

Interview with Henri (Ari) ERLBAUM on June 25th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium

1 hour 35 minutes 41 seconds

Henri Erlbaum was born on May 20, 1938, probably in Charleroi, Belgium, to _____ Belkovski and _____ Erlbaum, both from Polish families who immigrated to Belgium before World War I. They met in Charleroi. His father worked in a mine upon arrival so that he could get proper papers permitting him to earn a living. He then took a job in a factory that made cast metal parts. His mother made caps and sold them in outdoor markets, quite successfully. After WW I, his father became an itinerant merchant, selling cloth door-to-door.

Henri has an older brother, Charles, born in 1933.

It seems that the family was not religious: although both boys were circumcised, they received no religious instruction, but they learned the history of the Jewish people. Both of them celebrated their bar mitzvahs in the post-war years, too.

The parents spoke Yiddish at home and Henri remembers that though he could not speak it, he understood everything, even after a long separation.

Henri's first memories during the war occurred around 1942. His mother took him to be photographed with her. The photographer kept admonishing her to smile, but it was a somber occasion. Although he did not understand why they were being photographed at the time, his mother said, "So you won't forget me...."

It was Henri's mother who found the families to which he was entrusted and where he was hidden during the war. His brother Charles was elsewhere, in the Ardennes. He changed hiding places several times.

At one point, the person keeping him refused to give his mother her son's clothing when she came to get him....she may not have had the money to pay for his upkeep.

He remembers being hidden long hours, alone, where there was nothing to do, no one to whom he could talk. He was told not to go out the door. He remembers butcher's hooks and a wall of bricks, which he liked to run his hands over. One day, he found a frog in one of the holes in the wall and soon became fascinated by frogs.....it seemed to be the only living creature there.

The last place he was hidden was with a woman, Madame Pettarse (spelling?) whose family was in the Belgian resistance and belonged to the Communist Party, where he was quite happy and does not remember missing his parents. At first, he was alone, then a German boy his age,

named Eugen, who spoke no French, arrived. When Eugen was frightened, he hid under the table.

Henri remembers that every Sunday, the owner of the building where they lived invited Madame Pettarse and the boys to lunch. Her grandson of about 18 was there, too. He was dressed entirely in black, signifying his collaboration with the Nazi occupying forces or his membership in the far-right, antisemitic Rexist Movement, but he was apparently warned never to allude to the Jewish boys.

During the war, Henri's parents were in a Belgian resistance movement which did not seem to be specifically Jewish. They were given fake identity papers, told not to stay in their apartment and keep a low profile.

At one point, Henri's father was requisitioned by the Germans to help build the Atlantic Wall along Europe's western coast. When placed in a train headed eastward, Henri's father and several others escaped from the train and went into hiding.

During the last part of the war, they were all hidden in a convent together.

Henri's strongest memories of the war were in the fall of 1944, when Belgium was liberated. Madame Pettarse's apartment was right across from the Uccle train station. He remembers seeing trains full of wounded soldiers, many crying in pain. They were placed on the station platform and doused with water because of the intense heat.

There was a sort of rowdy, "carnival atmosphere" which frightened him. People threw furniture out the windows of apartments which had been occupied by collaborationists and made bonfires in the streets. They ransacked the businesses of those who were Nazi-sympathizers. Someone took him by the hand and entered a store, placing a pair of shoes in his hands.

He describes the arrival of the Allied tanks, liberating Brussels.

Henri's parents did not come to get him or his brother for about 6 months. At that point, all 4 lived in a tiny attic room. Henri had started attending school, although he did not understand what school was, or what he was doing there. He mentions that he was dyslexic and needed glasses from an early age, which may have contributed to his difficulties.

As Henri expresses it now, he "did not understand the codes"....his family did not possess books, beside a book of Yiddish poetry his mother kept beside her bed. Henri did not even know what a toy was or why anyone would give him one – on holidays, he and his brother received warm pajamas or mufflers from their parents.

Henri says that he never experienced any acts of antisemitism, either as a child or as an adult...in his school or during his military service in Germany in 1958.

Henri speaks of the importance of the Belgian Jewish organization, created during the war, called "*Solidarité Juive*". He speaks enthusiastically about the summer camp it organized (there was one in the Ardennes and one by the sea). Yiddish culture, not Zionism, was encouraged – there was a library and plays were put on in Yiddish. Henri participated in these amateur productions.

Henri credits the youth movements he joined for allowing him to discover how to read and the usefulness of doing so. He even introduced his father to books.

"*Solidarité Juive*" was also responsible for lending Henri's father money after the war so that he could set up a clothing store, instead of peddling his wares.

He emphasizes that what was left of the Jewish community in Belgium often attended galas and other events organized by "*Solidarité Juive*" because that was all there was in terms of diversion or amusement. That is where he met his future wife, Lise Reiter, an orphan who started out life in the Baron de Castro foster home for infants. They have a daughter and a son, both of whom pursue artistic professions.

Henri's parents hoped that he or his brother would take over their store – but neither Charles nor Henri wanted to do so. Charles trained as an electrician with ORT and Henri followed in his footsteps and then learned other technical professions - in the post-war years, work was easy to come by....but he had an inquisitive mind, too.

Henri credits both Jewish youth movements and his professional career as having allowed him to blossom and live a full and rich life.