

Interview with Rosette BECKER on June 27th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium

1 hour 21 minutes 43 seconds

Rosette (Rose, née GROSS) BECKER was born on October 20th, 1944, in Antwerp, Belgium to Baruch GROSS and Bronia GROSS (née LIMONIK), the first Jewish child to be born after Antwerp was liberated on September 4th, 1944.

Since Rosette was an infant, information concerning her family history comes from what her parents, her maternal grandmother and her eldest sister Denise (born in 1938) have recounted, but she admits the different versions do not always match.¹ (Her other sister, Monique, born in 1942, does not really remember that time.) Rosette was always made to feel that the other family members had suffered and that she had not really experienced the war.

Rosette also helped Sylvain Brachfeld with his book about hidden children in Belgium, and has conducted her own research for an unpublished memoir entitled, “*Tu n’as pas souffert.*”²

Rosette’s mother, Bronia, emigrated to Antwerp at the age of 13 in 1927 with her widowed mother, Rachel LIMONIK (née CHEFTEL) and her sister Tania and brothers David and Jacques.³ The LIMONIK family spoke mainly Russian and Yiddish upon arrival, then Flemish. Bronia became a “modiste” (milliner).

Baruch GROSS was the 12th of 15 children from a Hassidic Orthodox Polish family. His 5 eldest siblings emigrated to the United States before WW II. He arrived in Antwerp at the age of 19 and became a diamond dealer.

Bronia and Baruch met at a dance in Antwerp and married in 1935. The family seemed to speak Flemish, Yiddish, Russian, and French and made the conscious decision to try to assimilate and become citizens like everyone else in Belgium.

Rosette recounts how, in June of 1942, Baruch was sent to the *Dannes Camier* internment camp in northern France and was then obliged to perform forced labor on the Atlantic Wall. In October, 1942, he and other Jewish inmates were sent on train #42 to the *Kazerne Dossin* (in Mechelen), but did not even get off the train before being sent off to Auschwitz. This became the convoys XVI and XVII from Belgium. Apparently, there was a decision by the others in the train that Baruch should be the one to try to escape. They entrusted him with a *siddur* (prayer book) and *tefillin* (phylacteries) and he did execute the leap successfully.

It is not clear how he found his wife again or how he knew she was pregnant with Monique. The *modus operandi* of the German occupying forces, so as not to incur resistance from the local, non-Jewish population, was not to imprison the children or send them to the *Kazerne Dossin*. They were separated from the adults and placed in foster homes or hospitals.

¹ As she mentions later in the interview, speaking of how stories came out as the family was sitting *shiva* for Bronia, “each family member has a different story”. ...they were not all together during the war, so there are things Rosette will never know – such as how her mother fled Antwerp with her when she was 3 weeks old.

² Available with this interview.

³ Tania and Jacques were deported to Auschwitz and did not survive, David died of tuberculosis in Switzerland at the age of 22.

Rosette recounts how Bronia had a lot of *chutzpah* and escaped arrest on several occasions. When she was finally arrested with her mother Rachel, she found a way to get out of the *Kazerne Dossin* and retrieved her daughters.

Exceptionally, her mother Rachel remained at the *Kazerne Dossin* for 11 months and the day she was scheduled to be deported, she was traded as a Russian POW for a German soldier.

At one point, Bronia returned to the apartment to find Flemish collaborationists ready to appropriate the family's belongings for themselves. Bronia, with Monique in her arms, and Denise climbed out the back window of their apartment and sought refuge with a butcher down the street, chased by those who had denounced them. She sought out a woman she had seen in the street with Jewish children, named Madame Vygh, part of a Flemish resistance network called The White Brigade. She found a place for Bronia and the girls at a nearby convent. Their father was hired as a "gardener" or some sort of handyman there and the oldest daughter, Denise, was bright enough to realize that she was not to let anyone know he was her father and called him "sir".

Madame Vygh took charge of moving Denise and Monique around from family to family every week, but they were finally entrusted to a Catholic family of 4 sisters in Molenbeek, a suburb of Brussels. After the war, the women remained close to Denise and Monique.

Rosette describes the exceptional circumstances of her conception at the convent and her birth. Bronia then started working as a maid for a lawyer in Liège, but when they found that she was pregnant, she was sent to a home for unwed future mothers, most of whom were prostitutes.

Bronia gave birth in Antwerp, but only 3 weeks later, fled to Brussels with Rosette to escape German air raids on local factories. It was probably then that she found a place for them both at the foster home on the rue Baron de Castro. Bronia was very good with infants.

Bronia and Rosette, her mother Rachel, her husband Baruch, Denise, and Monique were reunited in 1945. After their wartime experiences, the couple no longer cared to "assimilate" and they sent their daughters to a local Jewish day school⁴, which was also an orphanage.

Rosette says that she "had an amazing childhood". There was a lot of love in their home and she was her grandmother's favorite. She loved school and studying Jewish texts. She and her sisters were bright and at the top of their class.

She recounts that perhaps 70% of the other students with whom she played after classes were over were orphans.

Some of the children who did have parents were born in Switzerland.

Rosette mentions that in the "hierarchy of survivors", those born in Switzerland were at the bottom.

Rosette joined one of the Jewish youth groups, the Zionist and religious, *Bnei Akiva*, while Denise joined the left-leaning *Hashomer Hatzair*, Monique joined the right-wing *Betar*, and their father leaned toward the Israeli Labor Party, Mapei, "which made for interesting discussions".

⁴ Perhaps the one run by Tiefenbrunner? **Angel of Orphans: The Story of R'Yona Tiefenbrunner and the Hundreds He Saved** by Malky Weinstock, Targum Press, 2009.

At a time when young Jewish girls in the Anvers community were expected to become secretaries and to marry, and young men were supposed to become part of the diamond trade, Denise and Monique chose to become pharmacists. “We were pioneers.”

Rosette wanted to be different. After graduation (exams had to be taken in Flemish...), she went to the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* and tried studying math, physics and chemistry, but ended up doing something related to pharmaceuticals anyway....

Rosette admits that she and her sisters lived in a protected bubble of the Antwerp Jewish community. School, extracurricular activities, and vacations were all with other Jews.

Rosette wanted to volunteer in Israel during the 6-day war, but by the time she got there, she was not needed.

She explains that that the professor at the *Université Libre* who had asked her if she wanted to pursue a doctorate degree under his auspices ended up saying that “people like her could do a PhD, but not with me.”

This was the first time she had experienced antisemitism.

In 1967, she went to Israel and was offered a two-year job at the Weizmann Institute. Eventually, she stayed on and obtained her doctorate, met her husband , originally from Milwaukee, and married in 1970.

They went to Finland for their post-doctoral work and later to California for 15 years, did research and development in Israel for 10 years, and have been living near Boston for 17 years, where she created her own consulting company. She claims that her 3 adult children are definitely “citizens of the world”.

Rosette said that she had fulfilled all her professional goals and that made her feel that it was time to “give back”. She has been active in bearing witness in schools around her Massachusetts home and finds that it is more rewarding to do so before non-Jewish students.

Now, after writing her memoir, she has started to pursue painting.

Rosette and her sisters had inscribed on their mother’s grave, echoing something that Bronia often said she felt herself: “Maman a réussi sa vie.”

The Reunion of the former children who inhabited the “*pouponnière*” (or foster home for children under 3 years of age), at the home of Maria-Isabel and Philippe Binard, current owners of the house on the rue Baron de Castro, on June 26th, 2022 was a very emotional and positive experience for her because it gave her information about the first 6 months of her life, while she was living among the 15 infants cared for by her mother, Bronia who was separated from her husband and daughters at the time. It helped her find yet another piece of the puzzle of her childhood.