

Interview with Salomon (“Jacques”) WEISSER on June 27th, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium

1 hour 4 minutes 42 seconds

Jacques WEISSER was born on February 2nd, 1942, in Antwerp, Belgium to Jacob (“Kuba”) WEISSER and Marthe MANDELBAUM. Jacob came from large family in a small town in Poland and emigrated to Antwerp. Marthe, born in Antwerp in 1920, made a living as a seamstress.

Jacob was arrested and sent by the German occupying forces to work on the Atlantic Wall on the northern Atlantic coast in France. He escaped several times, but was finally caught and sent to Drancy, from where he was deported.

Marthe was arrested and sent to the *Kazerne Dossin*. She was deported to Auschwitz on Belgian Convoy 9 and did not survive. Neither did her parents or sister. Her infant son was taken from her and apparently, the SIPO-SD placed him (as was the case with other infants, such as Bill FRANKENSTEIN) in the Saint Erasmus Hospital, where he seems to have stayed for 18 months until he was sent to the foster home on the rue Baron de Castro in the Etterbeek section of Brussels, probably in 1944.¹ Now, he thinks that he might have been placed in other places before ending up there. For many years, he believed he had been hidden with a Catholic family during the whole wartime period.²

Jacob did survive and in July, 1945, he found his son. He remarried – a Catholic woman named Yvonne Clément, who had a son named Michel, close in age to Jacques. The couple had two sons and a daughter. Although Jacob was not religious, Yvonne did convert to Judaism, years later. Around 1945, Jacques caught polio, which left him with some serious health issues.

Jacques said that he got along well with his step-brother, Michel Clément. They both attended a local public school in the Schaerbeek section of Brussels. His father earned a living selling leather goods and had several shops.

When Jacques was around 10 or 11, his father took him to England to live with his brother Joseph Weisser and his wife, Pola, who did not have any children. Soon after, the family moved to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where the climate was better for Pola’s health. Jacques attended school and had his bar mitzvah there. He joined the Zionist youth movement, Betar, and after 6 years in Southern Rhodesia, he and 5 friends decided to emigrate to Israel in 1959.

Since Jacques health did permit him to enlist in the Israeli Defense Force, he did his part defending the kibbutz where he lived and was learning Hebrew. He enrolled in a hotel management school and became a hotelier.

When his cousin Michel was to be married in 1965, Jacques left Israel and returned to Belgium, where he decided to learn the diamond-cutting trade.

¹ This home was run by the *Association des Juifs de Belgique*, but actually was a “holding pen” for children, controlled by the Gestapo and the SIPO-SD. The children were not safe there. At the time that it was decided to deport the children, those running it were warned by the Belgian resistance and the children were dispersed to various families.

² A young Dutch historian, Reinier Heinsman, working at the *Kazerne Dossin*, compiled information and traced the sources of photos from the various children’s homes. A book was privately published in English, “From the Children’s Homes to the Gas Chamber” in 2021. Mr. Weisser attributes most of the information he has found recently to Reinier Heinsman’s book, helping him to put together “pieces of the puzzle” of his past. It seems that Mr. Weisser was not placed in the Saint Erasmus Hospital for 18 months, but also spent time at the *Good Angels* children’s home in Antwerp.

When the 6-day war broke out in 1967, Jacques returned to Israel to help defend the country. He happened to take a few days to visit Eilat and met a young volunteer from England, Judy, whose family had escaped Austria while it was still possible, before the war. She was staying at the kibbutz *Ein HaHoresh* and her kibbutz “father” was the resistance fighter and poet, Abba Kovner. They became pen pals and finally married in 1970 in three ceremonies – a civil ceremony in Belgium, a civil and religious ceremony in England.

Since Jacques was involved in import-export activities, their daughter was born in Belgium, but the family settled in England in 1972, where Jacques became a coordinator for the renovation of commercial properties and warehouses.

Although not from a religious family, he joined the Orthodox United Synagogue and later became chairman. He is concerned with keeping Jewish tradition alive for the next generation: young people may not be concerned with the past as much as with their uncertain future.

At the same time, he became involved with the survivor community in England and Yad Vashem. He speaks of the “hierarchy of suffering” among the Jews who lived through World War II. People tend to believe that someone deported to a camp or prison or obliged to perform slave labor had “suffered more” than someone who survived in hiding. He wonders if that is why it has taken him so long to start to explore his past.

He mentions that his father was extremely reluctant to speak of what happened to him during the war, but he did tell his son that the worst part of his experience was being made to choose among about 200 internees 5 or 6 men who would not be sent to the gas chambers.

Jacques also wanted to do what he could for the British Jewish soldiers who were still alive. He was the CEO of AJEX, the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen in the British Army, for 24 years. He has taken trips to Poland with former soldiers to visit Bergen-Belsen, the only camp liberated by the British, and has participated in the “March of the Living”.

He feels that it is important to continue to tell his story to schoolchildren to try to prevent future destruction and hatred, but finds that non-Jewish pupils are more receptive to his testimony than students from Jewish schools. He makes a distinction between the terms “Shoah” and “Holocaust”. For Jacques, the Shoah is the destruction of the Jews. There are many “Holocausts”, according to his definition of the word – violence and genocide - still occurring today. Modern technology is helping Holocaust denial to gain ground.

Maria-Isabel Alvarez-Cuartero and her husband Philippe Binard, the present owners of the home on the rue Baron de Castro, have helped Jacques reconnect with the little boy in one of the pictures with him, Bill Frankenstein. He is extremely thankful for all that Isabel and her family have done to reunite the former children from all over the world on June 26th, 2022, after almost 80 years after they moved on to live their lives.....