

“A Hidden Child’s Story”
 Menahem Lowy
 { Menachem ben Yisrael h’ Levi v’ Nicha }



Erev Yom HaShoah
 28th of Nissan 5777
 Evening of 4/23/2017
 Temple Israel
 Manchester, NH
 USA



My name is Menahem Lowy and today I'm going to share with you the story of my family during WWII. During the Holocaust I was in hiding in Belgium. I was only 3 old at that time.

PERSONAL MEMORIES

Most of what I know about what happened to our family during these dark times and how we were saved comes from my mother's letters and testimony to Yad Vashem and from my brother's memories.



Map of Belgium

During the war we lived in Belgium. Belgium is a small country bordered on the North by Holland, in the West by France and in the East by Germany.

My father left Poland for France, then moved to Belgium. My mother was also born in Poland, but spent some years in Vienna, Austria, before moving to Belgium.

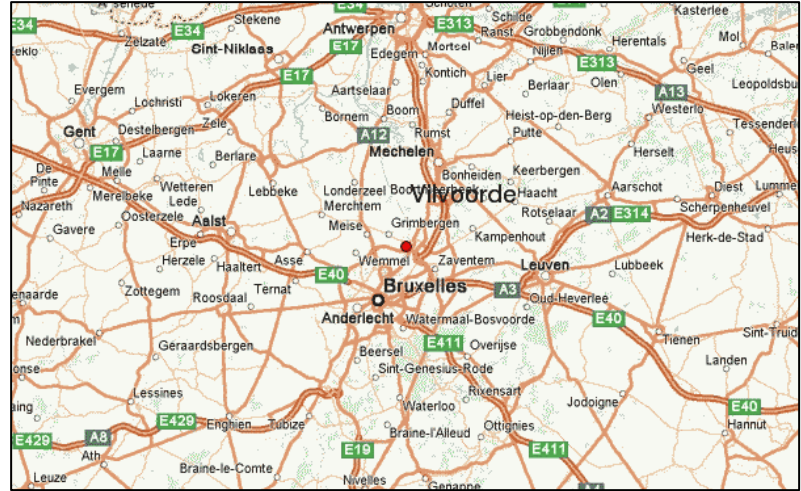


My parents – Nicha and Israel Löwy

They met in Antwerp, Belgium second largest city and its main port, and got married in 1935.



This is a picture of the town hall of Antwerp. It's a testimony to the medieval part of this old city.



Map including Vilvorde



My grandmother Mrs. Reitsl Katz, born Nebenzahl, my other brother Avi, and me.

We lived in Antwerp together with my grandmother (from my mother's side). My older brother Avigdor was born in 1936; I was born two years later, and my sister two years after that, in 1940, also in Antwerp.

We moved to Vilvorde around the end of 1940 or so, a small city about 8 miles North of Brussels, which is the capital of Belgium.

In Vilvorde we lived in a relatively large house with a yard. My memories begin from that time.



This is a picture of Modern Vilvorde. I remember the years before we were hidden as happy times, playing in the yard with my brother and sister, and probably spoiled by my grandmother.



My mother, my older brother Avi, my younger sister Tsipora, and me in 1941

I have memories of the minyanim we had in the mornings sometimes at home, of celebrating Hanukah, and of my father lighting the candles of our large Menorah. At that occasion I was standing too close to the candles and my hair began to take fire. My father swiftly blew on my hair to put down the fire. From that time the joke in the family was that my red hair are due to that fire.

Background

[The war was declared in September 1939 between Great Britain, France and Germany. Belgium had already mobilized in August 1939 but remained neutral. But it was clear that it would be overrun once the fighting began in Western Europe. Germany invaded the Netherlands and Belgium on May 10, 1940. Belgium fell after 18 days on May 28, 1940.]

German invasion of Belgium in late summer or fall of 1940, the Germans entered Vilvorde



I remember standing on the sidewalk with my mother and a large number of the population as the German troops in cars and on horses passed through the main street. I remember the tall horses (I was small) and the complete silence that reigned during that march.

In mid-1940, nearly 56,000 Jews were living in Belgium out of a population of roughly 8 millions.^[65] Many had fled to Belgium to escape recent persecution in Germany and elsewhere, meaning that only a minority were Belgian citizens.^[65] Most of the Jewish population was focused in communities in the towns of Brussels and Antwerp.^[65]

Anti-Jewish legislation along the lines of the German [Nuremberg Laws](#) was enacted in October 1940, a few months after the German occupation.^[65]



This is a poster – in French- detailing the Anti-Jewish laws enacted in Belgium on 28 October 1940.

The text reads: “Proclamation Ordinance of the German military authority of 28 October 1940 concerning Jews...Jews are required to inscribe themselves on the register of Jews. The holders of Jewish establishments must refer to the communal administration to procure a poster in accordance with the ordinance. ” Kept in the National Museum of the Resistance, Anderlecht.

Several pogroms took place in 1941, notably in Antwerp, and the economic assets belonging to Jews were seized.

I didn't realize it at that time, but my parents were probably sick with worry from all the events that took place before and at the start of the war in 1939. The fate of the Jews in Germany under Hitler and later in Poland after its surrender was already well known. I was not aware of their worries but I remember that one late evening, a Jewish friend of my father – the pharmacist – came to our house, very distressed, and said: “*Monsieur Lowy, J'ai besoin de cinq mille francs, pouvez-vous me les prêter?*” (“Mr. Lowy, I need five thousand francs, can you lend me that sum?”)

This was probably for an emergency due to who knows what, moving, or fleeing in that desperate period. My father without hesitation agreed. I can only imagine the state of despair of my parents as a relatively young couple (my father was 37 and my mother seven years younger) with three young children.

Separated from parents and hiding. My grandmother's sacrifice



In May 1942, wearing of the yellow Star-of-David badge became compulsory for Jews in Belgium.

I was too young to wear it, but my father, mother and my brother had to. I remember that I was ashamed to walk with them in the street and I was just following them at a distance.

From June 1942, as part of the "Final Solution", Jews living in Belgium were ordered to report to the Mechelen transit camp. Those who did not do so voluntarily were rounded up by the police.

On July 31, 1942, following the German decree, my grandmother, Mrs. Reitsl Katz, born Nebenzahl, presented herself at the Dossin Barracks in Malines, from where she was deported and perished in the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

My father had procured false identity papers for my grandmother so she could hide with a Belgian family, but she refused. She didn't want to take the risk that my father, mother, or us, the three children would be arrested by the Germans in case they would come to look for her at our address if she didn't come to the Dossin Barracks.



A view of modern Dossin Barracks in Mechelen, which housed Mechelen transit camp during the occupation.

Between August 1942 and July 1944, a total of twenty-six railway convoys deported 25,000 Jews and 350 Roma from Belgium to Eastern Europe. Most were sent to the Auschwitz death camp, although others went to camps at Bergen-Belsen and Vittel.



The gallows at Breendonk Concentration Camp, near Mechelen.

Of the 25,000 deported, over 24,000 were killed. Fewer than 1,000 were still alive by the time Allied forces liberated the camps.

Before the war my father was the owner of a factory of "Matzoth". One of his partners was Mr. Jean Maertens de Noordhout, a member of the Belgian aristocracy, who was a former administrator of the Bank of Brussels.



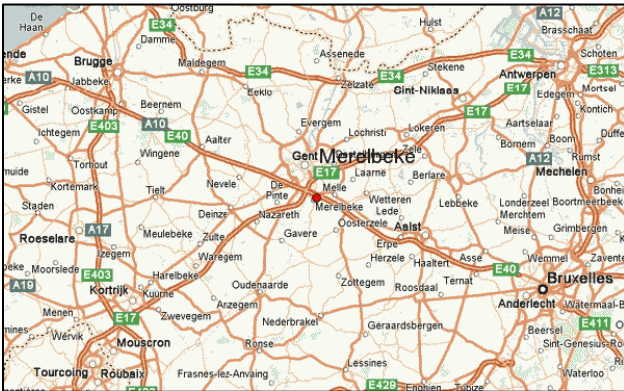
Jean Martens de Noordhout



My brother Avi, my sister Tsipora, and me

At that time, my father had asked Mr. Maertens to hide us, the three children. This was not as easy as it sounds. One family wanted to adopt all three of us and do it immediately at the office of a notary.

Several Belgian families were ready to hide my sister Tshipora and adopt her, but not my brother and me. My parents didn't agree as they wanted to keep all three of us together. Finally, Mr. MAERTENS found a family in need, the Pichas, who agreed to keep us in Merelbeke, near Ghent, where we stayed until the fall of 1943.



Map showing Merelbeke



Picture of Merelbeke

Merelbeke is a small village close to Ghent which at the time was populated mainly by farmers.

So, in August 1942, my brother, my sister, and I went into hiding. The three of us were hidden in a house in the countryside, with this Catholic family in Merelbeke. We had no more any contact with our parents.

The way I remember the separation is thus: One day my brother came to me and pointed to Mme Picha and simply told me: "Dad and mom told us that we have to go with those people."

The Pichas – a father, a mother and a teenage girl, Gertrude – were well paid, but the mother hated the three of us and left us to care for ourselves. At the beginning of our stay the Picha the father died. I remember the dog of the neighboring farmer howling the whole night.

When food became scarce, we barely received any. They forced us to eat bacon, which I hated, so I was throwing the bacon under the table. When Mm. Picha and her daughter noticed it, they forced me to pick it up and eat it.

At the Pichas we three were alone. No schooling and most of the time, only with my brother and sister.

My main recollections I have from this period are walking to the canal to watch the boats, the bad food we were given, the bread which was made of sawdust and some friends from the neighborhood.

Most of the time I was outdoors, playing with my brother in good or rainy weather, making little constructions with sticks and mud.

Although my parents paid a large amount to hide us, this family came a few months later to Mr. Maertens and demanded an additional large sum from us or else, they would denounce us to the Gestapo, but Mr. Maertens managed to settle the case. I believed that he gave them additional money.

MY PARENTS IN HIDING - LIFE IN MERELBEKE

At the beginning of 1942, after we had been left with the family in Merelbeke, Mr. Martens offered my mother the possibility to hide at the lodging of Mrs.de Smet de Naeyer, the widow of a former Belgian Minister whose son had been killed by the Germans because he was a member of the Resistance. My father didn't want my mother to go there, as Mrs. de Smet de Naeyer would not have accepted any payment and she would also risk her life. Mr. Maertens succeeded in enrolling my mother as a patient, with the false identity papers obtained by my father, in a clinic called "Institut Moderne" in Ghent; it belonged to Baron Lippens, a friend of Mr. Maertens, and was managed by the head physician, Dr. Van Cauwenbergh.

My mother stayed there for 8½ months until the chief nurse, who belonged to an underground organization, was arrested by the Germans.

My mother immediately left the clinic under false pretenses and rejoined my father in his room in spite of his objections, as the Germans might have arrested them together.

My father was hidden all that time. First in a room above a café owned by Armenians – which had been arranged by Mr.Maertens.

This was precarious, as many German soldiers frequented that café, so Mr. Maertens found him a hiding place in the house of an acquaintance in an attic under the roof. Both father and mother lived in hiding in Ghent, Belgium, but only my mother ventured occasionally outside.

The three of us in Merelbeke had almost no contact with our parents.

The main memories I have from this period are the incessant bombings during the nights. We lived close to the Merelbeke railway station, which was a central link in the German train network. From this marshalling yard trains were directed to various locations in Europe. The allies tried to bomb it many times. During the nights we stayed awake hearing the terrifying shrieking sounds of the falling bombs one after the other. My sister was afraid and crying all the time. During the day we could see the allied bombers passing high in the sky on their way to bomb other targets.

This was told by my brother Avi:

“In an airborne strike during the night of April 10 to April 11, 1943, the British dropped 600 tons of bombs on the important railroad yard of Merelbeke-Melle. They missed their aim but hit Merelbeke. That night, with the three of us in bed in the same room, we miraculously survived. For hours, waves of planes dropped bombs that fell shrieking down, frightening us to death, and ending in a thunderous explosion shaking the house, but that meant that we were alive since we still heard the detonation. We were covered by glass from the windows and plaster from the ceiling.”

Tsipora came to my brother's bed and they both wanted to see how I was doing. I did not answer and therefore they thought that I was dead. Actually, I was frozen to death and was unable to react. The next day we discovered that all around the house were bomb's craters, torn doors, and windows; it was a miracle that everybody in the house escaped without a single scratch. There were no other houses standing around ours and we could see all the way up to the horizon.

Months later our parents told us that they were out of their wits since it was reported that Merelbeke was flattened to the ground.” In 2013 an unexploded bomb was found in Merelbeke.

My brother Avi's malnutrition results

“As the war progressed, food went from scarce to inexistent. The so-called bread was green and inedible. Stones thrown into a tree would occasionally produce walnuts. Berries were sometimes found and eaten in the woods. I grew weak, my body was covered with the yellow stuff from wounds (pus), then became unable to move, next being unable to speak, lost sight, but could hear. When someone said that I was dead I was frightened they would bury me, but then somebody claimed he saw a movement of the pupils. I do not remember what happened later.”

My brother was saved, as explained later by my mother.

From my mother

“My husband had arranged with a friend of Mr. Maertens, Dr. Van Cauwenbergh, to have our children checked from time to time. In 1943, this physician told Mr. Maertens to immediately remove the children from this family because they are under-nourished and that the eldest, Avigdor, would already have had tuberculosis if it wasn't for his robust parents.”

We were the source of a lot of difficulties for Mr. Jean Maertens. Any change of location was a nightmare.

After we took back our children from Merelbeke to Ghent, Mr. Maertens kept Avigdor for a few weeks in his house so that he could recover from his extreme weakness.

First ,we had to be very careful how to feed him in order to get him used to normal food.”



Picture of Mr. Maertens' mansion

My sister and I were fetched later and reunited with him at Mr. Maertens' place in Evergem-Wippelgem, where we stayed one or two days. It was a vast estate with a large avenue boarded with huge trees and a river crossing it, and we went for walks. There was a lake on the grounds, and white swans were swimming in it. My sister Tsipora thought that we were walking in a fairy tale.

REUNITED WITH OUR PARENTS – THE LIBERATION

In 1944, we were reunited with our parents who lived at that time in an attic at 11, Koenstraat, Ghent.



Map of Belgium



Present day Ghent

The house belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Paternotte, who were the owners of a music store. We lived in two small mansards (attics), which were very cold, damp and without any water or electricity. One of them had a small skylight. The house was located in central Ghent above a music store belonging to the Paternotte.

From my mother's testimony to Yad Vashem:

“Mr. Maertens came one day accompanied by his wife Edith de Neve. It is she who had found this attic in the house belonging to the kind Mm. Paternotte. Mr. Maertens provided us with sheets, a small portable gas stove and coal during the winter of 1943-1944. These were very rare commodities at that time.”

This hiding place was dangerous as many German officers frequented the music store located on the ground floor.

The back of the house was adjacent to the German Oberkommandatur (Main German Headquarters) in Ghent. Therefore, we couldn't make any noise, nor could we go outside, and we had to take many precautions in order not to be discovered. One day, in the summer of 1944, we saw many airplanes, of many types, in the sky, flying back and forth. We knew that this was the beginning of the end of the Occupation.

During the period between June 6 and the liberation of Ghent, the Germans were very nervous and suspicious.

One day, my father, my brother and I ventured outside. We were walking near the town hall of Ghent; a cyclist was riding just a few meters from us. Just as I was looking at him I heard a terrible noise behind me. I saw the cyclist heaving from his bicycle and falling down. He had just been shot by a German officer. The reason for this murder as explained by the German officer is that he was biking in a one-way street in the wrong direction.



Ghent was liberated by the British Queen's regiment on September 6, 1944

We managed to leave Ghent only a month later. Due to the highways crowded by military convoys, and no trains nor cars, we had to walk and to hitchhike.

We moved from place to place. We lived first near Brussels, then in Vilvorde for a year or so, and then in Antwerp where there was a large Jewish community.

At home, life was very difficult, as both my father and mother never fully recovered from the malnutrition, stress and worries suffered during all these years.

They never recovered from the decimation of their families.

My mother lost her beloved mother, her sister, brother-in-law, and little niece, as well as numerous uncles, aunts, and cousins – her mother, being one of six siblings, having had a large family. My father's mother and one of his sisters were also killed by the Germans. My father had to have major surgery, was not able to work, and money was very scarce. We barely had money for food. New clothes were nonexistent, and my sister had to wear her brother's old clothes.



Picture of Ben Gurion

In the summer of 1953, we immigrated to Israel.

My father passed away in 1965. My mother found work as secretary to the Belgian ambassador in Tel-Aviv. She spoke French, English, German, Polish, Dutch, Hebrew, Yiddish, and knew shorthand and typing.

She contacted Yad Vashem and wrote a testimony of how Jean Maertens de Noordhout and his wife Edith the Neve saved our family from the Germans.



Yad Vashem ceremony

In 1974, in presence of the Ambassador of Belgium, they were honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous among Nations and by planting a tree in their honor in the Alley of the Righteous among the Nations in Jerusalem.

Yad Vashem Document



Their names appear in the registry of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.