

The Southern Institute
For Education and Research
at
Tulane University

Presents

STORIES OF
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
IN NEW ORLEANS

JEANNINE BURK

JEANNINE BURK WAS BORN ON SEPTEMBER 15, 1939, FIFTEEN DAYS AFTER WORLD WAR II BEGAN. SHE LIVED WITH HER FAMILY IN BRUSSELS, BELGIUM. IN 1942, THE NAZIS BEGAN DEPORTING BELGIAN JEWS TO AUSCHWITZ DEATH CAMP IN POLAND.

JEANNINE'S PARENTS PUT HER IN THE CARE OF A CHRISTIAN WOMAN. THE NAZI PENALTY FOR SHELTERING JEWS WAS IMPRISONMENT OR DEATH. IN THE CARE OF THIS WOMAN, JEANNINE WAS HIDDEN FROM THE NAZIS AND ANTI-SEMITIC NEIGHBORS.

JEANNINE'S SIBLINGS AND MOTHER WERE ALSO RESCUED BY CHRISTIANS. HER FATHER WAS SENT TO AUSCHWITZ. HE NEVER RETURNED.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN
INSTITUTE'S PLATER ROBINSON.

PR (PLATER ROBINSON)

JB (JEANNINE BURK)

PR Well, Jeannine, thank you very much for coming.

JB Thanks for asking.

PR And I'd like to begin by asking, please, when, and where you were born.

JB I was born September 15, 1939, in Brussels, Belgium.

PR And September 1939, of course, is when the Germans invade Poland. On the 3rd of September, the war is declared, and that's the month that you were born.

JB Yes, yes.

PR And then in May 1940, the German armies sweep across Western Europe, and I wonder what your recollections are of the life under the German occupation before you went into hiding.

JB I don't have any recollection. I have to assume that things began to be difficult for Jews. There appear to be rumors that Jews were beginning to be rounded up, and I think that's probably when plans, at least, my father made plans for me.

PR And for your sister and brother?

JB Yes, well, yes, they were. My sister at the time was bedridden, and so it was

very difficult to make plans. But things were in order for me, for my brother, for my mother, and I have to assume for my sister and my father.

PR To go underground.

JB To go into hiding.

PR So it's 1942, and the destruction of the Jewish people was underway.

JB Correct.

PR And your father takes you to a Christian home on the outskirts of Brussels. You take the streetcar.

JB I remember we got off at the last stop. And for a little girl, I remember, it was a long walk to this lady's house. And I remember they had a few steps to the doorway, and my father rang the bell. And this lady answered the door, and I believe she had two daughters, I'm not sure if I only saw two, but there were two daughters. My father took me inside, and I remember he had a suitcase, but I hadn't paid much attention to it, and that was the last time I saw my father. And that was the house I stayed in for two years.

PR This was a Christian lady. You refer to her as "that lady" because...

JB I don't know her name. I have no way of thanking her for saving my life. You see, the only people who knew her name, where she lived, was my mother and my father. My sister didn't know, my brother didn't know and so I had no way, when I became aware of what she had done for me, that I could thank her, because I always referred to her as "the lady." I don't remember what I used to call her. I'm quite sure that I had a name for her.

PR She was a Christian rescuer, risking her life and that of her family.

JB That is correct.

PR And your feelings towards her are?

JB How can I possibly tell you? She saved my life. She saved my life. I know it, as sure as I'm sitting here telling you this. She saved my life.

PR So from 1942 until 1944, when Belgium was finally liberated by the Allies, you lived in hiding.

JB Yes. I lived in hiding in this house. I never went outside, in the front of her house, for two years.

PR What did you do inside?

JB Sometimes I used to go out in the backyard, and I used play. I used to have imaginary friends. I had no friends. For two years, I never played with anyone. I don't even remember playing with her daughters, because I think they were substantially older than I was. I would make up games. Sometimes I remember I would cut out newspaper and I would make, like, handbags out of them, and I don't know where it came from. At the time I don't, but I used to have to make up things. I had nobody to play with.

PR You were so young, yet you were old enough to be afraid.

JB Yes, very much so, and especially when the Nazis paraded down the street. They used to really like to do that, because I assumed, as I got older, that it was intimidating. And apparently all the neighbors had to keep their doors open and so the neighbor had to keep her door open and stand in front of their house, and I remember I had to hide in the outhouse.

PR In the bathroom in the back?

JB Right.

PR Outside?

JB Outside in the outhouse. There was no bathroom inside that I remember in the house. But it was a small structure made out of, I guess two by four plywood, and I remember hiding, and there was a crack. I guess one of the boards was broken, a piece missing, and I remember being able to watch through the crack. It was a straight view to the front. I was so scared. I wasn't sure exactly what it was, but I knew that I was scared. And I remember going to furthest littlest corner of this outhouse absolutely petrified. And then I heard this pussy cat.

PR A pussy cat.

JB A pussy cat, meowing, and I had no idea how this pussy cat got there. And I remember I crawled out on my hands and knees. And I grabbed that pussy cat. And I think I grabbed that pussy cat, number one, I didn't want anything to happen to it, but, number two, it was something to hold. I had nobody to make me feel better. I had no one to reassure me that it was gonna be okay. So it was, I think I held that pussy cat for dear life. Because it was so frightening. And that was my existence for two years.

PR And today, so many years later, you turn on the TV, and there's a documentary of the Nazis marching down the street.

JB I can't stand it. I really cannot stand it. I literally curse at them to this day. I curse at them. In French.

PR Your father was arrested by the Gestapo.

PHOTOGRAPH OF JEANNINE'S FATHER 8:53

JB Yes. He was.

*PHOTOGRAPH OF PRISONERS ARRIVING AT AUSCHWITZ-
BIRKENAU 9:03*

PR And deported "to the East," as they said. To Poland, the killing ground. To *Auschwitz*.

JB Yes.

PR The Gestapo, when they came for him in Brussels that morning, would you describe that please.

JB Yes, they came at from what I gather five o'clock.

PR In the morning.

JB In the morning. They woke our next door neighbor. Our streets was attached houses, and all the back yards were connected by a low brick wall. So they woke our neighbors, ran through the house, broke into their house, and jumped over the wall to our house and broke into our house and broke down my parents' bedroom door, which was on the floor that you entered and they grabbed my father and they threw him in the truck, and the officer said to my mother, grabbed her to take her, and my mother said, "You can shoot me here. But I'm not leaving my daughter." And at that point, I want to explain that my sister had a disease called *Osteomyelitis*. And she was the only one of us children that was left at home. They were waiting to place her in a hospital and there was no room, so whatever plans my mother and father had, they could not do it until she was in a hospital. And so the sergeant, or whoever the officer

was, pulled the blanket off and saw that my sister was in a cast and that she could not be moved. So he told my mother, "We'll be back for you later." And one of the miracles, I guess, of this horrendous time was that my mother contacted a Catholic hospital and they sent an ambulance for my sister and they took my sister and put her in the isolation ward.

PHOTOGRAPH OF JEANNINE'S MOTHER AND SISTER 11:30

PR Your mother's protective instinct towards her daughter, your sister, Augusta was greater than her fear of the Nazi killers.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MOTHER 11:43

JB Yes. Absolutely, absolutely. She was not going to leave her.

PR That must have given you strength for the rest of your life to know that your mother was that sort of person.

JB She was. With all the suffering that she did afterward, she was. She really was. She was an incredible lady.

PHOTOGRAPH OF MAX 12:08

PR Your brother Max also was rescued by Christians.

JB Yes. He was in a Christian home for boys and he stayed there for the duration of the war and then after the liberation, he found his way home. And after the liberation my mother came from her hiding place to get me. And my mother hid in a prearranged nursing home in the country. See, my mother got away by not saying she was Jewish. Because she didn't appear to be Jewish. Because at that time most people had the preconceived notion that Jews had dark hair, dark eyes, olive complexion, possibly hooked noses. And my mother

didn't fit that at all. She was blond, blue eyed, fair. So she got a job, prearranged that she would be a nurse's assistant or practical nurse in the nursing home. And that's where she hid.

PR Giving the lie to the stereotype.

JB Yes.

PR Do you remember when, in 1944 once Belgium was liberated by the Allies, when your mother came to get you?

JB It was wonderful. And then we went to get my sister. And my poor sister had been immobile, in the isolation ward, for almost two years, so she really had difficulty walking again, and my poor sister suffered ever since, from all the almost forced immobilization. Because that saved her life, as well being placed in the isolation ward. Whether she, the need for her to be that immobile, I don't know, but that saved her life, being kept in the isolation ward, because the Germans, when they needed hospitals, they would take over hospitals in the occupied countries, occupied cities. But the one place they were afraid to go was the isolation ward. You see, and the nuns knew that. They knew she was Jewish. So that's where they hid her. And they wouldn't go in isolation ward, when the Germans needed hospitals, when the Nazis were in need of beds, the one place they refused to go, they were afraid of the isolation ward.

PR They were afraid of disease.

JB Right. Exactly.

PR So you also were united with Max, your brother.

JB Yes, he came back to the house. You have to understand my brother was

twelve years my senior, and he really began to have a life of his own.

PR He got married?

JB He got married very young, yes.

PR He wanted to live

JB Yes, and I can't blame him.

PR But there were those agonizing weeks and months of waiting.

JB We were waiting for father. And we waited and we waited. There appear to be groups of people that used to come home at certain times. Whether they were all prisoners-of-war, whether they were, had been soldiers coming home, and I remember waiting outside, with my mother and sister, we were waiting, and I guess it was three months after we were home we found out that my father had been exterminated at *Auschwitz*.

PR And your mother told you he wasn't coming home.

JB Right.

PR That was hard to believe.

JB Yes it was. I was very much older until I really realized that he was never coming back.

PR When was that?

JB 1986. I was already living in New Orleans, a mother, six children. And I still had these fantasies that my father was alive. It was, I know it was

irrational. But I still believed that somehow I was going to drive through City Park or walk down the street somewhere, and he would be alive, that he would somehow know that I lived here.

PR Because you had never been to his cemetery, never seen his grave.

JB Right, never.

PR But then?

JB Then, in 1986 I believe it was, there was gathering of Holocaust survivors in Philadelphia, and a nice group from New Orleans went. And my sister and brother-in-law also went and the gathering was in some sort of an auditorium and you went down the steps and there was this great big hall and there were different desks, and I know in the center of this hall, there was a, I guess, a makeshift stage where I remember people used to walk up that stage and they would be survivors, and would say, "I am so-and-so, and I lived in this place." Most of them were Polish survivors. Some of them were French. And they would say, "Is there anybody here, do you know of anybody?" It was the most heart wrenching thing to witness, really, it was unbelievable. And then we, my sister, brother-in-law, and I would walk around, and we came to a big long table and on this table were books and in the books were written deportation dates. You see, the Germans, the bastards, were so meticulous in record keeping, they had actually handwritten the name of every Jew they had deported. From every country, every city in their country. And they had my father's name, and then they had columns, they had the deportees name, when they were taken, and when they were set free. There was another column and next to my father there was the date that he was taken but there was no date. And then I realized my father really was dead. But I was grown woman. Can you imagine? All that time. That was the first time that I really said, "Okay, my father is dead and they did this. They did this."

PR It wasn't one person.

JB No. Oh no. It was the Nazis. It was the people who hate Jews. Belgians, it was Polish, Hungarians. No, it was not one man. He couldn't have done this by himself. He's not the one who came to take my father. He's not the one who gassed him. Not the one who threw him in the oven. It's not just him. It's all the others.

PR "Ordinary people."

JB Yeah. I think so. Absolutely they are "ordinary people."

PR How do you feel towards the Germans today?

JB I can't forgive. I have no way. It's not in me. I know it's not right, maybe, intellectually at some level I understand but there is no way that I can forgive. I can't.

PR And today when you watch the evening news and you see "human vultures" at work in Yugoslavia, and you hear friends, acquaintances, say, "Should we get involved?"

JB How can they possibly, how can they possibly doubt the importance of us getting involved in anything that saves other human beings? Because the human beings that are being killed are the same as my father. It's the same as so many, simply because they believe in something else. And how people have not learned. I can't comprehend. It is very difficult for me to understand how it is impossible to live with someone who believes something else. I cannot understand that. Why does it have to continually be that way? And it is.

PR It is not so much that history repeats itself, but human nature that remains so vexingly the same.

JB That's right. It doesn't change. It doesn't change. And I don't understand.

PHOTOGRAPH OF JEANNINE BURK 22:52

PR After the war, you didn't observe religion for a long time.

JB No, I did not. I attended a synagogue on the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*. I only remember really, I went to a Yiddish school in Belgium. I never denied the fact that I was Jewish. I just didn't believe.

PR Because?

JB How can God allow this? How can God allow what had happened to my father or what had happened to six million people? So many of them. One and a half million were children. And I could have been one of those, if it hadn't been for this wonderful woman. But, how can you believe in a God who allows this to happen? And after a while, I guess, I began to realize that maybe there was a reason. I can't figure quite out what the reason is. But there's usually a reason.

PR For your survival.

JB For my survival. For why God allowed this to happen. I don't know why. I still don't know why. I don't think if God, I guess...I think it's people. It's a maniac who started this hatred and he just fueled what was already was there. And that's not God. That's man. People. People.

PR And now you speak out. You speak to young people.

JB Because I think that's why I survived. Survivors have to go through a guilt process, I guess. I used to ask myself: why did I live? Why wasn't I

taken with my father? And this is why: because this can never be forgotten.

PHOTOGRAPH OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR'S REUNION

5:30

In the New Orleans area there's a "Club of New Americans" made up of survivors that you know most of. And I'm the baby of that club. When I go, it's up to these young people that I speak to, to remember what happened, at the Holocaust. They need to never forget. And I speak to them because they have to understand that it's true, it did happen. Because there are so many people now who are saying that it never happened. And I believe that's why I do this because it is something that has to be told.

PHOTOGRAPH OF JEANNINE WITH HER FATHER 26:23

PR It's a beautiful photo of you and your father. The only photograph you have.

JB Yes, I think that's the only one.

PR You're standing beside him.

JB As a little girl in the street. And that's all I have.

IN 2003, FIFTY-EIGHT YEARS AFTER THE WAR, JEANNINE RETURNED TO BRUSSELS IN SEARCH OF HER CHRISTIAN RESCUER. SHE DISCOVERED THE WOMAN'S LAST NAME (KUDRNA), AND THE HOUSE WHERE THE WOMAN SHELTERED HER.

PHOTOGRAPH OF JEANNINE IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE IN

BRUSSELS 27:03

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