The Northeastern University Holocaust
Oral History Project

USER’S GUIDE

GERALD HERMAN

An Interview
By Rochelle F. Gordon
Boston, Massachusetts, May 17, 1999
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INTRODUCTION

Professor Herman relates the story of his wife's parents living underground in Brussels during the Holocaust. This oral history has been reconstructed through conversations that Professor Herman has had with members of the family. Herman, a Historian, has a very strong interest in the Holocaust and teaches a course on the Holocaust at Northeastern University.

His relationship with his wife's family allowed him the ability to tell their story of what they endured, living underground in Brussels during the war years. The parents were not willing to talk about their experience, however, when asked specific questions the father and eldest son would provide an answer. They did not go into great detail.

The parents' lives were in constant jeopardy and they had to rely on their own resources to maintain themselves. They sent their two sons away in order to provide safety for them. The family was reunited when the Americans liberated Brussels.

An American army sargeant befriended the parents and helped them to rebuild their lives. The sargeant was instrumental in sponsoring their emigration to America. Their goal was to start a new life in America.

I interviewed Professor Gerald Herman at his Northeastern University office on the 17, of May, 1999, contributing to the Northeastern University Holocaust Link Oral History Project.

Rochelle F. Gordon

Interviewer

June 7, 1999
**PROFESSOR GERALD HERMAN**  
**TABLE OF TAPE CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NARRATOR:</th>
<th>PROFESSOR GERALD HERMAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEWER:</td>
<td>ROCHELLE F. GORDON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATE:</td>
<td>17TH MAY 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECORDER:</td>
<td>JVC TAPE RECORDER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTER NUMBER</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIDE ONE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>001</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 009 | History of family and life in Brussels  
Germany invades Brussels- Parents go underground  
Sponsorship by American army sargeant | 4 |
<p>| 069 | Life in Liberty, New York | 7 |
| 074 | Parents underground | 7 |
| 077 | Work during the war | 7 |
| 090 | Germans in Belgium - underground | 8 |
| 093 | Family relatives in America | 8 |
| 141 | Family relative in Paris | 9 |
| 152 | Death of Parents | 10 |
| 157 | Holocaust difficult topic to discuss | 10 |
| 179 | Jackie unaware of the Holocaust | 11 |
| 181 | Reparations from the German Government | 11 |
| 203 | Death of Jackie’s Grandmother and Grandfather | 12 |
| 223 | Jackie’s brother in the Belgium resistance | 13 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>252</td>
<td>Return to Belgium</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belgium citizenship laws</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>267</td>
<td>Brussels liberated</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>286</td>
<td>Reticent to talk about the Holocaust</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>325</td>
<td>Emigration to America on Holland America Ship</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>340</td>
<td>Remnants of War</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>399</td>
<td>Recollections of the Past</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435</td>
<td>Son in Military</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>477</td>
<td>The Holocaust End</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following is an interview with Professor Gerald Herman of Northeastern University’s History Department. The interview is being conducted at Professor Herman’s office on May 17, 1999, by Rochelle Gordon.

What is your name and position at Northeastern University?

My name is Gerald Herman, I am acting chairman of the History Department, Assistant Professor of History with tenure and Special Assistant to the office of the General Counsel at the university.

In looking over the information that was given to me this [story] regards your family that was in Belgium at the time of the Holocaust. Will you tell me about them and what they were doing?

Actually my wife’s family.

My wife’s father came to Belgium in 1919 from Poland in order to escape being drafted in to the war against the then new Soviet Union. His future wife, although they didn’t know one another, came to Belgium from Poland about three years later. They met in the early 1920s and they married. They had four children, one of them died in childhood. He was a tailor and had his own small business. His wife helped him in that business by doing hems and doing other things that didn’t require the level of skill that was needed to actually tailor clothing.

They lived in Brussels. They had two children...No, ...three
children before the outbreak of the Second World War. One of them died of meningitis as a very small girl. When the war broke out and Belgium was invaded they went underground in the same apartment house in which they lived. They moved into the basement. For a fee, the landlord provided them with food and whatever other material was necessary and they lived underground from the late spring of 1940 until late 1944. My father-in-law went out and worked and brought home income because they didn’t have many savings. He had to work in order to pay the landlord and provide for his family.

They sent their two sons off from Brussels. The eldest son worked as a runner for the Belgium resistance in the Ardennes. In fact, when we went to Belgium, we met the family with whom he stayed. The younger son was sent into a nunnery where he masqueraded as a Catholic child and where the nuns (at least my understand was) spent a lot of time trying actually to convert him and caused psychological trouble later on.

Because my wife’s father went out to work, he had run ins with both Belgium authorities and with German authorities. In fact, he was stopped... he once told me four times... one of which the Gestapo officer said, “I know you’re Jewish get the hell out of here”. Its one of those instances in which he ran into someone with a conscience despite what he was working for.
My wife’s mother was out one day and was hit by a trolley car. She couldn’t get the care that she needed, because they were afraid.

By the time Brussels was liberated my wife’s mother was pregnant with my wife and [my wife] she was born several weeks after the liberation of Brussels. In fact, Jackie’s father was going to call her “Liberte” in honor of the liberation, but her mother insisted that she be called Jacqueline instead.

They stayed in Belgium after the war. They became very friendly with an American army sargeant who was Jewish and who provided sustenance for them while they got back on their feet. By 1950, their eldest son was in the army and was already in a romantic relationship with a young lady who came from a wealthy family in Brussels. She had spent the war in Switzerland. She was part of the children’s evacuation that took place through France into Switzerland.

When the Korean war broke out in June 1950, Jackie’s father, having now been through two World Wars, had been through the first World War in Poland and then the Second World War in Brussels, decided that there was no way he was going to allow his family to go through yet another world war. He contacted the sargeant, who had helped them. The sargeant sponsored them and they came to the United States in the summer of 1950, when my wife was about six years old. That’s how they came to the United States.
They have lived here every since?

They have lived here ever since. First, in Liberty, New York. He tried to set up a small tailor shop and was unsuccessful. Then they moved to New York City, where he worked for clothing retailers as a tailor, as an alterer for his whole working life.

They were underground most of the time during the war.

That’s right.

Even though he went out to work, he was able to work on the outside. Didn’t they know that he was Jewish?

The people for whom he worked knew that he was Jewish, but they decided to keep the secret. He apparently, although he didn’t talk about this (my knowledge of it is very fragmentary) but apparently, the only trouble he ever had was going to and from work and not at work itself.

The funny thing is that I worked with a vice provost of the university who has since retired, a chemistry professor, his wife and my wife were talking. (he was much older) It turned out that his wife spent the Second World War in hiding about six blocks from where Jackie’s parents were. Apparently, the neighborhood was either tolerant enough or suspicious enough of the Germans to permit some number of people to successfully not be captured in the second world war.
When the German’s came into Belgium, they were not found at all. Were your in-laws underground the whole time?

I don’t know the timing of it. They were somewhat reluctant to talk about it. Apparently, they made arrangements relatively quickly and either just as or shortly after the German army entered Brussels, they had successfully found some place to hide and remained hidden.

When your wife’s family finally decided to come to America were there people here to help them? Did they have family here?

That’s a complex story. Jackie’s father came from a relatively large family. His father had married and had children with his first wife. His first wife died and, as was the custom, he married his dead wife’s younger sister. Jackie’s father was the offspring of that second liaison. He had a number of step siblings, as well as his own brothers and sisters. His father went to Israel before the first World War and tried to be a pioneer there. His mother was left by herself in Poland. I don’t know whether the intention was to get her to come to Israel at some point, but the father didn’t. The father took my father-in-law’s sister with him to Israel. The mother worked as a bread baker in the village and a caterer in order to make ends meet. Some of the children came to the United States in the 1920s, the same time that he went to Belgium, so there were relatives here. One brother came to the United States in the 1930s and became so homesick that he decided to go back to...
Poland. He landed in Poland on the first of September 1939, and was killed, according to the family, that day. In the German invasion my wife’s father’s mother died probably in a concentration camp.

They don’t know for sure?

They don’t know for sure and her husband had died in Israel. In what was then Palestine.

I don’t remember whether the daughter stayed or came back, but she ended up living in Belgium, because we met her. (I’m trying to remember all of this) When they came to the United States, they came to New York and there were not any relatives in New York. This sargeant acted as their sponsor and helped to set them up. That’s why they went to Liberty, New York, in the first instance. They did make contact with his family and they have been quite close ever since. One brother (who would be Jackie’s uncle) had three children. We are fairly close with two of those children and they have had two children each and their children have children. That makes up the bulk of the family who my wife knows on her father’s side.

Jackie’s grandmother died when she was a child and the grandfather died shortly thereafter leaving Jackie’s mother an orphan.

In Belgium?

No...In Poland and that’s why she decided to come to Belgium. She had, she still has, a sister still alive, who came to Paris to live.
She married a non-Jew and also spent the Second World War essentially hiding in his village and in Paris from the Nazis and still lives in Paris with her husband. They divorced, but they are living together, which is some sort of an odd relationship.

152 Gordon: This is whose relative?

Herman: My wife’s mother’s sister. My wife’s grandmother died when her daughter was very young. My wife’s parents died within a year of one another in the 1980s.

Gordon: Where did Jackie’s parents die?

Herman: They died in Coney Island.

157 Gordon: Did they ever talk about the Holocaust?

Herman: Not much. It was a difficult topic. At one point, it actually was a funeral where all of Jackie’s father’s relatives were together, I did a family tree of his side of the family. That was the only time that any of them spoke at great length about what had happened to them. Jackie’s father would answer questions when you asked him, but was not willing to talk about it. Jackie’s mother was unwilling to talk about it at all. They were willing to talk about their life in Belgium, but they were unwilling to talk about what happened to them during the war. It was not an easy time and coming to the United States was not easy because they had to leave their eldest son behind because he was in the military and he decided to stay in Belgium. They came to the United States rather late in life and they had to learn English, which was difficult for them. They lived
a sparse existence. He was a tailor. My wife's mother became blind with cataracts and detached retinas and her father was essentially taking care of the entire family. My wife's elder brother, not the one who stayed in Belgium, the middle brother, came. He had problems with asthma initially and was sent off to the Jewish children's home in Denver for treatment which was a second jarring separation. He developed mental illness in his late teens and has been hospitalized on and off ever since. Most likely because of his earlier childhood in the war.

179 Gordon: Jackie did not know anything about the Holocaust when she came here?

Herman: She came here when she was six. She was born right after Brussels was liberated in October 1944. I think one of the reasons they didn't talk about it was they wanted to shield her from that experience.

181 Gordon: Has any one in the family talked about the Holocaust, since it is over so many years?

Herman: Not much.

Gordon: Even the brother that is still in Belgium? He does not talk about it?

Herman: The brother who is still in Belgium went after the German government for *Wiedergutmachung* {which is the reparations that the German government pays to Holocaust survivors} it was a very difficult experience since none of them were actually in concentration camps. Because the family was so completely
disrupted and separated, they had a very difficult time getting any sort of reparations from the German government. He spent most of his time trying to get some kind of reparation for Aaron, because Aaron is the one, who in the long run suffered the most. The German government was unwilling to recognize that his experience in the war, he was the one who was in the catholic institution, had anything to do with the fact that he developed mental illness as a teenager. It was a very frustrating experience, but he hired lawyers in German and lawyers in Belgium to try to rectify this situation.

203 Gordon: Jackie’s grandmother died in the Holocaust?

Herman: She was taken off to a camp and Jackie’s grandfather died in Palestine in 1920.

Gordon: What camp was she at?

Herman: I don’t know.

Gordon: Her husband never knew which camp she had been sent?

Herman: Remember her husband was dead. He died in the early 1920s and the sister had come back to Belgium. I met her when she was very old. She was a very nice lady, but we never talked about what happened to her during the Second World War.

Herman: My wife’s mother had a brother, as well, who went to Israel, but I don’t know whether he went during the Palestine period or after the Second World War. I really don’t know whether he experienced the Holocaust. My memory is he didn’t and he went in the 1920s or 1930s. He may even have participated in the Jewish
military unit that was set-up by the British during the Second World War.

223 Gordon: Jackie’s brother stayed in the military. The military knew he was Jewish?
Herman: Remember he went into the military in 1949.
Gordon: That was after the war.
Herman: During the Second World War, he was a runner for the resistance in the Ardennes and stayed with a peasant family in the Ardennes, who we actually met on one of our trips. They were very nice. They sheltered him and he ran messages back and forth for the resistance. I think he got a medal of some kind the end of the Second World War.

He is fourteen years older than my wife who is fifty-four that makes him sixty-eight. He was born in 1931 and that would make him eleven years old when the invasion took place. The family was reunited in Brussels in 1945. He was old enough to be called for regular military service in 1949 and was in the army when Jackie’s father decided to leave before the Korean war. The time had come for them not to stay in Europe any longer. The original plan was that he would follow when he completed his military service, but he had fallen in love at that point. He decided to stay in Belgium and we into his father-in-law’s business after he got married.

252 Gordon: Have Jackie’s father and mother ever gone back to Brussels?
Herman: Jackie’s father went back once to see his son. Jackie’s brother and sister-in-law hated flying and so they only came to the states
once by ship to see Jackie’s parents. They had a son so there was an opportunity for Jackie’s parents to meet their grandson and Jackie’s father decided to go back to Belgium and see them. I think at some point in the early 1970s he went back and spent a month in Belgium. He also visited his sister, who was living in Brussels. Jackie’s brother and sister-in-law live in Antwerp. They took Jackie’s father back to Brussels to see the apartment house that they hid out in. In fact, the first time we were there, they took us to see it as well. There was another cousin, who was a farmer in Normandy.

The problem with most European citizenship laws of that period, some even today, is that even though they lived in Belgium for twenty or thirty years, they were never citizens. The way the Belgians treated the Jews (because in one way or another, they were citizens by blood rather than by residence), and its even true in some European countries today, you can live in a country forever, but unless you’re born there or something special is done for you, you remain an alien resident. That was the way in which some European countries justified what they did to the Jews. The Jews weren’t actually citizens. They were simply residents in the country, but they remain the citizens or subjects of the country in which they were born. Jackie is a Belgian citizen and Jackie’s brothers’ are Belgian citizens because they were born in Belgium, but Jackie’s parents were never Belgium citizens although they were residents.
Gordon: They came from Poland and then they moved to Belgium.
Herman: Yes.
Gordon: Did they have family in Poland?
Herman: Jackie's parents were born in Poland and moved to Belgium at the end of the First World War. Jackie's father late in the First World War and Jackie's mother after the end of the First World War.

side 2

267 Gordon: How did they know the war was over in Belgium?
Herman: The American army came. The war wasn't over, but Brussels was liberated and they could come out of hiding. At that point, Jackie's parents began sending for their sons who were in other places. I'm not sure when they rejoined them, but they knew because the American army appeared. Which was very fortunate, Jackie's mother was pregnant. There was the concern about what would happen if Brussels wasn't liberated and they had to have the baby in hiding. Because the child who had died of meningitis in 1939 was a girl, Jackie was considered sort of a Godsend. It was kind of a renewal that sort of signaled a new beginning for them.

286 Gordon: When did Jackie's mother and father die?
Herman: Early 1980s Jackie's father died of cancer and Jackie's mother died less than a year after.
Gordon: They never said anything or talked about their experiences to pass it on to her?
Herman: No... Only when asked specific questions and I was usually the one who asked the questions. I was a historian.

Gordon: You were interested in knowing what happened?

Herman: Yes. But they were very reticent about talking. I don’t think they wanted to impose what had happened to them on other people.

There was a small community of people from Poland whom Jackie’s father even knew or renewed acquaintanceship with as a result of coming to the United States. And there were also a small group of Jackie’s mother’s relatives. I’ve talked about Jackie’s father’s relatives, but there also was Jackie’s mother’s relatives who lived in and around New York and Jackie’s parents renewed acquaintanceship with them.

The problem is that most of those people had come, or their parents had come or whatever, before the Second World War. They didn’t have the experience of the Holocaust. Jackie’s parents, as late arrivals were somewhat reticent partly because of language, partly because they didn’t want to be treated like the newer refugees and partly because, as Jackie’s brother got sicker, they became more embarrassed to have people to the house. They sort of kept in telephone contact with them, but kept them at arms’ length.

Jackie’s parents came to the United States on a Holland America Line ship. In fact, Jackie and I just did a tour of Alaska on the same ship. It was the same name, and because Jackie had come on the “New Amsterdam” we got special perks because she had
already sailed on the ship. They came on the “New Amsterdam”. Because, they arrived in the 1950s (Ellis Island was in the process of shutting down and they came as regular passengers), they didn’t have to go through a lot of immigration procedures. And, of course, they were sponsored.

315 Gordon: Did they come in to Ellis Island?
Herman: No, they came into New York and they landed at one of the piers.
The tradition was that if you came steerage you would come in through Ellis Island, you would get off the ship and they would ferry you to Ellis Island, but regular passengers first or second passengers were always treated differently. They didn’t have to go through the herding operations that went on at Ellis Island. They were fortunate in that respect and then this American sergeant was waiting for them at the dock.

340 Gordon: The sergeant helped them to assimilate into the community?
Herman: He found them a place to live and all of that. They became estranged later on. One of the residues of the war was there was always a certain amount of suspicion in my wife’s family.

Gordon: Why is that?
Herman: It is very difficult to build up trust after you go through that kind of experience and so as a result they tended to become estranged from people. I believe it was a residue of the war. They were much more reticent and you asked why they never passed on the information partly because they didn’t want to impose it, but also
partly because they were very reticent about their experience at that time and simply didn’t want to look back at it. It was a very unhappy period of their lives. When you have to give up your own children, in order to save them, and you have to live an existence in constant fear it’s not a period that you really want to think about.

It seems that there are more people talking about the Holocaust and their experiences now.

I think that’s true, but it really is dependent on their personalities and the kind of life that they have led since the Holocaust. If you come to a place and you have been relatively happy and you have been able to sort of heal (I’m not sure you can completely heal), but heal the wounds, I think you probably are more willing to talk about it than if you’re in a situation where you continue to live sort of pantemont existence, which my wife’s parents did. There are some characteristics, which obviously came from the war. They tended to hoard things and they had a son who became mentally ill and their eldest son remained in Belgium, aside from a phone call every now and again, that remained a distant relationship. I think, to a large extent they really never recovered.

Jackie’s mother went blind from cataracts and became wholly dependent and Jackie’s father just went from one kind of horrific responsibility to another kind of, not horrific, but onerous set of responsibilities and so they never sort of had that breathing space where they could look back at their past and say well alright that was a finite period and that’s over with and move on to something
better and we can now sit back reflect on it. He spent his whole life
dealing with those kind of responsibilities. I don’t think they really
ever had the time or the inclination to think back either nostalgically
or in a sense that, “thank God we survived this and now gone on to
something better”. I think it continued to be a life of, if not
unhappiness, at least of unrelenting responsibilities. I think the
only real light, certainly in his life, probably in both their lives, was
Jackie because she was uneffected by it and I think that...or at least
on the surface... they were going to make a life in which she didn’t
have to live with those memories. I think, it was a very large part
of the decision they made to remain reticent about the experience.

399 Gordon:

Herman: Jackie didn’t ask her mother or her father what happened in the
past?

She knew there was a horror under there and felt very strongly that
they didn’t want to be reminded of it. She has always been
adverse...she couldn’t go to see Shindler’s List... for instance. Her
response is purely emotional. It’s not that it’s irrational. It’s
irrational because she can’t understand what happened, but the
adversion she grew up with was so great from her parents that she
has never had any desire to confront it. Frankly, I don’t think
there is any need for her to confront it. As much as I was capable
of, I was protective of her. I usually asked her father questions
when she wasn’t there and proceeded very delicately, because I
didn’t really want to cause any nightmares and he would answer the
questions matter of factly, but also without great detail and it was
clear he didn’t want to talk about it. I respected his wishes. I’m a historian who studies the Holocaust, among other things, so it would have been in some ways quite helpful to be the beneficiary of his experiences, but on the other hand, it would have been ghoulish. I felt that on balance, I needed to respect his desire not to relive those experiences. That means I have less to tell you, but on balance it was the right decision.

435 Gordon: Have you ever spoken to the son that was in the military about his experience and is he willing to speak about it?

Herman: He was also willing to answer questions, but not willing to go out of his way to provide a lot of information. He’s the one who took us to see the family in the Ardennes, who had protected him during the war. They were very nice. We talked about his life in the resistance, but he also had moved on, had a wife and child and was willing to answer questions, but again was not expansive about it. The impact of the war on all of them created this unwillingness to relive those days. I don’t think secret is the right word, but it was clear they did not want there memory reawakened. They simply wanted to leave the past in the past. I think it is partly because, at least in the concentration camps, you were among large numbers of people who were suffering the same way that you are. In hiding, where you were really left on your own resources and you really didn’t know anybody, there wasn’t anybody you could confide in. You became quite reticent and quite suspicious and always looking over your shoulder. You certainly can’t
compare what went on in the concentration camps to their experience, but I think that kind of experience did its own psychic damage.

Gordon: Just because they were always living in fear?

Herman: Exactly.

477 Gordon: In the concentration camps it was inevitable that a certain amount of them were not going to make it.

Herman: But there was also a support network. I don't know that the people in the concentration camps, from all the reading I have done, believed that they were going to die necessarily. You always hoped that you were the exception to the rule, but at least there were lots of other people to support you in what you were doing.

Gordon: The families were basically on their own?

Herman: It wasn't the family. It was the husband and wife were on their own. The children had been sent off so it was not knowing what happened to them and also not knowing what was going to happen to you and not really having a support network beyond the one or two people that were willing to keep the secret to rely on or to communicate with. It shuts you down. It's sort of like being a recluse or a hermit. He went to work every day, but he couldn't confide in the people with whom he worked, he had to be very careful in his interactions with customers and things. He developed a very careful way of dealing with the world and that induces reticence. It doesn't induce any willingness to share with others the travails of your life and I think that was what we were dealing with
and its effect on Jackie. In some ways, you can understand why they did what they did. They were trying to protect her from the horrors they had experienced.
INTERVIEW WORD LIST

NARRATOR: PROFESSOR GERALD HERMAN
INTERVIEWER: ROCHELLE F. GORDON
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 17TH, MAY, 1999

Ardennes - The forest on the Belgium/French border
Wiedergutmachung - The reparations paid to Holocaust victims
Belgium resistance - The underground partisans that fought against the Germans
People referred in text - Joseph Bolmut - Father
- Rachel Bolmut - Mother
- Simon Bolmut - Eldest son, born 1930
- Henri (name changed to Aaron when he came to America), middle son, born 1937
- Jacqueline, youngest child, born 1933