

Name: **Miriam Figatner Rudow**

Born: August 3, 1922

Birthplace: Antwerp, Belgium

Parents: Sam and Anna Bernstein Figatner

Siblings: Rachelle Figatner Corcos

Children: One

Grandchildren: Three

Miriam was born in Antwerp, Belgium into a family of diamond dealers. Her father's family had lived in Belgium for at least two generations and was well established in the trade that was so much a part of Antwerp's economy. Her mother's family had fled Russia only a few years before where they had lost everything in the Bolshevik Revolution.

Anna's parents, Hillel and Esther Bernstein, started over with a small cigar shop while their sons also began their careers in the diamond industry.

Miriam remembers her mother's love of chess. She also recalls family holidays in

Ostende where Uncle Kalman owned a jewelry store at the popular sea resort. She recalls that while the family was not very religious, her father, Sam, would rise every morning and say the morning prayers before he would go to work. By the early 1930's tragedy struck when Sam suddenly took ill and was dead from leukemia in a matter of months, leaving a widow and two children to fend for themselves in one of the most dangerous times for Jews in European history.

By the mid 1930's, one by one siblings and cousins from the Figatner side of the family began to immigrate to New York. Anna remained in Antwerp with her siblings and their families. They had left one place (Russia) just 25 years earlier and were loath to strike out anew once again. By the winter of 1940, trouble with the Nazis was heating up. The family decided that the women and children would go to southern France (Vichy France) where many Jews were headed. It was considered "safe" since the Vichy France government was still allowing entry for Jews into that part of France. What they didn't know at the time was that the Nazis were creating a trap.

Miriam was five months from receiving her high school diploma. If she left with the women of the family, she would not be eligible to attend the pharmacy school in Brussels to which she planned to attend in the fall. She asked to remain in Boatel to complete her studies and so her Bon MaMa (Grandmother Esther) stayed to care for her. On the morning of May 10, 1940 Miriam recalls waking to the sound of gunfire. The Nazis had begun their invasion three weeks before graduation day. A hurried phone call from the uncles set Bon MaMa and Miriam packing. They came by soon thereafter in two big black cars and together the family set off through the crowds of fleeing refugees to join the women in Vichy France. Miriam recalls the terror of bombs exploding in the road in front of them. This was a terrifying experience.

As they left Belgium and made their way to southern France, they were not exactly sure where the women folk were. Several days later, they found them in Be'ziers, France. A family discussion developed of where to go from there. Vichy France was teeming with refugees from all over Europe looking for a way out. They were all sitting in a trap.

The Nazis knew they did not have the organizational structure to round up all "undesirables" in Europe at once. They invaded countries one by one and rounded up Jews, Communists, and Gypsies, with each new conquest. But always there were those who escaped. The Nazis found that by actively advertising one place as "safe" those who had escaped would naturally migrate to that one place and then when all the invasions had been completed, they could go to southern France and gather those who had originally escaped their first grasp. Some the most famous of all labor organizers, artists, and politicians wound up in southern France, including Max Ernst and Marc Chagall.

After a fearful month hiding in Vichy, France, Anna and her daughters made it across Spain to Portugal. While they were in Portugal, Anna met Jacob Spikol, a family friend whom she had known in Belgium. A few months after they had met, he received permission to immigrate to America. Once in America Mr. Spikol secured passage for Anna, Miriam, and Rachelle to join him in the States.

It was the spring of 1941 when Anna, Miriam and Rachelle arrived in America. They were one of the very last of European Jewry to make it safely out before all exits were closed. Soon after arriving, Anna and Mr. Spikol were married. Miriam immediately went to work in the diamond industry with the help of the Figatner relatives, while Rachelle returned to school. Following the war, the Bernstein family in the Congo returned to Belgium.

There were a number of cousins who did not make it safely out of Belgium. One was Kalman, the husband of Rachelle, Anna's only sister. Rachelle had died in childbirth with twin daughters, Rachelle and Simone, in 1939. Kalman remarried a non-Jewish woman, thinking that that would protect him from the possibility of Germany's growing power. Together, they worked in his jewelry store in Ostende, which continued to be frequented by vacationers to the shore. Of several versions of the story, one tells that she had an affair with a Nazi soldier following the Occupation in May 1940 and turned Kalman in to the Gestapo. Another version says that when the soldiers came for him and found the girls, she claimed them as her own and then hid them in a French nunnery during the war. Following the war, a number of family members, including Martin Treshansky, a brother to the twins, traveled throughout France looking for their whereabouts. When they were found, the nuns were reluctant to give them to the family. They persevered and eventually were able to take them to Israel where Martin was building Kibbutz Mayin Zvi. Bon MaMa, Miriam's grandmother Esther, who had come to America following the war, went to Israel to care for them.

Miriam met Ben Rudow in New York following the war. Ben had gone in with the allied troops in Europe and helped to liberate a concentration camp. Together they operated a printing supply mail order business in Sarasota, Florida before moving to Asheville in 1974 with their son Marc.