

▼ Irène Probst, the last survivor of the St Malo evacuation to Jersey in 1940, on her return to the island

PHOTOGRAPH: GARY GRIMSHAW/VISIT JERSEY



## 'Thank you, Jersey'

# Tribute to islanders after fleeing Nazis

Steven Morris

She was last on these sandy shores eight decades ago when her family - just about - managed to stay a step ahead of the rapidly advancing Nazis.

Yesterday, Irène Probst, a 91-year-old Jewish woman from Massachusetts, was back on Jersey to remember her family's dramatic escape and thank the Channel Islanders who rescued them and provided refuge and kindness.

Probst, née Weindling, was nine when she, her mother and two brothers were evacuated with British troops from St Malo in north-west France just as the German forces reached the outskirts of the town. If the family had not been whisked away, they would have been captured.

"I think we'd have been sent to a camp and perished," said Probst, almost certainly the last living survivor of the evacuation. "This visit is a wonderful opportunity to close a circle, to say thank you to the people of Jersey. The people who helped us were brave and good-hearted. That's what I want to

commemorate - the goodness that is in so many people."

Before the second world war, the Weindlings lived in Antwerp, Belgium, where Irène's father, Samuel, ran a business. Her mother, Claire, was English and the couple had three boys as well as Irène.

In May 1940 their home was bombed by the Nazis and the family fled. Samuel Weindling paused in Paris to try to track down their oldest child, who had been taken prisoner, while Claire and her three other children headed for St Malo.

Luckily for them, their arrival in the French port in June 1940 coincided with a rescue mission involving the St Helier Yacht Club, which had answered a call from the Admiralty to send all available craft to St Malo to evacuate stranded British troops. Twenty vessels made the 35-mile trip.

It must have been terrifying. British troops had done their utmost to destroy the port to try to halt the Germans. "I remember clouds of billowing smoke and a sense of confusion," said Probst.

Among the Jersey sailors who headed to France were brothers Jim and Eddie Langlois in their family's 41ft motor cruiser, Callou. Jim asked one of the military leaders if they could take the Weindlings. The



◀ The Langlois family's motor yacht, Callou, anchored in St Malo before the outbreak of war, which was later used to evacuate Irène to Jersey

answer was: "Definitely not, but I'm not looking."

Probst continued: "We knew terrible things would happen if we didn't get on the boat. The situation was dire. We scrambled aboard and huddled in the cabin where we found a French priest. Someone shouted: 'Allez!' and we were off. German planes chased us and fired at the boat. Soldiers took up their rifles and fired back."

It was nighttime when they reached Jersey. The Langlois family took them back to their farmhouse.



▲ Probst, now aged 91, as a girl in Belgium before the second world war

"We hadn't eaten much for days and there was a long table full of meats and salads," said Probst. "We did justice to it. Such a welcome."

Probst recalls sleeping in a bed so far off the floor she needed a stool to climb in. They stayed a couple of days but had to get out as the Nazis were about to seize the Channel Islands.

The final act of generosity from the Langlois family was to give Claire Weindling an English pound to help when they reached the UK. They boarded a ferry to the UK and after being reunited with Probst's father and brother, set off for the US.

Probst was to marry the late Ronald Probst, a world-renowned professor emeritus of mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They had a child and three grandchildren.

"It would have been a very different story if we had not made it on to Callou," said Probst. "It was a very narrow escape."

Probst was greeted at Jersey airport by the commodore of the yacht club, Rhys Perkins. Then she had an emotional meeting with Jim Langlois' son, also Jim, who was a baby in a cot when his family gave her refuge.