

## The Questions I Can't Ask

By: Leah Zalcmann-Snyderman

I knew I shouldn't be going to Amsterdam. News sources were calling it a pogrom – straight from the 1800s and 1930s. Leaked group chat messages reported there would be “part two of Jew hunt” the following night. People were being stopped in the street, demanded to show passports to prove they didn't have Israeli citizenship or Jewish names. Jews were being singled out and assaulted on hit-and-run attacks throughout the city.

But I had booked this trip months ago. It was already paid for, nonrefundable. Half of my friends were already there. I could tell my friends to call me by my middle name Rose for the weekend and to not dare speak my Jewish-tainted last name. Leah (lay-uh), as the Hebrew pronunciation goes, would stay behind. And so I ignored the pleading voicemails of my parents to not go and boarded the plane.

We spent the weekend wandering through the canals, past the row houses and laughed through the narrow streets, moving in and out of cafés and stores filled with things we could never need. We went to coffee shops and took edibles, on a bottomless wine boat tour of the canals. It was like it was just a random weekend in Amsterdam, we were untouched by the so-called pogroms happening just the night before.

Until we went to the Anne Frank House Museum, the annex stood in time exactly how it was left. The markings of the kids' heights on the walls as they grew with time. The map they had drawn, following the Allied forces moving closer to them everyday. The stairs the SS came barreling up. And it was when we walked out of there to graffiti that read “Jews get out” that my blood ran cold, and I was reminded that my blood had been here before.

Anne Zaclmann was born and raised in Amsterdam. Her father Albert (Abraham) Bak worked in the diamond industry, moving the family to South Africa for a few years when Anne was a

teenager before moving them to Antwerp. I don't really know anything about their life in Amsterdam. She never spoke of Europe after it happened.

While living in Antwerp, Anne met Joseph, a charming, fearless tailor who did everything to win her over. They were quickly engaged, ready to start their life together. But their plans were interrupted when the Nazis took control over Belgium, assigning Joseph to work under them as a tailor because of his skills. When he started working for the Nazis, he used his position to his advantage. He chose to resist. He would sew itching powder and thumbtacks into the linings of the jackets, forcing the pilots to stab themselves and get thrown off track.

The Nazis eventually caught on to Joseph's activities. They called him in to do more "work" – and he knew he had to leave. He had a fake passport made, and took trains down to a small town on the French/Swiss border. He'd switch between French, Dutch, and German depending on the officers that approached him, pretending to not speak the language they spoke. Over the next 10 days, he continued to Switzerland by walking, riding in the backs of farming vehicles, and hiking through the mountains overlooking Nazis camps. He wrote back to Anne directions for how to follow, and she came with both of their mothers.

Anne was taken off the trains by French officers one night. The mothers waited in the train station all night, not knowing if she would return. She came back the next morning, without the diamonds on her collar, and never spoke of what had happened. They made it to safety the day before Switzerland closed their borders to refugees in 1942. Anne's father, Albert, decided to stay back in Antwerp and look over the business. He was never heard from or seen again.

I have always struggled with how to cope with my family's past. There's an indescribable feeling around it – something of a combination of pride and guilt and confusion. Pride in their strength to survive. Guilt in why my family and not others survived. And confusion in the events and why they even had to happen in the first place.

My great-grandparents never spoke of these years after the War ended. Just once about three months before Joseph passed and three years after Anne passed, my great-grandfather decided it was time. My mother and her siblings set up a voice recording and sat around him taking notes. These pages are the only documentation we have – nothing more. And so, when I had the opportunity to see where Anne spent the first part of her life, where Albert spent so much of his, I simply wanted to go.

Because I've read the pages of notes a hundred times. I've listened to my great-grandfather's voice on the tapes year after year. And they are never enough. I turn to them in hopes of finding an answer to even just one question, maybe I missed a part on how Joseph got involved with the Resistance or how Anne deciphered Joseph's coded directions. And somehow I end up with more.

But they are never any I can ask. So I thought that maybe if I went to one of these cities and saw it with my own eyes, maybe something would click. I might never know what happened that night Anne was taken off the train, but maybe I could understand just a fraction of what her childhood was like.

And as I wandered through the canals, past the row houses and moved in and out of bakeries and stores, I imagined Anne. I imagined her as a child, learning to ride a bike down the banks. I imagined her as a tween, laughing in these same streets with her friends. I imagined her as a teenager, saying goodbye to this city, having no idea the years that lay ahead of her.

I accepted long ago that I will never truly know what so much of their lives were like. But I have never accepted why their lives had to be like that. Why they had to uproot their lives and fight to survive, just because of their beliefs. Why my great-great grandfather had to lose his life for it. Why over 80 years later, my bloodline is still feeling the same hatred that wants to erase us.

So I went to Amsterdam. Straight into the city on the verge of Kristellnacht. And I existed in the same streets as my family once did, choosing to live just like them.

BUREEL VAN DEN BURGERLIJKE STAND		GEMEENTEBESTUUR VAN ANTWERPEN				
JODENREGISTER		Lijst der JODEN ingeschreven in het JODENREGISTER				
N A A M	Voornamen	Beroep	Adres	Geboorte		Aanmerkingen
				plaats	datum	
+ Badler	Mör	kleermaker	Lge Kievitstraat, 32	Budapest	26. 10. 1912	-
+ Badler	Jozef	kleermaker	Plantyn Moretus, 73	Budapest	15. 5. 1915	-
+ Badler	Latzlo	kleermaker	Plantyn Moretus, 73	Budapest	10. 8. 1920	-
+ Badler vel Seiter	Sara	zonder	Simonstraat, 8	Bohorodeczany	21. 9. 1909	-
+ Badner	Malka	zonder	Lge Leemstraat, 109	Dembica	28. 11. 1898	-
+ Baeker	Francisca Frieda	Zonder	Kets-straat, 15	Weenen.	4. 3. 1902	-
Baer	Roeschen	zonder	Somerstraat, 49	Sandeck	24. 2. 1869	-
+ Baggers	Marcus	zonder	Kets-straat, 6	Amsterdam	9. 6. 1867	-
+ Bagisz	David	bediende	Dageraadplaats, 22	Grajewo	17. 5. 1905	-
+ Bähr	Louise Emilie	zonder	De Boeystraat, 11	Keulen	13. 7. 1859	-
Bajrach	Josef	meubelkoopman	Leeuwerikstraat, 32	Dobra	14. 3. 1889	opgesloten gevangenis
+ Bajrach	Chana	diamantsnydster	Leeuwerikstraat, 32	Kalitz	22. 3. 1921	-
+ Bajrach	Chaja	zonder	Leeuwerikstraat, 32	Dobra	23. 9. 1925	-
+ Bak	Samuel	diamantbewerker	Mechelschesteenweg, 109	Amsterdam	4. 4. 1883	-
+ Bak	Abraham	diamantslijper	Carnotstraat, 50	Amsterdam	8. 5. 1896	-

The Nazis' official registry of all Jews in Antwerp. Last line, Abraham Bak (my great-great grandfather).