

Irving and Joanna Beller



Israel (Irving) Beller was born in Krzeszowice, Poland in 1911. As a young boy, Irving moved to Vienna, Austria with his parents and three brothers. His orthodox Jewish family kept kosher and strictly observed Jewish traditions until they moved to Antwerp, Belgium during the war years, where they had to adapt. In Antwerp, Irving met Joanna Gross, who was born in The Hague, Netherlands in 1916. Isaac Gross, Joanna's father, was the owner of a diamond business and was able to send Joanna to university, where she was pursuing a doctoral degree in language and philosophy. While she was completing her studies, she and Irving married in Antwerp on March 19, 1940. Two months later, the Germans invaded Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. The Bellers decided to risk illegally crossing through France to try to reach Portugal, a neutral country, where they hoped to board a ship for the United States. However, Israel was arrested by French authorities at

the border of Spain and France for having an Austrian passport; at the time, Austria had been annexed by Nazi Germany, meaning that Austrians were enemy nationals in France. He was held in the French internment camp, Saint Cyprien, but was able to bribe his way out of the camp. He then traveled across Spain in secret from monastery to monastery dressed as a Catholic monk until he reached Portugal, where he was reunited with his wife.

The members of the Gross family were able to secure visas from Aristides de Sousa Mendez, the Portuguese Consul in Bordeaux, France, who defied his country's directive to deny visas to Russian and Jewish refugees. With her visa in hand, in 1940 Joanna sailed to the United States alone and pregnant with their first child, Georg, who was born in December. Irving joined her in New York on New Year's Eve 1940. Soon after, the three moved to Vineland, New Jersey to purchase a poultry farm. The next four years they spent on the chicken farm were some of the happiest of their lives. After giving up the poultry farm, they moved to the Bronx, New York where the couple had two more children, Claude and Evelyn. Irving worked as a diamond broker in New York City, George went to medical school to become a cardiologist, Claude launched a successful film-making career, and Evelyn moved to Italy to teach English.

Irving Beller died in Fairfield, Connecticut on April 20, 2000. Joanna passed away two years and a day later, on April 21, 2002.