

Barbara Bandler Steinmetz

GYŐR, HUNGARY - 1936



Barbara Bandler Steinmetz was born on November 26, 1936 in Győr, Hungary to Margit and Alexander Bandler. Margit had studied at the University of Debrecen and worked as a pharmacist. Alexander operated Hotel Alhambra on the Italian island of Lussinpiccolo. Barbara's older sister, Ann, was born in 1933.

Barbara and Ann's early years were spent amidst the bustle of Hotel Alhambra. Despite the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, Jews lived in Italy unmolested for much of the 1930s. Once Mussolini strengthened his alliance with Hitler, Jewish residents became targets for repression. War and persecution displaced hundreds of thousands of Jews across Europe as Hitler grew more determined to destroy European Jewry. The refugee crisis led to the 1938 Evian Conference, but the 32 nations in attendance failed to reach agreements that would allow for higher immigration quotas.

In 1939, the Bandlers were forced to leave Lussinpiccolo and abandon their hotel. Not knowing where to go, they packed up what they could and brought their daughters back to Budapest. Wary of the developing alliance between Nazi Germany and Hungary, the Bandlers sought another escape route. They set off for Nice, France, where the grip of Nazism had not yet reached. There, Barbara and Ann attended a German language school while Axis air raids targeted Free French forces and terrorized the city.

The growing threat of invasion forced the Bandlers to flee to Spain, where Francisco Franco's regime tacitly allowed entry to Jewish refugees. The family stayed there briefly before moving to Lisbon, Portugal in 1941. Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar was more sympathetic toward the Allies, a fact that granted Barbara's family some security. In the port city of Lisbon, Barbara and her sister attended school, while Alexander and Margit worked and sought immigration visas. Growing desperate as the rejections piled up, Barbara's father appealed to former clients of Hotel Alhambra asking for help. All he received in return were apologies.

The Bandlers, along with other Jews fleeing certain death at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators, felt the world had turned its back on them. At the Evian Conference, only the Dominican Republic, a Caribbean island nation ruled by military dictator Rafael Trujillo, offered sanctuary to a large number of Jewish evacuees. Trujillo subscribed to a crude racism, though his perverse beliefs were notably different from the Nazis. For Trujillo, Jewish immigration would serve multiple purposes: deflecting American attention from his human rights abuses, developing the country's economy, and "whitening" the population.

Though Sosúa's Jewish residents began to create a new home for themselves, conditions remained harsh. Barbara was unaccustomed to the heat and humidity, not to mention the mosquitos, cockroaches, and tarantulas that would sneak into her family's beds. Worse, Alexander nearly died from dysentery, and Margit developed a life-threatening heart condition.

On January 30, 1940, Trujillo agreed to allow a first wave of Jewish immigration into his country. The Bandlers secured visas for the Dominican Republic from a consulate in Lisbon, and the family embarked for the Caribbean. Trujillo sent the Jewish refugees to an agricultural settlement located on an abandoned banana plantation in Sosúa, where they were warmly welcomed. Though thankful for a lifeline, Sosúa's Jewish residents faced serious hardships: limited access to fresh water, poor soil, and little infrastructure. Most of them were highly educated professionals who knew next to nothing about farming. Families like the Bandlers survived in no small part because of the generosity of locals.

The grateful Jewish settlers soon founded a school, La Escuela de Cristóbal, where Barbara and Ann studied. Though Sosúa's Jewish residents began to create a new home for themselves, conditions remained harsh. Barbara was unaccustomed to the heat and humidity, not to mention the mosquitos, cockroaches, and tarantulas that would sneak into her family's beds. Worse, Alexander nearly died from dysentery, and Margit developed a life-threatening heart condition.

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The officials who established Sosúa soon realized that ailing refugees needed a place to periodically rest and recover their strength. In 1942, Alexander and Margit were tapped to run a modest hotel in the mountain town of Jarabacoa. Barbara and Ann helped their parents care for guests and assisted in the kitchen. In the cool mountain air, Margit's health recovered. The Bandlers adopted a routine that reminded them of their previous life in the hospitality industry. Margit even began teaching local women how to make strudel. However, Jarabacoa lacked one important feature: a school.

The Bandlers met a local nun, Madre Ascención, who operated a convent school for girls in the neighboring town. Madre Ascención agreed to accept Barbara and Ann as students on one condition: they were never to reveal they were Jewish. Barbara recalls her time at the school warmly, and can still recite several prayers in Spanish. Meanwhile, Margit put her knowledge of chemistry to work and formed a cosmetics company. Equipment and materials were hard to come by in the Dominican Republic, so she appealed for assistance in American Jewish newspapers.

In March 1944, the Nazis invaded Hungary. By May 1944, nearly 800,000 Jews faced deportation; half were sent to Auschwitz. As the situation worsened, American Jews scanned newspapers for word on the fate of their loved ones. One of those anxious readers was Lori (Leonor) Mayer, a childhood friend of Margit. Lori Mayer had immigrated to Boston before the war. One day, Lori came across Margit's appeal for materials for her fledgling company and immediately sent off a letter to Jarabacoa. The two friends eagerly reconnected, and Lori and her husband secured visas for the Bandlers to come to the US in March 1945.

The Bandlers said goodbye to the hardships of rural life in the Dominican Republic and boarded a plane to Miami. From there, they caught a bus to Boston where the Mayers lived. Margit and Alexander quickly found work at the Mount Washington Hotel in New Hampshire, but Barbara and Ann could not accompany them to the exclusive resort. For the first time, the family was separated. Barbara and Ann attended a Jewish summer camp where they learned English from other children using comic books.

Once reunited, the Bandlers rented a one-room apartment in Boston's Back Bay. They shared a bathroom with the building's other tenants and had to navigate a rough neighborhood that contained a branch of the Christian Front, an antisemitic Catholic political league. Employment opportunities were limited because Barbara's parents had difficulty learning English, so when Alexander received a promising job offer from a restaurant in New York City, the family was quick to relocate.

Shortly after settling in New York City, the Bandlers picked up and moved yet again when opportunity beckoned at a Detroit nightclub. Margit worked in kitchens to help support the family. The Bandler family slowly achieved stability in their new home. Barbara found it challenging to imagine her parents' emotional world, particularly that of her father, who could be domineering. Her mother too found it difficult to adapt to the family's reduced circumstances. Barbara, however, thrived as an all-American midwestern teen. She became a cheerleader, captain of her school's swim team, and met her future husband, Howard Steinmetz, in high school, though they didn't wed until after she was accepted to college.

Barbara graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in speech pathology and later worked as a speech therapist. She and her husband had three daughters. They sent all three to Jewish summer camps to help them forge connections to their religious community. Barbara and Howard vacationed in Boulder for many years before moving there in 2005. Today Barbara remains an avid swimmer, enjoys telling her family story at schools, and actively supports humanitarian causes.

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