

features

“Painful memories of a dark time”

Before coming to America, Ashland resident Rosianne Stone lived through the Nazi invasion of Belgium



SUBMITTED BY STEVE STONE

Despite the struggles and fear she faced every day, Rosianne Stone still believed in love and started a family in Long Island, New York after she and her parents moved to America.

KAITLYN MOORE
@AU_Collegian

A 92 year old woman sits in her small, sunny drawing room, surrounded by her framed hand drawn images of wildlife.

She meticulously sketches the outline of a moth against the stark white paper, as one of her sons, Steve, calls on the phone. She uses her walker to get to him, as she is not the woman she once was.

Despite the small setbacks that come with aging, she lives comfortably in her apartment in Ashland, right next door to her daughter and her family. She sees her children every Sunday to have a home cooked, “from-scratch” meal. Though she does not get out much, she says she really enjoys having company over and sharing her time with them.

At first glance, Josianne Stone appears to be your average grandma. But when she starts to speak, a slight accent slips out.

Stone did not live in the United States until she was an adult. Born in the small village of Saint-Vaast in Belgium, she grew up during the time of Hitler and his Nazi regime.

“Saint-Vaast was small, but coal mining and metal work were the driving industry, and provided many of the village’s men with jobs. It was one of the few industrial parts of Belgium, only 15 miles from the France’s border,” Stone said.

Josianne was two and a half years old when she decided she wanted to go to school with her big sister, who was five. The nuns at the Catholic school said they would take her in, and so her schooling journey began. Her sister would sometimes carry her piggy-back on the half hour walk home.

Life was good enough. She was with her family, and though they did not make the most money or have the most food, they had each other. They were okay, she said.

Everything changed when Hitler came into power in the mid 1930s.

Fear gripped the hearts of the people of Belgium. Though a neutral country, she was often the middle ground for French and German enemies and their wars, caught in the deadly crossfire. Stone bitterly recalled the invasion of 1914, the painful memories of a dark time.

“We have fear of war, since I was born,” Stone said. “The first world war had ended only a decade ago. Those neighbors and friends who had been murdered, sometimes right in front of their children, in the most savage and inconceivable ways; soldiers killing babies in front of their parents... it left deep, deep scars in our hearts and minds. The German frontliners had committed atrocities we would never forget as long as we lived.”

The people knew this was going to happen again, and they were terrified.

In 1937, things were very bad for Stone and her family. The Belgian army was mobilized and prepared to defend her borders. Her dad had been out of work for the past two years, and her mother decided they had to do something, to go somewhere and find some work. Brussels was the only place they could think of at the time.

So they moved. Stone could not stay with her parents at their new jobs as a cook and butler, and her grandparents did not have the means to care for her just yet. She stayed with her aunt and worked on the farm. She continued her schooling and stayed with her aunt for about a year, until her grandparents got jobs as building superintendents in Brussels.

“The living quarters were not what I would consider today but it was much better than my aunts farm. I had all the love I needed. My grandparents were the most loving. You knew they were taking care of you,” Stone said.

She felt safe. Her family was working, and was at least a little bit more comfortable than it had been.

What she did not expect was rushing down to the basement at 4:00 a.m. after her grandfather woke her up. “We have been attacked. We are at war. Come,” he said, as they listened to the rumbling sounds of cannon and explosions. Brussels was less than 100 miles from the German border, and still they heard every sound.

People had a great fear of the threat of gas. The Germans used gas towards the end of the first World War, crippling Belgian soldiers with permanent pulmonary conditions. As many as could afford to do so purchased gas masks for protection.

They had no idea about the planes.

“Our troops were being destroyed from the ground and from the air,” Stone said, pausing a moment to take a breath and calm the stir of her memories. “My father had left before then, he was ordered to join the regiment. There were no TVs then, only a few people on the radio, and telephones were a rare convenience. We heard the railroad was going to be held for the exclusive use of the military.”

So, taken by panic and fear of siege, citizens started to flee their homes. It was a horrific exodus, a moving carpet of dirty, disheveled people holding their young, sick and elderly along with what little sentimental items they could.

Stone’s grandfather shook his head and muttered “Where do they think they are going. You and I are going to stay right here, no matter what. We are not leaving.”

His wife had other ideas. She took the train right away to join her daughter on the farm, leaving Stone to be a housewife for her grandfather at the age of 13.

Those people walked for 40 days. Stone and her grandfather watched, with pity and horror weighing heavy on their hearts, for 40 days.

So many people had left Brussels that it became a ghost town. Her grandfather walked from bakery to bakery to get an occasional loaf of bread or roll here and there, which she would dry in the oven for later use. There was little to no food to be found in grocery stores, if they were even open at all.

As it turned out, the siege people were fleeing from never happened. Her grandfather, in his wisdom, had made the right choice.

It took only seven days for the Nazis to take Brussels. Ten to take Belgium.

A self supporting country and very productive country for many years, Belgium now had to contribute their products to the Nazi forces, leaving barely enough for the people to survive.

Food returned to the stores, though not as much, and the citizens now needed food stamps to acquire basic necessities. Many items were not available except on the black market at a steep price.

School was eventually reopened,

but the curriculum was changed to fit the Nazi regime. History books in particular were screened meticulously.

Strict curfews were imposed. No street or house lights on at night, windows and openings were to be shut and blocked.

Things were better than they were despite the feeling of oppression, and life returned to some degree of normality. The Gestapo and SS officers made sure that didn’t last long, and they were feared by all.

“For several years, many Jews had found refuge in our country. Now they were made to sew a patch, a yellow star of David, on the left shoulder of their outer garment. That is when we realized many of our neighbors and friends were Jewish,” Stone said.

In high school, Stone and her sister were good friends with a young girl named Dina. They did not know she was Jewish, and never cared to ask. They found out when they saw the star on her lapel. Since they were a little better off because of their aunt’s farm, Dina would come every Thursday to have a meal with the Stones, and take some home for her mother.

One day she was absent at school. She did not come the second day either. Her father, a Polish Jew, had already been arrested and taken to Buchenwald. They found out, on the third day of Dina’s disappearance, that she and her mother were also taken to Buchenwald.

“It was a devastating situation for me, it really broke my heart. She was my dear friend,” Stone said, her voice breaking slightly.

Stone’s sister was working as a nanny for a Jewish family. They left when the war started, they were one of the lucky families who had a car. She came to live with Stone and her grandfather for a week or so and then a new opportunity knocked on their door, quite literally.

There was a woman living around the corner of the block from Stone. She had lived in her home with her two adult sons, but they had fled to England. She asked Stone’s sister if she would like a job as a maid, but also to be her companion.

After a couple of months of this arrangement the woman said she still had one room empty, and

asked Stone if she would at least put some of her belongings in that room, make it look lived in.

The Nazis were putting officers in the homes of those who had fled, and she was afraid they would want to occupy hers in the same way.

Stone and her sister stayed with the woman on and off for a few months. Two months later there was a loud and aggressive banging at the door, in the early hours of 8:00 a.m., “before the sun could even shine its warm light on the house” Stone said.

Six men. Six towering, young and handsome men impeccably dressed in black uniforms, stern looks on their silent faces.

They took the women first. Stone was led to a chair in the center of the small kitchen. They walked back and forth, circling around her chair, constantly staring at her with menacing eyes, questioning her with their sharp voices.

Simple questions, but repeated endlessly – Where were you born? How old are you? Where does your father work? What is your name?

Two of the officers proceeded to the bedroom to interrogate her sister and exchange information with the other officers. This went on for six hours, ending only after the German man her grandfather worked for discovered what was happening and vouched for them.

They never saw the woman again.

“We had heard of some young girls who were picked at random and sent to Germany to work at prison camps, factories, or farms. I was 15, my sister 17...I’m not sure what I felt,” Stone said.

“We too could be sent away. At the moment the S.S. came to the door, everything inside me was gone. I was empty. But then, something appeared to envelop me like a shawl, a blanket soft but firm, a shield protecting me, separating me from the outside world. I was not afraid. I was calm, composed, stable, able to answer those questions with ease. Without doubt, we Christians know where that time of strength and peace comes from.”

**Read Part 2 of this story
in the Oct. 26 issue**