

**Interview with Bella SWIATLOWSKI
(married name “Silovy”)
on June 26th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium**

1 hour 3 minutes 2 seconds

Bella SWIATLOWSKI was born on April 26, 1938, in Forest, a section of Brussels, Belgium and grew up in the Anderlecht neighborhood of Brussels, near the *Gare du Midi*. Her father, Berek SWIATLOWSKI, came from Lodz, Poland and had a workshop for leather goods, where his brother Abraham (“Ady”) worked, too. Her mother, Pesa KORONCZYK, was from Warsaw and emigrated to Belgium with her parents and sisters.

Bella thinks that her first language was Yiddish and that her parents also spoke Polish, but she learned French when she was hidden with a Belgian family during the war.

At the beginning of the German occupation of Belgium, Bella and two female cousins were taken to a small boarding house or *pension*, in a green and airy place not too far from Brussels, surrounded by a hedge. She remembers that her parents came to visit her there.

On September 12, 1942, both her parents were rounded-up at the Brussels-Midi train station, and taken to the *Kazerne Dossin*.¹ They were deported from there to Auschwitz on Convoy 10, on September 15, 1942.

A maternal aunt came to get her and placed her with a Catholic family, Pierre and Marie-Louise Verbist, and their son André, ten years older than Bella. This may have happened before her parents were arrested because Bella mentions a letter sent to this family by her father, asking them to take care of his daughter as if she were their own.

Bella’s aunts, her maternal grand-parents, and her cousins spent the rest of the war in Switzerland. Her Uncle Abraham remained in his brother’s apartment during this time and survived the war. The leather workshop was closed, but he found work elsewhere. Apparently, he brought ration tickets to the Verbist family and perhaps some money for Bella’s upkeep, too.

Bella mentions that she has few memories of this time, but that the family was a loving one and that they were fervent Catholics. She was not aware of the war. She does not remember going to kindergarten or playing games. Yet every night, Marie-Louise had Bella pray for her parents’ return. It was only years later that she understood why.

¹Madame Swiatlowski has donated family photos and documents to the museum and research center that has been created at the former *Kazerne Dossin*:
<https://beeldbank.kazernedossin.eu/index.php/collection/watch/648c916c5fd54ea0a4b056ea163ae6ac5dfef99036aa4737a5d64c2bdb4572ea77c9fb54d89c4f90843521030b8132ce>

After the liberation of Belgium in 1945, one of her mother's sisters came to get her and Bella lived with her family and her cousins for two years. In 1947, her Uncle Abraham met a Polish woman, Renia, who had survived life in a ghetto and deportation to a concentration camp, where she was liberated by the Russian Army. They married and Bella returned to her parents' apartment where she had lived before the war. There were many disputes with Renia and no one seemed happy. The couple maintained that they did not have any other children because of Bella. There was a question of formally adopting Bella, but she refused.

Bella attended the local public school ("*école communale*") situated behind the synagogue in Anderlecht for 5 years and then a local secondary school until the age of 18. Young women were not encouraged to continue their education, but pressed to look for a husband.

Encouraged by friends and her cousins, Bella joined one of the local Jewish youth movements, "*Hanoar Hatzioni*"², and participated in activities at the local neighborhood gathering-place, "*la maison du quartier*", where she met her future husband, a "free-thinking" Jewish medical student named Albert Silovy, who did not think much of traditional religious practices, though they married in a synagogue in 1961. A son was born in 1962 and a daughter in 1965.

In 1971, the family left on vacation and there was a terrible automobile accident. Dr. Silovy and their daughter perished, Bella and her son were seriously injured.

To support her son³ and herself, Bella took a series of jobs, and became the director of a large furniture store. She decided to set out on her own and opened a successful clothing store in the center of Brussels, which she ran until she retired.

In the early 2000's, Bella decided that she wanted to visit the German Holocaust Memorial and Information Center in Berlin, which she did when it opened in 2005. During that trip, she discovered the *Stolpersteine* or the paving stones inscribed with the names of victims of the Holocaust, placed where they had lived before deportation.

She was inspired to take this practice to Belgium and joined a non-profit association founded by the psychiatrist, Eric Picard, originally conceived to help Belgian Jews receive recognition of their losses and some restitution by the Belgian government ("*Association pour les biens volés aux Juifs*"). After this was accomplished, the association changed its name to the Association

² *HlIstadrou Haluzit Olamit Hanoar Hatzioni* (World Organization of Young Zionist Pioneers)

³ Although her father and uncle, attended services at the local synagogue regularly, neither her husband nor her in-laws were religious. Nonetheless, her son wanted to celebrate his bar mitzvah, which he studied to do....

for the Remembrance of the Holocaust (*“Association pour la Mémoire de la Shoah”*).

Bella recounts that when she laid the *“pave de la mémoire”* for her parents in front of the apartment building where she grew-up in Anderlecht – where her heart lies - she experienced a sense of closure and had the impression that she *“had finally brought them home”*, words that echo that of many others who have placed stones of remembrance.

Bella is a very active member of the administrative board of the *Association pour la Mémoire de la Shoah* in Belgium. For almost 2 decades, she has devoted herself to collecting the stories and vital information of hundreds of families all over the country so that they can honor their loved-ones, who never had a grave or proper burial....she accompanies each one as she listens and takes notes – she lives or practically relives an important personal story (*“une histoire importante pour l’individu mais qui fait partie d’une Grande Histoire”*) which is part of World History with each one, but it is often very difficult for her – one cannot help but absorb their pain – and people sometimes forget that she, too, has a personal story.....