

Summary of Oral History: IRENE SYMULEWICZ MONDLIN

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Irène Szmulewicz Mondlin was born in Brussels, Belgium in 1936. She changed her name when she joined the youth movement because she wanted to change her identity. (We are not told what the youth movement was or when she joined. Nor are we told what she changed her name to, but I will refer to her from here on as “Mondlin”, which may or may not be her married name.)

Mondlin had very few memories before the war came to Belgium. She does remember, however, that a little boy and his parents came to live with her and her parents after they left Germany after Kristallnacht. It wasn't until 1942 when it became dangerous for Jews in Belgium that Mondlin recalled more about the events affecting her and her family. She specifically remembered that her family was rescued by the Resistance and was placed in Protestant families' homes until the liberation of Belgium, though for some reason the boarders were not rescued.

Before being taken in by these families Mondlin recalled that her family tried to escape to France before it was occupied by the Nazis. However, they returned to their home in Belgium. Apparently Mondlin's aunt and uncle, Esther and Rafuel, also went to France but were separated, and Rafuel returned to France with Mondlin and her parents. But Esther after having gone to Bordeaux with her daughter Francine and newly born child returned later. Mondlin also remembered that she had two aunts, including Esther, who lived near her in Belgium. Both were sisters of her mother. The other aunt, Manya, and her husband, Harry, and their two grown children were deported and never heard from again.

Mondlin was never separated from her parents, though her cousin Francine was separated from her parents. (We are not told, but it seemed that they survived.) While Mondlin's family stayed with their first rescuers she attended school for a week in Charleroi, but a girl pupil recognized Mondlin as a Jew, and so the family moved on. The second set of rescuers, Pastor Ernest Charensol and his wife Louise Edith Débat were later recognized with a medal of the Just (presumably in Israel). They also had four children. Sadly, Pastor Charensol was later deported. Mondlin said that she never understood who paid the Resistance and her rescuers. Many years after the war, cousins of Mondlin arranged a meeting with the children of Mondlin's rescuers.

Finally, Mondlin told of the survival of her paternal grandfather and the deportation and deaths of her maternal grandparents. Her paternal grandfather was in a home for old people, but for some reason the Nazis never came and deported the Jews in the home, so he survived. Her maternal grandparents were deported (We are not told of the circumstances) and never heard from again. Mondlin recalled that her mother never spoke of her parents again until many years later.