

**Interview with William (“Bill”) FRANKSENSTEIN
(born Bernard BARON)
on June 25th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium**

1 hour 2 minutes 42 seconds

Bernard BARON was born on December 25, 1941, in Antwerp, Belgium to Abraham BARON and Henny BARON (maiden name “Roth”), Jews from Poland who met in Belgium. Abraham made practical clothes for workers. His mother was a housewife. From what their son learned years later, they spoke Polish and Flemish, which was Bernard’s first language.

The couple tried to hide as best they could, but in August, 1942, Abraham was arrested and eventually deported. In September, fearing for her child, his mother gave him up – perhaps to a Jewish organization.¹ He was hidden at the Saint Erasmus Hospital, but the Germans found the children there and sent the ones under 5 to various children’s homes. Bernard finally ended up in the foster home on the rue Baron de Castro in the Etterbeek section of Brussels, probably in 1944.

Bill has some memories of his time there – an accident while playing left him with a lot of broken glass that had to be picked out of his head. He remembers that the caregivers there were kind and he does not remember being hungry. He doesn’t remember other children receiving visits from relatives, nor did he realize that he had lost his parents. He does remember being happier after Brussels was liberated in the fall of 1944, not having to live in fear. Not having any parents or relatives who came for him, he remained in the home after the war was over. He does not remember attending nursery school or kindergarten in Belgium. (There are several pictures with another little boy, who he identifies as Jacques Weisser.)

A Jewish couple in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania wanted to adopt a little boy and selected Bill (then “Bernard”) from his photo. They did careful research to make sure that he had no relatives who might want to claim him later. Bill doesn’t remember the details of his trip across the ocean, only that he was about 5½ years old and that he was seasick a good part of the time.

His adoptive father, Dr. Frankenstein was a surgeon at the Jewish Montefiore Hospital. His wife Beatrice had been married before and had a daughter who was 16 years older than Bill. They both understood that their adopted son needed professional psychiatric help to overcome the trauma of the war and his fear of others. The constant moves from hospitals to foster homes during that time left him extremely wary and unable to look people in the eye.

When he arrived in Pittsburgh, Bill spoke only Flemish, but soon spoke English and was sent to kindergarten at the local Wightman School in

¹ According to Reinier Heinsman, author of “From the Children’s Home to the Gas Chamber”, he was in the *Good Engels* orphanage and rescued in October, 1942 and hidden in the Saint Erasmus Hospital.

Squirrel Hill. He was later sent to a private Episcopal academy where he received the individual attention he needed to thrive. His father made it clear that although he attended an Episcopal school, he was Jewish. Bill received a Jewish education, attending Sunday school at the Reform synagogue Rodef Shalom and celebrated his bar mitzvah in 1954 at the Conservative synagogue Beth Shalom.

Summers were spent in Atlantic City or on the “host farms” that brings fond memories, where there were horses, and he could milk the cows.

Bill cites several incidents of antisemitism as he was growing up in Pittsburgh. Certain country clubs were not for Jews and when he was invited to social events by friends, he mentions unpleasant incidents. He says that his adopted father, a highly-skilled surgeon, could not get work in hospitals that were not Jewish.

Not academically inclined when he was a teenager, he attended an all-boys prep school and then a co-ed one. He took courses in history, geography, and political science, but opted to attend the Pennsylvania Military Academy in Chester, Pennsylvania, hoping to make a career in the military.... but then again, he was told that there was an unwritten rule and that Jews could rarely be promoted beyond a certain rank.

After several years in Germany, he left military service and decided to venture out and find civilian work.

Bill describes his varied career in different jobs, first in a family-owned business in Mars, Pennsylvania, and later as a traveling salesman. It seems that he was ready to take up a challenge and enjoyed meeting people. He later moved across the country to California, working in an organization dealing with disabilities. He married in 1971 and has a daughter and 2 grandsons. His adopted parents retired to Florida and his father, Dr. Frankenstein, lived to see one of his great-grandsons celebrate his bar mitzvah.

Through the efforts of Maria-Isabel Alvarez-Cuartero and her husband Philippe Binard, the present owners of the home on the rue Baron de Castro, Bill has reconnected with the little boy in the picture with him, Jacques Weisser. He was looking forward to the special reunion on June 26th, after almost 80 years, with great emotion.