

RESISTANCE ■ BARBARA GETS FALSE ID PAPERS

Barbara Ledermann was born in 1925 in Berlin, Germany. In 1933, when she was eight, her family left Germany to escape the Nazi regime and moved to Amsterdam, Holland (the Netherlands), where her grandparents lived. In the same year, Otto Frank and his family also left Germany to find safety in Amsterdam.

When we got to Holland and I went to my first school, there was a girl in my class named Margot Frank. Our parents met, having come from Germany the same year and having a lot in common. They and the Franks socialized a lot and, of course, the kids played. As a matter of fact, Margot dragged me through school. Without her, I would have never done anything because I was full of play. I wanted to become a dancer and I worked very very hard at that, but not at much else. So without her saying, "Today we study," I wouldn't have been able to get through! We all played together. Anne came to the house a lot and we went to her house a lot. My sister was a lot more serious than Anne was. Anne liked games the way I did. Margot also was very serious, very deliberate, very beautiful. She would have made a real mark in the world, I know that, just like my sister!

Until the Germans marched into Holland [in 1940], I didn't know very much about anything. I knew that there was Hitler and that Germany was ruined for us. Things were bad. But I was just playing and going to school and dancing and having a good time.

Then one day we heard the bombardment of Rotterdam. We heard it all the way in Amsterdam—the planes, the low hum of the planes. I remember standing at the window and the Germans were marching in right through our street, and my father was standing at the window and saying to me, "Take care of your mother. You know, they'll come for me tomorrow." It took a year and a half, but it did happen in the end. Many terrible things happened then. Jews started jumping out of windows and out of balconies, killing themselves with gas. I remember a man being saved from trying to gas himself and him yelling and screaming, "I don't want to. Don't do this. Don't save me. I want to die." I was 15. This made a huge impression on me. I asked my mother, "Why does he want to die?" My parents told me it's because they're Jews and Hitler doesn't like Jews. It was the first time I was really aware of this.

After the Nazis occupied Holland in 1940, they began rounding up Jewish residents and sending them to concentration camps. While many assumed they were being sent to labor camps,



Franz and Ilse Ledermann with their daughters Barbara (right) and Susannah, on the terrace of their Amsterdam apartment, ca. 1936



Barbara's parents and Anne Frank's parents lived near each other and were friends. In this 1937 photo in Amsterdam, Anne is second from left, and Barbara is second from right.

Barbara's friends in the underground, especially her boyfriend Manfred, convinced her that their likely fate was death. They urged her to get false identification papers and pass as a non-Jew, which, as a blonde and blue-eyed German, she was easily able to do. In 1943, as her family was about to be arrested, they said their final farewells. "Bless you. Go," her father said. "This is the end. This is the last time."

Manfred told me that I would be murdered if I were called up [in a Nazi roundup]. He said to me, "you do not go." And I said, "That is impossible. I mean, what would happen to my parents if I don't go?" And Manfred said, "Nothing that wouldn't happen otherwise." I said, "What do you mean?" He replied, "Everyone who goes and gets into their hands will be killed. They are all going to die." And I wouldn't believe it. It took him about three hours to explain to me how anybody could not go, and what you do if you don't go, and how you survive and where you get food and where you get money. This was my first acquaintance with the possibility of not going.



False identity card issued to Benjamin Serphos in Amsterdam under the name Theodora Tijdgaat

And then I met a fellow and he had a friend who could get me false papers. He said, "You need papers. It'll be 300 gilden [Dutch money]." I remember that—300 gilden. That was a lot of money, you know! I came home and said to my mother that I needed the money, and she said, "What for?" I said, "For the papers." And she said, "Tomorrow, when you go back to school, you'll have it." And those were my first false papers.

And they were very bad, but they saved my life! In the early days, the false papers were of people who died or lost them or other ways that you could get people's real papers. What they would do is take out the picture of the person—the original person—and insert your picture and your fingerprint and whatever else they had to change. And, of course, these were not papers that had a J [for Jew] on it. They looked very authentic! Mine was of a 27-year-old girl. I was 17, maybe, and I looked like 13. Pigtails, little! So they were unlikely papers. And then one night I told Manfred I had the papers, and he looked at them and said, "They're not bad. They're not bad. They're very good. Keep them where you can get to them."

I told my father I had the false papers and said to him, "I'm not going. Whenever they call me, I'm not going." And my father said, "You have to go. What will happen to us?" And there came this guilt that was put on me like a hood, you know, all over. If you try to save yourself—that's what he meant, you know—we will all die.*

So for months I tried to live with that and say, "Okay. I can't kill my family!" And my father, he felt he had calmed me down. Then one night we were sitting at our big window in the living room and we were looking out—already it was curfew; there were curfews at night. And all of a sudden, we see trucks come—long rows of trucks. I couldn't believe what was happening. The Nazis came with lists



Jews expelled from their homes walk to an assembly center in Amsterdam where they will be deported, most to their death.

* The officials had lists of Jewish residents and would know that a family member was missing from the apartment.

and they picked up people by name. They picked up old Mrs. Treuman. Mr. Treuman was married to a Gentile [non-Jewish] lady, and he and their children were okay. But they picked up his mother, and she could hardly walk. She was a very old lady, and they were good friends of ours. My stomach just turned. They picked up all the Jewish people I knew. And they stopped about two stoops [front steps of the apartment buildings] before ours.

However, Manfred always knew what was going on, and he knew they were picking up people on our street. He sent this Leo Weil, a friend of his—he wore a long leather coat and was on a motor bike and had a hood on. I mean, you can imagine what he looked like! And right in the middle of all this going on, the doorbell rang and—I mean, I thought I was going to die. Manfred had sent him to get me. So I put my false papers in my pocket, and the J [for Jew] was not on my clothes! I had taken it off. And I said to my father, “Goodbye.” He grabbed me and he kicked Leo down the stairs, and Leo drove off and told Manfred, “I can’t get her. They won’t let her go! I can’t make a fuss. If I make a fuss, I get arrested.” So he left and I was left there and, as I said, the Nazis stopped two platforms [stoops] before us, so nothing happened to us that night.

Manfred hid Barbara in a factory owned by his father and then arranged for her to stay in a rooming house where the manager didn’t question her ID papers. Barbara missed her family very much and decided to take the risk and visit them.

I hadn’t seen my parents for a long time. We talked over the phone. I was very homesick, very homesick, and they wanted to see me. It was terribly dangerous, it was stupid, and I did it anyway! I sewed on the J, and I went to see my parents and my sister, trying to get through without being seen by the neighbors. Of course, there was a lot of crying and a lot of happiness that we were still there and we were still together.

It’s now 1943, June 1943. Everything goes fine that first evening, and then the next morning at six o’clock, a woman we used to call Cassandra comes up and says, “I just heard. This whole area is closed off and we’re all—this is the big deal for this area. All the Jews are going to be picked up. This is not a little razzia [raid]. This is everything! Everybody!” AND I WAS THERE. I was there! I was caught! It was terrible! At the same time, I was with my family, and if anything happened to them, it would happen to me, too, and this was it. My mother—who had never before spoken up to my father—said to him, “Franz, sie geht,” which means “Franz, she goes.” “She has to leave, you know!” And I had my papers—I had my papers. Couldn’t take a thing. My

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I didn’t even think how fantastic that was, you know, that, at least at the last moment, he said I agree with you, go. Not that it lessens



Barbara and Manfred in the rooming house where Barbara first stayed, using her false ID papers

my guilt. Really, it doesn't lessen the guilt of not having been with them, not participating in that thing that happened to them. Anyway, I kissed them and went downstairs, and it was a beautiful day. A sunny, warm, June day in Holland. Beautiful Sunday—people were going to church! Quiet. Nothing going on. Two streets up, nobody knows what's happening so nearby.

The day was June 20, 1943. Barbara's family was taken away to Westerbork transit camp in Holland, and for several months she was able to exchange mail with them. But in November she stopped hearing from them.

The Germans would let you send packages to people in Westerbork, and I managed to send a lot of packages during the months that my parents were there, and we had regular mail from my parents. They received everything I sent. Nothing disappeared. I want to say that when they were taken away later, I never knew that they were in Auschwitz. I didn't know where they had been sent. I heard they had been sent on, and that was it. And it now appears that they were killed the day they arrived in Auschwitz. Learning this was a terrible shock, really an incredible shock!



For the rest of the war, Barbara stayed in Amsterdam and worked with the Resistance.

[The Resistance] wasn't a great big organization where people all knew each other. It was one person knew another knew another knew another. The less you knew the better, because if you got caught you could give away maybe one person. Maybe!—if you were not tough as nails [to withstand torture].

They put me to work. I was a dancer.* There was a ballet company in Amsterdam run by Yvonne Georgi, a great dancer from Germany. She was put by the Germans into the Dutch national theater to run the ballet com-

pany. I went into her ballet school and took classes, and I was then asked to join the company. I asked the underground, "Was it all right?" Oh, yes!—because you'd get fantastic ID papers when you went there, into this company. Because the company traveled, you got papers to be out after curfew. And that way I could help shift people from one hiding place to another, like American soldiers—pilots who were shot down—and other people who were underground.

Let me tell you how this was done. There were no more trucks or taxis, and there were very few cars, because there was no gasoline. So what they had was people on bicycles pulling little wagons behind them. And the people that I moved were moved in the middle of the night, after curfew, with them being the bench and me sitting bent over—sitting on their backs, with a rather short skirt and my very good papers, with makeup still on from the ballet. When German soldiers or the Dutch police would stop me and ask, "What is this?" I would have a smile and [my false ID] papers. I shifted a lot of people that way, from one hiding place that had gotten dangerous to another one which was new and hopefully better.

At 19, they felt I was getting old enough to do some other things, also. I had to be good for something. Besides, standing in line for food was hard in the winter, in the rain and the cold, I can tell you. We took care of a lot of other people who were underground who could not come

* When Jewish children were excluded from the Dutch public schools, Barbara received permission from her parents to attend a fine arts school.

out. I didn't particularly see these people, but I had to get food for them. Somebody helped me rent an apartment; it was rented under my false name, of course.

Then a very difficult time started. Very difficult! First of all, we went into the Hunger Winter.* Not only us, but also the Germans! This was the first time they also had less food. They started to be hungry, and they started to be scared of the underground who had so many weapons! The Germans had weapons, but they were mostly old men and kids. It was just a very scary situation!

During that time I had the apartment which had big windows. I met the neighbors from across the street, and they told me that the people downstairs would go upstairs to our apartment when we were out and steal the food out of the closet. But we were hiding people there. Imagine the Germans running into these people. We had hiding places, closets—which used to be closets, now papered over—and there was an entrance via the floor and a rug that went up to it. The people we hid knew how to get into these closets. Of course, the Germans weren't stupid either, and if they did have a razzia [raid], if they did have a check into various apartments, they would stick their bayonets into the walls and into the floors looking for people.

There were no lights, no electricity. We had to go downstairs to get water from the fire hydrant and bring it to the third floor in buckets between three and five in the afternoon—you were assigned periods where you were allowed to get water. We were pretty starved. During that time we ate from the soup kitchen. We ate flower bulbs, soup made out of flower bulbs. We ate whatever the soup kitchen came up with. You had three little pots, and one of you had to go to the soup kitchen and get it. We hadn't had any butter or fat for so long that we were freezing to death. I was always cold. This is still one of my greatest fears. I can stand hunger better than cold. It was terribly cold! There were six or seven of us in the apartment. We would all go in one bed and put everybody's blankets and mattresses on top of us and we still were cold.

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We were hungry, cold, and full of fleas by the end of the war. The hunger got so terrible toward the end. The Germans knew [that the Allies were near], and they let the Red Cross drop food in and around Amsterdam. They dropped cases of food on the roofs or in the parks or in open space, and the Germans were so scared by that time they didn't dare to pick them up. The food was distributed evenly, you know. If you found a case on your roof, you better take it, but we rarely ate the food because much of it was spoiled.

Then we heard that the Canadians were coming to liberate us. During that period we were getting sort of ready. You knew you could already go in the streets. We knew you didn't have to be as afraid.

* More than 20,000 people died during the Hunger Winter of 1944-1945 in the Netherlands, caused by the severe winter and the Nazis' stopping food shipments to northern Holland after the Allies and Dutch Resistance liberated southern Holland. People had to survive on 400-800 calories a day.



In the early 1950s, Barbara Rodbell wrote this poem and created the collage with photos of her, her four children, and the dead of a concentration camp. © Barbara Rodbell.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Many women am I.
 Reach far into history.
 Walked through the desert with Moses,
 daughter of sages and wise men.
 Walked through Rome, Spain, Poland,
 Russia—
 walking, walking to Germany, Holland,
 daughter of poets, musicians, painters.

All Europe,
 its thought, religion—
 its suffering are mine.
 Holocaust, death all around;
 young and old—again, again—
 well known this.
 Prepare to fight, live: and do.

Alone now, as often before.
 Start over.
 Walk to America for husband and
 children:
 so nice, so nice (where next?)
 Children: beautiful;
 will they suffer?
 of course! Later, sometime——

Rest awhile, find myself;
 contribute, reach out and grow.
 Walk with my daughter
 hand in hand.
 Hope again, always hope—
 walk on and on.
 Hope——

And they were coming. And they did come. I remember looking at the trucks coming, full of these healthy, pink, blond, blue- and black-eyed guys. I'd never seen so much flesh! I mean, it was incredible. And, of course, we went out there and screamed. We just screamed.

The war's ending and people are showing up. My cousin Ava comes back. She says, "Here I am." She told me they—my cousins—all were dead. I started learning who was alive and who was dead. We started hearing that there were lists of people who were coming back, and that my mother was on one of the lists. Well, Manfred said to me, "Don't believe it." And I said, "I'm going to believe it." We then knew—we had learned about the concentration camps. In '45.

So I started going to the train stations when I had the time. I stood there and I stood there and I stood there. People coming out of trains, and they have their heads shaved and they looked awful, coming back from camps; and you asked, did you know so-and-so? Did you know so-and-so? No. No. No. Now I think that one of those people was somebody who took my mother's name to get back to Holland. And somebody showed up with my sister's name and, of course, when I started looking, she was gone. I mean there was nobody to find.

After the war I worked for two years in the ballet. I danced; that's how I made money. I went to the apartment where I had lived with my family and told the woman there where I was living and asked her to forward any mail that she would get and to let me look in the hiding places that we had around the house. And, of course, she'd found the hiding places. There was nothing there. And then the woman below us, who was a fascist during the war, said to me, "I saw you got on [stayed in Amsterdam with false papers]. I didn't give you away when you ran away. You helped me." And I said, "You were helped enough"—because she had a lot of our family's possessions and I didn't get anything back. So I said, "I won't give you away, just like you didn't give me away."

After the war, Barbara learned that her family had been killed on their arrival at Auschwitz in late 1943. She remained in Amsterdam and worked with the ballet company until she came to the United States in November 1947, when she was 22. For a time she worked with the Ringling Brothers Circus. Settling in Baltimore, she met and married Martin Rodbell. In 1985 they moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, when Martin became Scientific Director of NIH's National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences in Research Triangle Park. They have three sons and one daughter, six grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Barbara has spoken across the state about her Holocaust experiences.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- 1990: Oral testimony of Barbara Ledermann Rodbell, excerpted here, video: 2 hrs. 53 min. (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
 - collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504687
 - ◆ Segment on using false papers and living in hiding (1:21)
 - encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/oral-history/barbara-ledermann-rodbell-describes-false-papers-and-moving-people-to-hiding-places
 - ◆ Segment on Anne and Margot Frank's parents (1:08)
 - encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/oral-history/barbara-ledermann-rodbell-describes-anne-franks-parents
 - ◆ Segment on Nazi orders to go to Jewish schools (1:57)
 - encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/oral-history/barbara-ledermann-rodbell-describes-her-reaction-to-nazi-mandated-schools-for-jewish-children-in-amsterdam
- 1984: Oral testimony of Barbara Ledermann Rodbell, video: 2 hrs. (USHMM)
 - collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn520379
- 1998: Oral testimony of Barbara Ledermann Rodbell, audio only: 4 hrs. (USHMM)
 - collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506651
- "Barbara Rodbell: Growing Up with Anne Frank," *The Story*, February 21, 2013, audio: 45 min. (American Public Radio)
 - www.thestory.org/stories/2013-02/barbara-rodbell-growing-anne-franketurn
- *Daring To Resist: Three Women Face the Holocaust* (Martha Lubell Productions, 1999)
 - ◆ Video, 57 min. (about; video not online)
 - www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c483.shtml
 - ◆ Synopsis, teacher's guide, resources (WHYY/PBS, 2000)
 - www.pbs.org/daringtoresist/
 - www.pbs.org/daringtoresist/barbara.html



Barbara and Martin Rodbell on their wedding day, September 10, 1950, in Baltimore



Barbara Ledermann Rodbell, 2018

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