once the war started, there was no contact.

Of course. Of course. So once the occupation, once Germans marched in, there was no ability to find out for where did he land or if he survived.

Right.

OK.

Right.

But I'm not very clear, Josiane, was it that they left at the same time, or did they actually go to Dunkirk and were evacuated together with those soldiers? Do you know this?

No, I do not. I don't believe they were evacuated with the soldiers. It just happened to be, I think, at the same period of time, or very close.

OK. OK.

I don't know the details from my dad.

OK. So May 1940 is a pivotal month, a pivotal time in that he leaves. And your mother and you and your maternal grandparents stay together in Brussels in an attic apartment.

Yes.

And for the first year and a half or so, you were able to live there. Was it in hiding or was it openly?

Well, it wasn't hiding, but we didn't really wander the streets, you know. We really kept very much to ourselves. So the Germans, already as I mentioned, invaded. And they were walking the streets. In fact, I have some pictures in my album of there's actually a Nazi walking behind us in the street.

I see.

I was walking with my mom and grandma. And there's a Nazi right behind us.

OK. And somebody takes that picture.

You know, in Europe, they have a lot of street photographers.

Ah, OK. OK.

They do. Because that picture was taken by a photographer on the street.

And you're about how old, two years old?

It's something like that.

OK. OK. So aside from remembering your grandmother and having that bolstered by seeing a photograph where she's holding you, do you have any memories of this time that you can recall now?

Very little.

OK.

Really very, very little.

OK. Do you have memories of your mother?

I do, but also very, very little.

And what happened-- did you stay together? My next question would be is, what are your next memories?

My next memory is of actually when I was picked up by two women and placed in hiding.

And do you know when this occurred?

Yeah, it occurred in 1942.

All right.

Just prior to my mom's deportation.

My mom was actually-- she joined the Underground. And you know, she was like what they call a courier. She would deliver messages of meetings and different things. And she was also hiding Jews in her attic apartment.

Together with the family?

Yes. Jews who had fled other countries trying to find a safer place. So she would let them stay over at our house, at the apartment, for a night or two, I guess, till they found safer places. And because of that, she was able to contact the Underground and get two people to come and pick me up to put me into hiding.

And you remember that?

I remember not the fact that she was in the underground or anything, but I remember these two women coming to pick me up.

And what makes it memorable?

Well, the fact that these two women who I had no idea who they were and total strangers who took me--

Hello?

Hello?

Yeah, I lost you for a second.

Oh, are you OK?

Yeah, I'm fine. I'm fine. Now I can hear again.

What was I saying?

I was saying, what made it memorable that this stays in your mind?

Right. Well, the fact that I didn't want to go with them.

I see.

I didn't know who they were. And they just came to pick me up. And they took me to Bruges, which is a city in Belgium full convents. And they actually they took me to a convent.

I see. A Catholic convent?

Yes. Yes. Full of nuns.

And what do you remember from that?

Well, I remember there were a lot of children there. And apparently, it was like-- it was an orphanage, not necessarily for children who didn't have parents. But, you know, food was rationed. There was very little to be gotten. So I think parents place their children in an orphanage or in a convent thinking that there might be a little bit better chance of getting food.

Was that true?

Well, somehow I think perhaps there was a little bit more food in the convent, because there were a lot of children there and somehow they got food. I'm not really sure. You know, I don't remember food at all. I was a pretty finicky eater to begin with. So--

Well, do you remember going hungry? I guess that was what my question was, is not was there enough food. As a two-year-old, how would you know? But do know if you were hungry?

You know, I don't remember being hungry.

OK.

And, you know, yet I'm sure I must have been. But I don't remember that. What I do remember mostly playing in the courtyard with all the kids. And we slept. It was more like dorm style. All the kids were like a big dormitory. And the nuns would sleep with us, I mean in the same room.

And what shocked me more than anything else was at nighttime when we went to sleep, the nuns-- by the way, these nuns in Bruges were very much like *The Sound of Music* very stiff, dressed very, very stiff. And I remember them at night taking off their head gear. And they were bald underneath. And that really gave me the heebie jeebies.

You know, Josiane, I was raised Catholic. And I suppose in some ways I still am. And I was old enough to remember the nuns with the headgear. And I was always curious what was underneath there, always. And you have answered that question for me.

You know, I think because it was so tight. and so hot.

It could be that. I mean, who knows? But at any rate, this is what you see. They take off the head. And you see that there's no hair there.

That's right. They're just bald women. It was scary.

Yeah. Were the other children about your age or where there older or--

There was a variety. I think there were some that were younger. And there were a few that were a little bit older.

OK. Was there anybody of an adult who you feel you were able to connect with, who maybe took particular interest or care for you? Because you're so small, you know--

No. But I only stayed in the convent for six months.

I see.

Apparently, the Germans came to the convent and told the nuns they were going to pick up the Jewish children. I didn't know this, but after the war I found out there were three Jewish children being hidden there. The others were all Christian kids.

Well, if they knew that, I you think about it, if they knew that, they weren't very well hidden if the occupying authorities come and tell the nuns they're aware that they are aware that there are Jewish children in that convent.

Right. I'm not sure they knew how many or from where. But it's interesting because the Germans really knew the demographics of who was where, as far as Jews are concerned. Jews had to register at their synagogues and community centers. So the demographics were kind of known to the Germans.

But anyhow, they told the convent, you know, we're coming to get the Jewish children. And the nuns-- and I've heard



this happened a few times from stories and essays I've read that the nuns actually said, well, the kids aren't ready yet, why don't you come back tomorrow and we'll have them all ready for you with their clothes and everything. And what happened, night fell and the nuns smuggled the Jewish kids out.

Do you remember this smuggling?

No.

OK.

No.

OK.

They actually took us all back to Brussels. Bruges is about an hour or two away from Brussels. So they took us-- you know, I don't even remember how they took us, whether it was by car. I have no idea. But they took the Jewish kids and placed them in Catholic homes. And I was placed with a family, a Christian Catholic family, a mother, a father, and a little girl my age. And I stayed actually there for the entire duration of the war, till 1944 when Belgium was liberated.

Wow. So do you have your memories then of this family?

I do. I do remember them. There were-- the man was also in the Underground. And they would often take him out in the evening for interrogation.

You remember seeing that?

I remember him coming back in the morning. And, you know, obviously, he had been beaten. But they never told on me. But I think he was being interrogated for some of the other stuff he was involved with, which I have no idea what that was. But the little girl and I just pretty much played. Were on our own.

Do you know the name of the family?

Yes, their last name is Debrackelaer.

How do I spell that?

You know, I have it in one of my-- oh, I do have it. I got a certificate from Belgium where they told me where I was. So I'll get it right here. [INAUDIBLE] Good job, Jonathan. OK. OK. The first-- do you want the name of the convent?

Yes, please, I would.

Well, it's in French, Les Seours de Spermalli, the Sisters of Spermalli, Orphanage of Ste. Croix a Bruges. It's a Ste. Croix Orphanage. Saint, S-T-E, then C-R-O-I-X.

OK.

And Bruges is B-R-U-G-E-S.

OK. So it was Sisters of Ste. Croix de Bruges.

Yes. The Sisters Spermalli

How do I spell that?

S-P-E-R-M-A-L-L-I.

Spermalli, I've never heard of that. OK. Sisters of Spermalli in Ste. Croix, Bruges, OK.

Yes. Hopefully now, which is an orphanage.

OK.

And the family in Brussels was Debrackelaer.

OK. You know my next question is, how do I spell that?

What? What's that? How do you spell that?

Yeah.

It's a Flemish name.

OK. D-E-B-R-A-C-K-E-L-A-E-R.

Oh, yeah, Debrackelaer. I see that.

Debrackelaer.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And so does that mean that you started speaking Flemish?

Yes.

Would that have been--

Well, in school--

First language?

Well, not really, because I never spoke at home. It's required in school. You learn both languages. So I really didn't start Flemish till I went to school after the war.

OK. Now, let's backtrack just for a second when it comes to languages. When you were born and with your mother, father, and grandparents, what was the language they all spoke with one another?

Yiddish.

Yiddish. Still in Belgium--

Yes--

It was Yiddish. So the first language you hear is Yiddish?

Right, even though I didn't speak, I think my first language really was French.

OK, so that means that they spoke French as well?

Yes.

OK. OK. And do you know the first names of anybody from the Debrackelaer family?

You know something, I do not. And I can't believe that I have no recollection. It's in a way it's like blanked out.

Yeah. I take it then after the war, you didn't have contact with them again.

My parents did and I did. They were in touch with them till we came to the States.

What do you remember from the time that you were there? Can you describe what the house looked like or the apartment or any of the surroundings?

I remember playing with the little girl a lot. And-- oh, my God, my cell phone has alarm. Can you hear it?

Excuse me.

My cell phone has an alarm.

Oh. That's OK.

I don't know how to stop it. It's because I need medication.

OK. Then you know something, Josiane, maybe we pause and hang up and you take your medication. And then I'll call you back in two minutes? How does that sound?

It only takes-- OK, I'll be done in two minutes.

OK. Good. I'll talk to you in two minutes, OK?

OK.

All right.

Thank you.

All right. Bye bye.

Bye.

Bye.