

# The Red Star Line Museum and Me

By Sonia Pressman Fuentes



Sonia with Philip Heylen, vice mayor for culture and tourism for Antwerp, Belgium at the inauguration of the Red Star Line Museum, September 27, 2013.

I was born in Berlin, Germany of Polish Jewish parents in 1928. In mid-1933, at the insistence of my brother, Hermann, who was fourteen years my senior, the family left Berlin to escape from Nazi Germany and moved to Antwerp, Belgium where we had some cousins.

After nine months in Antwerp, during which time none of my father's business ventures panned out and we were unable to get visas to remain in Antwerp, we left Antwerp on the Red Star Line's (RLS's) *S.S. Westernland II* for the U.S., arriving on May 1, 1934.

Berlin remained an important part of my life since it was my birthplace but in my mind Antwerp was only a way station en route to the U.S. All I had to remind me of that trip was a small male doll dressed as a sailor in blue velveteen with *S.S. Westernland* on his cap.

All that began to change when I read a column by Masha Leon called "The Red Star Line--A Seafaring Magic Carpet for Jewish Immigrants" in the October 5, 2009, issue of the *Forward*. The article was about a book launch party held at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research on September 10, 2012, for a book called *One Foot in America: Jewish Emigrants on the Red Star Line and Eugeen Van Mieghem*. The book was co-authored by Erwin Joos, the director of the Eugeen Van Mieghem Museum, due to open in Antwerp in 2012. This museum would feature the work of Eugeen Van Mieghem, a Belgian artist (1875-1930) who became famous for his portraits of immigrants and others around Antwerp's harbor.

I wondered if I should write to this museum telling them that I had come to the U.S. on an RLS ship. *That's ridiculous*, I thought. *Millions of people traveled on the RSL. Why would they care that I was one of them?* But then I thought: *What have I got to lose?*

But I didn't know how to write to the museum, so I wrote to YIVO asking them to forward my letter to the museum. They sent my letter instead to the RSL Museum, another museum due to open in Antwerp, which was to be dedicated to immigration and the RSL. I immediately got a response from Luc Verheyen, head of the museum, asking for information about my family and my connection to the RSL.

As a result of our correspondence, in December 2010, Mandy Nauwelaerts, a consultant to the museum, and Mario De Munck, a filmmaker retained by the museum, came to my condo in Sarasota, Florida to interview and film me. Mandy brought along pictures she had taken of the Orthodox Jewish neighborhood where my family had lived in Antwerp and photographs of documents involving my family that she had found during her extensive research in the Antwerp and Brussels Archives.

Much of the information Mandy gave me I had never known before. I did not know that:

- In 1933, no one in my family had the legal right to be in Belgium;

- my brother was frantically filling out applications for us to be given visas permitting us to remain in Belgium; and
- Robert de Foy, the anti-Semitic head of the Sûreté Publique (the state security service, comparable to our FBI), had denied those applications and ordered our deportation to Poland, where both my parents had been born but hadn't lived in for twenty years. (Had we been deported, we would surely have gone to our deaths.)

Mandy invited me to visit Antwerp in September 2011 to see how the building of the museum was progressing and again in September 2013 for the museum's opening.

In 2011, I came to Antwerp, Belgium—my first time since leaving there in 1934. The museum staff arranged for me to meet with Dr. Frank Caestecker, a researcher at the University of Ghent and an expert on Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in Belgium during the 1930s. He and I spent hours together in the Brussels Archives, during which time he went over every page in my family's file with me, translated every document, and explained what it meant. Frank told me that he had been studying the Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany to Belgium in the 1930s for years, but I was the first one he had actually met.

The museum also arranged for Pola Adler, a volunteer at the museum and a Holocaust survivor, to take me on a tour of the Jewish Orthodox neighborhood in Antwerp where my family had lived in 1933-4. Pola and I learned to our amazement that my family had lived in the same apartment building in the 1930s that her family had lived in in the 1950s!

I also learned about the RSL. It had been in operation from 1873 to some time in 1934, the year of my family's trip. During that time, the line brought about two million passengers from its home port in Antwerp, as well as from other European ports, to the U.S. and Canada. I was one of five surviving passengers of whom the museum was aware.

About a quarter of those passengers were Jews. Among the prominent Jews who traveled to the U.S. on RSL ships were Albert Einstein, Irving Berlin, Gold Meir, and Hyman Rickover. All but Einstein came as children.

In September 2013, I returned to Antwerp for five days of festivities in connection with the museum's opening. During this time, I saw the permanent exhibit about me and my family at the museum; met the king and queen of Belgium at the museum and the new U.S. woman ambassador to Belgium at the American Embassy; toured Kazerne Dossin, the Memorial, Museum and Documentation Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights in Mechelen, Belgium for three hours with its director; attended an international press conference; and gave talks at the museum and the city hall. I spent considerable time that week with Linda Emmet, the middle daughter of Irving Berlin's three daughters, her daughter, and her niece. The Berlin family donated one of Irving Berlin's pianos to the museum. I was the only surviving passenger at the opening.

After my talk at the Antwerp City Hall, a man introduced himself to me and it was Erwin Joos, founder and director of the Eugeen Van Mieghem Museum. We subsequently became friends and, as a result, Erwin did lecture tours in Florida about Eugeen Van Mieghem and the museum in 2014 and 2015. In 2015, he spoke at one of the chapters of ORT in Sarasota.

The RSL Museum plans to bring an exhibition to the U.S., which will include a film Mario De Munck made about me when he visited me in Sarasota in 2010 and when I was in Antwerp in 2011. The exhibition will start in the most appropriate place for a museum dedicated to immigration--Ellis Island--and will be there from May 26 until September 3, 2016. Negotiations are under way for the exhibition to also be shown in Philadelphia and Chicago. And I am hopeful the exhibition will also come to Sarasota or another site in Florida.

I no longer have the blue velveteen sailor doll--but my memories of Antwerp are fresh.

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**Editor's note:** Sonia was a presenter at four IAYC conferences. She was a co-founder of NOW (National Organization for Women) and the first woman attorney in the Office of the General Counsel at the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). She is the author of a memoir entitled *Eat First--You Don't Know What They'll Give You: The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*. Sonia is a feminist activist, writer, and public speaker.