

Interview with Reine KENTOS on June 27th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium

1 hour 12 minutes 51 seconds

Reine (née LANDWANDT) KENTOS was born on August 10th, 1936, in Antwerp, Belgium to _____ LANDWANDT and Ella LANDWANDT (née ELBAUM).

Ella's family was from Przemyśl, Poland, although she also says that they are from Lviv¹. Ella's elder sister was born under the Austro-Hungarian Empire when it was Lemberg, Ella was born when it was Polish (Lwow), and a younger brother was Ukrainian, when it was known as "Lviv".

Reine seems not to know much about her father. Her mother and father met and married in Poland and her elder sister was born in 1925. The couple and their daughter were able to emigrate to Belgium in 1927 because Ella's elder sister and her husband were there, earned a good living in the diamond trade, and could vouch for them. The young couple started working with them on arrival.

Around 1938, Reine's father returned to Poland, but the reasons for this trip were never explained to Reine – she thinks that perhaps his mother was ill. She does know that he was shot by the Germans during the war.

Reine's first memories date from the beginning of World War II, when she heard planes overhead and people shouting in the streets, "*C'est la guerre, c'est la guerre!*"

Reine (4 years old), her sister Bronia (15) and their mother, with a large suitcase in tow, followed the thousands who were fleeing towards France. They searched for a different place to sleep each night – in the fields, in barns or stables, sometimes a bed. She does not remember being cold or hungry, but how her sister practically crushed her under a suitcase when bombers flew over them.

She admits that now she is more curious about the sequence of events than when she was younger, regretting that she did not question members of her family about this time when it was still possible.

Eventually, the 3 did return to Belgium, but not to their apartment in Antwerp – they went to Brussels, where her aunt and uncle, better off financially, took them in.

Life seemed "normal" to Reine, who went for walks and played with a little boy who lived in the same building.

Things started to change when the Jews were obliged to wear the yellow star². She said that her mother and aunt put it on, had their pictures taken, and then never wore the stars again.

When her uncle received a notice to report to Malines (or "Mechelen" in Flemish, the *Kazerne Dossin*) for "work assignment", her aunt knew that they all had to go into hiding and in this way saved the entire family.

Before she was placed in her permanent hiding place, Reine and her mother went from home to home, changing locations frequently.

Her sister was taken in by a man who owned a garage. He and his wife treated Broni like their daughter and asked for nothing in return. During the war, she was called "Alice". (After the war,

¹ Przemyśl is 91 kilometers or 57 miles by direct air route, west of Lviv.

² June 1st, 1942

Reine's aunt made sure that they were compensated, and they all remained in contact for years following the war.)

Reine was finally placed in the boarding school of a convent, "*Les Soeurs de la Divine Providence*" in Wodecq, far from Brussels by train.

Reine says that she had no idea that she was Jewish and that her family deliberately never mentioned that they were so that she would not blurt out something that might compromise their safety. She attended catechism and was a fervent Catholic but could not celebrate her First Communion since she had not been baptized. She remembers that one of the Sisters was an "Angel" to all the children...but she has some painful memories of other moments, which she describes.

Every two weeks, her mother and aunt came to see her, but on most Sunday's, a family with 12 children took her for the day. For the longer vacations, she joined her mother, her aunt, and her uncle in a little country house they had found. Everyone in the village knew that they were Jewish, but no one ever turned them in and the mayor gave them fake identity papers. Reine marvels now how, when her mother, aunt, and uncle were together, they never slipped into using their real names. (Ella was "Hélène", her Aunt Sala was "Marie", and her uncle was "André.")

They were all living in this village when Belgium was liberated and there was a moment of general euphoria. On their return to Brussels, their aunt financed an apartment for Ella and her daughters in the Schaerbeek section of Brussels, but later she went to school in the Saint-Gilles neighborhood.

It was quite a shock for Reine to learn that she was Jewish at the age of 10. She speculates that her aunt was probably tired of her going on and on about "*le petit Jésus*" and wanted to set the record straight, now that they were no longer in danger. For Reine, "Jews were the Devil because they had killed Jesus."

Reine admits that during the war, she was totally oblivious and not aware of her situation— "*j'ai passé la guerre avec une certaine inconscience*".

After the war, Reine often accompanied her aunt, who went to various Jewish orphanages every Wednesday to bring treats and gifts for the celebrations at the end of the year. She says that she knew that the children there were orphans, but they were not sad or depressed — "They were incredible....those youngsters had so much resilience."

During her years in secondary school, she joined a Zionist youth movement, *Hanouar Hatzioni*, although her mother thought that this might be an obstacle to her obtaining Belgian citizenship when she reached the age of 16.³

Her sister Bronia emigrated to Israël and married a religious man. They lived on a kibbutz and had 3 daughters, but Bronia died at the early age of 41. Reine expresses her opinions about Israel.

After secretarial school, Reine found a job at the Philips factory, before meeting her future husband, at a get-together for Jewish youth. They have three children and although their spouses are not Jewish, they respect the Jewish holidays at the Kentos' home.

Reine speaks about various relatives who were arrested and deported - Ella's brother and his wife- and how their daughter Francine escaped.

³ Although born in Belgium, her parents were Polish, so she had to go through the procedure of applying for citizenship, which she obtained.

She mentions how her mother and aunt applied for and received *Wiedergutmachen*, but Reine did not want to receive anything from the Germans.

Reine speaks of how, after the war, the Belgian Jewish community frowned upon those who converted to Catholicism either during, or after the war – it seemed “opportunistic”...but she mentions the great number of suicides in the Jewish community, too.....