

DOCUMENTS

13.1

A Jewish Girl Recalls Going into Hiding – 1942

Excerpt from Clara's Story by Clara Isaacman

Born in Romania, Clara Isaacman moved to Antwerp, Belgium, with her parents when she was young. When the German army captured Belgium in 1940, the family tried to escape but failed. Soon the Nazis began implementing their typical anti-Jewish actions in Antwerp. Isaacman's older brother was forced into a labor camp and was eventually killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The rest of the family—her parents, sister Frieda, and brother Elie—decided to go into hiding in 1942 in order to avoid a similar fate. They spent the next two and a half years in hiding. It proved a wise decision, as all of them except for Isaacman's father survived the Nazi occupation. After the war was over and Adolf Hitler had been defeated, Isaacman said that “for many years I found it too difficult to talk about the cruelty and viciousness that I had witnessed.” Over time, however, she decided that she could no longer remain silent, in part because “[so] many people had risked their lives to save mine. They were not all Jews, but they understood and practiced the ideals that are common to all faiths. They valued human life, regardless of religion or nationality. Some of these brave, selfless people perished in the attempt to save their country and to keep people like me and my family alive.”

Isaacman's life as a fugitive began when Mr. Yeager, a member of the anti-Nazi resistance, found her family a place to stay. Soon their lives became a strange mixture of extreme fear and utter boredom, as the following excerpt from her memoir *Clara's Story* shows.

July-December 1942

“Arrangements have made for you to stay with a family named Adams,” Mr. Yeager announced. “Clara, I think you know one of their sons. You will be taken to their home tonight, after dark. We must move you in two groups; you are less likely to arouse suspicion that way. Please make yourselves ready.”

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With a nod to Daddy and a quick bow to Mama he was gone as quickly and as quietly as he had come. We packed our few belongings. After Daddy said the evening prayers, we ate the last of our food and settled down once more to wait.

At nine o'clock, just as the sky was turning dark, Mr. Yeager returned with Mr. Adams. Adams was a meek man, of average height, bald, and thin. He shook hands with Mama and Daddy. When they thanked him for helping us, he murmured that he was glad to do it. He was a trolley-car conductor and had obtained trolley tickets for everyone. Holding Elie's hand, Mama announced that she and Elie would go with Mr. Yeager. Daddy, Frieda, and I were to go with Mr. Adams.

The trip seemed endless, fraught with dangerous, unthinkable consequences. We were breaking so many regulations, traveling after curfew and sitting on the trolleys. But all this was necessary. We were pretending that we were not Jews, but Belgian citizens going about our normal business. Dear God, I prayed, please, please let us all arrive at Mr. Adams's house safely. Don't let any soldiers stop my family.

We arrived at a modest, two-story row house in a working-class neighborhood. As the two families were solemnly introduced to each other, the Adamses assured us that we were safe. They and their five children could be trusted not to tell anyone they were hiding Jews. Robert, the Adamses' oldest son, and I greeted each other gravely. We had been in some of the same classes in elementary school. Seeing a familiar face was somehow reassuring.

Mrs. Adams, a severe-looking woman, explained the living arrangements. Their family slept on the second floor. The first floor had four rooms. She led the way as we walked through the house. First was a living room, then a kitchen. Behind the kitchen was a small spare room. The only piece of furniture in the spare room was a narrow bed.

"This is your room," the woman announced. "The children will have to sleep on the floor."

We looked around our cramped quarters as she continued.

"You are to stay in your room except when you are preparing or eating your meals or using the bathroom. You will give me the money to buy your food. Mrs. Heller, you may use the kitchen when I am out or when we are through eating. Under no circumstances are you to answer a knock on the door or look out a window. You will please remember that. Because we are hiding Jews, we are risking as much as you."

We nodded our understanding to each of her conditions. I sensed that she was not happy about our being in her house. Apparently it had been Mr. Adams's idea to shelter Jews in danger. Mrs. Adams was cooperating only for the extra income we would provide.

At first it was strange to sleep on the floor in the same room as our parents and to spend whole days doing almost nothing, never going out. But we soon

became accustomed to our surroundings, and our lives settled into a steady routine. Even though there were twelve people living in close quarters, sharing one bathroom and one kitchen, the two families lived completely independently of one another. Mrs. Adams had made it clear that this was the only way she could house another family. She and her husband were liberal-minded Catholics who felt that Jews were people like anyone else. But hiding them was strictly business.

On weekday mornings we stayed in our room until Mr. and Mrs. Adams were gone for the day. When school started in September, we heard the children getting ready to leave, Mrs. Adams preparing breakfast, Mr. Adams leaving for work. Once the house was quiet we were free to move about. Mrs. Adams spent most mornings at the local market. In the afternoon she liked to sit in the kitchen drinking whiskey, which made Mama nervous. We walked around the house without shoes and spoke in whispers, careful not to make any noise so that the neighbors on either side who shared walls with the Adamses would think the house was empty during the day. Each day was like the one before. There was no schedule. There was little to do. Our lives were punctuated by meals and by the coming and going of our hosts. We devised a system of knocks so that the Adamses could warn us if guests were coming. When we heard a warning knock, we would all run back to our room and wait in silence until the visitors left.

Of all the Adamses, Robert was the most sensitive to our situation. He often brought us games and books, and I thought he would have enjoyed spending more time with us had his mother not been so strict.

As days stretched into weeks, Mama and Daddy devised a program of instruction for us. They worried about all the schooling we were missing, so part of every day was spent studying. Mama was fluent in many languages. We spoke Yiddish among ourselves; but when she was growing up in Romania, she had spoken Romanian and German as well. She had studied French in school and had learned Flemish and English in the ten years she had been in Belgium. She and Daddy knew Hungarian, too, which they spoke when they did not want us to understand what they were saying. Mama started to teach us all the languages she knew, with special emphasis on English.

Daddy discussed philosophy and history with us. He and Mama always valued our opinions, so it seemed natural to us to examine our own situation with them in terms of history and ideas. Suddenly all the dry facts of Jewish history I had studied in school came alive as we talked. Daddy reminded us that the Jew's strength was also his burden. We had been persecuted through the ages because we had clung to our heritage. Our proud traditions and beliefs, which had become the basis for some of the world's other great religions, set us apart. We were fated always to appear different from other people, and this difference was often perceived by others as a threat. I had heard these words and ideas so many times—in classrooms, in synagogue, and in our home. But they never meant as much to me as when they

were spoken in hiding, surrounded by terror and war. Daddy recounted the famous stories we all knew by heart: the Purim story about the struggle between Haman and the Jews of Shushan, when Esther's courage saved Jews from the gallows; the story of Masada, where Jews died rather than submit to Roman rule; the tales of the

Spanish Inquisition, when the Marranos held fast to their Judaism in spite of the threat of torture and death by burning at the stake.

*"I was terribly
frightened each time
[my father] went out
and left us alone. I felt
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from a frayed rope."*

As my father spoke, a pattern began to emerge, a theme that helped me to see our own situation as the latest event in the long struggle for freedom. I also understood the difference between our troubles and those of our ancestors. In the last hundred years the world had become industrialized, mechanized. Haman's power in a small city in Mesopotamia thousands of years before was greatly multiplied by Hitler, who had all the resources of a modern republic at his command. Hitler had the means to exterminate the entire Jewish population of Europe.

"Our job, our sacred duty," Daddy said, "is to stay alive. You must not see our hiding as an act of cowardice. We must survive in order to preserve Judaism. We are soldiers in the struggle for survival, and our battle is just as important as what is happening on the front."

When we were not having discussions or reading, we played games. Everyone took turns keeping Elie occupied, playing chess and checkers for hours. Sometimes, especially when I was reading a good book, I almost forgot where I was. But then my attention would drift, and I had the feeling I was fading. Like words erased from a page, I seemed to exist only as a faint shadow.

Almost every afternoon when Mama went to the kitchen to prepare our evening meal, she found Mrs. Adams sitting at the kitchen table, a glass and a bottle of whiskey in front of her.

"A woman who drinks can't be trusted," Mama complained to Daddy. "How long will it be before she tells a neighbor about us."

"She's too frightened for her own safety to betray us," Daddy replied.

"She's using the money we pay her to buy liquor instead of food for her family," Frieda said.

"I don't think we can stay here much longer," insisted Mama. "And what about the Adams children? I'm so afraid they'll let something slip, that they'll whisper their secret to a friend at school."

"They're terribly curious about us," I said. "Last Sunday one of the little girls asked me why don't we go to church with them."

Daddy tried to reassure us, saying that these were good people who had put themselves in a dangerous situation. But Mama could not stop worrying. I noticed that she was smoking more and more. She had always enjoyed cigarettes, but she had smoked only occasionally at home. Now it seemed that she was always holding a cigarette. She could no longer buy regular cigarettes, so we took turns rolling some tobacco in a little piece of paper. At first it was like a game, but soon she seemed to need cigarettes more than anything else.

Our most basic need in hiding was money. Without the money that we used to pay the Adamses, we could not imagine what would happen to us. They certainly could not afford to maintain us on their own, no matter how good their intentions. Our supply of money was shrinking, and our parents worried about it.

The day we went into hiding, Daddy had brought with him all the money he had in the house as well as a few diamonds. Now our cash was all gone, and Daddy had to sneak out every few weeks to meet a Christian friend who bought his gems. I was terribly frightened each time he went out and left us alone. I felt as though I hung suspended over a fearful chasm, dangling from a frayed rope. It was as if any sudden motion might destroy my precarious balance and I would plunge into a great nothingness. I knew that my behavior could not ensure Daddy's safety, but I needed to feel that by being very still I was helping him return to us unharmed.

The days wore on in tedious succession. Outside, Antwerp was dressing in fall colors. Children were scuffling through crisp leaves on the sidewalks. The parks and the zoo were less crowded now; the old people who lined the park benches in summer had gone inside. Children no longer sailed toy boats in the ponds, but there were lovers strolling through the park, oblivious to the weather. And there were young mothers pushing prams, their little ones swaddled in wools to protect them from the chilly air.

At the Adamses fuel was in short supply. We had to put on extra sweaters. I began to spend long hours daydreaming about the world outside. I remembered the smell of burning leaves, the sight of giant elms, their golden leaves lit by the late afternoon sun, the sounds of children racing their bicycles in the park, laughing and shouting to one another. I longed for even a glimpse out the window.

"Just a little bit longer," Mama said when she saw me struggling with the confinement. "I'm sure it will be just a little bit longer."

Her calm certainty soothed my restlessness, and I went back to my book or played another game with Elie.

Our funds dwindled. We wondered whether the diamonds were still in their hiding place in the doorpost of our house on Leeuwerick Street [where they had been secreted before the family went into hiding]. Elie wanted to go for the diamonds, but Mama and Daddy wouldn't let him. Such an errand would be terribly dangerous, they argued, and there was a good chance the diamonds were no longer

there. We had heard rumors of empty Jewish homes being looted, both by Belgian citizens and by Nazi soldiers.

In December, just before Hanukkah, my parents decided that someone would have to go for the diamonds.

"I want to go," Elie insisted.

"He's too young. Let me go, Daddy," I begged.

"Perhaps it should be an adult," Mama said, "If you or I go, none of the children will be in danger."

"That's not fair," Elie cried. "I asked first."

We knew that it would probably be easier for a child to slip into the house unseen than a grownup, but Mama and Daddy hesitated exposing any of us to such danger. There seemed to be no way to settle the argument.

"Let's pick straws," I suggested. "The one who pulls the short straw runs the errand."

Mama and Daddy relented. We used five of Mama's matches. Daddy broke one off in the middle, then he held them between his thumb and forefinger with all the heads lined up evenly, the bottoms concealed in his fist. One by one we each picked a match. First Mama: she picked a long one. Then me. I pulled slowly, but it was long. Frieda pulled a long one also. There were two matches left. If Elie picked a long one, Daddy would go. Elie quickly pulled one match out of Daddy's hand. We all gasped: he had gotten his wish.

Daddy arranged for Mr. Adams to accompany Elie as close to Leeuwerick Street as possible. They would have to take several trolleys, and it would be dark. Elie would travel the last part of the journey on foot, alone. Mr. Adams agreed to wait for him at a designated spot.

They decided to go at nightfall. Everything had to be accomplished by the 7 p.m. curfew. Anyone on the street after that hour could be questioned, even shot by patrolling soldiers.

The streets were busy with people going home from work. Mama bundled Elie up warmly in coats and scarves borrowed from the Adams children, holding him close for a few moments as though she wished her love could protect him. When Elie and Mr. Adams were both ready, Mama gave Elie one last embrace, Daddy shook their hands, we all whispered, "Good luck," and then they were out the door, swallowed by the night. I envied Elie his errand, not only because he was doing something important, but because he was outside, breathing fresh air.

We sat in our room and waited. We had spent months waiting, but this was a special kind of torment. Mama started smoking nervously, one cigarette after another. Her broad, handsome face, usually so calm, was contorted with worry. Daddy sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees, holding his head in his hands.

In our minds we were all with Elie. I could picture every part of his trip. I imagined him sitting on the trolley. There would be soldiers everywhere. Elie had been instructed to behave calmly. Thank goodness it's cold, I thought, with that hat on, no one can see how dark and curly his hair is. If a soldier questioned him, Elie would reply in Flemish. Once Elie and Mr. Adams were across town they would have to travel on foot. This was as dangerous as riding the trolley because our entire neighborhood had been emptied that night in July. Anyone entering an uninhabited street after dark would look suspicious to a soldier on patrol. Alone and without lights, Elie had to go to our house, remove the doorframe, retrieve the packet, and return to where Mr. Adams waited for him.

One hour passed and another. I could not even think about the possibility that Elie might get caught or that he might not get the diamonds. The hour for curfew was approaching. Just when I felt I would explode from the tension, we heard the front door open. We stayed in our room in case it was guests for the Adams family—or worse. Then we heard running footsteps, and Elie burst into the room. He tumbled into Frieda's arms and said, "I got them! I got them!" He laughed hysterically and yelled, "I got them! I got the *lokshen*! I got them!"

After so much hardship, Elie's success made us all deliriously happy. We suddenly took delight in the code word we used for diamonds—*lokshen* (noodles)—and laughed with him. "He's got them. He's got the *lokshen*," we laughed so hard that we were soon panting and once again mindful that we had to keep quiet.

That night, despite our confinement, our joy was complete. Elie's triumph belonged to all of us. He told us that he had found the house in shambles. People had stripped it bare of furniture and had searched everywhere but the secret doorframe for hidden treasure. Floor boards were torn up, wallpaper was ripped from the wall, even the stairs had been destroyed.

A week later, on the last night in December, Daddy went out to sell one of the stones that Elie had retrieved.

Source: Isaacman, Clara, and Joan Adess Grossman. *Clara's Story*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1984.

13.2

Escaping the Death March – 1945

Excerpt from an Interview with Holocaust Survivor David Mandel

As the Russian Army approached the concentration camps in the Auschwitz-Birkenau area of Poland in January 1945, the Nazis decided to evacuate the prisoners held in these facilities. They forced the malnourished and poorly clad inmates to undertake a so-called death march through the winter cold