

## Nicole Milner

Nicole Milner composed and performed the piano music for the Multiply by Six Million film

Wife of Carl (Karl) Linn - Photographed separately

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

I was born in 1937 in Brussels, Belgium. My mother's name was Regine Goldstein. She was born in Paris. My father's name was Henry Milner from Lodz, Poland. I was an only child. On May 10th, 1940 Brussels was bombed by the Nazis. My father, a successful, self-made manufacturer, said he had made preparations as early as 1938 or 39, fearing the Nazi's growth of power. He had gotten some money hidden in a safe in the apartment, and kept his car full of gas all the time. My father also told me that he and others were helping German Jews who fled to Belgium, to get visas and places to live. He later found out that these activities put him on the blacklist.

The morning after the bombings he went to get the car and found it had been stolen. He gathered the immediate family together. It consisted of seven people: himself, my mother Regine; my grandmother, Batya; his sister Carola, her husband Sigmund, their daughter Nadja, and myself. The adult women were told to make seven money bags, and after the money was divided equally, to sew them into our clothing. We all went to the train station where there were thousands of people waiting. We took the first train we could to the border of Belgium.

We were amongst many thousands of people trying to flee Belgium. My father learned that the French border was already closed and he had the idea to hire an ambulance driver. We all hid in the ambulance, and with lights flashing we got across the border.

From the French border we took a train to Dunkirk where everything fell apart. There were very severe bombings and we had to spend the night in a barn. My father spoke of being on the road in Dunkirk where there were crowds of refugees. He recalled us being machine gunned by low-flying airplanes. He remembered seeing the faces of the pilots, that's how close they were. He told us all to run in a ditch and pretend we were dead. My cousin, then ten years old, corroborated the story.

We managed to get to Paris and tried to go to my mother's brother's home (my mother had one sibling). His wife wouldn't let the seven of us stay there, probably because she was afraid to. She found us a place to stay for the night. My father was really frightened and decided we should go as quickly as possible to the far French border. We were about 100 miles from the Nazi's all this time. He bought cars three different times and when one ran out of gas, he'd get another car which lasted about 150 miles. There was no available gas to buy. We passed Bordeaux, arrived, in Dax, near the Spanish border. My father rented a small house there for us. He assumed we would be safe there and shortly we could all return home. He discovered that the villages were being bombed around there too. He decided that he better drive back to

Bordeaux and try to get passports. My mother had a French passport, he had a Belgian one, and my uncle, aunt and grandmother didn't have any.

In Bordeaux, my dad went from one consulate to another trying to get visas. After a while he didn't even know what country's consulate he was in. One of the last ones he entered was El Salvador. There was a Frenchman who was working there. When he asked him for a Visa to El Salvador to visit friends, the man refused. My father becoming more desperate, took out the rest of his money, put it on the table and said, "For a visa this is all yours." It was a lot of money at that time. The man agreed after hesitating. This story has many more details but I'll skip a lot of it. My father grew more and more bold because he saw he could get away with it and he had no other options. He said, "Well actually I want more than a visa. I want a Salvadorian passport." The man said, "I can't give it to you." My father responded, guessing, "Well, in that drawer there are passports, put my name on one." Finally the man did it, giving him a passport for Enrico Milnero. Then the man said. " OK now I want my money." Henry said "Well I can't leave my wife behind." After he managed to get another passport, he got five more for the rest of us. Finally the man said "I want the money now; I did everything you asked." My father replied, "Well if we don't have exit visas how will we get out?" This man, already exasperated, and already enmeshed in the situation, walked with my father in front of tens of thousands of other people waiting for their exit visas. In ten minutes he had obtained the precious papers. During these minutes another refugee, a friend of my father, recognized him and begged for help for his family. My father, fearing exposure, pretended not to know him. He felt very badly about this for years.

At this point my father was really getting nervous about the danger of our situation, and went back to the small town of Dax and decided we better get out as fast as possible. We started going towards the Spanish border. At the Spanish border apparently, they were wondering why he didn't speak Spanish (since we had Salvadorian passports). He said, "I've been living in Belgium all these years and I've forgotten my Spanish." They responded, "Surely your old mother remembers Spanish." Apparently, he yelled at her in Yiddish really fast that she should pretend she was having a heart attack and fall down on the ground. She understood and she started screaming and fell down. My father then started getting very indignant and yelled at them for scaring his mother. They responded in anger and yelled "Get out of here, get on the train." He kept doing things like that. My cousin Nadia remembers also that we all had gas masks and that for some reason the train was on fire in Spain, and the children were thrown out of the window to safety. Next, we went to Porto in Portugal where my father went to the American consulate asking to go to the United States as a Salvadorian citizen. The American consulate was very suspicious of his papers and called in a Portuguese policeman who were known to be very harsh. My father saw he was close to being arrested. Then again, my father started getting very angry and screamed indignantly, "I've never been treated like this!" He said he didn't stop for half an hour, just screaming at the top of his lungs. Finally the consul was furious at him and threw the passports back in his face and said, "Get the hell out of here!"

My father, fearing this consul would warn the next consul about us, decided to rush us to Lisbon right then. He thought that because the offices were closing for lunch time, we'd have a

chance to make it. In Lisbon he went to the U.S. Consulate and asked for a 24-hour visa to the U.S.A. When asked why only 24 hours, he responded he couldn't afford to spend money in the U.S. and he was in a hurry to get to El Salvador. In actuality this was a ploy to fool them into thinking he was really a Salvadorian citizen, and not trying to escape into the U.S. While asking for the 24-hour visa, a man who worked in the consulate walked into the room. He looked at my dad, asked him excitedly if he was Mr. Milnero, the son of his best friend whom he hadn't seen for years. My father said yes, he was. He started introducing my father to all the people around there and wanted to see his mother, my grandmother, because that's who he really remembered. My father started hemming and hawing and said that she was so shocked from bombings that it was not a good idea to see her right then. He was always very quick with his ideas. Then my father decided to ask the so-called friend to stamp all the passports. The man said, "Well at least let me give you a six-month visa." Henry said, "I only want 24 hours because why do I need to spend money in your fancy hotels?", but the man insisted so he accepted.

The next day he came back to see his "friend" and asked him could he get him a booking on a ship to the United States, thinking that this would be like finding the Hope diamond on the street. The man made a phone call and he got us the next boat to the United States which was to leave in a few days. So, six of us got on an American boat destined for the United States. The seventh person, my mother, was not on the boat with us. She was left behind in France and I never did see her again. I was three years old at the time. About a week later we arrived in the U.S. and disappeared into the streets of New York City.

Upon entering the United States, illegally as we did, my father immediately found work, as did my uncle, and we all struggled to survive, living together at times. What happened to my mother is the most difficult part for me. Growing up in New York City with my father and grandmother, I repeatedly asked about my mother's whereabouts. It is a question that remains with me even to this day. At first, I was told she was sick and had to stay in Europe. As I grew older I asked why, if she was sick, he didn't do something to take care of her. Then he said she didn't want to leave Europe. I didn't understand that but to me it meant clearly that she preferred to stay in France than to see me. When I was an adult and still asking questions, my dad told me that she didn't come on the boat with us because she got so scared during a bombing that she threatened to hurt herself and me. He had to put her in a sanitarium near Bordeaux, France. He said that after the war she preferred to stay in France. This was a story I heard and believed. I never heard from her except for two letters when I was sixteen years old. I also didn't know what she looked like because all I ever saw were two distorted photographs that didn't give me an idea of her face or figure. At age seven, I was put in a boarding school to stay until I was out of high school. However, I became depressed there and my father took me out at age nine, when he married Eve, my stepmother. Eve meant well, but we had a very turbulent relationship and she never felt like a mother to me. She had difficulties of her own, including depression.

When I was around eleven, Maurice, my mother's brother came to the United States. I saw him briefly and remember he gave my father money to buy me a bicycle. At age sixteen I received those two letters from my mother. I remember one of the letters. She said that she heard that I

played piano, and she wrote that she liked Chopin and Wagner, and which composers did I like? My father's reaction to that letter was, "What a stupid thing to write about, music, after all these years." To me it was the best thing she could write about because it was personal and made a connection that I didn't even know we had. I didn't answer her second letter which I really regret...I deeply regret.

Throughout the years I was told by my father that I shouldn't be asking so many questions. I had a good life, enough to eat-that these matters were not important. Years might go by but I'd ask again. Growing up I felt myself to be quite unreal, almost otherworldly. There were mysteries, confusions, stories that didn't make sense. I didn't personally know other children in New York who had no mother. I always felt that I didn't belong or fit in anywhere. I was a shy child. Music, which I started studying while in boarding school at age seven, was the one area I felt good about and where I could be myself.

In 1981 I was living in San Francisco, California and visited my aunt Carola and uncle Sigmund in New York City. Again I asked, "What do you know about my mother?" My uncle said, "There is something I haven't told you before, I'll tell you now." My aunt was sitting there. He said we were in the middle of Dunkirk on a train and there was a terrible bombing. Nobody else in the family was in the car at the time and he looked across and saw my mother strangling me. He couldn't believe what he was seeing and as she kept doing it, he jumped up and rescued me. Then my aunt said, "Oh, you shouldn't have told her that. Henry will find out." He said, "I don't care." My shocked reaction to this information must have been obvious because my uncle said, "You must realize she wasn't like that normally. The bombings were horrible and she was terrified." My cousin Nadia recalled that after Dunkirk everyone was very nervous about my mother being near me. She also remembered that shortly after the bombings my mother was no longer with us.

In my adult years, asking questions as before, my father had told me my uncle Maurice had married and had five daughters. I inquired how I could locate these cousins and was told not only didn't he know, but he was sure they would shun me. When I was around 27 years old, my mother, her brother Maurice, and their parents, had all died within four years of each other. Suddenly to my amazement I inherited some money from my maternal grandparents. My father said the five cousins and their mother would resent my receiving some money that might have gone to them. Their last name was Gosselyn. At various times I asked my son Joel, and friends, to look up their names in the phone book while they were in Paris but, there were too many Gosselyn's in the phonebook to look up.

Shortly before my father died in 1993. I again asked for the names of the five cousins. I had learned not to believe everything my father said. He quickly rattled off the names, including the married name of the oldest daughter. Somehow it seemed right-Francoise Kreis, Rosine, Marie-Claude, Annie, and Chantai.

I married Carl Linn in 1992 and my father died in 1993. In 1995 Carl was trying to figure out a surprise for my birthday. He started calling up Red Cross and other organizations seeing if he

could find out about my French family. He asked me the name of my grandparents. I couldn't understand these strange questions. Finally he told me he wanted to hire a detective to try to locate family members on my mother's side. My first reaction was resistance and anger because this opened up very painful feelings in me. Despite these reactions, we went to the detective who took the little information I had. He said, "We don't have much to go on; you know the names of your parents, grandparents, and cousins, one with a surname-but still there may be a chance." After a few weeks the detective said he found out one cousin's name. Francoise Kreis Gosselyn. It took me several weeks to write a letter to her. "My name is Nicole Milner, we may be first cousins...", I gave the few facts I knew. It took me a really long time to write the letter. " I don't want much from you. I just want to know who you are, and if I you have any information about my mother." I didn't want to get too intense about that either. My dad had told me these relatives would be hostile to me. I felt cautious and jumpy and put the letter in the mail. A few weeks later I received a letter from Francoise. She said we were indeed first cousins. The family in France knew of my existence, that I had escaped to the United States, and had always wondered what happened to me. While visiting the United States she had wanted to visit me but didn't know my last name or where I lived. She told me about her sisters and family in France. We wrote back a few times. I discovered my aunt, Andre, is still alive (my mother's sister-in-law). I asked if she had any information about my mother. Eventually I received a remarkable photograph Andre had found of my mother and me. For the first time I could see what she looked like. In the photo she is holding me as an infant and is looking lovingly at me. This was the first time I could believe emotionally that I actually had a mother and that she loved me. It isn't possible to describe how profound that experience was. Until then my mother had no face and seemed to not have cared about me at all.

I made arrangements to go to Paris with Carl. I went there in 1995. I met thirty relatives-five first cousins-they all had children, and some had grandchildren. I met my aunt once. There were varying spouses and boyfriends. They were all incredibly nice to me and interested in my history. I was shown a family photo album with "Nicole Milner" and nothing underneath it. I was astonished. My whole life I felt I never had a mother and suddenly her side of the family was taking me in as a family member. My new family showed me great kindness, generosity and empathy, which has transformed my life. I was particularly nervous about meeting my aunt because she had been good friends with my mother and held important information. She said my mother was gentle, very literate, loved music and loved me. Our separation brought her profound sadness. My first question was, was my mother mentally ill? What was going on with her? She said, absolutely not, she wasn't. I told her the story of the train and her attack on me. My aunt responded, there was a bombing and people had unpredictable reactions. I kept thinking, I have three children, and if there was a bombing, I couldn't imagine trying to kill my own child.

I read a book not many years ago by Toni Morrison, called *Beloved*, which was the first time I got the picture that maybe there was another perspective. I learned that historically, in extreme circumstances, mothers actually killed their children feeling it protected them from even worse suffering. That's what occurred in the book *Beloved*. For some reason, this way of looking at my own history helped me to consider that my mother wasn't just cruel or insane.

My newly found cousins had different stories about my mother than those I had heard as a child. Two of them had met her and found her to be very affectionate, and warm. She had written poetry and was a very good musician. She was very intelligent. Apparently, she had lived in Nice, France all the years after the war. She never went back to Paris, and apparently had a very poor relationship with her parents. They were very wealthy but had little time for their children, and even less for her in particular. Maurice was the favorite child. They were said to be mean to her. My maternal grandmother, Anna, visited me once in New York when I just had my first child and shortly after my mother had died. She told me my mother had loved me and also that she had a boyfriend for several years before she died, adding, "Don't tell your father." I liked her and appreciated our contact. It meant a lot to me, though I remained confused why my mother and I never saw each other again. The most important thing about my Paris discovery is that I found out my mother had been trying to get me back all those years. That was really very painful to me and also in a strange way, made me feel better. I don't understand what happened. Apparently, her brother, when he came to see me once, was trying to get me back to France but found out my father had gotten remarried. Several cousins thought she died of a broken heart (she really died of cancer), and that she was severely depressed and never got out of it. They thought it had to do with me being gone, but I don't know. She was isolated when she died. There was probably a boyfriend with her, but no family.

Still looking for information, in 1997 I went to visit my father's first cousin in New York, who had been in Auschwitz, and whom I remembered as a child. I asked questions (my father had since died). They had been very close in business. I asked him, what did he know about my mother? First, he said, "She didn't want to come to the U.S." I kept asking and finally he said, "Well, your father wouldn't let her come here, she wanted to." For the second time I had gotten information that she'd been trying to see me. I've been trying to put together why, or what happened. I'll never really know. I went through a period of time feeling that my father was cruel to separate a child from her mother. Then I started thinking that if my husband tried to kill my child, no matter what the reason, I'd be frightened to let them meet or let anything like that ever happen again. I also thought he probably wanted to get out of a bad marriage. I think my father had a lot of faults but, I think he did love me in his own way. I was important to him. I felt that. I suspect that it was a combination of factors including his fear for me to be with my mother. He may have been thinking she was unstable and was afraid for me to be with her.

I'll never know the whole story. For a long time I always felt I don't have a story. I've always felt I don't have a history; I don't have family. Really just maybe a week ago thinking of this evening, I thought well, I have a story and it is a story with questions. It doesn't mean I don't have a story. This was a big insight for me. I had felt that I had to have all the big pieces in order to have a story; if somebody else was telling a history like this I would say well, OK, there are pieces you don't know but you're still here. So that's where I am with it now. I'm grateful for what I found out.

At this time of writing I am 63 years old. I'd like to give a brief overview of what I've done in my life and of some recent, surprising events.

After graduating from Barnard college in New York City. I attended graduate school to study social work. I'd just married a Jewish medical student in his last year of studies. After one year, I became pregnant and decided to discontinue school to focus on Danny, my first-born child who was born six weeks early. By age 25, we had three children, Daniel, Nomi, and Joel. For years I focused on the children, also taking classes in various subjects, and studying and playing the piano. We lived in New York, Florida, North Carolina, and Los Angeles.

In 1968 my husband, Hal and I decided to live in a beautiful, culturally alive place near Mendocino California. Several years later we divorced. The children and I remained there 12 years. I worked as a social worker with children. Also, I started and directed a private school in Mendocino as well as a community center which had multiple activities. In those years I composed and played a lot of music including scores for several theatrical productions. I also entered a Unicef sponsored, international contest For the Year of the Child. 1979, for new children's songs. The focus of the song, was children singing and asking to be taken care of. My song won for the United States.

After my third child Joel finished high school I left the countryside for San Francisco, California and returned to graduate school and received my Masters in Social Work. I worked frequently with groups, generally relating to family matters: teenagers, single mothers, and general counseling.

In 1985, after thirteen years of separation from my husband, and as many years as a single woman, I met and married my second husband Alvin. Suddenly, three years later, he died of a brain tumor. His death caused me incredible grief partially because of the loss of my new love. Also, I feel that the shock forced open my feelings of the loss of my mother which I don't remember ever experiencing fully before. My emotional life painfully expanded after those events. Eventually I discovered a greater than ever capacity to have intimacy with others as well as with myself. In 1991 my life was graced with meeting Carl whom I married a year later. A German Jew, he also escaped the Nazis in the 1930s. As I see it, the Spirit (or Providence) led me through all these experiences to where Carl would be the catalyst to discovering my maternal family and history. Over and over I have been amazed at how hard, even horrendous, events in my life, have led to later experiences which have made my life so much richer than before. There is much mystery here.

In the mid 1980s, I decided (because of a cancer scare which turned out to be innocuous but gave me a new thrust in life) to take my music more seriously and devote myself to it. I performed more often and eventually made three recordings of my own original music. Music is still a major focus for me. At the time of this writing, I am also involved in working towards keeping the last community-based radio station in the U.S. from being commercially controlled. I'm also working to get children's perspectives directly to the public through the radio air waves.

I am blessed with three grown children who each are doing well in the world, and with whom I have lovely relationships. My three grandchildren, Rachel, Malaika, and Patricia, also bring me joy.

As a postscript, around November 20, 1999, my cousin Nadia miraculously, and without trying, found out about a first cousin of my mother, Thea Zuker, (in her 80s) living in Antwerp, Belgium. Within a week, on Thanksgiving Day, my husband Carl and I flew to meet her. Thea corroborated information that my mother tried unsuccessfully to see me and wasn't allowed to by my father. She had a few photographs and for the first time I saw my mother as child (age 10 or 11). She made a family tree and connected me to two other first cousins of my mother, also in their late 80's. One, Antoinette, knew my mother well and said they had spoken for hours as teenagers. She said my mother was normal, though sad, and loved literature and music and was very nice. After I sent her my CDs, she said the music reminded her of my mother, who was dreamy and gentle. That letter made me cry and feel really good. Suddenly now, I have a family tree and again new people in my family. This is five years after having surprisingly discovered my five cousins and their families in Paris. The cousins I met on my mother's side in 1995 have led to several visits including the next generation getting in contact.

My experiences have made me acutely aware of the fragility and preciousness of life. Children, indeed all people (even animal and plant species) who are particularly vulnerable, have a special spot in my heart. I understand loss and the sense of being marginal. Insecurity and anxiety have been long time companions, but are becoming less frequent visitors. I also now understand the need to be one's own mother-to be gentle and kind with oneself. This has taken me years to comprehend.

I've been given many blessings and am very grateful for the immense gift of this life.