

BELLE ZECK

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



Belle Zeck (born Belle Mayer), daughter of Gustav and Gussy, was born on February 22, 1919, in Port Henry, New York. Belle had two brothers, Sidney and

Henry, and one sister, Helena. Gustav was a farmer, and when Belle was six years old, the family moved to a dairy farm in Suffern, New York. The family was Jewish, and Suffern was a largely Protestant town. After they moved to Suffern, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on a nearby mountain. Belle was scared by the fire and did not understand why it happened. Belle's mother explained that there were groups of people who did not like Jews, Black people and other minorities, and that this was the group's way of trying to frighten people into leaving.

Belle started school early and she skipped third grade, which resulted in her graduating from high school at a young age. The librarian in Suffern saw that Belle was interested in learning, and she let Belle take out as many books as she wanted—other children were only allowed to take two books at a time. Belle attended Syracuse University, and then studied law at Fordham University. After graduation, she worked for the U.S. Treasury as general counsel, and helped freeze German assets (Germany companies with bank accounts in the United States were no longer able to access their money). Belle was assigned to investigate how IG Farben, a German chemical and pharmaceutical company, was profiting from the war and how the company was involved in war crimes. As World War II progressed, it became clear that the United States and its allies would be prosecuting the Nazis for war crimes. Belle's work and research would become invaluable during these trials. In 1945, the United States seized control of IG Farben.

Bill Zeck, who was preparing to be prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials, was so impressed by Belle's knowledge of IG Farben's complicity with the Nazi government that he urged his superiors to hire her for the prosecution team. She went to Nuremberg, where she worked as an associate counsel to the U.S. prosecution team for the IG Farben trial. Before the trial, Belle assisted in the compilation of data and interrogations related to IG Farben assets in the United States. This material was later utilized in the trial. Belle wrote the first draft of the indictment for the trial, and she was responsible for getting evidence of IG Farben's part in conspiring for an aggressive war. She presented part of the first count during the trial, and one of her main tasks at Nuremberg was to explain to the judges what the documents she had uncovered in Washington D.C. meant. Twenty-three men were charged at this trial, and thirteen were found guilty of various war crimes. The guilty were sentenced to various prison terms; all were released by 1951.

While in Germany, Belle helped with the distribution of aid and materials to survivors in displaced persons' camps, and she helped with repatriation of Holocaust survivors. Upon returning to the United States, she and Bill Zeck wed. They had two children and four grandchildren. Belle continued to work as a lawyer, became involved in local politics, and advocated for the establishment of an international court for war crimes. She passed away in 2006. This interview was conducted on June 17, 1999, in Suffern, New York.