

# STUDY GUIDE: JEANNINE BURK

## BACKGROUND

Jeannine Burk (Rasalowicz) was born in Brussels, Belgium, on September 15, 1939, two weeks after Hitler invaded Poland and World War II began. The Jewish people had a long history in Belgium. Sixty thousand lived in the country, mostly in Brussels and Antwerp. Many Jews were assimilated into Belgian culture and national life. The country's geography (no mountains, no large forests) and its dense population made Jewish rescue difficult.

## EMIGRATION of JEWS from POLAND after WORLD WAR I

Jeannine's family emigrated from Poland to Belgium in 1927, along with the post-World War I wave of Jewish and non-Jewish people who fled violence-torn Russia and Central and Eastern Europe in search of security and opportunity in Western Europe. Jeannine lived in Brussels with her parents Isaac and Sarah, her brother Max, and her sister Augusta. Jeannine was youngest. Her father Isaac was a machinist. The family was poor.

# WORLD WAR II

After conquering Poland in 1939, Hitler turned his attention to France and Great Britain. In May-June 1940, the German Army swept across Western Europe. The Belgian Army was quickly overwhelmed and the country occupied. King Leopold III collaborated with the Germans. The local Nazis (Rexists) were ready accomplices in plunder and mass-murder.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: The Nazis' strategy of Jewish annihilation in Western Europe differed from their strategy in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe.**

The strategy in the West was 'sensitive' to the reactions of the non-Jewish population, fearing resistance to the Nazi deportations. There was less public violence in the West and no Nazi ghettos in the middle of a city (like Warsaw) where disease and starvation raged. The Nazi destruction machinery proceeded slowly in the West. In October 1940, the Nazis issued a definition of 'Jew' and ordered Jews to register at the local municipalities (and have their passports stamped with '*Jude*'). Between May and December 1941, Jewish property was '*Aryanized*' (purchased at reduced prices - or simply expropriated).

**KEY TEACHING POINT: Many non-Jewish Belgians profited off the 'disappearance' of the Jews. Not least of all, many apartments and businesses were suddenly available – and art**

**collections.**

In August 1941, Jews were concentrated in four cities: Brussels, Antwerp, Charleroi, and Liege. In November 1941, the Nazis established a *Judenrat* (Association des Juifs de Belgique). According to Belgian-Jewish resistance fighter Jacob Gutfreind, the *Judenrat* was “a tool in the hands of the Gestapo to facilitate the deportation of the Jews.” In May 1942, Jews were ordered to wear the yellow ‘Star of David’ on their chests beside the word ‘Jude’ in black letters.

*See chapter titled ‘The Jewish Resistance Movement in Belgium,’ by Jacob Gutfreind (a resistance fighter) in the book They Fought Back: The Story of the Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe, edited and translated by Yuri Suhl.*

## NAZI DECEPTION

The Nazis *always* employed deceit and deception, saying that the Jews would be ‘resettled’ in the East where they would work in German factories. Few people realized that a ‘death camp’ lay ahead. There was no precedent for ‘industrial’ mass murder. Isaac Rasalowicz recognized the Nazi threat for what it was: murderous. He eventually contacted the underground resistance movement in hopes of finding shelter for his family and for himself.

# UNDERGROUND RESISTANCE and RESCUE of JEWISH CHILDREN

The Belgian resistance movement included diverse groups (Catholics, communists, etc.) under the name 'National Front of Belgian Independence.' Jewish resistance groups joined this organization and operated as the 'National Committee for the Defense of the Jews.' *Before* the deportations began, the resistance movement prepared a network of potential 'hide-outs' for Jewish children. Isaac arranged for a Christian family (mother and daughter) to hide Jeannine.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** If caught harboring a Jewish child, the family would be imprisoned or executed. This was the Nazi penalty for non-Jews who were caught helping Jews.

Isaac brought Jeannine (by tram) to the Christian woman (rescuer) who lived in a modest house in a Brussels suburb. Jeannine, two and a half years old, never saw her father again. She spent the next two years as a 'hidden child' in the woman's house, leaving only to hide in the 'outhouse' when Nazi parades passed on the street. During that two year period, Jeannine didn't know the woman's name. Jeannine's brother Max was sheltered in a Catholic boarding school.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: A Jewish male was particularly vulnerable to Nazi inspection because he was circumcised - unlike non-Jewish men.**

Jeannine's sister Augusta suffered from *Osteomyelitis*, a disease which rendered her bedridden. She couldn't be moved from the apartment and into hiding. As a result, her parents remained with her in the family house – exposed to great danger.

## DEPORTATION in JULY 1942

In July 1942, the Nazis ordered Jews to assemble at various points for deportation 'to the East.' Jewish resistance 'partisans' raided the *Judenrat* office building in Brussels and burned the lists of Jewish names and addresses, which the Germans needed to facilitate the deportations. Between June 1942 and July 1944, the Nazis and their collaborators deported 25,437 Jewish people from Belgium to Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. Twenty-four thousand were murdered there.

## COLLABORATORS

Jeannine believes that her family was betrayed to the Gestapo by a neighbor. The neighbor informed the Gestapo that Jews were living in the house.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** In every country of Nazi-occupied Europe, local people collaborated with the Nazis. The Nazis relied on ‘informers’ – and offered ‘rewards’ to those who denounced Jews and Belgian resistance fighters.

As Jeanine tells us in the documentary, the Gestapo arrived at 5:00 o’clock in the morning and smashed the back door. Jeannine’s mother Sarah refused to leave Augusta, who lay in bed entombed in a body cast. The Germans didn’t have the means to transport Augusta. They arrested Isaac and vowed to return for Sarah and Augusta. In the meantime, Sarah found shelter for Augusta in a Catholic hospital – in the isolation ward.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Augusta was placed in the isolation ward because the nurses knew that the Germans were afraid of contracting diseases and wouldn’t inspect a place where very sick people lay.

Isaac was sent to the *Auschwitz-Birkenau*. Jeannine doesn’t know if he died there, at another camp, or on a ‘death march.’ Allied troops liberated Brussels in September 1944.

## POST-WAR

As soon as the Allies liberated Brussels, Sarah retrieved Jeannine from the Christian woman’s apartment.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** In Belgium, twenty-thousand Jewish people managed to survive the four years of German occupation. Three thousand Jewish children were saved through the efforts of the Belgian underground resistance.

Many Jews were hidden by Christians while others ‘passed’ as Christians. In one case, nineteen Jewish children were hidden in a church in central Brussels – and narrowly escaped a Gestapo search. After the war, Jeannine and her family waited for Isaac to return, but he didn’t. Jeannine’s mother died of cancer in 1950. Both Max and Augusta got married. Jeannine was sent to live with relatives in a suburb of New York City. Thus began another painful chapter of her life. She arrived in 1951 - on her twelfth birthday. Jeannine moved to New Orleans in 1971. She and her husband have six children.

In 1986, Jeannine attended a convention of Holocaust survivors in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As she tells us in the documentary, this was the occasion when she first realized - or accepted - that her father wasn’t coming back. In 2003, Jeannine returned to Brussels and discovered where she had been hidden, and that her rescuer’s last name was Kudrna. She lived at 137 Rue de L’Obus in the Anderlecht district.

# JEANNINE BURK: GLOSSARY

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Define the following glossary terms and explain their relevance to Jeannine's story:

1. Star of David armband –

2. 'Aryanization' –

3. Judenrat –

4. Belgian resistance movement –



5. Righteous Gentiles –

6. 'Resettlement' or 'evacuation' –

7. Collaborators –

8. Gestapo –

9. SS –

10. Auschwitz-Birkenau –

11. 'New Americans Social Club' –

# JEANNINE BURK: KEY QUESTIONS

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions using information and quotes from the documentary and study guide:

1. What is Jeannine's memory of last seeing her father?
2. Describe Jeannine's experience as a 'hidden child.' How did she

occupy her time?

3. Describe Jeannine's experience while hiding in the 'outhouse' during a Nazi parade.

4. Describe the Gestapo's arrest of Jeannine's father. According to Jeannine, how did it happen? What happened to her father? How did Jeannine's mother and sister avoid 'arrest'?

5. How did Jeannine's brother Max, her sister Augusta, and her mother Sarah survive the rest of the war?

6. When did Jeannine acknowledge to herself that her father was dead?

7. What is Jeannine's attitude about "forgiveness"?

8. What is Jeannine's feeling about God?

9. What is Jeannine's message to young people?