

Interview with Lise (Léa) REITER on May 6th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium

2 hours 5 minutes 26 seconds

Léa ou Leah REITER (married name ERLBAUM) was born on July 6, 1941. Her mother, Mina or Chaja ORBACH came from a long line of rabbis (Elimelech) from Poland. She met Joseph REITER, who was the person (“*mashgiach*”) who checked the kosher status of products for the Jewish community in Antwerp and whose great erudition conferred the title of rabbi upon him 7 times, though he did not lead a congregation and may have earned his living in commerce of some kind.

Leah’s brother, Meiler (a variation of “Elimelech”) Leib REITER, born in 1924, worked as a delivery boy.

Leah’s sister, Zivia or “Juliette” during the war, was born less than a year after her brother, and worked in garment manufacture.

Meiler was arrested and deported on one of the earliest convoys leaving Belgium from the *Kazerne Dossin*, but survived Auschwitz until the Liberation. However, the over-rich rations that the American soldiers shared with him was the cause of his death.

Apparently, Joseph had obtained false identity papers, but German officers came to arrest the Reiter’s in February, 1944, and her sister Zivia maintained that Léa was her child and substituted herself for the baby, which was then placed with a Belgian child welfare organization, not necessarily Jewish (ONE or *Oeuvre nationale de l’enfance*). Lea’s parents and sister were kept at the *Kazerne Dossin* in Malines until July of 1944. Chaja and Zivia were deported on convoy XXVI and Joseph or “Joshka” was deported on convoy XXVII, the last one to leave Belgium.

The Baron de Castro “*pouponnière*” was called “*Les Poussins*” and was for children under 3 years old, so Lise has few memories of her time there.¹ Lise had spoken Yiddish at home and recounts how she understood absolutely nothing when, at the age of 5, she ended up in a home for older children “*Les Moineaux*” in Uccles, where she was addressed in French. The *Association des Juifs en Belgique* or AJB kept track of the children under their care. As Lise grew older, she was sent to various homes for Jewish children, according to age and availability of space. Sometimes the children were sent to the local public school, sometimes they were taught at the home or orphanage where they lived.

Lise has good memories of a man named Siegi Hirsch at Ronquières. [Other people interviewed in Belgium recount what a wonderful educator he was,

¹ The *Association des Juifs de Belgique* organized and ran several children’s homes during the war and starting in 1945, financed largely by the American Joint Distribution Committee, the AIVG (Aide aux Victimes de Guerre) ran 12 homes for orphaned children, some of which were given the names of birds: “*Les poussins*” for the infants under 3, “*Les moineaux*” for children from 3 and older, “*Les hirondelles*” for adolescents and pre-adolescents, “*Les aiglons*” and others. Lise ended was shuttled around to a number of them, ending with the last one that remained open in Rhodes-Saint-Gervaise, on the border of Brussels.

understanding the traumatized children so well and devising ways to help them channel their anger and their fear through art and theater.]

She remembers very kind and helpful adults who cared for them, a woman named Fanny and a teacher named Mademoiselle Michelle.

At the age of 7, she was sent to the *Château d'Auderghem*, and attended the local communal school, which they called the *Ecole de Transvaal* because its brilliant whiteness recalled South Africa.

She recounts painful experiences with a very strict Tunisian Jew as the director there.² Since she was often ill with inflamed tonsils, she spent many long days and weeks in the infirmary, with no toys or books or instruction. She missed all the classes where she was to learn to read, write and count, and remembers being the second-to-the-last in terms of grades when she could finally attend classes.

She remembers antisemitic comments by a teacher or school official who was a known collaborator during the war at the local school and neighborhood children who yelled antisemitic comments and threw stones at the children at the *Château d'Auderghem* on the way from the home to classes.

Lise did make friends and still remembers their names. Estelle Goldfarb and Chaya, Rachel Rosenswaig, Jacqui Skalka, the best student in the class. She recounts that once a week, the children's clothes were prepared for them – each one had a locker. However, the smaller ones like Lise always got the worn hand-me-downs, while those who grew quickly received new apparel.

A home in Anderlecht was run by an artist.

At one point, a German Jewish family, the Roses, wanted to adopt her, but Lise's sister intervened and kidnapped her at the age of 11. Zivia had married an Orthodox Jew and opposed the adoption because Mrs. Rose was a convert to Judaism. Her sister placed Lise in an OSE home (Taverny) in France and spent three days in jail for child abduction. There was a trial and, according to Lise, it was controversial. Zivia then placed her sister in a very strict Orthodox school for orphans outside of Antwerp, directed by Mr. Tiefenbrunner, who forced her to write a letter to the Roses saying she did not want to be adopted.

However, Lise has happy memories of her time at "*Les hirondelles*", from the age of 13 for several years, until it closed. She participated in sports and the *Hashomer Hatzair*. She played the guitar and participated in shows put on for Jewish holidays at *Ronquières*.

²In the 2004 *Livre des homes, Enfants de la Shoah, AIVG-1945-1959* coordinated by Adolphe Nysenholc, the section on Auderghem says that Mr. Zini was Moroccan.

Then, as she continued her studies, she was lodged with a widow who was a real estate agent and was not really interested in interacting with her.

Lise was determined to become a teacher and was passionate about her profession. She attended the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*.

As well as her career as a French teacher, she also wrote a book to help simplify learning grammar and a book of exercises. Both were highly praised....but rivalry between two academic inspectors had unfortunate consequences, and she was obliged to give up teaching.

For several years, she has devoted herself to writing and leads a group of former children with similar wartime experiences. There have been cultural activities, such as a series of films devoted to the educator Siegi Hirsch. Every year, she opens their reunion with a short speech.

Nota bene: Lise recounts many of her experiences at the various homes in detail in the book edited by Adolphe Nysenholc, edited by Didier Devillez.