

### **Nicole David - Growing up in Hiding**

I was born in Antwerp in September 1936, the only daughter of Chawa Matzner and Munisch Schneider, my parents having moved to Belgium from Poland in the 1920s. When Belgium was invaded on 10 May 1940, the same day as Holland, we joined the long line of refugees, Jews and non-Jews, in the flight to France, in the belief that the French army could protect us. We found ourselves on the road to Dunkirk, amidst intense bombing during the British army's retreat to England. My father decided to go inland, and we stayed for a few weeks in a small village near Dunkirk.

My first language was German, as my parents were born near Cracow in the part of Poland that belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire, and schooling there was in German. Shortly after our arrival in the village in France, German soldiers arrived. They were delighted to hear me speaking German when I was playing with another child. They came over to talk and bring us chocolate. The next day, they came with a doll. My father started talking with them, and they told him that their Führer, Adolf Hitler, would lead them to a quick victory over Europe because their army was the strongest. Their discipline was such that if they received orders to shoot us children, to whom they had just brought chocolate and dolls, they would do so. My father called me in, and told me that from then on I was not allowed to speak German. Though I was only three years old, I was made aware of the danger we were in. The memory of that incident remained with me for the rest of the war.

We soon went back to Antwerp and moved to Profondeville near Namur in the Walloon part of Belgium at the end of 1940. For the first two years, there were various laws restricting the freedom and movement of Jews. We were not allowed to run our own businesses, to be treated by non-Jewish doctors, attend non-Jewish schools. Cinemas, theatres or parks were out of bounds. Antisemitic decrees were in place and getting tougher. I wasn't even supposed to go to school, but a nun agreed to let me attend Kindergarten. One day, we were told, "Christ is everywhere." I was a bright, inquisitive child. I asked, "How do we know that if we can't see him?" That afternoon the nun called my mother and said, "You'd better take her out of here, she doesn't sound anything like a Catholic child."

In May 1942, Jews had to wear the yellow star which they had to buy. Although I was exempt from this regulation as I was not six years old, I do remember coming home from a walk to find my mother very agitated. Two German soldiers were inspecting my parents' overcoats and jackets to ensure that the star was correctly sewn on them.

The trains taking Jews to death camps (generally Auschwitz in the case of Belgium) started on 4 August 1942. The last train left Mechelen on 31 July 1944. Less than one month before the liberation of Belgium, the Germans were still making detailed plans to deport Jews. Of the 25,124 Jews and 351 Gypsies taken to the camps, only five per cent of adults and one per cent of children survived.

At the end of August 1942, my parents decided to go into hiding. Having failed to find a place that would take all three of us, my mother placed me in a Catholic orphanage, run by nuns, while they hid in an attic, protected by a Belgian family. I was very unhappy, as this

was the first time I had been separated from my parents. I had constant tonsillitis, and the orphanage could not keep me. Antibiotics were not available then. I needed a tonsillectomy.

As the hospital would not take me, we returned – against my father’s will – to the house where we had lived before going into hiding. There was a very good paediatrician there. We planned to stay one week so that I could have the operation, and my mother found a family willing to take me in when my health was restored.

I was so happy to be home, not only to be with my parents, but also to play with the nine-month-old baby of the other Jewish family living in the house. They had not gone into hiding because it was difficult to find someone willing to take a family with a baby and an elderly grandmother.

The day before the operation, 7 October 1942, I went out for a walk with my father, while my mother was preparing lunch. It was a beautiful day and we stopped on the terrace of a café on the river Meuse. When my father and I returned home, we saw three German lorries in front of the house. I never saw my mother again.

Someone from the Resistance was waiting for us and took us to a safe house, belonging to an Italian family. We spent the rest of the day there while the Germans were searching for us. In the evening, members of the Resistance took my father back to the attic where he had been hiding, and I was taken to stay with Monsieur and Madame Gaston Champagne, the Catholic parents of a neighbour whom my mother had befriended. They had ten children, five of whom were still at home, the youngest being 15. The family took me in, knowing full well that they did so at the risk of their own lives and the lives of their children.

I lived with them for one and a half years, treated as one of the family. They never took any money for keeping me. My only outing was going to church with the family, and for me this was a great treat.

My mother had asked them to remind me to say my Jewish prayers, and so every evening Paulette (the daughter in whose room I slept, who later became a nun) would remind me not to forget to say my prayers. I did not go to school, as questions from other children might have been dangerous. Paulette was my teacher. Most of the time I was by myself and quite lonely. Every day I spent hours and hours making up fantasy stories which always involved an imaginary friend called Mickey. I had not been a loner by nature. I loved company and loved to talk. But I developed into a very self-sufficient person.

Exceptionally, on my seventh birthday, I was allowed to go for a walk with Ilse, now called Yvonne, the German Jewish girl who had been with us since 1938. She had blond hair and blue eyes, and was working locally on false papers. While waiting, I decided to walk out on my own, and before I realised it, found myself at the home of the Champagne’s married daughter, at the other end of the village. By that time the whole family was looking for me, and as a punishment, I had to write out 250 times “I am not allowed to go out alone.”

After about one and a half years, I was separated from the Champagne family and moved to another village to escape the bombing of a nearby ammunition dump. I was moved to Besinne-Arbre, the same village as my father, and we were briefly reunited.

Very soon after my arrival, the Germans drove up to the farm where I was staying. As soon as I saw the car approaching, I ran to my room, got into bed and pretended to be ill.

Fortunately they were not interested in me, but were looking for the farmer's two sons, whom they wanted for work in Germany. I was moved on and hidden again, as it was too dangerous for me to stay in this village.

By then, there were rumours that the Americans were coming. The rumours were true and I was liberated by the Americans on 6 September 1944. An American soldier jumped from his lorry to give me a bar of chocolate. I was so frightened by his uniform that I ran away. When the family I was with and the soldier caught up with me, they explained that this was a friendly uniform.

The surrounding woods were still full of German soldiers and shooting continued for a while. In fact two young men were killed by Germans while they were hoisting the Belgian flag on the Town Hall.

It was some time before it was safe to travel along the country roads. Finally I was reunited with my father, but soon we had to flee again. We were in the midst of the heavy fighting of the Battle of the Bulge, and there was a genuine fear of a German victory against the Americans. We had intended going to France. Luckily before we got to the border, we were told that the Germans had been defeated, and so we went to Brussels, where we stayed until the end of the war.

My father did not want to return to Antwerp, which was being bombarded by V-1 and V-2 missiles. Because he was homeless, we were separated once again and I was placed in a convent in Brussels until the end of the war. Although he came to see me almost daily, this last separation was very difficult for me, coming so quickly after we had been reunited, and I had been assured that the Germans had fled.

When we returned to Antwerp after the liberation in May 1945, my father and I lived as lodgers in separate families for more than a year, until he could start earning again and find a flat, as Antwerp had been so badly bombed. Owing to illness, I started school a few months later, when I was nearly ten years old. After all the chaos, normal life resumed, unfortunately without many of our loved ones. But it was a period that was as difficult as everything that had gone before.

It was not until 1982, when the Belgian Memorial Book was published, that I had any indication of what had happened to my mother after she had been bundled into the lorry on 7 October 1942. After her arrest, she was put on a train three days later. According to the list, 1,679 people, including 487 children, were put on that train which arrived at Auschwitz on 12 October. Only 54 people from that convoy survived the war. The book was a copy of the detailed lists, methodically prepared by the Germans at Mechelen, the Belgian transit camp for all the people arrested and subsequently deported to the death camps. The lists had been found and handed to the Belgian authorities by the British soldiers who liberated the camp in 1944. They were produced in 1980-81 at the trial in Germany of Kurt Asche, the Gestapo man in charge of the "Final Solution" for Jews in Belgium. After an eight-month trial, he was given seven years' imprisonment.

My mother was one of seven brothers and sisters. All were married and had children. Only two survived.

Some six years ago, I returned for the first time to the café where I had stopped for a drink with my father on the day of my mother's arrest by the Germans. When I explained to the

owner who I was, he went to fetch the daughter of the previous owners of the café, who was living next door. She told me she remembered 7 October 1942. It was a day she would never forget. It was indeed a beautiful day, and she was doing some shopping at the greengrocer's opposite our house. Screams were heard, and when she and the other customers came outside, they saw two women and a man being taken to the lorries in front of our house. The mother of the nine-month-old baby was begging for her baby, but she was brutally thrown into one of the lorries. The woman who was speaking to me added, "The other woman was your mother." The baby was taken in and looked after for the rest of the war by the two elderly sisters from whom we had rented the house.

There are thousands of individual stories like mine of separation, terror, physical and emotional hardship. But I think it is important to remember that there was goodness amongst all the evil. People who put their lives and those of their family at risk, in order to save us, my father and me. In Belgium during the war, some rail-workers tried to sabotage the trains, some postmen steamed open letters if they suspected denunciation, and warned people of impending arrest before forwarding the letters. Social workers helped Resistance movements to save children. Many priests and convents took in Jewish children and adults. This happened not only in Belgium, but also in France, Italy and other countries, thereby saving many who otherwise would have been sent to a certain death.

It helps us to remember that individuals in society can make a difference.

This story of my survival is dedicated to my mother, paternal grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins on both sides of our family who did not survive. They were brutally murdered not for anything they had done, but for being Jewish, by people who had always nurtured a deep-rooted anti-Semitism, and who had been conditioned to demonise and vilify Jews until they were considered sub-human beings that could be killed at will.

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