

## RECOLLECTIONS OF A HIDDEN CHILD IN BELGIUM

TALK GIVEN AT TEMPLE EMANU-EL IN TORONTO AS PART OF THE HOLOCAUST EDUCATION WEEK

Adrian Sheppard, November 9, 2008

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*Note: This text was written shortly after I delivered this lecture in 2008. Since then, I have been made aware of some minor errors and inaccuracies in my text. The following is the revised version of the text. (Montreal, August 2015)*



*Adrien Sapcaru in Saint-Denis Westrem, 1943*

I am honoured to be here today and to be part of a distinguished slate of guests speaking at the Toronto Holocaust Education Week. I would have like to say “*honoured and happy*”, but one cannot be happy speaking about the Holocaust. Yet one must. I wish we had never known such an event and that mankind had not been branded by such a horrifying occurrence. We are all marked by it and we cannot evade it. We no longer can envisage our world independently of the Holocaust. It has changed our values, our understanding of civilization, our art, our definition of agony, even our language.

My reason for being here is twofold: first, I want to speak about my experience as hidden child in Belgium for a good part of the Second World War, and second, to recount my recent involvement as a member of a jury for an international architectural design competition for a new Holocaust Museum in Belgium, more specifically in Mechelen. These are seemingly unrelated stories, yet as you will soon note, the two are intimately tied. The first account is a personal one, the second professional, but as fate would have it, the two are so interwoven that I cannot speak of one without the other.

### **PREAMBLE**

For a long time, I resisted the invitation to speak here or in other venues about my childhood during the period of the Holocaust. There are two reasons for this. First, I find it uncomfortable to speak publicly of very personal and private moments in my youth, and secondly, I believe my story is not at all original, nor new. All of us in this hall have heard these stories, and read these tales, and viewed the documentary films, and visited the sites so many times. These stories happened six or seven or ten million times. The real tragedy of these chronicles is that they are

so repetitive. I know full well that they are also unique for anyone who lived through them. I say “repetitive” because a painfully repetitive thread ties them together: fear, grief, alarm, panic, deportation, trains to the east, and eventually extermination in the camps. The Holocaust constitutes a litany of heart-breaking tales we European Jews are so familiar with, and to which I can add but little of significance.

Let me start my story by saying that despite the tragic circumstances of the Holocaust, providence was kind to me, not only for saving my life, but also for placing me in a tight-knit, happy and loving family. I lived an almost normal childhood in a world that I came to cherish and in which I felt totally safe. Moreover, when the War ended, I was fortunate in that there was something left for me to return even though an entire world around me had been erased. Unlike so many hidden children, I did not emerge from hiding with a new name, a new language, a new homeland, and a new religion. I had not lost my sense of identity.

It did not take me long to become an integral part of my new foster family. I was given all a child could care for under the circumstances. I lived a sheltered and privileged life well removed from the tragedy of War. Though I was happy, I am fully aware that there is no such thing as a happy Holocaust story. The immediate foreground may be joyful, but the backdrop remains tragic and painful.

Many have spoken and written about the Holocaust today, most often to recount its horrors. And so, they should. It is equally important, however, to recall the heroic deeds that were done during this period of the tragedy. Where it not for these individual and collective acts of bravery and humanity, we would have lost our faith in mankind. History teaches us that noble acts of courage often grow out of great tragedies, inspiring leadership out of strife, good out of evil, idealism out of wickedness. The accounts of the Righteous are to me as significant as the story of the perpetrators of evil. I wish to focus my talk on the role that my adoptive family played during the Second World War. First, let me place my story in its proper context.

## **THE CIRCUMSTANCES**

I am the younger of two sons of Joseph Sapcaru and Simelia Elman, both born in Galati, Romania. My parents were married in their hometown in 1931 and left soon after their wedding for Belgium, where my father was pursuing architectural studies. My brother and I were born in Ghent, Belgium in 1935 and 1936, respectively. As the persecution of Jews in Belgium escalated, my parents resolved to place my brother and me in the care of foster families, and go into hiding themselves.



*Simelia and Joseph Sapcaru, Galatz, circa 1931*

In 1942, with the help of a common friend I was brought to the de Brouwer family who resided in Saint-Denis Westrem, a village not far from Ghent. The de Brouwers were Belgian citizens and practicing Catholics and had five children of their own. At the time of my arrival, the family had already taken in a 12-year-old Jewish child whose parents were also in hiding. Soon after my departure to the de Brouwer family, my parents, together with my



*Simelia with Adrian and Claude, Ghent c. 1940*

brother, found a hiding place for themselves in a miniscule house in a working-class district of Ghent, which they shared with the owners, Romain van de Putte and his wife. Then, in the early morning of March 4, 1943, the doorbell rang at my parents' place of hiding. They were awaiting Hubert d'Hoop, the person who was to fetch and my brother on that very day, but instead, it was the Gestapo. The person, who is suspected to have betrayed the family to the German authorities, lived in the same building we did. Claude and I knew her as "mademoiselle Mary". She allegedly discovered my family's hiding place and, for money, had denounced us to the Gestapo. My brother, following the training he had received from my father, hid instantly in the attic. By great good fortune, he was not found by the Germans, who, after arresting my parents, searched the house superficially. Though the Gestapo officer noticed the presence of a child's bed in my parents' room, my father convinced him that the bed belonged to the owner's son.



*Hiding place of Joseph and Simelia Sapcaru in the Leeuwstraat, Ghent*

My mother's closest friend, Germaine van Waes, learned of the arrests after my brother pleaded with Romain van de Putte to fetch her and take him away. Although Claude was only seven years old at the time, he kept his calm and waited silently for Germaine to fetch him. She came immediately and found my brother who was still hiding. At considerable risk, she hid him in her small apartment and contacted Hubert d'Hoop who came to take my brother the following day.



*Germaine Van Waes, the family friend who rescued Claude*



*Claude and the d'Hoop family, Merelbeke, c. 1943*



*"Mademoiselle Mary", the lady who allegedly betrayed our family with Claude and Adrien, Ghent, c. 1941*

My parents were taken to the local Gestapo headquarters for interrogation (mainly to find out where their children were hidden) and were subsequently interned in the Ghent prison. Eventually, they were shipped to the SS army depot and transit camp at Malines (Mechelen), a city halfway between Brussels and Antwerp.



*New arrivals in the Inner Court of the Dossin Barracks, Mechelen, 1942*

From Malines, my parents were deported by way of the infamous XX<sup>th</sup> Transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April of 1943 where my mother died some months later. She was 32 years old. Sometime later, my father was transferred from Auschwitz-Birkenau to Monowitz (Buna), to Spaichingen and finally to Buchenwald from where the Allies liberated him. My father returned to Belgium in 1945, a shadow of his former self, to be reunited with my brother and myself.

Five years later, in 1950, the three of us immigrated to Canada to join my father's sister and two brothers who had settled in North America before the war. When we arrived in Canada we changed our name to Sheppard, which was the name all other members of our family had adopted when they arrived on this continent. In 1953 my father remarried and soon after I had a new sister, Judy Sheppard-Beldick, who now lives with her husband and two children in Toronto. Her birth was a true moment of joy for all of us, but shortly after the birth of my sister in 1955, tragedy struck the family once again and my father died at the age of 48 of complications following cancer surgery. His last five years in Montreal had been very happy ones.

### **LIFE AS A HIDDEN CHILD**

From the time I became part of the de Brouwer family in September of 1942 to the moment my father returned from the camps in the summer of 1945, I rarely left the house. I was taught to keep a low profile, to avoid strangers who came to the house and to be extremely careful not to be discovered. I was taught to memorize my new name and the fictitious story devised to explain my past. The de Brouwer family lived in *Les Hêtres*, a large country estate, not far



*"Les Hêtres", Saint-Denis Westrem, c. 1940*

from the central town square of Saint-Denis-Westrem. The house was a small chateau isolated from the road

by virtue of the spacious garden that surrounded it. The family comprised of Carl de Brouwer, his wife Denise, their three daughters, Monique, Brigitte, and Colette, and two sons, Jacques, and Jean-Marie. At the time of my arrival,



*The de Brouwer family with Adrian and Monique c. 1942  
Monique de B., Colette, Adrien, Denise, Jean-Marie, Carl, Jacques, Brigitte, Monique M.*

the oldest de Brouwer child, Monique, was eleven years old and the youngest, Jean-Marie, was three. Being six years of age, I was older than the boys and younger than the girls. The adopted girl, Monique Mogoulsky, was twelve years old and thus the oldest of all the children.

Even though Carl and Denise de Brouwers had five children of their own, and were already caring for another Jewish child, and had never met me or my parents before, yet they accepted at great risk, to hide me to protect me from deportation. They were aware of the dire consequences were they to be found out.

Monique Mogoulsky and I lived with the de Brouwer family with false names and forged identities. I was known as Adrien Simons and Monique as Monique Michaud. The official story was that I was a distant relative who had survived the bombing of our house but that the rest of my family had perished. It was a tale I was often asked to repeat before going to bed.



*Monique "Michaud" and Adrien "Simons" »*

Since I was not allowed to leave the house, I could not attend school. In any event, Jews were forbidden to go to school. In order that I not fall scholastically behind other children my age, I received private tuition at home. I followed, on a regular basis, a curriculum of courses prepared by a recognized institution in Brussels. My teacher was the Baronne Yvonne de Hemptinne who dedicated long hours to my education. One of my greatest regrets

during those years of hiding was not being able to attend school like other children. I was ten years old when I first attended a regular school.

### **THE LIBERATION AND THE END OF MY HIDING**

The Liberation of Belgium changed my life radically. I was able, once again, to leave the house and to be seen in public without fear. I resumed my own name, Sapcaru, and I could acknowledge my national and religious origins and lead a normal life. There were neither no longer German soldiers to be afraid of nor strangers to avoid. I could speak to anyone and visit everything. I cherished the idea that I could roam the village streets on my own.

When my father returned from the concentration camps, the de Brouwer and the d'Hoop families, with the backing of my father, felt it would be good for Claude and me to go to a summer camp founded by the Prince de Ligne in his Château at Beloeil in Belgium. The Prince, who was a friend of the de Brouwers, had transformed part of his domain into a refuge for children of camp



*Chateau of the Prince de Ligne, Beloeil.  
Children playing in the forecourt, 1951*

survivors and war orphans. Our stay in Beloeil was intended to be a period of re-acquaintance for my brother and myself as we had seen each other only once or twice during our long hiding period. As well, it was to serve as a transition period between life in hiding and life with our father. The summer also afforded my father time to organize a household for us.

Never did the de Brouwers ask for any remuneration from my father in return for what they had done. On the contrary, they offered him support and help in setting up a household for the three of us. They remained concerned about my well-being and continued to invite me to their house. They always treated me as one of theirs and made me feel, from the very beginning, that I was an integral part of their family.

I left the de Brouwers with great regret and much apprehension. Parting from Saint-Denis-Westrem was as painful for me as the moment when I was taken away from my father, mother, and brother. The bond had become intense. The de Brouwer's had become my universe. I had adopted their values and I felt very close to both children and parents. Most of all, I was very aware of the fact that they had saved my life and had been extraordinarily good to me.

### **THE QUESTION OF CATHOLICISM**

The de Brouwers were pious and practising Catholics. The wartime ritual of the evening prayer with the entire family had a profound effect on me. Since no one was to know that I was Jewish and Rumanian, I had to be a Belgian Catholic child. Moreover, I knew nothing of Judaism. By the process of osmosis, I became strongly

attracted to Catholicism. In the absence of my parents, religion had become an additional and important psychological refuge during my period of hiding. By the end of the war, I wanted to convert and be baptized. But despite my religious commitment, of which the de Brouwers were unquestionably aware, they never attempted or felt they had a right to convert me. On the very day of my father's return from the camps, I remember Carl de Brouwer made it clear to my father that my Catholic upbringing had been undertaken for reasons of safety and family cohesion. Carl de Brouwer felt strongly that I was Jewish, that my parents had suffered greatly and that on no account should I change my religion. His mission, he felt, had been to save an imperilled child. My deepest wish was diametrically opposite to Carl de Brouwer's view that I ought to retain my Jewish identity and religion. I knew nothing of Judaism and Catholicism had become the new pivot of my existence.

### **AFTER MY HIDING**

I continued seeing the de Brouwers on a regular basis after the war and spent many a Sunday playing with the children in Saint-Denis Westrem. Not only did I feel very welcome there, but also visiting the family was always a homecoming for me. Although Carl and Denise de Brouwer are no longer alive my sense of gratitude and admiration for the family has never diminished. I have maintained a close bond of friendship and love for the children and their families. My wife Sylvia and my daughter Lola share my feelings. Returning to Belgium to visit my adoptive family has become a part of my life.

I am aware that I owe my life to Carl and Denise de Brouwer. Were it not for them, I would have been deported. Their exemplary comportment during the war and throughout their life can only be explained by their profound morality, their sense of sacrifice and duty, their high human values, and their intense faith. They inspired my life, they provided me with a sense of idealism, they moulded my values and they transmitted to me their most profound Christian value: Love.



*Hof «Arendsnest » which became the de Brouwer family estate after the War*

The very last time I saw Carl de Brouwer before he died, we went for a drive through the countryside of Flanders. It was one of the rare occasions I had been alone with him for an extended period. I wanted to talk about what he had done for me and tell him, for the first time, of my immense gratitude. I wanted him to know that his actions had shaped my life. I began by asking what had made him do what he did, why he had taken such a risk having five children and enormous responsibilities. He was surprised by my question, as if I had asked the obvious, and he said in a most matter-of-fact manner: "If you had been in my place, would you not have done the same?" I never answered him, because I did not want to lie. He understood my long silence.



## LIFE AT THE DE BROUWERS

My first encounter with the de Brouwers occurred when Denise de Brouwer came to our house to meet the family and decide which of us children they would adopt. A few days later she returned to fetch me. Of course, I did not want to leave the house. I clearly remember the parting from my parents and my brother, and then leaving with Mrs. de Brouwer. I recall that one of the last things my mother did before she kissed me good-bye was to remove the yellow star from my brown overcoat. We travelled by train to Saint-Denis and walked about one kilometre to de Brouwer's home. I carried with me one suitcase which contained my clothing, a few personal belongings and two framed photographs my mother had given me: one of herself and one of her together with my father.



"Les Hetres", Front view, c. 1940

We arrived at the house shortly before dinner, to be greeted by all the children, the governess, and a number of servants. My recollection is one of being overwhelmed by the number of people present and the size of the house, and of being afraid to lose my way in the house and in the garden. When Carl de Brouwer arrived, the children, the governess and the parents moved to the dining room where everyone had an assigned seat. Despite the friendliness of my entourage, I felt intimidated by the setting. I had never encountered such formality before, nor eaten in such surrounding. I felt afraid, homesick, and very nervous. As always, we began the meal with a prayer. Barely a few minutes into the meal, I became ill and vomited. I was totally humiliated by the ordeal. The governess, to whom I took a great liking, led me to my room, washed me, and helped me to bed. Thus began my stay with the de Brouwers.

The household was large, lively, and cheerful. Besides the seven members of de Brouwers family, their two adopted children and many servants, there were often relatives who came for extended stays, especially during summer months. The ambience, as far as we children were concerned, was one of order, harmony, and discipline. Carl de Brouwer, an engineer by training, had become the director of the Banque de la Société Générale in Ghent. He was an imposing and handsome person who asserted his sense of authority both with his children and the household staff. He was a proud and true *pater familias*. He did not suffer bad behaviour, disobedience, or disorder lightly, but he was kind and very fair. His wife Denise complemented him perfectly. She was the daughter of an army officer, Général van Maldeghem, and an equally imposing person. She was dignified in manner and dress, articulate, well read and very reserved. As much as her husband enjoyed being in the limelight, she preferred to be a background person and focused her interests on family and home. Together, Carl and Denise were a couple much admired and liked by all who knew them.



*Carl and Denise de Brouwer, c. 1964*

The governess and the household staff were ever-present. As a housebound child, I spent much time with them. I enjoyed helping them in my own way whenever I could. In fact, all the children had many tasks to perform. Since a good part of the garden had been transformed into a vegetable garden to provide the family with additional food, many hands were required to pick fruit and vegetables, to milk cows, to collect eggs from the chicken coop, etc. The de Brouwers had three jersey cows to make the family self-sufficient in milk. The cows grazed in the garden and on neighbouring pasturelands. Some of the most vivid memories of my stay in Saint-Denis are tied to the harvesting of hay for the cows on the estate. It was a collective effort that involved children, neighbouring farm hands and assorted friends.

As in all large families, life had its strict routines. I have forgotten many of the details, but I specifically remember Carl de Brouwer leaving early in the morning for Ghent on his bicycle right after breakfast. He returned at midday for lunch and on time for the evening meal. Meals were important moments in the life of the family and began and ended with a prayer. The evening meal was always interrupted by a long period of silence when the parents listened, illegally, to the BBC. The news always began and ended with the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. These notes, three short followed by a long one, still resonate in my mind. The children did not understand English, so that the language of the BBC took on an aura of mystery and truth, much like Latin in mass. Once the news was finished, the radio dial was changed to Radio Berlin, in case the Germans entered the house. We were all told to deny, if ever asked, that we listened to the BBC, which was strictly forbidden.

The day ended with same ritual: the entire family would assemble in the large living room following the evening meal. After a short period of talking, playing, or looking at home movies, we concluded our day by reciting prayers together. My parents, as well as those of Monique Mogoulsky's, were always mentioned in these prayers. These were powerful moments for me.

Very often, especially at the beginning of my stay, Carl de Brouwer would come up to my room before I fell asleep. He would talk to me about my special situation, about my fictitious background, which I had to remember in case



*The two photos my mother gave me which were in my room for the duration of the War, photographed in our house (left) and in the country*

of trouble, about my parents whom he did not want me to forget, about Claude, and about the war. Sometimes we looked together at the two photos my mother had given me when I left her. He used to tell me how much he liked my mother and how refined she was. And when we looked together at her photograph with a warm smile, I used to think she was so beautiful. I recall a particularly long discussion we had when he learned that my parents had been arrested. He wanted me to be courageous. Frequently, his stay in my room ended with a prayer for my parents.

### **THE STORY OF MALINES**

Mechelen, *Malines* in French, is a small city situated halfway between Brussels and Antwerp, the two cities in which most of the Belgian Jewish community lived. In the mid-eighteenth century the Austrian Army built a large military barracks at the edge of the historic city, next to the River Dijle. Initially known as the *Hof von*



*The site of the Dossin Barracks along the Dijle River, 2007*

*Habsburg* and later re-baptized as the Dossin Barracks (*Caserne Dossin*), the building served many purposes over the years. From the summer of 1942 onwards, the Dossin Barracks served as a *Sammellager*, a transit camp, where all Jews of Belgium origin were gathered before being sent to Auschwitz. Like in most of these transit camps in Europe, the Jews were told to bring supplies for two weeks after which they would be sent to work camps in Germany. Of course, reality was different: all were transported to concentration camps to work and then be slaughtered. What makes the Dossin Barracks so unique is that virtually every single Jew in Belgium who was sent to the concentration camp (Auschwitz, for most of them) passed through that building. Moreover, the names of literally all the inmates who were sent there are known to us today, for the Germans, with their obsessive sense of order and planning, kept perfect stock of all the prisoners. Their special prisoner ledgers, which thankfully have

been saved, indicate names of the inmates, their profession, address, place of birth, religion, marital status, etc. All interns were photographed *de face* and *de profile*. All were given a number, which was later tattooed on their right arm. In all over 25.200 people, mainly Jews and a minority of Gypsies were sent by train from here to Auschwitz. About 1.200 returned. My father was one of the 1.200, my mother one of the 24.000. Or I should say, one of the six million.



*The main entry to the Dossins Barracks, with the rail line in the foreground, c. 1945*



*List of the 25,267 Jews and Gypsies sent to Auschwitz in 27 Transports*

After the war, my father often spoke of his experiences and life in the various prisons and the camps. As a 10-year-old child I heard these terrible tales, and eventually got used to them. After his imprisonment in Ghent, he was sent to Malines. I associated the terrible atrocities with Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buchenwald, and others, but in my naïve way, I judged Malines could not be that bad. After all, Malines was in Belgium, not in Poland, and Belgians were civilized people. Furthermore, the name sounded less infernal and frightening to a child than Auschwitz. Later as an adult, especially after I read Marion Schreiber's *SILENT REBELS* I learned otherwise. Malines was as diabolic a place as one could find anywhere in Europe.

## **THE COMPETITION**

Two years ago, the Marcel Smets, the Chief Architect of Flanders, invited me to participate in the adjudication of the architectural submissions for a new museum in Belgium. Smets had a mandate from the Government of Flanders to organize an international competition for the design of a new Holocaust Museum in Mechelen. The new museum

was to be partly housed in a new building, and partly in the existing Dossin Barracks. At present, there is a small Holocaust Museum in the Barracks, but the facility is deemed inadequate, too small, and impractical for its



*The winning proposal for the "Holocaust" Museum*

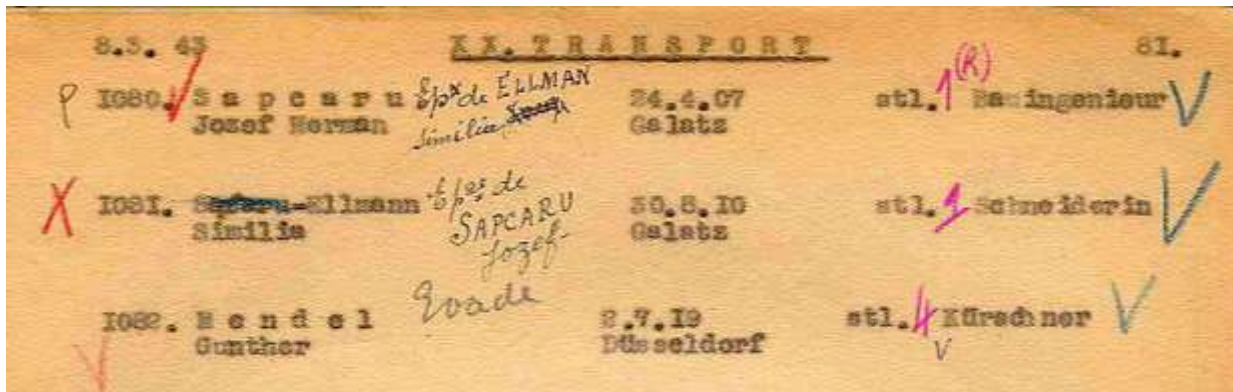
mandate. In fact, the museum is forced to turn away many visitors (mainly school children) for lack of space and human resources. The proposed museum is to be much larger and specifically designed for its purpose. When completed, it will be the official museum and memorial for the Belgian victims of the Holocaust. Its brief also calls for the inclusion of a documentation centre for research purposes.

Visiting the Dossin Barracks for the first time moved me profoundly. I was haunted by the very idea of being there some sixty years after the imprisonment of my parents. As I walked through the site and the building, I became acutely aware of the value of freedom. I went there as a free individual, and an architect to participate in the design of a memorial for these who had perished in the camps, including my mother. I wondered what my young parents' thoughts were during their incarceration in the Barracks and on their way to the death camps. Never could they have imagined that one day their six-year-old son would travel to that infernal place to be implicated in the commemoration of their passage in Dossin and their transport to the camps.

I was greeted at the Dossin Barracks by the director of the museum. He knew about my parents and me and took me aside to show me the so-called "Golden Book" in which was inscribed the names of all the people who had passed through the prison. There were 25,267 names in all. He showed me the names of my parents: Joseph Herman Sapcaru, 35 years of age, architect-engineer, prisoner number 1080, and his wife Simelia Sapcaru-Ellmann, dressmaker, 32 years of age, prisoner number 1081. The register indicated that both had been sent to Auschwitz with 1,600 other prisoners on the famous XXth Transport. I also learned that the youngest and the oldest of the Belgian Jews sent to Auschwitz were on that transport: Suzanne Kaminsky, prisoner number 215, was 38 days old and Jacob Blom, number 584, was 91 years old. Both were gassed upon arrival at the camp. We must remember their names.



Page from the XXth Transport file showing the names of Joseph and Simelia Sapcaru



Detail of page 81 of the Register.  
Note that Gunther Mendel, no. 1082, escaped (Evade)

### A CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECT

One would think that creating a Holocaust Museum in Belgium in 2008 would be an obvious matter. One is told that Belgium is the last country in Western Europe not to have a major Holocaust centre. It is understandable that for some nations there is a political and moral discomfort in making their gloomy past manifest. Yet by the standards of the time, the Belgian population acted honourably and saved more children proportionally than any other nation.

The facts of the Holocaust in Belgium are well known; the history of the Barracks at Malines is fully documented; the building is still there; many of the witnesses are still with us. Finally, there is a conspicuous need and a demand for a proper museum and memorial. This begs the question: “why did it take so long to build one, why the delay, why the torment, why the endless debate?” One can only assume that the museum, once constructed will make some people feel ill at ease. A local historian tells me that it took 10 years of discussion to formulate an acceptable name for the institution. Would the obvious name not be *National Holocaust Museum of Belgium*, or the like? But that name must have troubled some. The word “Holocaust” has been eliminated and the centre is to be known, at least for the time being, as the MUSEUM OF OCCUPATION, DEPORTATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS. If some are troubled by the word “Holocaust”, I am troubled by its elimination. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Government of Flanders finally settled for the name *Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance*. The word Holocaust is still not part of the official name of the Museum.

Diluting the name is diluting the purpose of the museum. The British historian, Nick Stargardt, in his book *WITNESSES OF WAR* stated appropriately “*possessing one’s name is one of the most elementary forms of personal identity*”. He was referring to the prisoners’ whose number tattooed on their forearm was meant to replace their names. One can say the same for a dubiously named memorial. The proposed euphemistic label for the museum is a subtractive act that dilutes the true and painful identity of the Holocaust. In the words of Gerda Bikales, an American historian, who spoke eloquently in Montreal on the issue a few years ago:

*The term “Human Rights” now replaces the word “Holocaust”. Abuses of human rights, genocides, military occupations, are undeniably deep-seated concerns of any civilized society, but the Holocaust stands apart as a historical phenomenon. ... The mass killing continues, with incredible intensity, in many places around the world. Are we, as has been suggested by some, witnessing another Holocaust? Or more horrible, are we witnessing many Holocausts? And yet it seems preposterous to us, as Holocaust survivors, to believe that what happened to the Jewish people in the Europe of our childhood is just part of a routine pattern of genocidal savagery. We sense, deeply, that the furore unleashed against us was like no other in history, and that none – we fervently hope – will ever equal it.*

I am told of one possible explanation for the deliberate omission of the word Holocaust in the name of the museum. The presence of this museum touches some very raw political and cultural nerves in Belgium, especially in Flanders. The Flemish government is in control of the enterprise, yet by logical accounts, the museum should be a national endeavour, one that transcends the cultural communities of the nation. The museum is, after all, a commemorative monument to the loss of the Jews in the entire nation. It is not a Flemish or French issue, but a national one. By virtue of the Belgian constitution, however, cultural matters are the sole jurisdiction of the linguistic communities. Since the museum is to be built in Flanders, in Mechelen, it is and will be a Flemish undertaking. In and of itself, this would not matter, except that the history of the collaboration within Belgium tells us differently.

It is a fact that some of the cruellest and most brutal collaborators of the Nazis in Belgium and in Mechelen were SS members. They were the devil’s disciples who relished playing their part. The history of Mechelen (and that of the nearby prison in the old fort of Breendonk) attests to this sad reality. These places were so brutal that even the German High Command was concerned with the viciousness of the guards. The zeal and the nastiness of the Flemish SS towards their Belgian compatriots are legendary. Marc Verschooris, lecturer at the University College Ghent (*Hogeschool Gent*) has been doing research about the Holocaust for years and makes frequent references to the behaviour of the SS and to the collective amnesia amongst some Flemings today. He speaks of a growing reflex to reduce (and even dismiss) their collaboration with the enemy.

Let me cite Bikales again.

*The U.S. Holocaust memorial Museum in Washington, a national institution almost exclusively shaped by Jews, has over the course of a very short time also drifted uneasily toward a “not-unique” position, mostly in response to political pressures. In its exhibits and its on-going programs, it is becoming an institution for the all-purpose defence of the generic victims, blurring the lines between the tragic fate of the Jews and that of other victims, such as Jehovah’s witnesses, homosexual, political dissidents, the handicapped, and the ordinary people in Nazi occupied territories. [It is] at the same time moving further apace in the direction of a “non-unique, non-Jewish” interpretation of the Holocaust.*

## **IN SUMMATION**

I, for one, am incapable to draw a conclusion from the most horrific episode in human history, except to realize that human depravity has no bounds. Over the years I also became aware of the opposite: namely, that inspiring acts of

courage and humanity can and do emerge during the most horrifying times. My helplessness on drawing any conclusion, however, does not prevent me from reflecting on the events and from reminiscing on my childhood. With age, I become increasingly aware that notwithstanding my happy existence with my adoptive family, subconsciously I had been a frightened child. As the years went by, this retroactive fear became more pronounced, and even painful. I became haunted by the idea that I came so close to deportation and its inevitable end. I could have been on the XXth Transport with my parents, and would certainly have ended in the gas chambers. I think, time and again, about what could have happened to my saviours and their family had they been discovered.

I have learned that the margin between happiness and tragedy, between life and death, is infinitely small. I am haunted by the thought that the difference between life and death can be a fraction of a second, a wrong turn in the street, a treacherous friend, a word too many. I recognize the fact that supreme goodness and absolute inhumanity can co-exist in the same place and at the same time. Most of all, I have learned that inhumanity does not cease, and that the thin veneer of civilization is indeed very thin.



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