

RISKING HER LIFE TO PROTECT HER STUDENTS

JEANNE DAMAN was born into a Belgian Catholic family in 1919. When World War II began, she was a young Roman Catholic schoolteacher in Belgium. The Nazis—after annexing Austria, claiming part of Czechoslovakia, conquering Poland, and occupying Denmark and Norway—conquered Belgium and the

Netherlands in May 1940. They then organized the classroom curriculum to fit their propaganda requirements. Daman quietly resigned from public school teaching.



Jeanne Daman was a schoolteacher who saved 2,000 Jewish schoolchildren and worked for the Belgian resistance. For her efforts, she was recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

After Jewish children were no longer permitted to attend regular public schools, Fela Perelman approached Daman and asked whether she would be willing to join the staff of Nos Petits, a Jewish kindergarten in Brussels. The Perelmans were prominent Jewish citizens of Warsaw, Poland, who emigrated to Brussels and became Belgian citizens before Germany invaded. Daman was only 21 years old at the time.

“I had no contact with Judaism or the Jewish world, but the need was demonstrated clearly when we heard that (due to a Nazi raid) a small child left alone at home fell through a window to the street below and was killed. Having been raised in an anti-Nazi atmosphere, my immediate impulse was to agree to go into this work. It was essentially a question for me to take a political position, one of solidarity with the victims of the Nazis and sympathy for the children involved.”

Daman became the headmistress of Nos Petits at age 23.

Jewish schools had a precarious existence. It was a great danger to keep the children together because Nazi raids on Jews had already begun. The tactics of

Jeanne Daman (center) poses with Jewish children under her care in the Nos Petits kindergarten. *US Holocaust Memorial Memorial Museum, courtesy of Jeanne Daman Scaglione*

“Under their curriculum,
I couldn’t teach what
I wanted to. I wouldn’t
teach what they wanted
me to. My parents agreed.
I took employment as a
secretary. I spoke German.
I was Catholic. The Nazis
paid me no attention.
I was ‘safe.’”

—JEANNE DAMAN

the Nos Petits staff changed as the occupation went on, and clandestine efforts to find shelter and hiding places for the children, to save their lives, became a matter of first importance.

Initially, children were placed with non-Jewish Belgian families simply out of a spirit of solidarity toward children in danger. However, as time passed, it became necessary to find money to make monthly payments to families providing shelter for the children.

Children were given new names and identities. These details would be rehearsed repeatedly with the child, with the teacher stressing the importance of never making a mistake.

There were times, however, when the placements did not work out well, and Daman was forced to move the child again.



Eventually, Jewish schools, including Nos Petits, were closed. Fela Perelman once again asked Daman to continue her rescue efforts by joining the underground.

A network emerged placing Jewish women as maids in the homes of the Belgian elite. Daman was involved in obtaining false identity papers and ration cards for them. She also worked with the underground to search for people who were denouncing Jews to the Gestapo.

Near the end of the war, Daman became actively involved with the Belgian resistance, transporting arms on her bicycle and providing intelligence.



Daman continued her efforts after the war by reuniting Jewish orphans with their families and fundraising for Israel through the United Jewish Appeal. Jeanne Daman was honored in 1971 by the Belgian Jewish Committee, the King of Belgium, and Yad Vashem.

Above: A group of young people, including Jeanne Daman (third from right), gather in an apartment in Brussels, Belgium. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Jeanne Daman Scaglione.* Left: Daman and her husband, Aldo Scaglione, visit Yad Vashem in Israel. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Aldo Scaglione*

JEANNE DAMAN'S DIARY

This excerpt from Daman's diary highlights the motives and pressures she faced, which influenced the decisions she made:

“ It was at the height of the raids. We knew, of course, when children didn't come to roll call, that meant their families, including them, had been taken by the Nazis. It became the way of life for us, day after day.

But one day, Gestapo agents arrived at the school in a truck. They named three children, told me they had been asked by their mothers to pick them up and take the little ones to them. These Gestapo men were pleasant and polite. Of course, I knew what it meant. But I had to think of the 60 other children we had in our school that day.

I was helpless to stand up to them and I didn't. I dressed those children myself, the youngest was three-and-a-half years old. I put them in the truck myself, delaying the moment when the Nazis would touch them. And they took them away. We learned later that the parents were hiding and the Nazis used this trick to get them out in the open. It worked. They got them all.

I knew those children would never be seen again, or their families. I couldn't intervene without peril to all our children. But I felt I should have done SOMETHING. I was anti-Nazi by conviction before. Now I wanted to strike back myself, to damage them. When Mrs. Perelman asked me, I didn't need time to answer. From the time I stood and watched those three children taken away from me, I was ready to join the underground. ”



Top: Studio portrait of Jeanne Daman. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Olivia Mattis.*
Above: A scan of Jeanne Daman's diary with a flower pressed between the pages. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Aldo Scaglione*