

JEAN-CLAUDE VAN ITALLIE
ON HIS STAY IN MONTE ESTORIL, IN 1940.

Family Members

JEAN-CLAUDE VAN ITALLIE (n. 25.05.1936)

HUGO VAN ITALLIE (06.03.1908 – 1996)

MARTHE VAN ITALLIE (22.06.1912 – 18.05.1963)

NELLY PAULINE LEVY (16.06.1911 – 1968)

ISAIE FERNAND LEVY (07.09.1884 - 1958)

GERMAINE ROTTEMBOURG LEVY (28.06.1884 - 1976)

Stayed at:

MONTE ESTORIL: PENSÃO ROYAL, 08.07.1940 – 28.09.1940

On July 8, 1940, Jean-Claude Van Itallie, who had just turned four years old, checked-in with his parents, Hugo and Marthe, his aunt, Nelly Pauline, and his maternal grandparents, Fernand and Germaine, all Belgian nationals, at the Pensão Royal, in Monte Estoril. They remained there until September 28, 1940, boarding the New York-bound *Hokosaki Maru* at Lisbon harbour on the same day.

Born in Brussels, Jean-Claude remembers his life there as calm, organized, and of great proximity to his mother – 'It was as if she and I lived in an enchanted garden.' His father, a stockbroker like his grandfather, saw himself as a free thinker, *un libre penseur*, and the family did not celebrate Jewish rituals.

The family's stay at *Pensão Royal* was their last European stop in an exodus that began on May 10, in Brussels, with the invasion of Belgium by the German Army. Anticipating the attack, Hugo and his father, Ferdinand Van Itallie, had sent money to the United States and rented houses in Belgium and France. With Hugo enlisted in the Belgian Army, Marthe gathered her in-laws, Ferdinand and Tilly, the maid, Jeanne, and little Jean-Claude and drive to the border town of St. Idesbald.

Upon arrival, Marthe contacted her own parents, Fernand and Germaine Lévy, and sister, Nelly Pauline, to join them. The group then traveled in two cars, with a trailer, which overturned several times along the route. The fall of Belgium pushed the family into France, and they headed towards Fouras, a French seaside resort on the Atlantic coast. There they remained, awaiting the arrival of Hugo, who had been evacuated from Dunkirk with the British.



Jean-Claude Van Itallie in 1939, aged 3.

Photo: Sousa Mendes Foundation

‘My father was always thinking on his feet’

Hugo's ability to anticipate and react allowed the family to continue their onward journey, but not without a cruel loss. The whole family arrived in Bordeaux on June 18. That same day, Hugo, Marthe and Jean-Claude saw off Ferdinand and Tilly Van Itallie, who embarked on *Bérénice*, which was evacuating Dutch citizens to England. On the way to the United Kingdom, the ship was torpedoed by the German Navy. Ferdinand and Tilly Van Itallie died, as did most passengers and crew.

On June 20, the Portuguese consul Aristides Sousa Mendes granted visas to the remaining group, for which Hugo had obtained diplomatic passports. The family brought with them Gerhard ' Jerry ' Brunell, a 13-year-old who was traveling alone.

The group entered Elvas on June 29th. After a brief stay in Lisbon, they settled in Cascais. Hugo worked at the Belgian consulate, in Lisbon, while Jean-Claude stayed with his mother, aunt and grand-parents in Monte Estoril.

'In my memories, the sea was everywhere I looked'

As a four-year-old, the memories of Jean-Claude Van Itallie are few, but precise. The *Pensão* was comfortable, and its windows looked out into the sea. At night, Aunt Nelly would put him to bed. Other, older, children were staying near his and his parents' bedroom, and, every night, they stopped by his room to wish him a good-night. To fall asleep, Jean-Claude scratched the textured wallpaper on the bedroom wall, much to Hugo's irritation.

On a Friday the 13th, probably September 13th, Jean-Claude woke up thirsty and reached for the water jug nearby. Wishing to avoid his father's anger at his water-spilling, he attempted to fill the glass leaning out of the bedroom window. The heavy, green glass jug was too heavy and fell, shattering on the guest porch below. The following day, the chambermaid told Marthe that her son was a criminal. As luck would have it, the couple who sat nightly on that porch had gone out for a walk.

Marthe taught her son English, and, at dinner, Jean-Claude asked the waiters for 'No soup' and 'No fish'. Jean-Claude recalls feeling that the adults were always angry, and that they were always angry with him.

In the United States, the family settled in Great Neck in New York, where Michael, Jean-Claude's brother was born. After the war, the family created the habit of spending the annual summers in Belgium, thus maintaining a connection to their country of origin. Jean-Claude became a renowned playwright of the New York avant-garde theatre, the author of the *America Hurrah* trilogy, and part of the LaMama Theatre. Today he divides his time between the city, and his farm in Massachusetts, where he created the Shantigar Foundation.

EXILES MEMORIAL CENTRE: Telephone interview by Inês
interviews to former refugees in Fialho Brandão, 23.07.2019
Cascais.

Duration of the interview: 90
minutes.

In addition to Ferdinand and Tilly Van Itallie, Jean-Claude also lost his great-aunt Irma Lévy, and her daughter Luce, who were murdered at Auschwitz, and his Aunt Hedwig (Hedda) Lévy, née Rosenblatt. His great-uncle Leopold Van Itallie and his wife survived the camp of Terezin.

‘I am still adjusting to the terror my family must have felt – in fact, I have carried with me throughout my life.’



Jean-Claude Van Itallie

Photo: www.vanitalie.com