

THE MISGUIDED IDEALIST

The Story of Rachel Gunzig's Life

As one of her first gifts, we give our daughter the Hebrew name, Sarah Rivka. Sarah was the Hebrew name of my father's mother who perished along with six million other Jews in the Holocaust. Rivka was the Hebrew name of my father's aunt, who was responsible for saving hundreds of lives, including my father's during her work in the Underground.

Caryn Rubinstein, Brit B'not Yisrael, Nov 27, 1994

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Foreword

This is the story of Rachel (Rivka) Gunzig, Jessica's great aunt. Rachel was married to Jacques Gunzig, brother of Sabine (Sarah) Gunzig Sochor, Jessica's grandmother. I chose the title because it best describes the person whose idealism was exploited by a cynical radical movement. While it took Rachel over twenty years to recognize the true nature of international Communism and to break with the Party she never gave up the humanist and egalitarian ideals that drove her to it and continued to work for human rights causes to the end.

This narrative is an edited transcription of Rachel's conversation with her nephew, Marcel Braitstein, during her last visit to Montreal. The conversation was conducted in French and recorded on four audio tapes..

The contents of the tapes have been edited to remove redundancies and some irrelevant dialog and to rearrange the sequence of some of the material in order to maintain the continuity of the narrative. Otherwise Rachel's words have been retained.

The story as told on the tapes is incomplete. In some cases Rachel skipped over some events, dismissing them with the remark "you know all about it" either because she had told Marcel about them in earlier conversations or because he had lived through them with her. In order to fill in these gaps I have added some material, clearly identified as such, based on my own recollection of some events as told to me by Rachel as well as material supplied by Marcel and Rachel's son Edgard whose recollection of events in Poland doesn't always agree with Rachel's. These include excerpts from Edgard's imaginary diary, a literary device suggested by Marcel, to report stories that Edgard had told him and excerpts from Edgard's narrative at a family reunion at Vale Perkins in Canada, and referred to as Owl's Head.

Summary

Rachel was born in Poland in 1910 where she went to elementary and High School and where she was first exposed to Marxist philosophy. She moved to Belgium with her family in 1927. The move aborted her ambition to become a doctor. Instead she went to pharmacist school in Belgium. She joined a left wing Zionist organization in Antwerp, the *Hashomer Hatzair*, and went to Palestine in 1928 or 1929 to live on a Kibbutz. She returned to Belgium in 1932 disillusioned with the Zionist experience and became active in the Communist Party. This eventually led her to go to Spain in 1936, where she served as a pharmacist and her husband, Jacques, served as an officer in the International Brigade. In 1938 she fled Spain as Franco's troops were conquering the country and ended up in an internment camp in the South of France. She returned to Belgium in 1939.

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She spent the war years from 1940 to 1945 in Belgium working for the Resistance. It is during that time that she successfully hid her parents, son and nephews, including Bob and Eugene.

Following the Liberation she became a very successful businesswoman, but never gave up her political ideas. Indeed, she followed through on her dream and after settling her parents and nephew Marcel in Canada, she moved to Poland with her son Edgard to live the Communist dream. Unfortunately this dream turned into a nightmare: she crossed the Iron Curtain just as, unrecognized by her, Stalin's purges were moving into full swing and as many of her friends from Spain were being jailed and worse. She spent four years in Poland, half of them trying to get out, including a stay in Vietnam with the Polish UN peacekeeping mission. She made it back to Belgium in 1956.

Joe, 1995

Chronology

The following chronology places Rachel's story in its historical context and may help explain why Rachel, and many like her, rationalized their loyalty to the Party in the name of a higher cause, namely the fight against Fascism.

Spanish Civil War

July 17, 1936	Start of the war
<i>July 1936</i>	<i>Rachel goes to Spain first time</i>
September 1936	Siege of Toledo lifted
October 1936	Siege of Madrid starts
November 6, 1936	Capital moved to Valencia
<i>Fall 1936</i>	<i>Rachel and Dolly go to Spain</i>
October 1937	Capital moved to Barcelona
April 1938	Castile cut off from Catalonia at Vinaroz on the sea
<i>June 1938</i>	<i>Edgard is born</i>
<i>Summer 1938</i>	<i>Rachel leaves Spain for France</i>
December 1938	Final offensive by Franco
January 1939	Barcelona falls
February 1939	Spanish President flees
<i>1939</i>	<i>Rachel returns to Belgium</i>

World War II

August 23, 1939	Hitler/Stalin Pact
September 1, 1939	Germany invades Poland

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May 10, 1940	Germany invades Belgium
June 4, 1940	Dunkirk
June 22, 1940	France surrenders
June 22, 1941	Germans invade the Soviet Union
1941	<i>Dolly arrested</i>
December 7, 1941	Pearl Harbor
December 13, 1941	Raid on Rue des Atrebrates
1942	<i>Dolly deported</i>
July 28, 1942	<i>Dolly killed in Mauthausen "while attempting to escape."</i>
September 1942	<i>Sochors deported</i>
November 7, 1942	Allied invasion of North Africa
November 8, 1942	Germans occupy the rest of France
Fall 1943	<i>Rachel arrested at French border</i>
September, 1944	Liberation of Brussels
May 7, 1945	VE Day
September 12, 1945	VJ day
Post-War Period	
1950	<i>Surplus Business in Brussels</i>
1950	<i>Veterans' Conference in Warsaw</i>
Nov '51	Slansky purges in Prague
'51	Gomulka arrested in Poland
1951	<i>Bonne maman goes to Canada</i>
Poland	
July 1952	New Polish Constitution
September 1952	<i>Rachel arrives in Poland</i>
October 1952	Polish elections, single list
October 1952	<i>Edgard goes to boarding school</i>
November 1952	Slansky convicted in Prague
November 1952	<i>Anti-Semitic incident in school</i>
December 1952	<i>Rachel gets menial job</i>
March 1953	<i>Bonne Maman dies</i>
March 1953	Stalin dies
September 1953	<i>Edgard joins Rachel in Warsaw in "new apartment"</i>
December 1953	<i>Under Police Surveillance</i>

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March 1954	Security officials arrested
March 1954	Surrender of Dienbienphu
<i>Summer 1954</i>	<i>Edgard visits Belgium</i>
<i>Winter 1954-55</i>	<i>Edgard victim of anti-Semitic assault</i>
<i>1955</i>	<i>Rachel goes for Vietnam</i>
February 26, 1956	20th Soviet Congress
<i>1956</i>	<i>Rachel returns from Vietnam</i>
July 1956	Gomulka released
<i>Summer 1956</i>	<i>Edgard and the Youth Congress</i>
October 1956	Hungarian rebellion
November 1956	Soviets crush Hungarians
<i>1957</i>	<i>Rachel leaves for the West</i>
<i>1957</i>	<i>Move to Vienna</i>
<i>1958</i>	<i>Marriage and return to Belgium</i>

Cast of Characters

Rachel Gunzig-Keymolen nee Eckstein

Bonne Maman -Rachel's mother

Bon Papa -Rachel's father

Dolly, Jacques Gunzig, Rachel's husband

Edgard Gunzig, Rachel's son. Lives in Brussels, Belgium.

Alice, Rachel's sister

Maurice, Alice's son, Rachel's nephew

Monik, aka Maurice, Rachel's brother

Paula, Rachel's sister and Marcel's mother

Marcel Braitstein, Rachel's nephew who conducted the interview. Lives in Montreal.

Dov Lieberman, a friend in the Communist Party and the Resistance.

Yvonne Jospa, a Resistance member, who helped Rachel hide the children.

Yvonne Kunstlunger, a Resistance member, who helped Rachel hide the children

References

The following books pertain to the Red Orchestra, a Communist wartime espionage network that Rachel mentions in her story. The activities of the Red Orchestra indirectly led to the arrest of Rachel's husband in a case of guilt by association: a cousin of his was involved. The English language books are available in the Cherry Hill Free Public Library and probably others as well.

FOREWORD

Le Grand Jeu, Memoires du Chef de l'Orchestre Rouge by Leopold Trepper, Ed Albin Michel, 1975

The Great Game, Leopold Trepper, McGraw Hill, 1977

The Red Orchestra by Gilles Perrault, Translated by Peter Wiles, Simon and Shuster, 1969

The Red Orchestra by V.E. Terraut, 1995. The Soviet Spy Network Inside Nazi Europe. Cassell Military Classics.

In addition, the following book includes a section that describes how the Resistance in Belgium saved Jewish children and specifically identifies two of the women who worked with Rachel and helped hide the four boys, Bob, Edgard, Eugene and Marcel.

Rescuers, Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust by Gay Block and Malka Drucker, Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1992.

A recent book written by a German journalist describes the interception of a transport from Malines to Auschwitz by members of the Belgian underground associated with Rachel's group:

The Twentieth Train by Marion Schreiber.

Poland

Marcel. Tell me about Poland. What did you live on?

Rachel. I don't know how my parents lived before we were born. Like all the Jews in Poland at that time, *bon papa* had no trade. All he knew was reciting prayers, going to synagogue etc... After they were first married they lived with my paternal grandparents. I don't know how long. *Bonne maman* told me that she had a hard time, that they cut off her hair. She had beautiful hair, you remember that don't you? Thereafter I don't know.

We were born not in Warsaw, but in Pultusk, a small town 30 miles North of Warsaw where my maternal grandparents lived. At the beginning we probably lived there with the help of one or the other set of parents.

My earliest recollection is of living in Warsaw. We were suffering a lot, we were not very rich. It was wintertime and it was impossible to go out without boots. I remember clearly that Alice and I shared a single pair of boots. When one of us was out, the other had to stay home.

I remember a typhoid epidemic. I don't remember if it was that same winter or later. I was about five or six years old. I think it was before Paula was born. It was around 1914-15, something like that. I was the first one to catch typhoid fever. At the time, when you called the doctor they sent you to the hospital, where people were dying like flies. Of course *bonne maman* would not hear of it. I don't know how she managed to get a doctor to make house calls. The rest of the family went to Pultusk while she remained behind to take care of me.

I remember that as a little girl, and not being rich, I had always dreamed of having a doll. As I lay delirious with a high fever, *bonne maman* bought me a doll, probably with the last of her money. I became very attached to that doll, and the doctor said it was good that I was hanging onto life so much. My biggest disappointment came when I improved and became lucid and *bonne maman* had to burn that doll, because I had slept with it, hugged and kissed it, etc...Then, no sooner than I had recovered, and when I should have been cared for further and properly fed, *bonne maman* came down with the same fever. The doctor had predicted it. That is why he had not wanted me to remain at home.

I was taken to my maternal grandmother in Pultusk. Actually, she was not my real grandmother but my grandfather's second wife. (My real grandmother died giving birth to *bonne maman's* brother.) The poor woman was very nice, but she did not have grandchildren of her own (she did not have any children), did not know how to care for us, and really neglected us a lot. I still carry traces of damage to my eyes from that period. The doctor had said I needed glasses, but grandmother was too proud to let her granddaughter wear glasses and would not let me do so. It got worse.

M. What did your maternal grandparents do for a living?

R. My grandfather was a yeast wholesaler. He had a rather substantial business, because it was not a very large town and everybody baked bread and needed yeast. He worked and he was very active.

M. And on the paternal side?

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R. I don't know what they did. They were rich. They were in business, but I don't know what kind. We were never very close to them, because we did not like our paternal grandmother at all. She was a very proud, authoritarian and demanding woman. When she visited us in Pultusk, when we lived there, she made us iron her blouses. We, poor little girls, had to iron her blouses! We did not much like the family on the paternal side.

M. You told me that *bonne maman* had a hard time making a living.

R. That's right. I don't know when she first started working. *Bon papa* worked a little. Did he earn a living? That, I don't know. I don't know what he did exactly. He always had his nose buried in his books. He associated with the relatively modern world of young Zionists, the enlightened Zionists who in addition to Yiddish and Polish also spoke Hebrew, not prayer book Hebrew, but more or less Modern Hebrew. That is why I told you that *bonne maman* had understood that it was up to her to earn a living for the family after Monik and Paula were born.

M. How much younger than you was Paula?

R. Let's figure it out. Aunt Alice was two and a half years older than me. Maurice was a year and a half younger than me and was born in 1911-12. Paula was born about three years later. She was probably born in 1915-16, early in the war. I think *bonne maman* delivered during a German bombardment on the shores of the Vistula (that is perhaps how Paula got her weak heart.) As I told you, we were living near a small bridge over the Vistula. I even ran after my father to watch it burn. For me it was fun. I thought it was a celebration for me, that the fire and all the noise were fireworks.

Bonne maman started visiting farms in the countryside outside Warsaw in order to buy what she could. The most important item at the time was bread. She went looking for flour.

She sewed a special dress with pockets that she filled with flour. This remains etched in my memory. As soon as she came home, all perspired, the first thing we did was to empty the pockets and transfer the flour into sacs in order to keep it from spoiling. All that was in short supply. Today we laugh about it. It sounds so easy, but at the time there were neither plastic bags nor paper bags so we had to manage somehow.

And it was not *bon papa* who sold the stuff. At first, no sooner had she rested a little bit, the poor woman had to rush out again and distribute the merchandise. But later on, people who had placed orders and made downpayments (she needed the money in advance as she did not have the necessary cash to buy the flour) were notified that she was back and they came to the house. I remember the whole town coming to see *bonne maman* and us weighing and emptying these large containers full of flour.

POLAND

M. Was *bon papa* affected by the war? Did they try to draft him into the Russian army, or the Polish army if it existed?

R. I don't know. Nobody, especially the Jews, liked to see their children going into the army. So they tried various things. For example, if the oldest brother went into the army, he arranged for the others not to go, perhaps on the grounds that they had to help their parents or by reason of health. One managed as well as one could. It might have been better had *bon papa* gone, because then he might have become more aggressive about getting a job.

Early Schooling

M. Did you all go to school, boy and girls? Was it a Jewish school or Polish school?

R. At first we were still too young to go to school, and it was not yet compulsory. If we had been of school age, it would not have been free, and attending would have been out of the question, because we did not even have enough to live on. That is why, as I told you, *bonne maman* found it necessary to go out and make a living for us all.

M. When did you start school, was that after the 1914-18 war?

R. That's right. We could not start before '17 or '18. First there was that business of languages. For example, when *bonne maman* went to school in Pultusk, they were still using Russian in school. It was rare for a girl with her religious background to go to school, but grandfather felt that she was so intelligent, much more so than her brother who went to the *cheder*, and therefore sent her to school. Without even having gone to *cheder* she was said to have read Hebrew and the prayers better than he did, even with *cheder*.

I don't remember exactly when I started school. It must have been at a young age since I was very young when I graduated. It was not a public school. School was not compulsory at the time. Maybe at age 8? *Bonne Maman* had managed to teach us, because we knew how to read a little and we probably waited for school to start in Polish or German.

M. In what language did you study?

R. I studied in Polish. We waited for the war to end, because during the war we were caught in the middle with the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other. It was either at the end of the war or in 1917, but I do not know whether my parents had enough money to pay tuition, because education was not free. All I can remember is that Maurice went to *cheder* because that starts very early.

Zionism/Communism

M. Is that where you got your first Zionist ideas?

R. Not at all. I was not a Zionist, quite the contrary. I was attending a private Polish school, where the boys and girls were in separate classes. I must have been about 13, almost 14, when I first heard about Communism. The Party was banned, as were all parties, under Pilsudski ¹ who was more or less a fascist. I had a friend in my class who was a little older than me, because as I told you I was always one or two years ahead in school. So if I was 13, she was probably 15 when she started telling me about all the meetings she attended, etc....I became interested in them and

¹ President of Poland

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she described them to me. It was my first exposure to Communist or Socialist organizations and to the fact that the workers had grievances.... As it was after 1917, we also started discussing the Russian Revolution if only in books. I clearly remember that my first contact occurred at the time of my *bachot*². I learned through my friend that my math teacher had gone to the May Day demonstration, which was strictly forbidden at the time. I did not know then that he was a member of the Communist Party. We never saw him again. I found out from her that he had been arrested and jailed, because belonging to the Communist Party was forbidden.

My first encounter with Zionism was also in school at about the same time. That may be why I developed the feeling that Zionism and Socialism were closely linked. It was not the patriotic idea of a Jewish homeland that attracted me to Zionism. Rather, the *kibbutz* was for me something like the *kolkhoz* (collective), which to me was the epitome of socialism. I became involved with the Hashomer Hatzair, i.e. the young Jewish scouts if you will, in the last two years before the *bachot*. My father had always worried that I was leaning towards Communism. Therefore it was with a feeling of relief that he allowed me to attend meetings of the Hashomer Hatzair, since it was not banned by the government.

M. This need to join, did it arise from anti-Semitism? Did you feel anti-Semitism? What made you feel that it would be good to have a Jewish state? Did you feel persecuted, alien in Poland?

R. Persecuted yes. I felt that life was very hard for my parents even though things had improved after the war. Business was better. *Bonne maman* could afford a helper, which was a necessity to allow her to engage in business. She needed someone to mind the baby, take care of the house and prepare meals while the three of us were in school

The idea of communal living in Israel I attracted me to Hashomer Hatzair by. I did not think much about the Jewish question. While I reasoned that it was better to have a homeland where one could live better than in Poland, I was not very enthusiastic about it, and I attached much less weight to this national issue than to the social question. For me the ideal was to live differently in a *kibbutz*, rather than to engage in business and live like the middle class. And that was in spite of the fact that my first contacts with people who had returned from Palestine was with people who had left the *kibbutz* and were upper middle class Jews who were also Zionist, but who had found life in Palestine much too hard.

² Baccalaureate exam. Final High School exam, based on French system.

BELGIUM

Antwerp

M. When did go to Belgium?

R. We left in '27. *Bonne maman* move to the center of Antwerp and opened a small restaurant, almost like a family pension. There were members of the Eckstein ³ family already in Antwerp in the diamond business. They, along with friends and acquaintances, came to eat there. They brought Uncle Sam, my future brother-in-law. For a while things went well: the place became known by word of mouth and had quite a few customers. But then, softhearted *bonne maman* started extending credit, and eventually the business failed.

Alice helped in the restaurant while I went to work in a cigarette factory. I remember that. I think I worked for almost a year. It was hard work, but it provided me with my first contact with working class people, because up to that time in Poland I had not met any. All I knew about them was from my teacher and my little friend, who were both middle class, not working class.

M. Is that where you learned French?

R. Not at all. Antwerp was Flemish. I could not make myself understood (my native tongue was Polish.) So I learned to speak Yiddish. The only social life I could find, was in Jewish circles. Since I had already been a member of Hashomer Hatzair in Poland, I sought them out when I first arrived in Antwerp. That is where I met Dolly, my future husband [Jacques Gunzig], and made many friends.

M. The name Dolly, where does it come from?

R. It's his name from scouts. In the beginning the Hashomer Hatzair were very much like scouts. They gave themselves names, called *totems*, derived from Kipling's Jungle Book. For example, my brother in law Baghi's name is actually his *totem* and is short for Baghera, the panther.

Hashomer Hatzair is also where the idea of leaving for Palestine was born. In Poland I had not thought much about it, because had I stayed in Poland I would probably have gone to Medical School. But in Belgium, given our precarious financial circumstances, I could not see an acceptable future for myself. So I told myself, that since it looked attractive, I would give the *Kibbutz* a try.

³ Rachel's father's relatives

Palestine

Departure

I did not go to *Harshara*, the training program for Kibbutz life. The reason my departure was rushed was that several boys had received permission to go to Palestine. A special document, like a visa, if you will, was required to go there. It was issued by the British who were occupying Palestine. The Zionist movement considered it poor practice to give a certificate to a single girl, because it would essentially waste one unit of the quota.⁴ So the girls arranged marriages of convenience, (marriages of convenience have followed me through life!). I married Eliezer Reich, I remember it very well, who was older than me. He had been teaching me Hebrew. I had learned Yiddish in Antwerp and started learning Hebrew at the same time.

I left for Palestine either at the end of '28 or the beginning of '29 with a rather large Belgian contingent. . When I arrived there, there were very few Belgians in Palestine, except for the ones we had married in Antwerp and who finally scattered. As they were older than us, they went to existing kibbutzim with people their own age.

M. Were there many kibbutzim at the time?

R. At the time there were not as many as today. There was a major one in Petach Tikvah. There was one between Haifa and Hadera whose name I don't remember. There was one in Hadera proper, but it did not work out for me. They were much older than we were.

M. Were the kibbutzim organized by age, you said they were older?

R. Yes. They tried to arrange for the kibbutzim to have people of the same age. I stayed in an already existing kibbutz in Hadera while waiting to join my Polish friends who arrived a few months later. I think it was called Em Shemer ⁵. As to the Belgian kibbutz, the young Belgians with whom I was in Hashomer Hatzair, came perhaps 2-3 years later, because they had to wait for entry permits. They did the same thing we had done; the men married young women because that way they always came as a couple so-called.

Today there are two kibbutzim from that time, one made up mostly of Poles from Warsaw and Lodz, and another one of Belgians who arrived later. That is why, when I go to Israel today, I have friends in Hadera, including one who came from Lodz, and whom I have seen again a couple of times when I was in Israel. He has played a major role, as did all the kibbutzim, in the War of Independence and several members are buried in the kibbutz itself, because we were surrounded by Arabs everywhere. And of course, the British who did not want to withdraw encouraged the Arabs.

Life on the Kibbutz

⁴ The British had established an annual quota system, which was based on family units. Thus a single individual or a family both represented one unit and therefore using a unit for a single person was effectively a waste of one or more potential immigrants.

⁵. This may be the settlement of Shomeira in Upper Galilee near the Lebanese border

PALESTINE

M. And what did you do in the kibbutz?

R. We were assigned work on a rotating basis. When we were at full strength we had about 100 people. I think that we had to do the same work for a month, either on the kibbutz or outside, and then rotated jobs. On the *kibbutz*, people were assigned to kitchen or to dining hall duty or were given laundry assignments, which were very hard. We had no washing machines; we had to walk very far for water and had to light a fire to heat it. It was not a trivial task.

The third job assignment, which was essential to the survival of the *kibbutz*, was outside the kibbutz where we earned the cash that we needed to support ourselves financially. We were receiving some financial support from Hashomer Hatzair headquarters or from the party ⁶, which already existed in Palestine and directed, if you will, from the top all of the existing *kibbutzim* of the Hashomer Hatzair. However, this support was inadequate.

In addition to the *kibbutzim*, there were the *moshavim*. These were [and are] cooperatives whose members owned their own land and houses, but worked the fields cooperatively. It was like a collective, but they did not live together like we did, and furnished their own meals. They supplied their labor, for which they got paid, or shared what they earned. It was not like us.

When we first arrived all we had was a piece of land surrounded by barbed wire, because the Arabs did not welcome us and viewed us as intruders. We had to drain the *wadis* (swamps) and everybody contracted malaria, including me. We had no houses and were living in tents. It is only much later that we built a combination dining room/kitchen because we were afraid to light fires in the tents.

Much later still, we were able to start a garden, and grow carrots, tomatoes and some corn, for our own consumption. I enjoyed this work very much, but it was not easy either. We had to get up very early, 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, before the sun got too hot to water the garden. At first we covered the garden with gauze to keep the sun from beating too hard on it. Much later, we built greenhouses and we had to open them up to a certain time, clean them etc. I liked that better than immersing my hands in dirty, soapy or not so soapy (because we were short of soap too.) water.

The Orange Groves

M. Didn't you work in orange groves?

R. Yes, we took turns doing that. We worked the garden or picked oranges and lemons. It was hard work. It was really a very, very hard life. We had to get up very early and walk an hour and sometimes more in the sand. One had to be athletic in order to manage, to take long strides in order to reach these *pardesim*⁷.

Then we started picking. That part was nice, because we were hungry and thirsty, and when the guards were not looking, we could eat. Eating the oranges still cool from the night, washed by the morning dew was our dessert, our best meal. We ate as much as we could. We could only take them when we were high up in the trees on a ladder, because then, even when they looked, the guards could not see us.

⁶ Poale Zion, the Labor Zionist Party

⁷ Orange groves.

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M. Why, because it was private property, you worked for them?

R. Oh sure.

M. You were doing this to earn cash?

R. Yes, precisely.

M. How long did you stay in Palestine?

R. I returned in 1932.

M. Why did you leave?

On Strike

R. As I already explained to you, when I arrived in Palestine I was already mentally predisposed to join a left wing political party. Then little by little my attention was drawn to various problems. For example we had to join the union. There were both Jewish and Arab workers and we had to fight to get these jobs, because the Arabs worked for much less pay.

One day the union called a strike because the employers had threatened to employ only Arabs if we did not accept a cut in wages. [They were arguing that the business was not earning enough, the usual arguments. Today employers say the exact same thing.] We were told to keep out the Arabs because of the strike,

M. The employers, were they Jewish or Arab?

R. Oh, they were Jews. Do you think for a moment that the Arabs would hire us? It was a tricky situation for the owners. On the one hand, they felt uncomfortable not giving jobs to Jews, because the unions had considerable influence and they knew that we were preparing for a Jewish state etc.. They also felt threatened by the Arabs, and were telling themselves that if they did not have Jews around them, that it would not go well with them. These were people who had lived there for a long time.

So we had to prepare for a strike and keep the Arabs out, because they were supposedly taking our jobs and working for less pay. I remember standing at the entrance of a *Parde*s discussing the situation with a friend from Lodz, the one I saw later on during my visits to Israel. We could not understand what was going on. The union was Socialist Zionist and belonged to the *Poale Zion* (Labor Zionist) movement. It was not Communist, because Hashomer Hatzair had a socialist orientation, left wing socialist in its *kibbutz* life style etc.

We thought it was odd. We felt that as socialists we should have been organizing the Arabs so they would demand the same pay as ours rather than doing the reverse, namely keeping the Arabs out. Then, if we found that we were paid too little, everybody should go on strike. That's what we were discussing. We were not happy. On a couple of occasions we had to get rough with the Arabs. I did not like it. It made me feel like a police officer.

That evening back at the *kibbutz*, we discussed the matter. Many people reached the same conclusion that I had, and we said, "No, we don't want to be policemen, that is not our role." We did not cover all the issues that evening, and agreed to discuss them further another day.

We held a rather stormy session. There was a *kibbutz* administration, a secretariat made up of people who took care of public relations, looked for work for us and maintained liaison with Hashomer Hatzair headquarters. They told us: "Let it drop, we will ask for some higher up of the Hashomer Hatzair to come so we can discuss it all together "

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When the Communists got wind of this, they came to the kibbutz to recruit us to their side. They told us that we should stay as long as possible to sow a seed that would probably bear fruit. Personally I did not like that approach either. I was too young and really (her emphasis) too revolutionary. It was dirty politics and felt the same as the bad union politics. I told myself no, if I really have to leave the kibbutz because of these ideas I will leave it entirely, I cannot stay. This situation lasted a while, a few months. The higher ups of the Hashomer Hatzair, the old timers, came to discuss matters with us. They did not want to lose us. They could feel that a new wind was blowing, probably not only in our kibbutz but in other kibbutzim as well.

All I know is that the evening came when we had to decide whether or not to leave the kibbutz. There was a vote. I think it went, I wouldn't say three quarters, but fifty fifty. I know that many people left. The proof is that I met many of them in Tel Aviv. Many went to Jerusalem.

[Marcel provides a somewhat different and expanded version of this episode in a story he started writing about Rachel. His narrative is based on this interview and other exchanges with Rachel.]

One evening after a particularly acrimonious discussion, a man she had never seen before approached her as she was leaving the communal dining room. He introduced himself as a member of the then illegal Communist Party, and pointed out that her arguments coincided with the aims of the Party. "Only when there is justice for all will Jews also find justice," he said. He talked for a long time describing the International Workers' Revolution that was bound to bring about a great new society.

In the end, he asked her if she would join the Party. Since she already had sympathy for its aims, she accepted, without realizing the impact that this commitment would have on her future.

"It was the beginning of something which affected my whole adult life. I had joined the Party, which represented the future, the avant-garde: the Communists were the romantic revolutionaries of our time, just as Che Guevara is to many young people today. Unfortunately joining the Party also meant accepting Party discipline, which meant in fact giving up your understanding of events, and accepting instead the Party's interpretation. This would lead to tragic outcomes for so many of us in years to come. But at the time, it was a great feeling of security to think that somebody had all the answers..."

After congratulating her on her decision he explained in great detail where, and how, and when they would meet, and what her duties were as a Party member.

"What do you want me to do as a first assignment?" she asked him.

"First you should tone down your rhetoric and accept your union's position, at least on the surface..."

"What? !", she exclaimed, "you just said that I had the correct ideas in this dispute and that this was also the position of the Party, and now you're asking me not to speak out?"

"Hold it! Let me explain! And keep your voice down. You are twenty-one years old, popular in your kibbutz, and you will most likely go far in the union hierarchy, if you accept their position. In fact, though, you would be working for us, and when the time is right, we'll tell you what to do."

She was thinking back of that meeting while watering the garden knowing she had to make a decision soon. But something in her rebelled at the thought of having to say one thing and believe another. "I can't do it!" she decided at last, "Next month I am not going back to the orchard grove and keep the Arab workers from crossing the picket lines." She resigned from the kibbutz as many others did for

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similar reasons and went to Tel Aviv to see her Party contact in order to explain how she felt. "I'm still with you, of course, but I need more direct action," she explained. He was disappointed but he knew that she had made her decision and that nothing he said would change her mind.]

After the Kibbutz

The saddest period of my stay in Palestine was in Tel Aviv. I found myself alone, without. Family Even if I had had any, the thought would never have occurred to me to go looking for them. I contacted the Communist Party. I had to work and eat; the Party did not feed us. So what I to do? The same as Spanish and Italian women do today: do housework. But doing housework in a Jewish bourgeois home is atrocious. You cannot imagine. There, I preferred kibbutz life. That is why, seeing no future I gave up and wrote home. Well, you know *bonne maman*, when she heard I was doing housework for a living she immediately called out "come back, come back". But it turned out that it was not that easy. I needed a visa and my parents could not argue that I was a minor returning home. I was already of age and married, and my husband was planning to remain in Palestine, in Petach Tikvah (I think he was in Ben Gurion's kibbutz). We had seen each other several times; he had come to see me. (I did not much like visiting him.) He had hoped that I would return to his kibbutz and that we would stay married but we had different ideas and did not think alike. I was much more revolutionary, while he was really pure Zionism. He was very well educated in Torah etc. We did not have the same temperament.

Belgium 1932-36

Antwerp

R. I don't know what borders I crossed nor who helped me cross into Belgium. I probably traveled on a Polish passport, because we had not been in Belgium long enough to apply for naturalization and my husband was Polish too. That nationality was not popular with Belgium and I had trouble returning legally. So after I returned I had to legitimize my stay. I think my parents applied to the ministry. They already lived in Charleroi, where they owned a bookshop, having given up their restaurant in Antwerp. As they lived in a place with a store front facing the street and since bon papa always at home with his nose buried in his books, it was proposed that he sell newspapers, which he did: Polish and Italian papers for the miners, as well as Jewish papers. They struggled, but they managed to make a living that way. There was enough to eat, they were not unhappy. But they never managed to save any money so they could help others. They did help people though, but at their own expense [i.e. at the expense of necessities for themselves.]

I did not want to go to Charleroi, because if the authorities came looking for me they would come to my parents' house.

I decided to stay with aunt Alice in Antwerp. It was very convenient for her. Because I did not have any official papers, I could not go out safely. So, I essentially became her housekeeper and took care of Maurice. I loved Maurice a lot, he was a lovely child, very bright and very active, but pure gold. He became very fond of me and I remember hearing him speak his first words and seeing him take his first steps. Later on, when I visited, he never left my lap, he nestled there. He loved me a lot and it remains that way for both of us.

My parents were eventually able to regularize my return. The authorities were not as strict then as they are now, they did not engage in witch-hunts. After I received my residency permit I moved out of Alice's house, because I did not want to stay with her.

I enrolled at the University to become a pharmacist. I had wanted to study medicine, but I knew it would take too long and that we could not afford it. So I went to the *Université du Travail*¹ in Charleroi instead. My Polish *bachot* certificate qualified me for admission without an entrance exam, except that I was required to take a French language test. I remember writing to them that I did not yet understand French, implying that I had come there to study, although I actually did know some French, because the Jews in Antwerp spoke it and I spoke French with the baby. Not well you know. At the University I studied literature (not in great depth), which I liked a lot, and which I already knew from reading it in Polish or German. I also spoke German with Dolly who spoke it fluently, but with a very heavy Czech accent.

I learned French pretty well. It got to be ridiculous. When we wrote compositions or took a spelling test, I got better grades than my poor little Belgian, Walloon classmates. These "poor"

¹ This was the same school that my cousin David Dushman attended around 1936. It is the rough equivalent of a Community College.

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girls were not poor financially, but were culturally deprived. You see Charleroi was a small town (it has grown since.) At the time, the mines provided most of the jobs and all the shops around them depended on the miners.

M. Did Dolly also go to Palestine?

R. Yes, but he left before me, and returned after me. Not very much later.

M. Did you know each other?

R. We knew each other in *Hashomer Hatzair*, but did not pay attention to each other. It was a matter of age. You see, to a young girl like me he looked like a mature man (*comme un Monsieur*.) but as you grow older the impact of the age difference decreases

Dolly had taken a different route. His parents owned a bookstore in Antwerp that was run by the girls. There were three girls ², and only one boy.

He went to *Harshara* in Holland. There he learned to milk cows, handle horses and do real farm work. Actually it was a very naive program. Perhaps today they have farms like these Dutch farms in Israel, but at the time there were none and it would have been more useful to learn to pitch a tent.

When Dolly returned from Israel he asked that we get together, because we were rather cut off from our former friends. The Hashomer Hatzair did not greet us back with open arms. After all, we had abandoned the front lines. As to the Party, I knew that they would eventually contact me, but did not know how or when. Well, the contact turned out to be Dolly. Since he lived in Antwerp, he was the first one to be contacted and he asked me to see him on my next trip to Antwerp. I used to go there from time to time to visit Alice etc, and find out about things. This is the way we were drawn into the Party. Afterwards, we did not get to live together very long.

The Barcelona Workers' Games

A few years later, in '36, the civil war started in Spain. An Olympiad was supposed to take place in Barcelona, Spain, that year but it was cancelled, because you surely remember, Hitler held his own [in Berlin] at the same time. It reminds me of the Olympic games in the United States that the Soviet Union boycotted.

[The segment that follows is somewhat garbled in its details. Specifically, the official Olympic Games took place in Berlin in July '36. Earlier that year, in May, the international labor federations had decided to organize competing games in Barcelona to be called the Workers' Games. This action was taken to protest Germany's introduction of racial and religious criteria for participation in their games.³ These alternate games were cancelled a week after they started because of the onset of the civil war, and the participants were evacuated to France.]

M. Did Hitler hold his own Olympiads?

R. Yes, he held large Olympic Games that were far better attended than those in Spain.

² Gina, Sabine and Hilda. At the time Hilda (the youngest daughter) was already married and had moved to Palestine. Gina, the oldest child, (who was to raise Bob after the war) was working as an executive secretary in a grain importing firm and perhaps worked in the shop after hours. Sabine (Bob's mother) was probably the only one working full time in the shop. Their father, Asriel died in '31. The shop closed around '34-'35. Their mother died in '35.

³ New York Times, May 17 1936.

M. People don't know that the games were supposed to be held in Spain. Everybody knows that they were supposed to be held in Berlin.

R. Exactly, because he had said that he wanted a pure race, and that he probably would not have allowed Jews to come to Berlin. Anyway, the ASC sent athletes to these games.

M. What is the ASC?

R. It was an organization like the *Soi*⁴ but for athletes. There were many athletes involved. I first went to Spain with *asc*. We needed a cover to get into Spain, so I went as a press representative. Another who went was Dov Lieberman.⁵

M. Why did you need a cover? Had the civil war started? Were you going for the war?

R. Because we were not really going for the Olympiad, but rather to observe what was happening in Spain⁶ and report back to the Party in Belgium.

So, we arrived at the beginning of the civil war. Barcelona had been bombed, but we chose to hold the opening torch parade anyway. We started marching and the town was bombed again. It was not worth continuing. The games were cancelled.

M. It was bombed by whom, the Franco forces?

R. No, by the Germans.

M. When was that?

R. It was in '36.

M. The Germans were already bombing Spain during the Olympic games?

R. Oh yes, at the request of Franco.

M. While the Olympic Games were in progress?

R. Yes. They were practicing in Spain for the '40-'44 war.

When we saw what was happening, as Party members, we wanted to remain in Spain. Several people who had been in the Jewish branch of the Party in Belgium earlier and who had left in '32 had become *apparachiks* in Spain. We (Dov and I) went to see them. When we asked how we could join in the war effort, they told us there was no question of us doing so because I had come as a journalist and Dov as a director of *asc*, the athletic group. They told both of us, "you brought the young people here, you are responsible to their parents and since there is war on you must go back with them." I was heartbroken. They told me that all I had to do was to ask the Party in Belgium to send me back as a pharmacist. I thought this was a good idea.

We then returned to Belgium. The trip was very difficult. We could not take the route we had taken to come in.⁷ I remember returning by ship to Sete in Southern France, probably from a place where we could board a ship and sail for France. Fortunately everybody returned safely.

Brussels '36

⁴ *Solidarité*, a Communist organization. ASC was probably *Association Sportive Communiste*

⁵ A party comrade whose name will appear again during the occupation and after the liberation.

⁶ There had been considerable unrest in Spain in the months preceding the outbreak of the civil war, abetted by extremists from both the right and the left and travel to Spain was probably restricted.

⁷ NY Times articles of the period indicate that road and rail communications around Barcelona were disrupted by the fascists.

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When I returned I was one exam short of getting my diploma. We were living in Brussels and I was serving my pharmacist internship in Antwerp. This internship was a graduation requirement. I eventually passed my exam. I remember being sick as a dog and running a 39 ° [102° F] fever that day. That is why I did not do too well. Had the professor not known me from daily contact, he would not have passed me. But I told him that I was running a fever. I came home with a terrible bronchitis. Still, I passed and received my diploma. I was living with Dolly at the time and through him had easy access to the Party, including Lalmand, who was to become the Party Secretary in Belgium. At first Dolly did not explain to me why we had to move suddenly to Brussels. To me it did not matter as I could easily commute to Antwerp and complete my internship.

Eventually Dolly told me why we had moved to Brussels: he was a member of the *MOI*, *Movement Ouvrier International* ⁸, or something like that, and had been put in charge of helping volunteers who wanted to join the International Brigade get to France on their way to Spain. They had to be smuggled across borders, because it was illegal to send volunteers to Spain. The majority of the volunteers at the time came from Eastern countries: anti-fascists from Germany, many from Poland, even some from the Polish-Russian border area, etc.... They were mostly democrats, but there were also many spies and Nazis among them who were much better organized than we were.

The Party assigned Dolly the task of leading them into France, using back roads, to avoid falling into the hands of the Belgian police. France was more tolerant of them because the Blum [Popular Front] Government was in office at the time. That government lasted from '34 to '36, two years, no more.

Why did they give that job to Dolly? Besides being a member of the *MOI*, he was working with architects, and thanks to the bookstore that the parents had in Antwerp, he knew printers etc.⁹

M. What was his profession, did he have one?

R. No, he had no profession. He knew how to type. He knew several languages. He edited books. He worked with architects who gave him brochures and photos of houses that they had built and he turned them into books. With this work and what he sold in the bookstore he earned a modest living. At the time I was not earning anything because I was working for a pharmacy owned by *Yids* who did not pay me. In contrast, friends of mine who were also interning were paid a little, but they received something. In my internship I worked frequently alone, and never received a penny, but I did not complain because I wanted to stay in Antwerp.

Prelude to Spain '36

After a while things started getting hot. When you cross once a border once, twice, three times, the fourth time the border police grows suspicious and Dolly started feeling that he was being followed. Remember at the time all the Western Countries had declared their neutrality in the Spanish Civil War, and while they tended to close their eyes when it came to the sale of arms,

⁸ International Workers' Movement

⁹ She seems to imply that his occupation provided a good cover, since he was not tied to a desk and did a fair amount of traveling.

they took a dim view when it came to sending people.

This episode finally came to an end one day when I was at home alone in our second floor apartment on the Rue du Trone, near the Royal Palace, [in Brussels] and the bell rang. It was the police.

I was afraid it was bad news about Dolly. *Le Drapeau Rouge*¹⁰ was lying on the bed, and for some reason I had covered it at the last moment with a copy of *Le Soir*,¹¹ which was a very large format newspaper. I did not have time to hide anything. The cops came in, glanced at the paper on the bed [they could not see the *Drapeau*], showed no interest in it, and searched the apartment. They asked me what my husband did for a living. I showed them the brochures that he was publishing. I happened to have some new ones handy.

"Do you know whether your husband is engaged in other matters? Oh you are not married?" they inquired.

"I don't know of any. I only know about this work." I said.

M. Were you married to each other at the time?

R. No. I was still married to Eliezer Reich at the time.

M. When did you get the divorce?

R. Much later, by correspondence. About the time Edgard was born [June '38]. The official documents came later.

I managed all right with the police. They told me to tell Dolly to come to the police station in a few days and left. When he came home, I told Dolly about the visit and we decided that the time had come to get out. He knew that he had been followed, and here was the evidence. This could mean prison.

M. What was the charge?

R. The charge was "recruitment of mercenaries" or some similar charge.

¹⁰ The Communist newspaper

¹¹ A conservative newspaper

Spain

Travel to Spain

Dolly went to Party headquarters in Brussels. Lalmand, the Party secretary, was there and told him to leave immediately without asking permission from the Party. He gave him the address of the recruiting office in Paris where it was allowed to function openly by the French government.

I did not want to stay in Belgium. The people in Spain had promised me that I could return and I wanted to go back. I now had the necessary credentials and was ready to go to work. I had already worked for a year in a pharmacy. Dolly said, "If you ask Lalmand [the Party secretary] he will say no. So, come with me to Paris without asking anyone. The man in Paris is easy to get along with and will agree to your coming along. Once we have crossed the border it will be easy. In case we are arrested and since we are not married, I will say we are on a little escapade and that you have nothing to do with my activities. Let's go and see what happens."

Well, in Paris I met this man Lehmans [the Belgian Party representative] who asked laughing: "And you, comrade, do you have a letter for me from Lalmand?" I told him the truth, that I had just finished my studies, had worked for a year and hoped to go to Spain. I also told him that I had already been in Spain, but the Party there had not allowed me to stay.

He said, "OK, as far as I am concerned you are free to go."

He gave us passports or identity cards and we left (we did not stay in Paris) for an assembly point in Pertinent or in its vicinity. We were to wait there for the Spanish border runners who were supposed to come that evening or the next day. We always stayed a very short time in a place in order to avoid police interference. Even though the Blum government was in office, they did not have time to change everything and the police remained pretty much as before, pro-fascist. You know, in '34-'36 the fascists came close to seizing power. We waited, everything went well and the border crossers came for us. There were people there from all over the world.

M. Were you supposed to be part of a Belgian delegation or were it really international.

R. No, international. Because, as I told you, Dolly had met several people whom he had helped cross into France. They came from all over the world, some from the depths of Poland, Czechoslovakia, etc. but not knowing French they had had trouble finding Lehmans in Paris.

Because the French had the border under surveillance we went singly or in very small groups through the railroad tunnel that separated France from Spain, watching for trains and the French police. Thus we crossed through the tunnel to Port Bou on the Spanish side, and then went on to Barcelona by train. It was a spectacular sight. Spain was still a pretty undeveloped, rugged, country then, not like today, and we were in awe of the sights as we traveled with the Mediterranean on one side and the mountains on the other.

From Barcelona we went directly to Albacete, which was the assembly area from which the new arrivals were sent out on their assignments, to the front and elsewhere.

There, we were met by André Marti, the hero of the Black Sea, who ended up badly because he was accused of being an agent of the French Police, which is unimaginable. He was a very hard man, hard as nails. I was afraid of him, because I had been told that he was very

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misogynous. He did not like women, he considered them a nuisance and felt that they were a distraction in a war such as this one, and that he had already enough nurses. He sometimes was right.

Assignment in Spain

We lined up on the square, a huge square, in Albacete, men and women. Dolly was in one line and I was in another. Marti approached. I was trembling like a leaf.

"What do you do? Nurse? Out" he said to the first woman

"Nurse? Out." he said again to the next and the next.

"And you too are a nurse?" he asked as he came to me

"No," I answered, "pharmacist."

" You stay" he said.

I felt relieved.

After everybody had been assigned, they assigned us living quarters. That same evening or the next day, I don't remember which, we were received by Dolores Ibarruri ¹² who came to welcome us. She told us she was happy to see us there in the cause of freedom. We cheered her, we cheered each other.

The Pharmacy

My story begins in Albacete. I was assigned to work in the pharmacy which was set up in a beautiful oriental style house with grape arbors on the side, amid orange groves and with wonderful aromas.

I was assigned as an assistant to the pharmacist, a French Jew and supposedly a very good comrade. Along with an Austrian woman the three of us ran the pharmacy. Well, one day we discovered that he was *etheromane*., i.e. inhaled ether. This of course was dangerous, because these people eventually go insane.

How did we discover this? Our job was to supply battalions, especially at the front, and hospitals with all the medicines, anesthetics and everything else they needed. But somehow we were always running short of ether no matter how much we received. Most of it came from France or through France because all the donations were sent to France and from there they were sent to us.

I started wondering when I noticed that there always was a faint ether odor in the house, which I could not stand. At first I thought the odor came from the transfer of ether from large containers to small bottles, like liter bottles, no larger. We did not use larger bottles, because we did not have any. Then I discovered that the aroma came from his room. Thus, little by little I discovered that our man was *etheromane*. It turned out that he was not a comrade, but had committed petty larceny. The Party in France was pretty large and some who said they were Party members were plain mercenaries or sometimes people who were recruited simply because they knew how to fire a gun. Who among us, knew how to shoot?. No one!

The pharmacist was dismissed and sent home, because one doesn't go to jail for that offense.

¹² Internationally known as *La Passionara*

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I was put in charge of the pharmacy. Because there were too few of us, and because we supported all the fronts, two Argentine male and a Czech woman pharmacists were added to the staff. I don't know what happened to the poor woman. I saw her once at the second Dombrsaw¹³ Congress, (the name of the Polish Brigade, meaning "For our freedom and yours.") I still have that badge. In addition a few Spanish girls helped us with the household chores, housecleaning, preparing meals, etc. and because I traveled a lot I was assigned a pickup truck.

Dolly was sent directly to Army headquarters where he knew someone: Schaelbroek, from the Communist youth movement in Brussels, and with whom he was later caught and sent to Mauthausen [during the war]. Schaelbroek worked in Andre Marti's secretariat. Dolly was angry that instead of sending him to a military training camp they had sat him behind a desk. He created a row from the beginning.

"I did not come for this. I want to go to the front. I want to fight. That is why I came."

Dolly did not stay there long. He kept complaining until Marti got tired of him, and they sent him to an officer's school at Paso Rubio and from there he left for the front. He was a good horseman, because, as I already told you, he had been in Palestine and before that had gone to Harshara in Holland where he learned horseback riding.

M. Did they have cavalry in Spain at the time?

R. Yes they did. Can you imagine what cavalry could do against tanks? It was like in the Soviet Union later on. They did not learn anything. Because, they too, like the Poles, kept attacking German tanks with cavalry at the outset of the war.

Dolly issued me a pass, not as a personal favor but because I needed it, that allowed me to travel very close to the front with the pick up truck to deliver supplies.

Highjacking Incident

One day I had an incident with a German driver. He spoke pretty good French, but we knew he was German. He was going to drive me to Madrid, but because it was very far away and we could not use the direct roads, we were going stop at the American Hospital on the way and spend the night there. The American Hospital, which was installed in the king and queen's summer home, was perhaps 20-50 km from Madrid.

At one point he studied the map (I had no idea where we were) and turned off the highway.

"Why are you going this way? Is it not straight ahead?" I asked

"No" he answered.

Just as he said that I noticed a *Gardia Civil*¹⁴ across the road. Well the *Gardia Civil* were Fascists, the enemy.. What should I do? I always carried a small revolver. We had been shown how to use one, but I knew I could never do it. Even if I had to, I wouldn't know how, neither would I have had the heart. But I put it to good use anyway.

I drew my gun and told him: "Turn around immediately. We are not going that way."

He thought that the gun was loaded, which it actually was, and perhaps at the last moment I

¹³ In Poland after the war.

¹⁴ National Police

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would have decided to kill him, because I knew that I would have been killed if I had fallen into the hands of the Fascists. He turned pale, obeyed and turned the truck around. Unfortunately, I did not know how to drive, so I ordered him to drive and stop at the fountain where I had seen passers-by and planned to wait for a Spaniard to come by and ask him to get someone to fetch somebody from the American Hospital. The driver drove on a little bit, then jumped out and fled, leaving me stranded with the truck.

We sent for someone to get help from the American Hospital. They came and were absolutely charming. The reason I wanted to go there was that I knew that they had many supplies that we needed. There were no antibiotics then, of course, but they had *cat gut* [a French term!] which are special surgical needles that are aseptic, etc and the necessary thread. That's what we were short of.

When we asked Paris for supplies, they would send us all kinds of samples, especially female hygiene supplies, because they were inexpensive. You know, when pharmacists receive samples, they usually throw them away. So they chose to throw them away in Spain. But what we really needed, we had to buy.

When I told this story to Dolly he told me that indeed they had suspected the driver, but we were too trusting and did not place people like that under surveillance. It turned out that he was a German fascist who was posing as a political refugee.

I spent the night with the Americans, received what I needed and went on to Madrid.

As luck would have it Madrid was heavily bombarded on the day I arrived and we could not do very much. I had not come to go sightseeing, of course. I did not see anything, only the bombing and the people's courage. I went to the infirmary and delivered my supplies, which was the purpose of the trip.

Sometimes I was told not to go too close to the front in my pickup truck. At other times when it was necessary, I went because they could not send a truck to pick up the supplies from us. On still other occasions they would try to relieve doctors who had been at the front too long in one spot and send them back to the rear, if only for a short rest. When that happened, they notified us that they were coming, asked us to prepare certain supplies and took them back with the pickup truck that had brought the doctors. That's the way we operated, either they picked up supplies or I went and delivered them. For example on one occasion they sent back a physician, a Dr Neumann, who was of German origin. We had an enormous number of Germans who had come from the Soviet Union and I am sure that once they were repatriated, not one survived.¹⁵

We drove him to Barcelona in our pickup truck, because he had a lung disease and it was essential to get him to Switzerland. He was a big shot.

The Anarchists

This trip proved to be a good opportunity to get extra supplies. I knew that the Anarchists in

¹⁵ The Soviets arrested and eventually executed many returnees after the Spanish civil war and after World War II. The Soviet authorities felt that they had been turned by the West and could not be trusted. Some of the most dedicated Communists lost their lives as a result.

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Barcelona had supplies that we could use and that they did not need. They had swiped them but did not use them very much, because they were at the front to fight, not "to cure, to help".

Early on there were many partisans during the war in Spain who fought outside the international brigades but cooperated with them. Instead of being integrated officially into the Army along with the Spaniards, they were operating as partisans. Marti did not want me to give them pharmaceuticals because they were anarchists. However, Dolly would phone from time to time to tell me that someone [sent by the Anarchists] was going to come for supplies and instructed me to give him what they needed. There was a German comrade, who was fantastic. He was one of many who had come from the Soviet Union and had participated in the bloody revolt in Berlin. He would come to the pharmacy and I would give him supplies without asking anyone's permission. Later, during the retreat, I met a friend and asked after this person. He did not answer. Had he been killed? I wanted to know. He said he did not know.

So, when I arrived in Barcelona I looked them up. They were a very congenial bunch. I knew they had stretchers. There was a representative of the International Brigade, whose headquarters was in Paris, in each important town near the front. He was always either a German or a Frenchman. In Barcelona it was a Frenchman because it was so close to France. He organized many things, border crossings, etc. He was a very congenial young man from Marseilles; I'll always remember him. I just loved to hear him speak French ¹⁶. I told him what I needed. He said *sotto voce* "I'll get this for you. Listen... You know, they don't like women." (This is the same thing they had told me about that character Marti when I first arrived). "But I'll take you, and if you talk to them like you do now, they'll give you the stuff, because they have their hearts on their sleeves." That's exactly how it went. They promised to send me the stuff and perhaps a week later we got everything but in Valencia because it was too far for them to send the stuff all the way to Albacete, where we were stationed. This worked out fine for me, because from Valencia we could send the supplies directly to the front.

Marcel has more to say about her contact with this Anarchist:

....[while dealing with the Anarchists] she had learned to know and appreciate their openness and their heroism in battling the Fascists. She knew that they could not possibly be the 'traitors', which they had been made out to be by the official Party press...

.... She spent many hours with him, sharing a bottle of wine listening to his irreverent talk about her Communist friends. She mocked him when he said he had more to fear from the Communists than the Fascists. She was therefore profoundly shaken when a few weeks later she found out that he had been killed, with many of his comrades, not by the Franco rebels, but by 'a special unit that had been dispatched to Barcelona to restore a unified command and put an end to the Anarchist units who had been puppets of the Fascist forces.' "This should have opened my eyes to the truth" she said, "but it didn't. I believed so much in my ideals that I was blind to reality. And, occasionally there were real traitors to feed our beliefs..."

Drunken Driver Incident

I once had a French driver who had drunk heavily because he was so scared of going to the

¹⁶ Probably because of his Mediterranean accent. People from the Marseilles area speak with a very distinct regional accent, much the way a Houston accent is distinct.

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front. Half way, not even that, on our way to Valencia he missed the approach to a bridge and overturned the pickup truck. I think it was at the Ebro river. Fortunately, it was dry because it was summertime. There were four of us. We were taking someone who had been shell shocked at the front to the insane asylum, because we did not have one in Albacete. The accident actually caused him to recover! Yes I swear. He started talking lucidly and behaving rationally. We were all startled. I had two broken ribs. I was sitting next to the driver who was asleep! I was afraid that the truck would burst into flames. We were carrying medications that could catch on fire and we had locked the rear door to keep the shell-shocked passenger from escaping. He [the passenger] was banging, banging at the door, yelling "Let me out" He was an American, yelling in English. It was a crazy scene. I was banging with my hands and feet. Fortunately passers by saw us and brought a group of people including the *alcalde* ¹⁷ to help. The Spaniards were fantastic, especially to members of the International Brigade. They woke up the driver and I think they took him to jail. They opened the doors and helped us out. I don't remember what we did with the pickup truck. I know that they took the American to the psychiatric hospital in Barcelona.

I was dropped off at a place that was heaven on earth. It was a Rest and Recuperation center for people who had been too long at the front. There were quite a few Germans and Frenchmen there who did not understand each other and did not get along. And whom do I meet there? I meet the guy who had given me permission to go to Spain, the one I had seen in France. What great joy!. He knew that Dolly was Czech and spoke German.

"I am sure you speak German," he said:

"Yes, a little, I speak it with my husband." I answered

We exchanged news about my husband and then he told me that since I had to stay at the center, he wanted me to help him. I was not seriously injured but I hurt badly. I could not breathe and coughing was terribly painful. The X-rays showed one broken and one cracked rib. I didn't have to stay in bed but I could not travel because every bump would hurt.

He [Lehmans] said, "You must make peace here. I cannot do it myself, because I don't know German. We must improve morale." Well, we ended up having a good time. I made many good friends who later frequently came to visit me at the pharmacy. I stayed there at least a week.

Dolly's Assignment

M. Did you see Dolly from time to time?

R. Very rarely. As long as he was in Albacete, before going to the front, I saw him very often. During the day he worked at headquarters and at night he was given permission to live in my quarters. Fortunately there was also a Belgian there who was the political leader. We had asked ourselves and we asked him, whether we should live together, because others might be upset. We already knew that he was going to Paso Rubio [for training] and looking for a room for him in the village would be foolish. Each of us [at the pharmacy] had a room. "He'll sleep with you" he decided. I was delighted, so was Dolly. It did not last very long. He was sent to Paso Rubio where they had Russian instructors whom he liked quite a bit. I saw him from time to time. The last time

¹⁷ Local Justice of the Peace or equivalent

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was just before he left for the front. He was supposed to stay a few months. I was working at my job. After he left I became a woman, like all the others, who felt relief when we received a letter, and when we did not receive one wondered: "Where is he, is he still alive?" This was our lot. We had accepted it in advance. There was nothing we could do about it.

M. Did he go to the front as a private?

R. No, as an officer. He was supposed to lead a battalion. At the beginning they were not given independent assignments. He was sent to the Polish-Czech-Slav Brigade, people who spoke slavic languages. He sent regards from them and wrote about this Pollack, Bronik, who had been in the kibbutz with me in Hedera and whom I later met in Poland.

You asked me if I noticed dissension among the various groups. I think Dolly knew more about it than I did, because at the beginning he was closer to the center of things. That is why he wanted to get away from there, because he was tired of all the conflicts between the Germans, the Socialists, Communists, etc. They did not give, did not even talk of giving clothes or ammunition to the Anarchists or the Trotskyites, everything went to the Communist Party.

We knew this and rebelled a little against it. One thing we knew was that Spanish gold had gone to the USSR, yet they were telling us that all the war supplies were the free gift of the Soviet Union. We told ourselves, Dolly and I, that for all that gold they they could have sent us better supplies. They were sending us second hand material that very often did not fit together or had parts or ammunition would not fit the weapons. We felt that something funny was going on and that there was a lot of infighting for control within the leadership.

M. How long did that war last? When did you realize that it was a constant retreat and that it had to come to an end?

La Retirada- The Retreat

R. There were many casualties, it was a bloodbath. We had to retreat. We also noticed that we had a only a couple of planes and the other side had lots of them. They had Italian and German tanks and what did we have? And there was the alliance for non-intervention. Blum ¹⁸ was under pressure and knew he would have to resign or they would do it for him if he decided to help. The British did not want [to help] either. They felt it was better to have a war in Spain than one at home. And we insisted that they would eventually have this war, but they would not listen to us.

M. You gave birth in Mataró?

R. Yes. It was during the retreat. It was called the *retirada*; we abandoned territory little by little. Unfortunately those who were at the front in the South beyond Valencia were cut off, and it was a tragedy for me, because we were now in Mataró a few miles from Barcelona with the medical and pharmacy staff etc and I had no news from Dolly.

We were married by correspondence. Before leaving for Spain I had asked my husband, who had remained in Palestine, to institute divorce proceedings. About the time I left for Spain, he went to visit relatives in Poland, including his brother who was a lawyer and was able to provide

¹⁸ The French Socialist Prime Minister of the Popular Front Government.

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the necessary divorce documents. With these papers I was able to marry Dolly while I was in Barcelona. Because Dolly was at the front, the wedding had to be performed by proxy. A witness stood in for Dolly in Barcelona and another witness stood in for me at the other end. Following the ceremony I was able to register the baby under the name of Gunzig. It was not a critical matter, but since we knew the war was coming to an end, we felt it would be better for all of us to have the same name in returning to Belgium.

There was another occasion when I heard from Dolly. An Italian group was visiting the Italian volunteers at the front. There were quite a few Italians in Spain: there were the Fascists, but also quite a few in the brigades. The group was headed by Luigi Longo. I think he has since died. He became Party secretary in Italy after the war succeeding Togliatti, the famous leader who changed many things in the Italian Party and who later died in the Soviet Union.

He was in uniform; he was the political commissar of the Italian Brigade, which did very well. Dolly must have asked him, because he came specifically to see me and told me that "Dolly is there, he is a captain, he is highly regarded, etc." I asked, "When will he come?" He did not say "God willing", for sure. But I understood that the situation was critical. He said they were not fighting very hard, because it was not worth it, but they were trying to come out with honor.

A few days later Edgard met his father for the first time. I remember seeing Dolly in the distance and letting go of the baby carriage, which I had received from someone. It could have rolled away, but somebody caught it. It had been a year since I had last seen Dolly, so you can imagine how I felt. He took his son in his arms and the first thing the baby did was to make *pipi* on his uniform!

The worst part came later. We did not stay long in the area. When we saw all these soldiers straggling in, we knew there was no front left and that we were in danger of being taken hostage. The evacuation of the rear areas began and we were brought back to the border, near Port Bou.

We were three women, I think, with small children and without a drop of milk. During that period I had found milk perhaps on a couple of days, no more. How to prepare a bottle? One of the comrades I had helped earlier said "Do not worry you'll see, we will find milk for you". They brought us milk, we boiled it immediately, this way we had a few days' supply. It didn't last. I think we stayed there one night. Then trucks came, open trucks, and we crossed the border into France that very night.

Return from Spain

France

Women and children were interned, but it was relatively easy. We were not allowed to leave the place where they had taken us in central France in the Dordogne, I think, or in its vicinity. The mayor and his staff in City Hall were Socialist or Communist. They were ready to receive us and arranged everything. I think there were a hundred or more of us. In the camp there were Spanish women with their children, older people of both sexes and a few women from the brigades also with infants, but no men of course.

M. Where were the men?

R. They brought the men later. First, the men were bludgeoned like cattle at the border. They were very badly treated by the French police and border guards. "Reds, Reds" you see. They were sent to St Cyprien, and other camps along the Mediterranean coast. The worst for them was the cramped quarters, the filth, the wind and the sand, the total lack of sanitation. Even worse was that they were always being infiltrated by fascists, either Germans or others, who informed on those who had played a major role in Spain, either high-ranking military or political personnel. They suffered a lot, much more than the others.

Dolly was sent to St Cyprien. I found out that he was there from my mother. I had written her as soon as I arrived in France, as had Dolly. Dolly and I had agreed before our departure that if we should lose contact (e.g. I did not know where he was, because I received very few letters from the front.) that he would write to my mother and his mother, and I would do the same, informing them as well as we could of our whereabouts. I was very happy when I found out from my mother that he had reached France. I had feared that I would never see him again after that time when where Edgard made *pipi*. They had sent him out again even though the battle was over. I don't know why... Things started going very badly among the various parties as they started pulling for their own glory. I was very happy to know him there, out of immediate danger even though people did die in the camps.

M. How did you manage to leave camp and return to Belgium?

R. That was also a major problem. I had no passport. We were married, he had his Czech passport and I had nothing. First we needed an entry visa. The Belgian government, like the others, did not want the Reds to return. They were happy to be rid of us. Fortunately, Antwerp, where Dolly came from and where his whole family lived, had a well-known Socialist burgomeister¹⁹, Camille Huysmans, who died recently. He was a good man who collaborated with and did a lot

¹⁹ Mayor

for Spain. I think that he helped support hospitals in Spain, including a Belgian hospital with Belgian doctors and nurses. There were also friends that I met later in Poland.

Dolly's family, not mine, not Alice, moved heaven and earth with this burgomeister as well as tried to alert Dolly's old friends from the kibbutz and Poale Zion. With the help of both sides, he finally received the visa allowing him to return as if he were a new immigrant. It was great. Now what about me?

Return to Belgium, 1938

I did not even have a passport. Edgard was already six months old, I think; perhaps older so you can see how long this episode took. Since I spoke French better than the Spanish women did, I was assigned to do the marketing daily or two or three times a week. This meant going into town, (we were living in an unused school outside of town, because it was Summertime) and shopping for vegetables, and whatever else we needed. As soon as I received his address I wrote to Dolly directly and told him that he should come and fetch me.

M. How did you finally leave that camp with Edgard?

R. I went marketing as usual accompanied by the Spanish girl that I had coached for several days, without explaining why I had taken her with me. She was an intelligent girl and I told myself that even if I were to leave she would be able to continue to do the marketing. I introduced her to all the shopkeepers. Dolly arrived that evening and spent the night with us. The next morning I packed a few items for Edgard in a small suitcase he had brought with him. We then arranged for him to take Edgard out for a walk and then meet me at the railroad station and I went marketing with the Spanish girl as if nothing had happened.

M. There were no problems with the French? They allowed you to come and go freely?

R. Oh not quite. We were not in a camp with guards, but they came from time to time to see if we were all there, that the right number of people was there. It was a matter of eluding them, we were not under strict surveillance the way the men were. We did our marketing, I told the girl that I still had to see someone about buying fruit, vegetables or something like that and told her to go back with what we had. Instead of returning with her, I went to the railroad station. Dolly had noted the departure times and we timed our meeting so that in case she, or someone else had to report me missing, I would already be far away. I joined Dolly at the station and we left for Paris. That went quite well. I felt somewhat guilty because I had left the girl in a lurch, but on the other hand, as I had planned this project for some time I knew that she would manage.

In Paris we stayed with family and friends. The first step we needed to take was to add us, Edgard and me, to Dolly's passport, which already had a Belgian visa. We had our official marriage papers. His passport showed he was single. We left Edgard with friends and went to the Czech Embassy, which at the time was very pro-Spanish and rather leftist. They had lost many people in Spain and we knew what was going on in Czechoslovakia, which could only help. We were very lucky, the Czech official was very supportive and promptly added us to the passport

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on the basis of the Spanish marriage papers. The matter was settled. We went home and promptly returned to Belgium.

Belgium 1939-40

R. There, of course our logistical difficulties started: finding work, a place to live. Here we were with a nine months old baby. He had had his first tooth while in camp in France. He was doing very well. He was a magnificent baby etc. What else can I tell you? Our private life was very difficult..

M. What did you do for a living?

R. Dolly started working in his sister's ²⁰ store that sold newspapers, tobacco and souvenirs for tourists. The store which was located near the docks was doing very well.

M. When was that? In '39 already?

R. Yes. '39.

M. Did you make contact with the Party at the time?

R. Of course. They contacted us immediately. They promised us help, but it never came. Neither one of us was disposed to go and ask for assistance. We had done what we did because we had wanted to. It was rather difficult for us. There was not even a promise of a job. It was not so much the money, although we did not have any. Imagine, that after Spain where we saw so little of each other, we spent another few months apart, I with my sister and he with his sister where he worked, you know going for newspapers at the distribution center at ungodly hours. He was very tired and at one point he became sick, because he had been weakened by the war.

M. Then came the invasion of Poland and the Hitler-Stalin pact.

R. That's right.

M. What happened then?

R. I don't remember how our friends reacted. But I do remember that for the first time we dared to say that we did not understand it. It was something that went beyond our understanding in spite of all the explanations we received. I know that Dolly went to see someone at Party headquarters to ask for an explanation. He returned as he had gone, totally dissatisfied with the response and we thought at first that the man he talked to had wanted to destroy our trust in the Communist Party, because we just could not believe that the report was true.

Marcel provides more detail from another conversation:

"The hardest part though, was not the lack of physical comfort, we were used to that, but the feeling of hopelessness and doubt in our beliefs. In spite of all that we had seen in Spain, we still thought that Russia was the only country that had done what it could to stop Fascism. But when we first heard about the Stalin-Hitler pact, we couldn't believe it! We asked for an explanation, but in spite of the answers we were given, we remained skeptical; and yet we accepted the Party's infallibility, for by that time we had been brainwashed into believing that the Party could never be wrong. Whatever the Party line was, it was the gospel truth, and to question it was a sacrilege.

Once the Nazis launched their blitzkrieg on us, however, we did not have time to ponder such questions, for besides being baffled Communists, we were Jews and knew all about the persecution of the Jews in Germany."

²⁰ Sabine, Bob's mother.

Because of these difficulties, I went with Edgard to stay with my parents in Charleroi. Dolly remained in Antwerp to reorganize his job and look for an apartment, because we did not want to continue living apart.

I still bear scars from that period. *Bonne maman's* apartment was not very roomy. She installed us in a very nice room between the shop and the kitchen, keeping a small bedroom for herself. There was no electricity in my room. Once, during the night Edgard called out that he had to go to the bathroom. I had spread ointment and wrapped cotton around my fingers, because of rheumatism or something. When I lit a match to light a candle the cotton caught fire. Because I did not want to frighten him, I ran into my parents room in order to put my hands under the blanket to put out the fire. As a result, I ended up with third degree burns.

A few days later I went to Brussels to see a doctor who had been Spain. When I got there I was very surprised at his cool reception. He was nervous, even though he knew me quite well since he had frequently visited our pharmacy to pick up surgical supplies that I had prepared for him. I learned later that the Germans were already there, looking for his friend, a well-known doctor who had established the Belgian hospital in Spain. The Germans came for him in the hospital in Belgium.

War preparations had started, although officially the war had not started. It was not yet 1940. But the German undercover takeover had started. At first they targeted the intellectuals. They sent them presents, invited them to conferences. The brainwashing had started in order to draw Belgian public opinion to their side. Those they could not convince, they tried to take to Germany or to kill.

This doctor managed to escape. The men who came looking for him (they were officers) were barred from entering, because the doctor was in surgery... He was warned and escaped from the operating room through a French door, leaving his patient on the operating table. Fortunately the operation was not very serious.²¹

M. Where did this take place, in Belgium?

R. In Brussels

M. This was during the occupation then?

R. No, during the secret occupation

M. What do you mean by "secret occupation"? The Germans had not yet seized Belgium.

R. If you read the history books you will see that since '36 they had been paving the way for a low key takeover of Belgium, without using too many of their own soldiers or involving too many of their own people.

M. You mean there was a conspiracy with Belgians?

R. With Belgians, that's right. Belgian fascists had infiltrated newspapers, doctors, pharmacists, attorneys, etc and the Germans fully exploited this later during the occupation.

I arrived. I did not understand but he removed my bandages, he said it was very serious; he did

²¹ Rachel seems to have her timing mixed up. While the Germans had indeed infiltrated many organizations before the war, the incident she describes is more likely to have taken place during the occupation. Notice she refers to arresting officers.

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not replace them and ran off. It was the other doctor not Dr Marteau.

I left. I had rebandaged my hand as best as I could. I was not aware that I was running a 40° C (104° F) fever. I took the train back to Charleroi. People on the train noticed that I was not well. When we arrived in Charleroi a good Samaritan asked me about my hand. I removed the bandage. He turned white when he saw it, told me he knew of a doctor near the station and took me there. The doctor saved my life and my hand because he was certain at first that the hand would have to be amputated. I had third degree burns.

I stayed in Charleroi a while longer to recuperate, because I could not take care of the baby. By the time I improved, and the danger of amputation was past, Dolly had found an apartment on Molenstraat (Rue du Moulin) in Antwerp, and we moved in. He still had the same job, at the store, which was awful, awful, awful.²² We managed as best as we could.

²² I don't understand why the job was so "awful." Sioma had done it for several years, but had become ill and had had to slow down pending possible surgery. It was not glamorous work and was physically demanding: newspapers had to be picked up twice a day rain or shine at the central distribution center. The morning pick up was at about 6 am and in afternoon one around 4 pm for the evening editions. In addition other merchandise had to be picked up such as tobacco, cigarettes, postcards etc. Everything had to be transported by bicycle.

THE WAR

The War

Start of the War, May 1940

M. The war started on May 10. There was the exodus.

R. Exactly. I was so traumatized by all these events that everything is mixed up in my head. I remember that we left Antwerp with Dolly's family.

Part of the family managed to get out of Belgium. Aunt Gina, her husband and two children went to France. They lived there a while, perhaps 6 months or maybe a little longer. Bell Telephone obtained visas for them and even transportation. They went to Portugal and from there they sailed to the USA.¹

M. And I know Aunt Alice's story, she went to Spain, Portugal, etc...²

R. Right. But first she lived in Nice in a princely style. She did not even ask her mother whether she had enough to live on, to survive. But that's another story.

We failed to get out of Belgium³ and went on to La Panne⁴, where we hoped to escape to England with the British. It was the only place from which we could flee. That is where we all met. We lived in a house or an apartment in La Panne that had been abandoned by its Belgians owners. Many had fled because the presence of the English made the place dangerous. I also remember several bombardments.

M. Who was there? I remember that *bonne maman* was there, my mother was there, my father was there. How did we manage to meet there?

R. I don't remember.

M. I remember that my mother was ill and that my father built a sort of cart with old bicycles in which she could be transported.

R. Yes, that was on the return trip. She was already ill, she already had a heart condition. I don't remember much about our return to Belgium.

¹ A somewhat garbled description of the family's exodus. See Joe's Exodus story

² See the Owl's Head transcript and Marcel's *Enfant Traqué, Enfant Caché*.

³ At first the whole family went to the small Belgian frontier town of Wervik, not far from Armentières (France). On the next day only Belgian subjects were allowed to enter France. That is when the Strip family left. By the time Rachel and family were allowed to cross into France it was too late: they had been cut off by the German panzers.

⁴ A seaside resort a few miles East of Dunkirk. The same place where Eliane was during the battle of Dunkirk.

The Occupation

The Textile Business

M. Yes, I have vague recollections, not very happy ones. What happened with you? How did you get involved in the Resistance? It must have started somehow while the Germans were there.

R. The Resistance network operated through individual contacts with Party emissaries. At times even I did not know how far it went. Our initial contact was through the Spitz family. They owned a small textile factory in Antwerp that engaged in garment manufacturing and possibly spinning and the sale of wool cloth as well.

The Party arranged for Dolly to be hired by them. The Spitz family was leftist. We knew one of the young Spitz's from the *Iask* [the sports organization]. He was a leftist, but not a full-fledged Party member. His older brother, who owned the business, was also a leftist as were most Jews at the time.

This business provided a very good cover. At first Dolly expanded the business and went on business trips himself, because at the time the Germans had not yet banned Jewish travel or business. They were still behaving very correctly in order to make a good impression on the Belgian population and to give the Jews a false sense of security. Dolly was the sales director of the firm, while Spitz remained officially the proprietor. The business was very profitable. Part of the profits went to the Party and was used to organize the first Resistance network. We also used some of the money for living expenses. if only to maintain a life style compatible with our business position. Some of the money also went for the establishment of safe houses for the resisters, including those who wanted to prepare for military action. At the time we were not yet talking about the other part of the job, the one dealing with Trepper.⁵

M. That probably started only after Hitler attacked Russia.

R. That's right.

M. The German-Soviet pact was still in effect then. What was the Party's reaction after the invasion of Belgium and before Hitler's entry into the USSR?

R. Well, that created a major internal conflict. On our side ⁶, we had to take care of ourselves if not for the sake of the Soviet Union, then for our own sake [the Jews], for the sake of the European anti-fascist left. It was absolutely essential to forget everything we had against the Socialists, the Zionists and all that, and make a common front against fascism, which was there, not at our door but already inside.

⁵ The organizer of the "Red Orchestra" that supplied information to the Soviet Union

⁶ As she explains later, there was a relatively autonomous Jewish section of the Party that did not accept the concept of neutrality towards the Germans. Thus while the mainstream part of the Party followed the official line that the Germans were not the enemy, the Jewish groups started organizing for the expected struggle.

THE OCCUPATION

We were not the only ones. I don't know if you have read Trepper's book carefully.⁷ or even the earlier book written by a Frenchman⁸, *The Red Orchestra*. There were several small groups that were concerned with the same matter, but in different domains. For example in Brussels there was this business of the *Roi du Caoutchouc*⁹ and in Antwerp Dov started a fur business¹⁰ and later went into the jewelry business in France.

After we first returned to Antwerp we tried to organize small groups among our acquaintances. Sometimes I went to meetings with these groups; other times Dolly went, because we could not leave Edgard alone. On other occasions, when we were too tired to go, we foolishly invited some of them to our house until we noticed that the landlord was getting suspicious. Dolly reassured him by explaining that he was giving German lessons.

After a while it became clear that we could not manage both the business and our Party activities concurrently. In order to maintain the front, the Party directed us to leave Antwerp and break off all contact with all our friends and acquaintances, Party comrades, Jews, non-Jews, all the young people that we knew. We had to break off completely with everybody even if they were led to believe that we had abandoned the workers and were becoming middle class. This was a painful cross to bear, but we did not dare whisper that we were involved with the Party and the Resistance. That is why we moved to Brussels. This was in '41.¹¹

We had a beautiful apartment and entertained a lot. We entertained the wool merchants who traveled to wool mills in Lille and other cities, because by then we were no longer allowed to do so, or those who went to the textile mills in order to deliver goods to the factories.

M. Were you using your real name or did you have false papers?

R. At that time we were still using our own names. However we had already prepared false papers.

M. Was kind of work were you doing?

R. Basically we supplied goods to the German Army. We had to buy the wool but made sure it was of poor quality, real junk, so that it would fall apart before being used on the Eastern front, which had already started. But that was not the most important part of our business although we did make money. One of the members of the company was this fellow Schaelbroek who had worked with Dolly on Marti's staff in Albacete. He was a veteran from Spain and the leader of the Communist youth of Brussels or perhaps Belgium, I am not sure. He had a good reputation, he was a very likable and intelligent person. His job consisted of entering key places, finding out what was going on, and contacting the Red Cross or *Secours Rouge* which was responsible for the purchase of merchandise for the Germans. You see how rotten to the core it was, that the Red Cross should be in the business of supplying goods to the Germans. Unfortunately as you will see later he proved to be Dolly's undoing

⁷The Great Game

⁸ Gilles Perrault

⁹ The Great Game page 96, page 102

¹⁰ Ibid page 153

¹¹ This probably occurred after June '41 when the Germans invaded the USSR and the Party swung into action against the Germans.

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The business made it possible for us to determine where the German Army was going, where the front was going to be, information that was needed by the Red Orchestra. They would then 'play' ¹² it to the Soviet Union, who unfortunately chose to ignore these inputs [which included the exact date and time of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Stalin had forbidden his generals to place their troops in a state of alert, lest this should offend his German allies.]. Stalin did not want to believe what they sent. Thus all our work and everything we did, and all the dead were almost for naught.

So, you can see the value of this work, this undertaking. I must admit as I told you earlier that I only knew vaguely what was going on, because Dolly did not dare confide in me.

I was very surprised and upset by it all. "This work seems very strange, from what you tell me." I said. Finally I rebelled at the notion of helping the Germans.

"No, calm down" he said, and showed me the wool, it was junk. Then bit-by-bit he started telling me. "You know my cousin...."

This was the cousin who set up the radio transmission and reception post here in Brussels and was Trepper's right hand man. He is the one mentioned in the book, who was arrested in France and jumped from a third story window [to avoid torture and possibly betraying his cell.]¹³.

M. That was your cousin?

R. He was Dolly's cousin. I first met him in Hashomer Hatzair before we went to Palestine. After our return we knew he was a leftist and that he had joined the Communist Party, and since we had returned for the same reasons, there was a certain convergence of views and he [Springer] had recruited Dolly into the Party.

M. How long did this textile business last?

R. It lasted until Jews were prohibited from working.

M. Is that when the Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star?

R. Yes. Dolly had already been arrested at the time the Jews lost the right to work. It was the beginning of '42. It all happened gradually. At first the Germans instituted a curfew, i.e. restricted the hours Jews allowed on the streets, later they were no longer allowed to go to the movies or the theater (we could care less, we had no wish to do so). Then little by little they tightened up, making us put up a sign saying *Judische Unternehmung* ¹⁴ on the building, but we could still carry on. It was before the large roundups of August '42. But Dolly was arrested before that on political grounds.

Dolly's Arrest

M. Did someone who was arrested talk?

R. Yes, someone talked and told all, about Spain, about the Communist Party and probably, but I do not know what, about the business. But anyway, whatever he told them was enough for

¹² The term used by the Red Orchestra to describe broadcasts to the USSR

¹³ Isidor Springer in *The Great Game*, pages 119, 150-153, 156, 204-206, 208, 237, 432

¹⁴ Jewish Enterprise

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the Germans to infer partisan and anti German activities, etc..

M. Do you know who it was?

R. Yes I do. He came running to me, crying on my shoulder, saying "Forgive me, the flesh is weak. I was terrified; I thought they were onto us. I could not resist because I knew that I could not have survived in prison, I was so scared."

He had learned too much from our dear friend Schaelbroek, our friend from the Communist Youth and Spain and who worked with Dolly. They were good friends. He was in the Friends of Nature ¹⁵ and probably talked carelessly. Afterwards I was told that the Germans had infiltrated that group. They were *petits bourgeois* with liberal opinions, but without any political agenda and generally not trained to keep secrets.

There is nothing I could do. I pushed him away; the way one chases an animal. I reported to my Party contact that Dolly had been arrested along with six others. That was quite a haul. Then I told them the story.

"Give us his address, we will kill him." they then told me.

"No" I said, "That would be too easy, without suffering. Let him suffer the fear, the idea that he will be persecuted. Do not kill him." I did not have the heart.

M. Were you already involved with the Resistance at that moment or did that come later.

R. No. I was already involved. .

M. How come the Germans did not arrest you automatically when they arrested Dolly?

R. When I returned home our landlady, who owned a bakery downstairs, was waiting outside and said "Madame do not go in, the Germans came in and have torn your place apart. When they asked after you I told them that I thought that Madame had gone abroad." She had figured out that my husband must have been arrested, otherwise the Germans would have asked about both of us.

My major concern was about a large number of ration cards and white cards ¹⁶ that we had hidden in our basement. These included cards with assumed names for us as well as cards we handed out to others when they needed them. We had decided not to wear the Jewish star, and did not want them to stamp it on our ID cards. We knew the person at the municipal building who was supposed to stamp the Id's and were getting along well with him. He may not have been in the Resistance himself, but he sympathized with us. I explained to him why we did not want the stamp. He understood and did not stamp the ID card with *Jude*.

I was afraid that if the Germans should find these cards they would shoot Dolly the next day. I had personally buried them under a pile of coal in our basement. I had reasoned that if I hid them under a pile of potatoes, the Germans would find it easy to shift them around in the event of a search and might find the papers. On the other hand these *gentlemen* would not want to get their white gloves dirty with coal dust. It was a good move.

M. Where did you sleep after the raid?

R. Earlier on the Resistance had told us to establish a safe house while we were still half-free,

¹⁵ An organization similar to the Sierra Club

¹⁶ White Id cards for Belgians, as opposed to yellow cards for aliens

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under surveillance.

You asked if we were both active. Yes, I had to help Dolly. We did not go together [to meetings], we always went our separate ways. We hired a young woman whose husband worked for the post office to baby-sit in our absence. She stayed with him mornings, then I would come home to prepare the meals etc.... She spoke very good French, which was good, because we wanted him to learn to speak good French (he was just starting to talk). It was important that he learn to speak good French so that, if we were to be arrested, the people who would hide him could say that he was their son or nephew.

For a safe house we rented a house on Chaussée de Wavre, away from the center of town, but not too far. The only disadvantage was that it was not far from the *gendarmerie*. We paid a year's rent in advance reasoning that we didn't know how long we would be able to continue earning rent money. The babysitter agreed to rent the place in her name. Doing so we were taking the risk that one day she would tell me: "It's all in my name, go away." That's the way we arranged things.

When I came home on the day that the landlady warned me away, I immediately went to this safe house. You can imagine the state we all were in.

The next day or the day after I went to recover the legal papers etc, looking around to make sure I was not being observed. I went to the basement recovered the cards and came out through an exit on another street. I did not go upstairs, there was nothing left, no letter, no photograph of Dolly. Either they had taken it all or torn everything up.

I don't remember how I got the notification of Dolly's arrest, which I expected to be sent to my house. I did not dare send the baby-sitter because I could not trust her not to say, "Yes, the lady and her son are with me" in the event she were to be stopped. So I sent Yvonne Kuenstlunger to find out if a notice had arrived. In the end I think that I stopped at the bakery at a time when it was crowded supposedly to buy bread etc. The landlady played her role very well and passed me a letter from the prison in St Gilles ¹⁷ notifying me that my husband was being held there. I did not dare go to there myself, since they had come to the house looking for me. I needed a German permit to visit the prison and if I went there, that's where I would stay.

I had notified my sister-in-law [Sabine], and she came to Brussels from Antwerp (it was still possible to travel) and went to the prison. She told me that when he saw her Dolly turned pale and the first question he asked when he saw her was: "They got her! Where is Edgard?" She explained, no, I had not been arrested and that I had successfully carried out our contingency plan. This calmed him.

A few weeks later I went to the prison (he stayed there a couple of months) to bring him a package. The Germans wanted the prisoners to starve and die of thirst and used to confiscate incoming packages in whole or in part. I went with my false Id card and asked for a pass to see him. I trembled like a leaf.

M. What reason did you give? You were Mme X who wanted to see Mr. Gunzig. What

¹⁷ According to Trepper the prison where they held and tortured Resistance members.

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reason did you give?

R. I don't know what they asked me. I may have said I was a neighbor or something like that. I certainly had an answer. The whole episode was frightening, being there in the wolf's lair. They would have killed me had they figured out who I really was. But I could not bear the idea of not seeing him at least one more time. I knew that he was in deep trouble. That was the last time I saw him

I hired a lawyer using money I received from the factory, which was still in operation. I did not know then that he was pro-German. He told me: "Don't try, you'll only cause him trouble." I said "Can I cause him any more trouble than he already has? It was black market." That's what I had chosen to say. He smiled and said he would check it out. He accepted a big bundle of money and told me to call back in a few days (I didn't have a phone). When I called he told me "There is nothing to be done. It is a political case and I don't handle that."

Right after that we could feel that the period of so-called freedom under the Germans was coming to an end and that the time had come for all of us to start preparing, the Resistance, the Jews (not only the Communists, but the Zionists also), and other Resistance workers. We could only meet one on one in order to maintain security. I stayed in contact with a person that I knew. Others did the same. The arrangement was such that if one link in the network was broken, one could establish another link so that there would be no interruption of the work.

M Is that when you started working, traveling to France?

R. No, not yet. At first I did not want to undertake anything. Dov was still in Belgium. When I saw Dolly he had told me, not in so many words of course, that the Germans were trying to find out about his cousin's whereabouts. He was known to them by his nickname, Sabor, and they wanted his full name and address. From the way Dolly talked I understood that they were beating him to get the information. I passed along the warning, urging him to leave. But of course he did not leave and shortly thereafter there was that raid on the place where the Red Orchestra was playing.¹⁸ Sabor fled to France and was captured a few months later in Lyons.

Dov was still in Belgium. This was after the business of the *Roi de Caoutchouc*¹⁹ which had opened a department in Paris. It was not working well and they sensed that their cover had been or was about to be blown and left for Paris. Dov had started a private fur business, not a retail store, that sold furs by the piece or by weight. It was all for the cause.

German agents came to Dov's place asking if he knew Sabor and showed him his picture. They explained that they wanted to buy furs and that they wanted to do business with him because they found him very *sympathique*. Everyone was looking for him, Dov thought quickly.

"He looks like someone I know, but I'm not sure."²⁰ Come back tomorrow or the day after. When I see him I'll ask him to come and I will notify you when he will be here."

Of course there was no tomorrow and he took off right away. He abandoned everything and

¹⁸ This must be the raid on the house on *Rue des Atrebatés* on December 13, 1941 (See Trepper on pages 205-206), which implies that Dolly must have been arrested in late Fall of early Winter '41.

¹⁹ See Trepper

²⁰ December 16, 1941: The Great Game, page 153

left for France.

Two months later Dolly was deported. I found that out when I received a letter from the prison at Forest.²¹ The letter, his last one, tragically has also disappeared. After that I had to start finding hiding places, first for you, then for Edgard, and later on for my two nephews from Antwerp and my parents. It was a big job. I did not dare take on too much for the Resistance.

The Deportations

The whole Spitz family was deported from Antwerp shortly after that.²² I do not know why they did not leave earlier, having seen all that had happened (one of the brothers who knew nothing of the Resistance activities had been caught in the raid in Brussels). Perhaps they felt safe because they were working for the *Secours Rouge*, the people who were buying goods from them for the Germans. The mass deportation of the Jews started a few months later, I think in July or August, in Antwerp. It started with the Flemish Fascists setting fire to two synagogues in Antwerp. As I told you, the Germans always tried to do their dirty work through their Belgian proxies. At first they, the *Volkspolizei*, were very proper and did not get involved in anything. But when the Germans needed them, they were ready helpers in the Flanders. In Wallonia and Brussels the Germans had Degrelle.²³

When they arrested the Spitz family I hurried to Antwerp to recover what I could from their factory. I do not know how I did it. It was a real feat. I could not take machinery, but I could take goods. I also knew there was some money in the cash register. But I was primarily interested in the cloth, since I knew businessmen who would buy it from me. I managed to bring them all back to the house where I was hiding. I have no recollection of how I did it, because I shook like a leaf while I was doing it. It was as if I was in a trance.

Dolly had introduced me to all the people with whom he was doing business. I was the housewife who worked in the kitchen, who entertained elegantly and shared a glass of wine or beer when the men came, but I also attended the discussions and listened very carefully, because I had to learn the names and addresses of these people.

I promptly contacted the buyers who now became my salesmen if you will, and explained what had happened, that my husband had been caught. They knew he was Jewish because of his appearance and because he spoke with a horrible accent, not Yiddish, but German. They agreed to handle my goods. Little by little I was able to sell the wool that I had brought back. They did not give me top price but I did get quite a bit of cash and gave a large share of it to my Party contact.

M. Is that when the Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star? I remember *bonne maman* sewing them on for us, and your coming and saying "Are you crazy? Take these stars off." I think I also remember your coming with a ration card.

R: At the time the Communist Party did not know what position to take because they had other concerns.²⁴ At the beginning, some of the members did not think it would turn out as badly

²¹ A Brussels suburb

²² The roundups started in August '42. She must be describing events in the Spring of '42

²³ The head of Belgium's Nazi Party. He escaped to Spain after the war and was never arrested.

²⁴ Presumably respond to instructions from the USSR

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as it did. They said there was no shame in admitting to being Jewish. As a result many fell in the trap, and were caught in the roundups, even those who had not been Jewish for generations, who did not speak a word of Yiddish, who did not know the meaning of being Jewish, including the wife of Jacquemotte, the secretary of the Belgian Communist Party. She was proud to wear the yellow star.

I used an assumed name and never wore the star. As you remember I told all our friends, everyone I met in town and who would listen, friends, acquaintances who I knew were Jewish: "If you don't have one, ask me for a white card, I have them. If you can, go away, otherwise leave your house immediately."

Unfortunately my sister-in-law refused to listen, because her husband was ill. Did she imagine that she would be spared? I even sent poor Yvonne ²⁵ with another Belgian woman to bring them to Brussels. I had a safe house for them in the Ardennes. She refused.

Shortly thereafter my sister-in-law and her husband were seized by the Germans.²⁶ By chance the children were not at home when the Germans came, they had gone for a walk. ²⁷ When they returned, some good Samaritans, and there were some, told them "Your parents have been taken by the Germans don't go home." I had given the address of my hiding place to my sister-in-law [Sabine], who fortunately had given it to the older boy [Eugene]. He is a half brother to Sabine's son, the child of their father's first marriage. He was already 10 or 12 [actually more like 14] years old. ²⁸ He had a little money on him. I had told them to do that, or perhaps they figured it out themselves, and came immediately to Brussels and I found hiding places for them.

²⁵ She found it too risky to go to Antwerp herself!

²⁶ They were seized in the September 11 and 12, 1942 roundups. See description in table below

²⁷ See the Owl's Head Summit transcript for more details

²⁸ Actually about 14

Convoy X of September 15, 1942 *

This transport consisted of 1048 persons, including 264 children. It completed the program established on June 11, 1942 in Berlin which dealt with a first segment of 10,000 deportees for the "mise au travail." But since the new instructions of August 28, 1942, even the supervisor of Jewish affairs spoke openly of the evacuation. Kurt Asche repeated several times to the delegates of the AJB that he summoned. On October 25 1942, in a meeting where he knew that minutes were being recorded, he announced to them that the evacuation would involve all the Jews living in Belgium and that none of them would return to the country.

In order to assemble the complement of the X-th convoy, the Security Police, the Flemish SS and the Feldgendarmarie conducted a systematic two-day sweep of Antwerp on September 11 and 12. The registration started on the 11th and was completed on the 14th, on the eve of the departure. The convoy arrived in Auschwitz on September 17, without stopping in Kozel as its predecessors did. 331 serial numbers were issued. Of those selected for labor assignments, there were only 17 survivors when the camps were liberated.

(from the *Memorial de la Deportation des Juifs de Belgique*).

* Convoy in which Sabine and Sioma were deported

Hiding the Family

The threat that I had feared materialized earlier than I had expected. The landlord started harassing me. He had seen that I had a ring and he told me he wanted it. I asked him why?.

"Well, I am taking a risk" he said.

"We bought you for that. You have a house that you could never have dreamed of. It is for one year and if I can leave sooner I will. You know that" I replied.

He insisted on knowing where I had hidden the jewelry. I managed to put him off and when he left for work at the post office I picked up the jewelry, took Edgard under my arm and left the house with nothing else. I was not going back to the house; it was more dangerous than staying on the street. I immediately got in touch with my contacts and they helped me, but I don't know or remember how I did it.

We found a hiding place for Edgard, with *tante Titine*, through a factory worker who worked for Yvonne Kunstlinger, the cousin of the boy who was in the Red Orchestra [Springer]. She was our mailbox, if you will. Yvonne was half Jewish, but she had also been baptized, unbeknownst to her father who was Jewish and would never have allowed it to happen. It happened at a time when her grandmother had taken care of her for a few months when she was little; the parents were furriers and very busy. She [the grandmother] did it out of conviction and wanted to do a good turn for the baby and it turned out well. Before she died she told Yvonne about the baptism and gave her the certificate, which Yvonne kept without telling her father. That is what saved her. As a result she was able to hide her father and continue to run the business under her own name.

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When she was questioned she explained that her name was Alsatian.

An employee who worked for Yvonne knew a family that lived outside Brussels.

M. And that is how you found *tante Titine* where Edgard went?

R. That's right. They were very happy to have him. I forgot to tell you, that Edgard had realized that *papa* was not coming home, because normally his absences never lasted more than one day. He had been used to seeing his father every day and on the few occasions that he was late, Dolly would telephone and then come to say hello to Edgard the next day. Edgard knew he wasn't coming home. He became sick. He had stopped eating (I think these were the first signs of an ulcer) and was vomiting all the time. For me it was a calamity.

M. He must have felt subconsciously the pressures you were under.

R. Certainly, even though I covered them up as much as possible, even with laughter. I took him to the Doctor who examined him and then looked up at me and commented quietly "This little boy has suffered a trauma, has he not?" I said yes. He understood the situation without being told.

In the meantime I taught Edgard that his last name was Bataille or Le Noir, something like that. I think that was the first alias I adopted. For him it was a game.

It was very fortunate that I brought him to *tante Titine*, because the atmosphere there was totally different: it was in the country on a farm where they had cats, dogs and chickens. The grandfather, who was retired, loved to talk with the children as did two spinster aunts who took care of the kids. From that point of view I was relieved. I visited him quarterly when I went to pay for his support. For me not seeing him for three months was wrenching, but it was better than endangering him.

As to myself, I found a safe house through a Christian association, probably with the help of the Party, because I could not stand sitting around idle. Although there were many collaborators during the occupation, the true believers, Catholic and Protestant, helped us a lot, because they felt it their Christian duty to help the distressed. I don't remember how long I stayed there.

M. I am curious to know. After you went into hiding you started working again for the Resistance. Was placing Edgard a condition for resuming your work?

R. It was and after I did they allowed me to resume my work. My work consisted in part of helping financially. They knew that I could do so, because some of the merchandise still remained with the buyer, who paid me as he sold the merchandise. He [the buyer] was very honest. He could have been otherwise, but for once my instinct that I could trust him proved right. The man himself had been pro-Degrelle ²⁹. However he broke with the movement when he found out about Degrelle's cooperation with the Germans and his support of everything they were doing to the Jews. I thought that this was a good sign. He was so upset about Dolly's fate, (he adored Dolly), that I knew that I could trust him, and he did make progress payments as he sold the goods.

²⁹ The Belgian Quisling, head of the Belgian Nazi party.

In the meantime Dov was in Valence, in Provence. A Party courier brought me the addresses of contacts so I could reestablish liaison and to tell me that he [Dov] was working again and was sending money back to the Party in the form of jewels.

The Trip to Valence

The arrangement was for him to send someone with the goods to Paris and for me to meet that person in a safe house we had there belonging to a very quiet acquaintance who was never involved in political work. It was also understood that on other occasions he would send somebody directly to Brussels.

I went to get what he had, watches, diamonds, or jewelry etc., and then tried to find places where I could sell them in Belgium which was not easy, because as you can imagine one could not simply go out and sell them. I had to place them on consignment in a store. I did not know anyone, because the Jews that I knew (it was the beginning of the roundups,) had either been arrested, were in hiding or had left the country. I had to find people I could trust. It was risky. On one occasion I lost almost everything, because they had claimed that the Germans had come and had seized everything. I don't know whether it was true or not, but what could I do? I stopped doing business with them. I looked for someone else. The risk was there, but the Party trusted me anyway. Well, what else could they do?

Then a day came when Dov could not find anybody to send because nobody dared cross two frontiers. At the time Valence was already occupied ³⁰ and the trip involved first crossing the old demarcation line and then the Belgian border. He said he could not make arrangements and that I would have to come all the way to Valence and pick up the goods. He had been sending his wife to Paris, but decided that it was too dangerous, because she might be followed.

So I agreed to undertake this trip to Valence, because I wasn't that busy. A few appointments here and there, to carry things around, hand out white Id cards, ration cards, take care of the large family which was a burden. Sometimes other things came up, like finding housing for someone who was setting out on a mission and who did not want to stay in his own safe house before going out on the mission. It wasn't easy, but I did what I had to do.

So I had to go to Valence. It was a terrible undertaking and it is on my way back from Valence that I was caught. Either someone had informed on me or the customs people just had a hunch, they have a sixth sense.

M. Was there really a closed border between Belgium and France? It did not make much sense. Both were occupied countries,

R. Yes, there were customs agents, Belgians on one side and Germans [French?] on the other. That's where the danger lay. To the Belgian customs agents and Belgian police I showed

³⁰ France was divided into two parts after the armistice in 1940, the occupied and unoccupied zones, which were separated by a demarcation line that served as a border. Following the Allied landings in North Africa in November 1942 the Germans seized the unoccupied zone, but retained the demarcation.

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my German papers, a German pass with an assumed name. To the Germans I showed the Belgian or French papers I had.

M. You had two sets of papers on you?

R. I had both sets of papers on me. I had other things on me also.

M. Weapons?

R. Oh no, no. No weapons. You did not want to mix documents and all that.

The First Incident

The whole trip was a disaster. I reached Paris and changed trains for Valence. It was a local that made several stops on the way. At one of these stops the Germans boarded the train. I showed my papers. Unfortunately, I was missing a stamp. They kept changing the regulations every few months. Well, the people in the municipal building who made up my papers were not aware of a recent change requiring a travel authorization from the mayor or a deputy showing that I was not a person with a restricted residence or whatever they called it.

The soldier told me to follow him. I was fortunate that it was not the other way around. He walked ahead of me. I was in second class, and we were not very far from first class. When I saw him get off the train and wait for me I quickly ducked into a first class compartment and hid. Just then the train started moving, leaving the German soldier on the platform with my papers. A lucky star watching over me!

I remained hidden in first class. What I was afraid of was that they would stop the train or they would order a search at the next station, before Valence, because he did not know where I was going. He had not had the time to ask me. He was preoccupied with my identification card which he was still holding when he got off the train. So, they had my photograph and they could very easily recognize and arrest me. Did he have more pressing business or what? He may have thought it was a minor matter. I did not look very important. I did not have much luggage; just a small bag and I had told him that I was going to visit my family for two or three days.

I was afraid of the arrival in Valence (and at each railroad station along the way, of course) because it was the last stop and they might be waiting there to pick me up. Besides I had no identification papers. As the train stopped I saw a large peasant family getting ready to get off the train: father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, children all carrying baskets with eggs, butter, etc.. I have no idea whether they were engaged in the black market or were simply coming to sell their wares in the Valence market. I simply removed my hat, put it in my pocket and said: "Let me help you, you have all these children, let me carry something." I took a couple of baskets with eggs and butter, or something, and got off the train as if I was a member of the family. Wow! I was able to get out without anyone asking me for my papers, because the family knew the local police. They greeted each other in their quaint southern accent and they let them pass. Once outside the waiting room, on the square in Valence, I put down the baskets and left. Dov had given me a map of the city and I went directly to his house.

I did not stay very long in Valence. Perhaps I should have stayed longer, but I was in a hurry. I

never liked to stay away very long: there was always the chance that we might lose our link to the network i.e. that we would not find our contact, with whom we could communicate. I needed a new identification card and therefore I had to stay a few days while Dov had another identification card made up so that I could return with proper papers. He gave me a lot of jewelry. We usually hid the jewels in a false bottom in a thermos, suitcase or pocketbook. This time it was in a thermos.

Arrest at the Border

R. Things had gone well. I had successfully crossed the demarcation line, arrived in Paris and taken a train for Belgium. When the French customs agents stopped me on their side of the Belgian border, I first thought it was going to be a routine inspection because they knew that there was a lot of black market going on.

I could tell that they were really looking me over, they inspected everything and then went for the thermos bottle. Had somebody informed on me? I have no idea. It looked like it. Either someone had followed me, or maybe I looked so worn out that they figured something was not kosher, as we say. They broke the bottle and found the jewelry. They called their boss, and he told me to accompany him to his office to prepare a report. They kept the jewelry, of course. At that point I blurted out my whole story.

"First, I am in the Resistance. Second, I am Jewish. Third, my husband has already been deported and I don't know where he is. I have a small child and I have a family to feed. I am not in the black market and am doing this work for the Resistance in spite of the danger. I ask you to take all this into consideration as a good Frenchman."

He looked at me and said: "You may trust me. But there is nothing I can do now, because everyone knows about this catch. For them this is a major event, because they are paid a bonus for black market seizures and this is a big haul. I am forced to jail you, but I promise that I will help you get out."

By the time he wrote it all up, it was already very late. I was immediately taken to a courtyard where they had stalls for the horses to sleep. It was the *gendarmarie* I think. It was a locked stall. During the night, one of the customs agents tried a line: "let me enter, I will bring you hot coffee." I thanked him and of course I did not open the stall.

The next morning they took me to the prison. It was the women's prison, not very far from the border somewhere near Douai, but I don't know exactly where. Many of the women prisoners were prostitutes who slept around with the Germans and may have broken health rules. Others had engaged in the black market.

I need not tell you how it was. I was certainly better off than Dolly and the others who went to Germany or were in the St Gilles ³¹ prison because at least they fed us, not much, but the same as the French: bread, water and so called bouillon.

³¹ The prison in suburban Brussels where political prisoners were being held. See The Red Orchestra.

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They made us go out every day and walk in the courtyard. In the process everyone told me her story. A couple of weeks had gone by when one evening several prisoners, some of whom had been in prison for quite some time and knew the prison routine, told me that the Germans were coming the next morning. The prison officials did not tell me anything.

M. Were you being held as a political prisoner? .

R. No. I was booked for black marketing. The officer had left the jewelry with his customs agents but taken everything else, including my pocketbook, my watch and my overcoat. This way he was able to destroy my papers. He either burned them or tore them up. I don't know which.

One of the women told me: 'You know, the Germans are coming tomorrow.'

"What for, to see if the place is clean?" I asked

"No", she said laughing, 'but every time they come they take a few women away.'

I understood that they checked names. My name was not Jewish. I had been arrested under the assumed name, but that was not indicated in the report. It only showed that I was there for black marketing. I don't remember what name I used, but I know it was a French name. But such a large haul of jewelry was also something that would arouse the Germans' suspicions. I feared that they would call me, recognize one way or another that I was Jewish, take me away and that would be it.

You can imagine my state of mind. That's when one of the women, a fortune teller (I had not told her why I was despondent), asked me to show her my hand and told me "I swear that I will tell you the truth about what I see. I see in your hand that you will be free in a few days, not only free, that you will be able to rejoin your family." She knew that I was Belgian. It did not give me much comfort, but I thought she was very kind, and I thanked her.

The Escape-France

The next morning we received our coffee and a piece of bread and started on our walk. No sooner had we started walking that the prison guard called me over. I thought it was all over for me and bid my farewells. As soon as we left the courtyard where we had been walking, the guard said, "Hurry out the gate, it is open, and go straight down the street."

"But I have no papers" I said. "

"It doesn't matter, go, hurry" he said.

Well, I left. He must have been in cahoots with the guard. I felt helpless not knowing what was going on. I was wearing light clothes; I had neither money nor documents. So not knowing the town, how could I continue? But freedom beckoned.

In front of the prison I started walking, I wanted to get away from there, lest the Germans should arrive at that moment. Then I spotted the customs agent standing near the corner and beckoning to me. We walked a few steps together and he slipped into my hand some money and a paper with instructions on what streetcar to take in order to cross the border safely.

Not all the way across actually. The streetcar stopped just short of the border. I would then have to cross a green border, i.e. woods that I could only cross at night, because they were

patrolled with police dogs during the day and it was dangerous. It was possible to cross only at night.

"How can I do that, how will I be able to see?" I think he gave me a small flashlight. He gave me a pack of cigarettes for his buddy at the border, to use as a pass because at the time this area was guarded by the French. The Germans always made the rounds in the area and would sometimes appear there. He told me at what time it would be safe to cross. "Obviously don't go there if you hear dogs. Allow a little time after they leave, and then you can cross." he said.

He gave me his buddy's name. Actually it was the password. "You give him the cigarettes and tell him it's from his buddy François" he said, or something to that effect. "He will know what to tell you and will show you the way to Belgium."

I went on my way. I started wondering if I had done the right thing, leaving the prison. I was scared out of my wits, alone, in the night. I was terrified. You could not see much. I am not sure whether I had a light, because even if I had had one I could not have used it, lest I should have drawn attention upon me. I think that there might have been a little moonlight or perhaps I just got adjusted to the dark. I was covered with black and blue marks from bumping into rocks and other things. I had no experience with the outdoors and a very poor sense of direction. I don't know how I managed to find my way. Anyway, I heard the patrol, or rather the dogs barking, because I did not hear any footsteps. I waited for them to recede and then proceeded

I reached a border post, a small sentry box. The guard heard my footsteps and called out "Who goes there?" I recited the lesson they had taught me. He came out to meet me, I gave him the cigarettes and told him: "I'm headed for Belgium, can you help me?" He showed me where to go. He could not accompany me because he could not leave his post. The situation was already a little less tense as he told me "You can relax now. You came at a good time, it is dawn already. It is at night that they expect people to cross the border. They are gone, that was the last patrol. Go straight ahead and when you reach the streetcar tracks you will be on Belgian soil."

The Escape-Belgium

I did as he told me. I arrived in, I think it was Tournai, because there was at the time a part that was French and one that was Belgian.³² I was in Belgium now, but it was very early and I did not know where to go. What should I do? I found the parsonage, I went in, and the priest's housekeeper told me that he had already gone to say his prayers or make a pastoral call, I don't remember which, but anyway, she told me to wait. She could see that I needed help: it was very early, I was soaked from the night's walk and scratched from my falls. There had been dew on the ground, it was cold, it was horrible. I was shaking.

M. What time of the year was it?

³² Doesn't sound like the right place because Tournai is a few miles from the border. It was probably in that area however.

THE OCCUPATION

R. It was in the fall, not yet wintertime.³³ I was not dressed for the weather, even though the customs man had given me a sweater or a wool jacket. Anyway I was wearing some woolens and had high heel shoes.

The housekeeper was preparing breakfast and made some tea for me. When the priest returned he took me to his reception room. I explained everything to him. I had to.

"I am in your hands and if you believe in your mission before God you will help me." I told him. I described what had happened, why I looked the way I did, that they had just helped me escape from prison before being deported to Germany (I did not tell him I was Jewish. It was not necessary. If he understood that was all right. If not, it was not necessary to tell him.)

I told him: "I don't even have the money to buy a ticket to go to Brussels. Is taking the train the right thing to do? "

He thought about it for a moment and said: "Wait here. Eat something. I have friends here and will ask them."

I understood then that he knew of a Resistance network. He went to see a hotelkeeper and returned half an hour later and escorted me there. I was treated like a queen. They immediately sent me to bed. I took a bath, I warmed up. They also gave me some clothes so that I would be better prepared. They went and bought a railroad ticket. I don't know whether the priest or the network supplied the money,

"Do not go today, stay here for the night. It is better to take the first train in the morning. It is the safest way." they told me, because, again the same thing: the Germans do not come out that early etc.

As it happened there was a horrendous bombardment that night. Everybody went down into the cellar. "I have escaped once, I will not go down" I told myself. I was too tired, too exhausted. Whatever came, I just could not move. After this overwhelming emotional experience my nerves were really shattered and I just felt helpless. It was the second phase, despondency phase. I did not have the courage to get up.

"Do not worry, go down, and you will see nothing will happen." I told them.

Indeed that is how it went. My lucky star was still watching over me, because a bomb did land next door, partly collapsing walls and blowing out windowpanes, but I wasn't touched.

Well, everything went well. I took the train. They gave me a travel permit, in case I needed it for the checkpoint, because there always seemed to be a checkpoint somewhere, but they urged me not to show it except in case of need. I was not going to make a display of it.

³³ It must have been in late 1943

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Return to Brussels

I reached Brussels safely. I lost myself in the crowd. That was the way to do it, mixing with the crowd, avoiding being alone and leaving the station quickly. I went straight home too exhausted to look for my contact.

[Rachel told me part of this story when I was in Belgium after the war in '45. She told me of her arrest in France including the part of the story about her release from prison, but leaving out the trip to Valence and many of the other details. However, she also told me that when she reached Brussels, the Germans had the area around the station surrounded and were checking papers. As she feared that her papers might not be valid, she said that she propositioned a German soldier in the crowd. He escorted her through the dragnet (they did not bother German soldiers' girl friends.) She had him escort her to a café owned by a friend. She then excused herself to go to the ladies room and slipped out through the back door.]

[She also related another escapade. She was at home one day when the doorbell rang. She looked into the mirror in the front window of the top floor apartment in which she lived to see who it was. She could tell that her visitors were the police. So she put on a her hat and coat, took her shopping bag and went downstairs. When she opened the door they asked "Mme Gunzig?" "No" she replied confidently, "that's the lady on the top floor." She then let them in, and disappeared. She said she was wearing a wig and a disguise, which may have fooled the police. She also had a set of false papers that might have helped her had they asked for identification.]

M. Having returned and reestablished contact with *bonne maman* to tell her that you were alive, and having reestablished contact with the Party, what happened? I know that you did nothing for a month. Then what?

R. Then I resumed my work. I still had to collect money for the merchandise that still remained in the store. As I told you, I ran errands between the stores. I know that I did not travel after that. It was getting very dangerous. I still had the same kind of occupation. How did I spend my time, what did I really do until the liberation? I carried on a humdrum routine until the liberation. Everything was a burden, being jailed, not having any news from Dolly. There were also occasional moments of joy and hope, like the news about Stalingrad.

There were several unsuccessful meetings, when I failed to make contact with people I was supposed to meet. We were always allowed a five-minute leeway, early or late for our meetings. On one occasion, I think I told you already; I was scheduled to meet with one of the leaders. When I arrived I saw the Germans arresting him. I had arrived five minutes late to the Bois de la Cambre. We didn't wait for more than five or ten minutes. One wasn't supposed to wait longer because something may have happened. I had an appointment because I had missed another one with someone else. There was always a back-up. I had been told that he wanted to see me. We had known each other in Spain. We had a date, I remember, at the entrance of the Bois de la Cambre. We would supposedly walk around, etc... The young man would meet me, kiss me, and would pass whatever it was he was supposed to pass. I was five minutes late the first time. And there I see him being taken away. There really was a lucky star watching over me. It was terrible. I avoided capture several times that way.

Liberation and Post War Belgium

M. Let's talk about the Liberation. Were you in Brussels when the Americans arrived? How did you get started? One day I learned that you were working with American goods.

R. I was in Brussels for the liberation. For me it was a painful period. I cried more than during the war. There were tears of joy, of course. But there were also the tears for Dolly: I was remaining without news about him. Then everyone was asking, Englishmen passing me by on the street, a little drunk, would tell me 'smile a little', but this only caused a tightening in my throat. For them it was over. The same for the Americans. But what about me?

Right after the liberation, *bonne maman* wanted to come and live with me of course. She did not want to stay with the people where she had been hidden. She also started urging me to bring back Edgard right away and then to get the nephews.

The first thing I did was to rent an apartment. I found an inexpensive one, my parents moved in and I went about getting Edgard. I knew it would be a trauma for the women who had been taking care of him. The women told me that the separation would be heartbreaking for them. I asked people for advice on how to proceed, should I bring him home a few times a week? So I let a week go by, I think, to get him used to the idea. I went over there almost every day telling him that the house would soon be ready and that he would then be able to come and stay with me. But I could see he was not terribly anxious to do so. As they were very religious, the two good ladies had placed him in a Catholic school in the neighborhood, and generally speaking he was becoming like you ¹. I could see and feel it. So, I decided: "Yes it may be heartbreaking for them, but better them than Edgard. He has suffered enough." That's when I decided to hurry matters and bring him home.

After I took care of Edgard I went looking for you. It was rather difficult. It looked as though the people who were taking care of you were trying to avoid me.² I was never able to reach them. I don't remember how I finally got you back

M. I am rather interested in hearing how you managed to earn a living to support the family.

Earning a Living

R. At the end of the war I found myself almost without money and without income, and of course I had to find a way to earn money in order to support the family and pay the bills.

At first Dov Lieberman helped me a lot. He was engaged in the 'monkey business', the black market, selling watches etc, a continuation of what we had done during the war. I started in the black market with him, but I did not like it. I did it for a short period of time during which others

¹ Referring to the fact that Marcel had also gone to parochial school and come to believe that he would grow up to become a missionary in the Belgian Congo.

² Rachel had to go to court to get Marcel Back. See Owl's Head..

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probably exploited me, because my mind was elsewhere. But it provided me with income from which we lived.

In the meantime, Alice had come to Belgium because she wanted to start a business there. I had nothing to offer her and she mentioned Esterowitch in New York as a possible contact. *Bonne maman* knew him and we wrote to him. He responded by giving us Maurice Leviner's address in Paris and recommending that we go into business with Leviner because he was up to date in that business [presumable the sale of American surplus goods.]

Maurice Leviner came to Brussels, at first alone, without his family, to see if it was worthwhile, if I had contacts. I told him frankly that I didn't know anything about this business. He said to leave the business side to him but he wanted to know if I had business contacts among likely buyers. There I said, yes, I had old friends who like me were looking for businesses. Everything was by word of mouth.

Since everything was in short supply in Belgium at the time, clothing and everything else, even people in good circumstances were looking for fabrics that we had not had for a long time. That is how we started the business. The three of us signed a contract and formed a company, each receiving his or her percentage.

We started by renting a big house on Avenue des Nerviens with a basement in which we could store our stock. It was our shop. Business thrived and soon we had to look for space elsewhere, because we could not continue working from the house. There was a Catholic school next door and they started complaining about the delivery trucks that sometimes came very early in the morning or late in the evening, and disturbed them. We did not want to draw too much attention to ourselves, in a residential area, even though the landlord was not complaining. He was satisfied; who else could afford the rent? The company started paying off.

We rented a place near the *Gare du Midi* which was also a better location for our customers, including many friends from Charleroi who were buying from us and were coming by train.

M. You were selling wholesale?

R. Yes only wholesale. We sold fabrics in bulk. The merchandise arrived in large bundles. Fortunately I managed very well. I left the business side: sales, buying etc.. to my partners and I took care of obtaining import licenses. That was a major task. On the one hand Belgium needed the merchandise, but on the other hand it was not anxious to issue licenses, because I had to pay in hard currency (dollars) and they wanted to conserve their hard currency reserves. We managed to keep our taxes down by understating the value of the goods. That worked very well. Financially I was in good shape.

The Party Connection

M. What was the connection between the business and the Party? Is it something that evolved? Were they already talking of a cold war?

R. Unfortunately, I must admit, I was still a believer in the cause in spite of all the grievances I had against the Soviet Union on how they had conducted the war and even though many of my

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acquaintances had dropped out of the Party. At the time we knew nothing of their treatment of the Jews. .

M. People were saying it was capitalist propaganda.

R. Exactly, as usual, because they [the Party] wanted us to remain where we were. I maintained my contacts with the Party. I paid dearly for that. I could have assured a secure future for my parents and myself much more easily than I did if I had not had to pay.

M. Are you saying you were paying a large share to the Party?

R. The Party, Party, yes. [*sotto voce*, with a tone of resignation]. I paid monthly when it was possible, otherwise when there was a significant profit. I remember that Maurice Leviner was amazed that I was such a spendthrift.

M. I am surprised. I did not know the Party had such a hold on all who were earning money. It is the same today with pseudo-religious groups who exact money from their members.

R. Exactly, it is the same. It was organized to such an extent that they sent a woman lawyer and essentially put me under contract. They called me personally for money, and sometimes they even called me back when they thought that my contribution was too small! It was no use telling them that I was not alone, that the company had three principals and that I could not withdraw cash when we had bills to pay, that it was not manna from heaven.

M. And what did the Party do with the money?

R. Restart the newspaper that had fallen apart, put employees back to work, i.e. the full time staff at the Party headquarters, establish sections, conduct propaganda, and perhaps even send money to the Soviet Union. Who knows? **Who knows** [her emphasis]?

That is what I was doing. And in addition, there always was the waiting, the waiting, the waiting and hoping for some news about Dolly as the first convoys started returning from the camps.³

I don't remember if you were already with us at the Avenue des Nerviens house, when a woman who had been in a camp, Dachau or Auschwitz, came and asked me if she could spend the night. I said, certainly. We were in a large house and it was not difficult. I was willing to help all these persons. Then I learned that she had been a *Kapo* ⁴ that she was hated and that is probably why she was trying to find shelter with people who did not know about her. I rapidly distanced myself from her. I could see what was going on. She wanted money and I gave her some, so that she would go away as soon as possible. She told me stories that I half believed, because I wanted to believe them. It was perilous at such times, because one hung onto any thread of hope. She told me that she had recently seen Dolly, but that was an unadulterated lie, because Dolly was killed two months after his arrival at the camp. So she could not have seen

³ These must have been people returning from the East. The Soviets were slow releasing concentration camp inmates to the West.

⁴ An inmate guard

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him.

Dolly's Fate

M. When did you learn of his death?

R. I think it was in '46.⁵ There it was final. As I have told you about my nephew from America...

M. Had you already thought this was a fact or did it take time to accept it?

R. I knew, but did not accept it internally. When I received the official paper after my nephew's visit is when I really felt like a widow. I locked myself up for several days. I could not help it. Yet I had known it was coming, but when you have the official paper in front of you you stop hoping. Otherwise there is always a glimmer of hope.

[At the time I was assigned to the Headquarters of the War Crimes Commission in Wiesbaden, where we were preparing evidence for the Nuremberg war crimes trials, and where all kinds of concentration camps documentation was being assembled. When I returned to Wiesbaden I discovered that we had a ledger from Mauthausen listing the names of all the inmates who had died there. On a Saturday morning, during my time off, I sat down and started reading through the ledger, and tragically found Dolly's name in it. The Germans had been very methodical in their documentation. Each page of the ledger contained the names of the victims, and personal data such as their places and dates of birth, nationality, home country as well as time and cause of death. The record showed that Dolly had been shot during an escape attempt on July 28, 1942 at 8:30 am. This ledger can be found in Washington in the Archives of the United States among the WWII German captured documents under the heading Mauthausen *Totenbuch*. (See photocopy)

Having made this grisly discovery, I prepared an affidavit supported by a copy of the ledger entry pertaining to Dolly with the intent of sending it to Rachel. This would help expedite the paperwork to establish her status as a war widow and make her eligible for war widow benefits, including such things as a free education for Edgard. Then I ran into a bureaucratic snag: for some mysterious reason, perhaps to keep someone from walking off with it, the Mauthausen file had been classified "Restricted" by the military authorities. No officer in my outfit would agree to sign my affidavit because technically it would have been a security violation: the unauthorized disclosure of classified information, a violation of the law. So, assuming that common sense would prevail in the event of a challenge, I signed the paper myself and sent it along to Rachel. I was told that the Belgian authorities accepted it. It is a good thing that Senator McCarthy did not find out! Joe]

From an e-mail from Edgard, 2/17/03

"I have also learned that Dolly had run into former comrades (not only Belgian, but Germans and Spanish as well) in the camp and that they organized cells and meetings in the camp. It turns out that one of the Belgians (Spitz) appears on the list of those shot with my father. Had the Germans discovered something? We'll probably never know.

M. In one sense, therefore, it was a good thing for you that you were so busy.

R. Certainly. I was also busy preparing Eugene and Robert's departure for America. Did you

⁵ Actually in the Fall of 45 shortly after V-J Day

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know them? Have you seen them?

M. Yes, I remember. One is a philosopher,

R. That's right, the older one, the half brother. And then there was the little one.

M. Yes. He used to play with Edgard.

R. That's right, he was younger than Edgard. Right after the liberation Eugene notified the family in New York of what had happened, that only the children had survived. There was Kubowitzki; he was a VIP in the Poale Zion in Antwerp.⁶ He escaped, first to Lisbon, then to the United States. There, my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, who also were active Zionists, either met him or worked with him. When Kubowitzki left for Europe she asked him to call me and see what could be arranged for the children. He contacted me and was very considerate, because he had known Dolly very well from the days in Hashomer Hatzair. These meetings were very painful for me.

[This part of the narrative is somewhat confused. In recent years Rachel told me that this postwar period had been a blur, probably a period that she subconsciously wanted to blot out. We first found out about the fate of the family in November 1944 from an English soldier. He had befriended Eugene shortly after the liberation of Brussels and had written to us in Newark. That was well before my first visit to Belgium on V-J Day in September '45. It was during that visit that Rachel told me that Dolly had been seen in the camp at Mauthausen, Austria in 1942, but had not returned with the survivors. Joe]

M. Did you ever consider going to Israel, Palestine at the time?

R. I never thought of going to Israel. I don't think that at the time any resister thought of anything but staying in Belgium, in that environment, among our friends. From that standpoint, I never thought of changing my life. I was still active in the Party, but primarily in a Jewish group.

M. What kind of Id, did you have, a white card?

R. As to the white card [Belgian ID], this was very unfortunate. When I inquired, everyone told me that the end of the war was a good time to apply for Belgian nationality. However, when I went to the *Procureur General* [Justice Department] they told me frankly: "Yes you and your husband were very dedicated to Belgium, but, were you not even more so towards your Party?" and they flatly refused to grant me the naturalization.

M. So, with one hand they gave you a medal, and with the other they refused you the naturalization.

R. That's right. With the medals, which I still have in my drawer, I am entitled to a war widow's pension as long as I live, even if I remarry. In addition, Edgard was considered a "ward of the nation", (one who had lost a father in the war). This was a significant status, because as a result I never had to pay a penny for his education. In addition, children in need were also entitled

⁶ The same person who was instrumental in obtaining our visa in 1941

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to free school supplies, food and clothing but I did not ask for that since I had a good income. And of course they did not pay for private schools.

M. Is that what finally drove you to decide to go to Poland?

R. No. It was the meeting with Bolek.

M. Where did he come from? Did he just drop in out of the blue one day?

R. He is an individual who always tried to freeload, always leaning on a woman. He behaved very badly in Spain although I personally had no contact with him there. He literally dropped in out of the blue. He got my address from friends in the Party, (all the old timers were in touch with each other) through the Jewish part of our cell. He knew all the people from Antwerp. I forgot to tell you that most of the people from Antwerp had moved to Brussels, and had formed a cell consisting almost uniquely of people who had known each other in Antwerp.

Anyway, Bolek got my address from them and he attached himself to me. It was not difficult to conquer me. I was an easy mark. I was drained emotionally having been deprived of a family life for so long. It was not easy, living with aging parents, being constantly under police surveillance, and with *bonne maman* forever urging me to get married. He [Bolek] exploited this situation. For example that he sweet talked my father by showing him how well he knew Torah, quoting from the Holy texts, etc (he came from a small town where he had studied in the *cheder*.) He was a very competent person and still is. He speaks several languages fluently. Pretty soon he asked me to marry him. I turned him down. And a very good thing it was that I did!

Spanish Veterans' Congress, Warsaw, 1950

He told me that there was going to be a congress of the Spanish Civil War veterans in Poland. He left for Poland before that and strongly encouraged me to attend. I thought it was a good idea.

Leading a double life, one in the Party and the other as a businesswoman, was very trying for me and kept me from being myself. I had all these doubts. "Did I want to spent the rest of my life as a businesswoman?" I wondered. "I have a very comfortable life here but it goes against everything I believe in. Why not stay and fight to establish the just society in Belgium? Because I'll always be handicapped as a foreigner." Anyway, I decided that going to Poland was not a bad idea. I would visit Poland; it was a socialist country.

I went there, primarily in order to see my comrades from Spain and I met many of them. It was a very moving experience, totally different from my second, final, trip to Poland. I was received like a queen. Everybody was telling me, and I can quote them, because it remains etched in my memory: "My home is your home, whenever you want and however you want. You may come any time you wish, I am at your disposal". Some of these people had come through the Soviet Union, so they had arrived early with the Red Army at a time when everything had to be organized by the Party. They had a good setup, with good jobs, apartments etc...

So I said "Yes" and I promised to come. They knew many things about me. They had probably found out about Dolly's death before I had. They knew that I was running a business. and asked: "You are not going to spend the rest of your life doing that, are you?" I replied: "No, I

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don't want to, but I have to make a living, feed the family."

M. So this was the beginning of the descent into hell?

R. Yes. That is when I really decided to return. I had observed that they were all happy. It was a time when the Jews were holding good positions. I must admit that I found it extraordinary. It was not all to the good, however, there were too many Jews everywhere. I thought to myself, that the Poles being Poles, it would not take long for antisemitism to break out in the open. And of course that is what happened.

[The timing of her departure could hardly have been worse. Gomulka had been removed from his Party post in 1948. Arrests had started in Poland in 1950, and Gomulka was arrested in 1951. These arrests marked the beginning of the anti-Semitic campaigns in the East.]

I stayed for a few days; perhaps a week, I am not sure. I returned to Belgium, and continued my work. The idea of going to Poland was constantly on my mind and as a result, the quality of my work suffered. As it was, my business [surplus clothing etc.] was slowing and becoming more difficult to manage, because new merchandise was becoming available. Profits were down, but I could have still made a living from it for some time. A number of people left for Poland and sent back glowing reports. Warsaw had made a good impression on me, even though it had been badly damaged, and perhaps three quarters of the town was destroyed. It was horrible to behold.

The Belgian Party's Role

I must also confess that the Party was urging the Jews to go. Looking back, I realize that it had been difficult for non-Belgians (and most Jews were foreigners) to participate in a Belgian cell. I had always belonged to a cell for non-Belgians, foreigners, and they [the Belgian Party] probably wanted to get rid of us. They no longer needed us, whether former members of the Resistance or not, we could feel it. They did it subtly, I must say. When I think back, the meetings that we held to salute those who were leaving to offer their lives for Socialism were pushed by the Belgian Party. So you see, anti-Semitism is everywhere. Also some of our highly placed members who had been offered the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union had praised very highly what they had observed there. Unfortunately we did not realize at the time that they had been shown only what they, the Soviets, wanted them to see, and that they were never shown anything negative.

Planning for the return to Poland

M. Did it ever occur to you to take the whole family with you, i.e. *bonne maman*, *bon papa* and me?

R. Oh yes. There was a war on in Korea and we were in a state of shock over it. Everyone was predicting that there would be a new war in Europe. I knew that I could not go through that again, with the burden of supporting the whole family. That's when I decided to return to Poland,

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alone, not *en famille*. I then talked to my mother and told her that I would go to Poland alone first, find a house, and then they [the rest of the family] would follow. And here is what she answered: "over my dead body. I never want to see those Polacks again, they are the same pigs they always were (and of course she was absolutely right), and the day you leave I will rather die than return there, and I'll die if you go alone."

Of course she had suffered more than I had, and remembered better than I did. Having come to Belgium and having gone to Palestine, I did not have as keen a memory of Poland as she did. She was older than I, of course, and knew what that represented. In particular, she had lost her entire family there. It had not been a large family. She had had a brother with a wife and two children in Poland and had always sent packages to them from Charleroi (tea, coffee, sugar, etc), because they were very poor and he had trouble feeding his family. For her the Holocaust meant losing the last link to her family and she did not want to have anything to do with Poland.

So I had to work around her objections.

I still intended to take both you and Edgard with me. It was clear to me that you were both coming with me. Oh yes, *Gott sei dank!* But *Bonne maman* again proclaimed: "Over my dead body, over Marcel's. You may do what you want with your son, I cannot stop you. It will give me the greatest pleasure; the greatest joy if you leave him [Edgard] with me. But Marcel belongs to me. I have promised Paula [Marcel's late mother] that I would be his guardian until my last breath, and I intend to keep that promise". I did not want to take that away from her, and fortunately for you, it worked out very well.

I don't know who advised me, saying "You have family in Canada, why don't you send your parents there?" That's when the idea to send the family to Canada was born. As soon as I suggested this plan of action to *bonne maman*, *bon papa* was all for going. He liked the idea of going to a new country. That appealed to him.

' *Bonne maman* and *bon papa* were too old to work. I was concerned about you. I was not afraid of the future, because I would find work. But how could I leave with peace of mind? Maurice Leviner helped me, because I did not know how to proceed. I went to Canada to investigate the situation.

I saw Alice and the first question she asked when I arrived in Canada was: "How much money do you have? We could do this and that." I felt that this was no good, because everything would end up in her pocket, and you'd have nothing.

I don't know if it was Mr. Leviner or Mr. Esterowitch who gave me the idea to invest in income producing property for my parents. I could not invest in a business, because I would have to be active in it, so they told me the simplest solution would be to go into real estate. I bought two small French houses that were very inexpensive at the time. I signed a legal document stipulating that the income from the rentals would go to the parents, and after their passing to you [Marcel].

In spite of kinship with Alice, my sister, the lawyer was specifically barred from giving anything to her without my parents' consent. Even so, I know that *bonne maman* gave her money every

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month. Alice would come complaining, "I am short of this and that."

Maurice Leviner knew that it was useless to argue me out of going to Poland, but he urged me to send Edgard with my parents. "Go by yourself, this way you'll find it easier to return, if you should change your mind" he had said. I did not listen.

Poland 1952-1956

M. You arrived in Warsaw and were in the hotel. On what kind of passport did you travel?

R. I traveled on a Nanssen passport for stateless, displaced persons, not as a political immigrant. It was a good passport; it was easy to get a visa that allowed you to travel everywhere.

Prague-1952

We left at the time of the great purges. We had to travel to Prague, and from there we had to take a train for Warsaw. There may not have been an air connection then. I don't know.

[Rachel picked a particularly bad time to go east. She arrived in Prague in the middle of ongoing purges. Rudolph Slansky, the longtime Secretary of the Czech Communist Party was arrested in November '51 along with numerous members of the Party. He was tried in November '52. He confessed to having been a Zionist agent and a spy for the West. He received the death sentence and was subsequently executed. He was exonerated in '63 and reinstated into the Party in '68. A number of Rachel's friends from Spain were also caught in this purge.

During that same period Poland had conducted so-called espionage trials which resulted in numerous arrests and executions, mainly of people who had been in the West (France, Spain, etc). Thus many of Rachel's friends had either been arrested or lived in fear of arrest or worse. She had either not been aware of any of this when she arrived or she had suppressed it from her memory.]

As we were waiting at the station, I heard people calling out *zjid, Zjid, Zjid*, meaning Jew in Czech. Same as in Polish. Edgard kept asking me what was going on. I told him that I did not quite understand them. We were happy to be going to Poland and I did not want to tell him, but I was beginning to be concerned.

The Early Days

When we first arrived, I moved into a hotel for foreigners.

[Rachel had described her arrival in Warsaw to Marcel earlier on and did not repeat it here. Marcel's recollection of her earlier narrative and Edgard's comments at the Owl's Head reunion are presented here.]

[Edgard at Owl's Head:

After we arrived, went to the only hotel on that side of Warsaw, a big hotel. I took a walk around the hotel. It was snowing. I think it was December '52 or January '53. Suddenly guys my age, I was 14 at the time, started chasing after me, throwing snowballs in a very aggressive manner. They were yelling *Zhid! Zhid!*. I did not understand a word of Polish, I had never been exposed to Polish, only French, Flemish ...They recognized I was Jewish. Actually they recognized I was not Polish. They were so xenophobic that they hated anybody from abroad. For them to be from abroad was to be Jewish. From time to time, even, they mistook Polish people with black hair for Jews. So they ran after me. Imagine, the week before I had been in Brussels with the USJJ, [the Jewish youth organization.] so the difference was very acute.

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When I returned to the hotel] I asked my mother the meaning of *Zhid*. She replied: Jew. So I asked her the meaning of that incident. She answered "Oh that." ...She made excuses, trying to put everything in a positive way. It led to stupid arguments. Incredible, really irrational

The next day, on the third day, I remember a man appeared in our room. I don't remember his name. He was speaking Polish to mother. She was translating only some of the words. I don't know exactly what he said. He was from the secret police. It was her good fortune that he was a Jew. In general there were no Jews in the police. I don't know why he was still there. Perhaps because he was in the underground during the war and was an ardent Communist. He was still very active in the secret police. In Poland, at that time, there were anti communist groups. They called them Mafia bands etc, etc...They operated in the mountains and even in the vicinity of Warsaw. He was the leader of one of the groups who went after them.

I did not realize at the time what he was doing but I knew that he was from the police. My mother understood very quickly that she was being followed by the police and that I could no longer stay with her, and that she had to send me somewhere. Not a school, but a home [an orphanage].

Two years later, after I had learned Polish, he told me that he had to make a daily report or something like that. So he made the reports in in a manner that indicated that they should not worry about her, in the sense that she is really crazy, not crazy [insane], not that she is crazy to want to go back to Poland, but that she had nothing to do with the people that she gave as a reference. He knew all the names.

[Marcel describes the second day in Warsaw based on other recollections by Rachel

The following day she had received a new Polish ID card in exchange for her Belgian travel documents.

"We are full citizens," she joyfully told Edgard,"with all the rights that come with it." Her joy was short lived however, for they had no sooner returned to their hotel that they were told that they would have to vacate the premises.

"This hotel is for foreigners only," the man at the desk told them,"since you are Polish citizens you have to move out right away. That is the law."

She tried to argue with him, but to no avail. They packed their suitcases and left them in the lobby while they went looking for another place to stay. The best they could find was one room with no bath in a small, dirty looking street. The bathroom had to be shared by the six rooms on the floor. There was a telephone in the lobby, and since taxis did not seem to exist, the woman who rented them the room offered, for a fee, to go fetch their luggage with a hand-drawn cart.]

Diary- September 1952

Can Mom not see what I see? What did we let ourselves in for? She keeps making excuses for situations that are inexcusable. We left such a large and comfortable house and we now share a miserable hovel with 6 other people. I had friends and so much warmth and joy, while here nobody smiles and everybody is so distant. I was led to believe that in Socialist countries everyone worked for the common good in an unselfish manner. But here I see people, supposedly friends and comrades, who seem unable to be reached and unwilling to help anyone.

I fear we have made a terrible mistake in coming here. Can Mom not see that the King has no clothes?

Tomorrow I am going to a boarding school for new arrivals. Maybe things will be a bit more pleasant.]

THE MISGUIDED IDEALIST

Before we left for Poland I had been advised by my friends to bring with me goods such as knitting wool, razor blades, drugs such as penicillin, watches and the like for resale, because they were in short supply there. The idea was to place them in consignment in special shops called *commisz* who would sell them and give me the proceeds, less a commission. I thought it was a crazy idea, but did it anyway. These things turned out to be gold there!

By the time I arrived in Warsaw the penicillin that I had brought with me had been stolen from my luggage. I did better with belongings I shipped separately, although there too things were stolen.

I had to muddle through during those first months in Warsaw, and it is by selling through the *commisz*'s that I was able to pay my rent and buy food until I was able to get a job and ultimately made it possible for me to buy an apartment. If I remember correctly my brother sent me things for sale during my first year there.

Job Hunting

M. How did you get work?

R. I sensed that something was wrong almost as soon as I got there. As I starting looking up my contacts the people who had originally told me that "my home is your home" made themselves scarce. They had been promoted and if I wanted to see them, I had to go to the Central Committee headquarters, because that is where most of them were employed. I would come to their offices and ask for them. In order to avoid giving me a pass allowing me to come in, they would come down for five minutes and then they would excuse themselves saying "I am very busy". They seemed to be afraid I might see some secret and possibly endanger them. When I asked for the address of others, former companions from Spain they told me "I don't know, I don't remember", because they did not want to tell me that most of these people were already in prison.

Only one of them, Grisha, strung me along. He would receive me at home, for example in the evening. He would tell me: "Sure, you can go see so and so, he is the chairman of the ministry of commerce, and so and so at some other ministry. Since you know the language and since you come from abroad and you know about the outside world, I am sure that you will get a job". He recommended places to interview. I went there and was received with open arms as for example at the central pharmacy.

"We would be glad to hire you, but you understand we must get approval from above. You will hear from us in a few days. " They would say wherever I went..

But they didn't mean it, because they did have authority to hire without asking for approval from higher authority. They would then call this Grisha [my so-called friend] and seek his approval.

"It is your responsibility," he would tell them, "I know her, but I don't know anything about her activities after I left Belgium, I don't know what she was involved in."

Yet, he knew me very well, he knew I had been in the Resistance, he knew that I had been in the Party until the day I left Belgium. I had a very good letter of introduction from the Belgian

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Party: I used to go regularly to Party headquarters in Brussels to make my payments to the Party secretary, so you can well imagine the kind of references they gave me. I had a letter of recommendation with me and he had promised to send another one ahead of me.

But the Russians, not the Poles, had ordered the assassination of all the Party secretaries. There was this story of Rayek [?] and others ⁷. They were all assassinated. And they probably had the same attitude of suspicion towards the Belgian Party. What was the recommendation worth? There is no way of knowing.

I was in an impossible situation. Everywhere I went they made believe. Then I learned something else. Grisha's wife worked for the Ministry of Justice. She was Russian, a Soviet. I learned from a friend from Belgium that Grisha had also been in Spain. You remember how we got out from there, Dolly and I...But others were brought out of the camps in France by the Party and sent to the Soviet Union by boat. Grisha was among those who went. In my opinion he worked for the GPU. ⁸ One could feel that. Another indication is that very few foreigners could have married a Soviet. You should have seen how she was sobbing when Stalin died. "What are we going to do without you" she was sobbing in Russian. I was already feeling differently about things and I found it funny.

I kept asking friends, no acquaintances, because I could no longer call them my friends because of the way they behaved towards me: "What is happening, why do they treat me this way, why can't I get a job?"

I got a clear answer from a woman during a job interview: "We know all about your past, but only up to a certain point. We do not know what you did between the end of the war and your arrival here. Tell me why you waited so long to come here."

"If had come earlier," I said, "you would have asked me, 'why so soon?'. What does 'so long' mean?"

"Well, you know, others have come earlier and taken all the good jobs".

"I am only asking for an plain ordinary job, I don't need to go to the Central Committee," I replied.

M. So, how did you get the job at the Review?

R. I knew a woman who had left for Poland two years ahead of me. She was originally from Poland, had come to Paris and had been in the Resistance there. She had played a major role in it and had done very well. Fortunately there had been many of us who had done so. She had returned to Poland very early, because the French Party had encouraged the Jews to emigrate to Poland. She managed very well and very quickly. She was surrounded by her friends. There were many more Polish Jews in the French Resistance than in Belgium and they had taken the

⁷ This is probably a reference to the outcome of the "espionage" trials that took place in '52

⁸ KGB's predecessor

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first jobs in Poland. I knew her through Dolly who had worked with her when he was helping foreigners get into France on their way to Spain. I asked her "How could you think I worked with the enemy, while my husband was in custody?"

Finally tired of battling, I said "I'll do anything, even work as a maid. I have to get out of the hotel where I live. I must start earning a living so I can get an apartment and have Edgard join me." At the time he was living in a stupid school, almost like a military school.⁹ Reveille who knows when, everything military. He was being called *Frenchy*, as in America, but it was meant as an insult.

Diary-October 1952

I have been in this place for a month now. I was just too exhausted at night to write anything before now, but I guess one eventually gets used to anything. The first week I was here, I thought I had discovered what hell must be like. Up at six, calisthenics to martial music, then breakfast and the beginning of another school day. I cannot even look forward to the meals which are plentiful but disgusting: cabbage and potatoes, potatoes and cabbage, cabbage and greasy meat, cabbage soup, bread and cabbage, cabbage, cabbage,....What I wouldn't give for a steak and French fries!

I have met some of my fellow students and we communicate as best we can. There are some friendly Koreans and Spaniards. My greatest joy was to meet someone I had known in Brussels. We had not been too friendly in Belgium, but here we found each other like two long-lost brothers, with a common language and shared memories. At least we know that our memories are not just dreams, but reality. Will we ever go back to that reality? Or are we doomed to finish our lives in this God forsaken place?

Diary- November 1952

Today I went to the village with some of the Spanish fellows. We were quietly having a beer at the local inn when some of the villagers started to look for a fight with us. We were able to get out and dodge the rocks with which they showered us, but some of the things they said hit their mark: I now understand enough Polish to understand the words "scram you filthy Jews." I suppose that my friends' Mediterranean looks must fit their mental stereotypes of what a Jew must look like. This is the first time in my life that I have witnessed anti-Semitism. Sorry, no, it is the second time: I now understand what Mom was refusing to translate for me when we went through Prague. When I told my Spanish friends what sort of insults were shouted at us, they could not understand what it was all about. They have never heard of Jews, and it was not easy to explain anti-Semitism, or why they are mistaken for Jews.

Diary-December 1952

Just got this week's letter from Mom. She's starting to work at last in a foreign language publishing-house. She does not mention what her job will be, but I hope she'll now be able to find a decent place so that I can get out of here.

The First Job

M. It's inhumane to refuse someone employment. It's fascism.

R. Well what happens today? If you don't work, they put you in jail, because they say you are

⁹ See Owl's Head

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a parasite.

At long last I was hired as a cleaning lady for a bookshop. I could not even be a saleslady. I was the first to come in the morning, I mopped floors, took books out and arranged them on the shelves. The place was more than just a bookstore. It was also the House of Culture where activities were always taking place. Numerous foreign groups used to visit the place, because we were a showcase of what was supposed to be heaven on earth. After a while they started pushing me ahead a little. Who else could understand French, English, and Spanish? In due course and in spite of their lack of confidence in me they also started sending me occasionally outside of Warsaw. In a word, they gradually promoted me to where they eventually entrusted me with the assignment to Vietnam. This was a high level job that came later.

Diary January 1953

I saw Mom during the Winter holidays (if you can call living in Warsaw a holiday. Far from the happy days when holidays meant skiing in Switzerland!). After a lot of evasive tactics, she finally told me what job she had. I was so shocked, I could not find the words to say anything. When I think of what we gave up, I start crying. But what really amazes me is that she still finds excuses for all that is rotten here, and that she keeps speaking of things getting better. One thing is sure, it will be a long time before we can afford a decent apartment on a cleaning woman's salary.

Diary-March 1953

Today I received the sad news that my grandmother has died. Mom sent me the letter she received from my cousin in Canada, telling her about it. At least Grandma was smart enough to refuse to come back to Poland. Why couldn't Mom listen to her? When I think of my cousin living in Canada, I envy him so much, the lucky bastard!

Diary-April 1953

I must be getting pretty fluent in Polish: today I got into trouble for speaking up too much. I have learned that disagreeing with the teacher is strictly "verboten" if you know what is good for you, but I just could not keep quiet when he started telling us about the decadence of Western capitalist society. From now on I'll concentrate on mathematics. That is one subject on which they cannot possibly find some Marxist/Leninist interpretation.

Diary-August 1953

I had a relatively enjoyable Summer, camping with some friends. Enjoyable for here, that is, as long as you don't think too much of what Summers were like when we were in Belgium. At least I won't have to go back to that horrible boarding school. I am anxious to see what our new apartment will be like.

It is through sales through the *commizs* that I was eventually able to pay for the purchase of an apartment. It was dilapidated and they kept promising that repairs would soon be completed. Eventually we moved in and made repairs with the help of friends. The place was a mess, mice were running all over, the stair well, did not have a railing. I don't know how we survived.

R. Things started looking up. It was a good period.

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M. Were you thinking of leaving or did you still believe?

R. I still believed. I still believed.[she repeated with resignation] No. That happened a little later. I was still trying. I started gaining recognition in my job. After a while they recognized that they were not fully utilizing my capabilities and eventually promoted me to editor of the Polish propaganda publication called *Pologne*. I did not have to do the work myself, but rather had to organize the work, deal with the translators etc. That's when I started making real money.

[Edgard had a less sanguine view of the situation]

Diary-October 1953

We have been living in our new place for about a month. Yesterday we finally started to get running water. We are on the third floor. And there is no banister to the staircase. The light in the hallway is on the blink most of the time: The light bulbs get stolen. It gets to be pretty creepy to climb those stairs in the dark, with nothing to hold on to, hearing the rats scuttling about. Still, after speaking with some schoolmates, it seems we are pretty lucky to have this place. Better than the boarding school anytime!

Diary-November 1953

Mom just came from work with a few oranges. She told me she had to wait for two hours in line, and this was all she was allowed to buy. We have a gas stove, but since gas is not available in the building yet, she still cooks on the alcohol stove, which takes an awful long time to heat up some soup. Patience!

Diary-December 1953

Last month Mom had to go to the police headquarters for some "clarification." She was there for the whole afternoon answering questions. She was very upset to see that she was still not trusted. I have given up arguing with her. Can she not see what kind of society this is? I think she is starting to believe me when I told her that there is someone following her wherever she goes

Office managers were supposed to be elected by the staff. On one occasion there was a meeting of the personnel for the purpose of electing the president. There was a Frenchwoman at the meeting. The French party members were the worst, they had taken all the jobs. She went from one to the other and was saying: "Listen, you must vote for so and so," she had a short list of names. I asked her why.

"But they are the best, you know. They are the best Communists. If the others were to be elected can you imagine, we would get non Party members in office."

"What's wrong with that?" I replied, "They do very good work and are very energetic. Why not?"

'Oh, no" she replied.

Early Doubts

That's when I experienced my first doubts. Well, for the moment it was just doubts. I was fully indoctrinated. So it was not clear in my mind, but doubt had insinuated itself, and I was trying to bury it as deeply as possible.

M. It is a little bit like perception. Up to a certain moment one only sees what one wants to see.

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R. That's right. There were times when I was fed up.

I continued working, but doubts were creeping into my mind. When Poland became a member of the UN observers' team in Vietnam in 1954 I thought that I might be able to go there and from there I would be able to escape with Edgard, but it did not work. But there was an earlier opportunity that did not work out.

Edgard's Vacation in Brussels-Summer 1954

M. On the one hand things were going well; on the other hand you were looking for a way out.

R. That's right.

M. When did the opportunity arise?

R. It happened one summer. As they trusted me, I was able to get a visa for Edgard to visit Uncle Monik in Brussels. I expected that once there he would stay in Belgium. I never dared breathe a word to him, that he do it. All he had to do was to stay. I knew his uncle could help him. But at that time I would never have been able to leave Poland. That is why we did not both get a visa, as they do in the USSR today, they kept me hostage. But I almost prayed to God for help, because I could see that Edgard's pain was getting worse. He did not feel well. Politically he did not have the same scruples that I had about leaving. He could care less about the Party there. Everything he had seen was already too much. But he did come back.

Diary-Fall 1954

This Summer was like a dream, but like a dream it went by too quickly. I can't believe that I came back to this nightmare. When I left Brussels I could not help crying all the way to the airport. Mom had suggested that I stay in Belgium with my uncle and she'll never know how tempting that was. But how naive can she be? Does she not realize what would happen to her if I decided not to come back?

Decision To Leave Poland

When he came back I decided that it was time for us to leave together. We had become good friends with the prof who was to care for Edgard while I was in Vietnam. He lived in the boonies outside Warsaw and when he came to town for a concert or the theater, he sometimes stayed with us and we had time to talk. I remember one day when Edgard had had it. He was crying his heart out in front of him. "I've had it", he was saying, "this is no life." That is when I told him: "I swear before this gentleman, I brought you to Poland and I will get you out or I'll kill myself." because there is no hope.

In a way it was good that he had returned. At the time that he had visited uncle Monik in Brussels Edgard had not yet finished his *bachot*. He had become a very good student. Because of his limitations with the Polish language, he had experienced problems with literature and history, subjects that he loved in Belgium and in which he had been very good. So he switched to math instead. He was brilliant, and was able to finish his *bachot* (it was his last year). Because of equivalency, it was later accepted at University in Belgium.

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There was an incident with hooligans. Edgard could tell you about the time he was hit with stones. I came home and found him bandaged. '

'What happened" I asked?

"I fell", he answered.

It was only much later, perhaps a couple of weeks later, that he told me that he had been beaten because he was Jewish. They did not call him *Frenchy* anymore, but simply *Zhid*. This lit a fire under me and I decided right then and there that we had leave.

Diary-Winter 1954

"Kill the Jew" they yelled. Then they knocked me down and started pelting me with rocks. One of them hit me on the head and blood started running down my face. Fortunately a couple of people appeared at the street corner and the gang dispersed when someone started shouting for the police. They picked me up and took me to a pharmacy where I was bandaged up. I told Mom I had slipped on the ice. I now have to find a safer route to come home.....

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Vietnam 1955-56

Editor's Note: Rachel went to Vietnam in the hope of finding an escape route through China. Her attempt failed when she was unable to secure permission for Edgard to join her for a leave in China.]

M. You went to Vietnam as a translator?

R. Yes.¹⁰ Poland was a member of the U.N. observers' group that was to monitor the French withdrawal from Indochina. One of the areas of discussion was what equipment and materiel the French would remove or leave behind in Vietnam as they left. The French had a big appetite. In order to do this amicably, I went with a Polish group. There were a number of men, women and us and we each had our department. I was assigned to the Haiphong group that was primarily responsible for visiting hospitals in order to see what the French should leave behind for humanitarian reasons. We had to travel quite a bit so we could observe on the spot. I clearly remember visiting a hospital in the neighborhood of Haiphong or perhaps a little farther and observing for the first time in my life how the Vietnamese, like the Indians, came to the hospital with their whole family when one family member was sick. They lived under the patient's bed ate there, slept there, stayed all the time with the patient. I saw the bandages, and smelled the odors. It was horrific. I asked myself "why do they allow this, because that is how diseases spread?"

The Indian who was there with me told me. "You are too delicate, Madame, in our civilized country we have the same thing." He was dead serious. He really believed it. I didn't dare say anything further.

In summary, my job consisted of attending meetings, translating what the Poles said, and translating for them what the others had to say. I must confess that I had such a stupid group, that sometimes my translation was totally different from what they were saying, a totally free translation.

I managed very well. I was fortunate, because people back in Warsaw were aware of what I was doing. Many eyes were watching us.¹¹ Warsaw congratulated me, and when I returned I was treated as a great patriot, with a good reputation who had done a great job. But if I ever had had an enemy I would certainly have landed in prison. Anyway, they were very happy with me. So much so that the Polish ambassador (each nation, Canada, India and Poland had one on the commission) asked me to help him out when I did not have a special escort assignment, because we did not travel every day. Normally we traveled, then prepared reports and had discussions with the French etc. I said no, I refused because I felt that my English was not good enough. But he insisted: "No, you are the best we have". You can imagine how good their English translators

¹⁰ That must have been in 1955.

¹¹ See Owl's Head. Edgar explained that there were security people watching everything going on.

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must have been if I was the best. He himself was pretty good, but he wanted help with technical terms. He is the one who told me that I absolutely must see him after I returned to Poland. He had asked me what my job had been, and when I told him he told me I was underutilized. There were intrigues in Vietnam, but they were mostly personal. I did not feel the heavy hand of the Party there.

M. Would you have been able to escape had Edgard been with you?

R. Oh yes. Even before my departure, I was happy to have been offered the job because it offered an possible escape hatch. At the time, I was thinking, "If I could I would leave." The situation had become untenable. Even ideologically I did not see why I should stay, because I abhorred the regime. I could see that it could not survive long, because of the nepotism that existed, Jews, non-Jews. [Anti-Semitism was beginning to surface]. Even I became anti Semitic in a way, because of the rampant nepotism. The leaders and their lackeys who were living it up.

Unfortunately things did not work out. I could barely correspond by mail, I got mail infrequently. I did not even know that Edgard was sick; he had jaundice, and had been hospitalized. He received very good medical treatment, because I was well regarded at the time. He was even sent to a sanatorium in Krynica [near the Czech border.] It is a wonderful place that I never saw.

He had stayed with a teacher who took very good care of him. Edgard had always been raised by women and he adored this man like a father. He helped him with his Polish (he knew some French) and also helped him with his studies. Also before I left, Edgard had expressed the desire to learn to play the piano (we had brought one with us). I left money for the man to find a good piano teacher. He found one who came to the house.

[Edgard remembers that period differently: "I was living in an apartment with a Yiddishe Pole Jachman who took care of me. It was not a good time. I must have suppressed all of this in my mind. I don't even remember how they look. All I remember is the taste of the marmalade I had to eat every morning. It was horrible. That's all I remember."]

Return to Poland 1956

Edgard learned to play quite well and played for me when I returned from Vietnam. It was delightful, very moving. I found him much changed and I was very happy about it. During my absence he had almost become a man. It was the age, he was 17-18 years old. He had changed physically and morally. He felt more independent and had made many friends at Krynica [the sanatorium] as well as in school.

An international youth congress was in progress at the time of my return, and I was immediately assigned the task of arranging the sale of books to the 'youth of the world', or something like that. Edgard worked with them and managed his group, which included many old friends from Belgium.

M. Did you discuss anything with them?

R. I never said anything to Edgard as long as he did not bring it up. He had told me how

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shocked his friends had been by the way we lived. Of course, we had invited them to the house. "Do you struggle like this every day?" they had asked. They looked at each other.

Selling books was supposed to be temporary until I got a different job and they were looking for a new assignment for me. That did not bother me since I would no longer have to be the cleaning woman. I was assigned as a translator to work with people from Latin American countries, which gave me the opportunity to refresh my Spanish, which was getting rusty.

I started thinking about how to proceed since my escape plan had failed. I had thought that I would be able to escape through China. Because China and Poland were friends at the time I was going to arrange for Edgard to visit Beijing, and from there we would find a way out, as there was a fair amount of confusion in China at the time. Instead I was assigned to escort a sick woman back to Warsaw. There was nothing I could do I had to return with her.¹²

Planning the Escape

There was a change in the political situation. Stalin's death helped us all. First, the prison gates had opened. The former president [actually deputy premier] Gomulka was released from prison.

[The repression in Poland eased gradually starting in '54 following Stalin's death (in '53). The famous 20th Party Congress took place in Moscow in February '56. Gomulka was released from prison in July '56, and elevated to Party Secretary a few months later following which he ordered an end to the anti-Semitic campaign and allowed Jews to leave for Israel. Joe]

Edgard:

The story of our departure really begins with what happened in the first days of the Budapest insurrection at the end of '56 or beginning of '57. Due to those events the same atmosphere began to develop in Warsaw. We were surrounded by Soviet tanks etc. etc. But fortunately the Russians did not want to repeat the Budapest story. It was the beginning of the Polish story: they released from prison all the people who were arrested after the events of '52, among them Gomulka, etc. and so they put him in as first leader etc etc... For 2-3 months the "winds of freedom" blew in Poland and all the Jews who wanted to leave were offered the opportunity to go to Israel. We jumped at this opportunity, and requested and received the Israeli visas, which were put on our Polish passports. It was a trick of course; because my mother and I just wanted to return to Belgium, not go to Israel. So what we did was to take a plane out of Poland. Two planes actually, one to Germany, then to Paris, because there was no direct connection between Warsaw and Israel, Tel Aviv. You had to go through a third country.

Rachel continues:

¹²It is quite possible that the escort assignment was a subtle way of getting her back to Poland and discouraging any attempt to defect along the way.

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I felt then that it would be easier to get a passport. It worked out that way. I was also helped by the friend I told you about who worked in the Russian-Polish Gestapo.¹³

He had become a friend who visited me at home. I did not know then that he had been fired a long time ago and he was simply coming for the meals. He had a sister, but he was ashamed to admit it to his sister. He was coming over more frequently than I cared. It was difficult to give more than one felt. I knew that I did not want to stay with him or leave with him. I was afraid to tell him that I wanted to leave. There were times when I knew that if I asked him, he would have said that he would help. But I did not fully trust him.

The time came to make a decision. There was a congress of the Spanish Civil War Veterans. I was assigned as a translator to an Italian group to escort them and show them around. Among them was a very important individual who still plays an important role in the Italian Party. I don't remember his name. They came and there was a big reception.

I met the Czech woman who had worked with me in the pharmacy [in Spain], as well as the doctor, who unfortunately has since died, but who played a major role in the renewal in Prague.¹⁴ It was a very joyful reunion for all of us, but we all felt oppressed. The strangest thing was that many-viewed Poland as the freest country. For example, the Czechs envied us our freedom of speech. That is when I found out that I was not the only one who was thinking of leaving. Others spoke of it too, which encouraged me to proceed and ask for a passport. I was always afraid that it would turn out badly.

M. Did you have to ask for the passport as a Jew going to Israel?

R. I wanted to avoid doing so. I wanted an unrestricted passport and was fortunate to receive one that did not require me to go to Israel, but one that allowed me to go abroad. The passport was authorized but it would not be issued until I identified a country that would accept me. That was the big unknown.

We could already phone abroad, so I contacted my brother Maurice and asked him for help in getting a Belgian visa. He tried and he tried but it did not work. Perhaps he would have succeeded for Edgard alone. But there was the danger again, that if he were to leave alone they could change their minds about me. And I knew that after all that had happened he needed a mother.

The Final Departure

M. How did you finally receive your passport with Edgard?.

R. I was able to obtain a French transit visa by telling the consulate that I had been promised a Belgian visa. As a result I got my passport with the French transit visa valid for two or ten days, I don't remember exactly.¹⁵

¹³ The secret police officer that had kept her under surveillance at the beginning of her stay and then befriended her. See Edgar's explanation in Owl's Head.

¹⁴ She is probably referring to the period preceding Slansky's purge.

¹⁵ This must have been in July 56

RETURN FROM POLAND

M. I assume you lost your job the day you asked for the passport.

R. That's right. As soon as I announced my intention to leave I lost my job. It was official, we could announce it, but they took your job away. It was better that way, instead of hiding. I did not want to try an escape, I preferred to leave legally. I was without work. I started disposing of what I could, preparing my luggage, encountered many difficulties, but it didn't matter. We were too happy that we were about to escape. Edgard was so impatient.

M. Was the house sold?

R. I wanted to sell the apartment but could not. Who had money to buy it at the time? Besides we did not have the time to sell. We had to abandon it. I just salvaged what was most valuable and sent it along with another couple, Belgian Jews, who returned directly and arrived well before we did. We had to travel all over. Finally we left the next day.

There were difficulties getting space on the airplane even though we had tickets, paid for in dollars. The first time we went to the airport, they had no space for us. Edgard said, "I will spend the night here. I'll die here, I won't move", he was horrified at the thought of returning home. I did not let him though. I probably would never have seen him again. I think, because there were terrible hooligans.¹⁶ We did not return home, we did not have one, but went to the house of a friend with whom I had worked in the editorial office in Poland. She was not a Communist, which is probably why I got to like her so much. She had seen her live-in boyfriend die in prison. She used to bring him medication there until his death. We spent the night with her and left the next day. As we left I thought of *bonne maman*. She had died while we were in Poland and I hurt very badly. As we left Poland I thought, "Yes she was right, she had been right all along. I should not have gone to Poland." She had said 'I will die...', and I was beginning to see things clearly around me.

¹⁶ A reference to the earlier stoning incident

The Final Return

France

"How long do you plan on staying here?" was the first question the immigration agent asked me when we arrived in Paris,

"As long as possible" I replied. I thought, we could always manage something.

"No" he said, "I'll give you a permit for ten days."

So, I had to rush matters. Maurice [her brother] came to see us in Paris. We were staying with Maurice Leviner. I could see that they were afraid that the *Sûreté* might come looking for me. When we arrived I had to give an address, but I had thought it best not to give the address where I would be (I was still accustomed to subterfuges, from the war etc.) So, I had given the address of a woman that I received from one of my friends in Poland who was leaving for Vietnam. He had told me "She is my cousin; she will help you. You may go to her, and if they ask you, you may give them her address." I gave that address, but stayed at the Leviners.

I went to see this cousin to find out if she could help me. She said that she could, that she knew somebody who worked in Paris City Hall.

How did he help? "I'll come with you and hope I'll be able to do something for you" he had said. He was a Corsican. When we arrived at city hall, we had to go to the *Sûreté*. I did not like that at all. He introduced me and walked away, disappeared. I never saw him again. I found that strange.

They called me in and told me "You worked against France, how dare you ask to remain in France?"¹⁷ I then remembered that I had used a passport in my own name on my trip to Vietnam. I was stupid. Others had used assumed names. Why did they [Polish authorities] not think of that? Perhaps they did it on purpose to block my return to France.

I immediately understood the situation and did not return to the cousin's house. I assumed that the Corsican was working both sides of the street, and as a matter of fact, that's the way it was. The police came looking for us there. She [the cousin] told them, truthfully, that we had not returned and that she did not know where we were. We never went back to her house. I called her to find out what was going on, but when I did, it was from a phone booth, not the Leviners'. That reminded me of the war.

Edgard provided a more detailed description of these events at Owl's Head:

We had family in Paris and my mother was sure that after arriving in Paris it would be very easy for us to go to Brussels. The family was at the airport waiting for us, but it became apparent that it was impossible for us to leave the airport, because we did not have a French visa.

We argued with the authorities for hours. The French staff was very understanding.

¹⁷ A reference to an involvement with an espionage network in France. See Owl's Head

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They had said there were only two choices: either we go to Israel or we go back to Poland. The officer in charge understood that we did not want to go to Israel and did not want to return to Poland either. We were refusing both choices. So finally he says : "I have an idea." He had found that the only way for my mother to be admitted was to receive a medical paper at the airport from the official airport medical staff, certifying that she was sick and must wait for a couple of days before taking another plane. He called the medical staff and they prepared a paper saying that she had to stay for a week, because they found I don't remember what and, we went into Paris.

My mother felt very lucky, because she was sure that with the help of the family there, and knowing many people in Paris she would be able to arrange everything in a week. After five days it became clear that nothing was happening and that she could not arrange anything: could not arrange entry into Belgium, could not even arrange an extension of the French visa. The whole thing, they said, was due to the fact that Belgium refused to give her an entry visa because before going to Poland she had been in the Communist Party.

On the fifth day we were called to the police intelligence central. We went there and I remember seeing a sign on the door saying *Département des personnes non-grata* (undesirables). My mother went in and the man said "We know that you are in Paris for a week, that you were convicted [of espionage] and that you have two days to get out of France." There is another story after the war, in '47-'48 before going to Poland, that I did not know about at the time. She had been working in Paris with a group of people conducting espionage on behalf of Czechoslovakia...She was convicted [in absentia?]...it was a big thing. She did not know about the conviction.¹⁸

So really, under the circumstances, they had been very kind in France. First at the airport; then the police. The man said: "Look, I understand that you came back from Poland and do not want to go back. I can understand that you changed your mind etc. This is an old story. According to the law, I have the right to jail you, but I will not do that. I will give you an official paper that you must leave the country within two days, not mentioning that matter.

We were afraid to stay in Paris, because I knew that the *Sureté* would come and pick us up. During the war, Leviner had been hidden in the South of France. He knew someone in city hall there and called the woman who had helped them during the war. She was very, very charming. Since she had helped the Leviners during the war, she agreed to help us, if she could.

At the same time I was also in touch with my brother, but he was not much of an operator. So I also contacted Lieberman¹⁹. I met him in Paris and I asked his advice on how to proceed. He said the only way out was to arrange a marriage of convenience. As he saw it, when France rejected my request for residence, Belgium would do the same, they were happy to get rid of me.

M. That's why you first went to the South of France before going to Vienna?

R. Yes indeed.

¹⁸ This explains her earlier comment where she complains about using her real name on her passport.

¹⁹ Dov, who used to be her contact during the war

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Cantal

[Edgard explains what happened there:

It was a very bad scene, better than my mother going to jail, but we only had two days. What to do? We went back to the family and they thought of the time during the war when they were hidden in the middle of France, in the Cantal, a very nice region South of Paris. There they were helped by an old lady who was working with the French police, but the police did not know that she was working with the resistance. Tens and tens of Jews and *résistants* are alive because of her. She played a wonderful game. There was a big cabinet in the room. Every time she received a file it was her job to affix the last stamp. She was considered a very cooperative woman by the Germans and the French police. Whenever she saw a file about Jewish people and *résistants* she would hide it behind the cabinet, and after the war they found a huge number of files on all these people who had been saved. Moreover, she took responsibility for finding families in the neighboring little villages with whom to hide all the Jews. She received the order of the *Légion d'Honneur*.

In any case my family was saved by this woman, and every year they went to see her in the Cantal for one or two days. So they stayed in close contact. They said to my mother: "We only have one idea. We will go to her and ask her if your *persona non grata* papers arrived in her department, because once you are declared *persona non grata* (undesirable), they send this paper to all the departments in France. They phoned to this lady. She was home, she was an old lady. She went immediately to her old office, where she knew everybody and told them she wanted to show them something. She knew exactly where the books were kept and found out nothing had arrived, there was no mention of my mother. She phoned back two or three hours later and said. "Look, there is no indication about anything. Take the train; come down tomorrow. I will arrange things locally." We still had two days left. So we took the night train down.

We arrived in the Cantal the next morning and went straight to the police station where he was waiting for us. In the meantime she had prepared everything. Once more a doctor was called by the police. She explained everything (well, maybe not everything) and asked him to do her a favor. He made out a certificate stating that "this woman is very sick and must stay at least one month in the Cantal, she may not be moved, etc..."

This old lady made out papers, not identity cards, because she did not have the authority, but a *permis de séjour*, good for one month. Once more my mother was very optimistic. She was sure that during that month everything would come out OK. We were in Nanterre. We had some money that was sent to us little by little by Dov Lieberman from Belgium (one of the old friends from Spain.) He was a rich man. She was on the phone all the time trying to find out what was happening. They were working in Brussels trying to find out what they could do to arrange for us to get a visa for Belgium. But after one month there was no success, it was really frustrating. So the old lady made us a second paper for a second month.

We stayed a second month and after the second month she said, "Look, I cannot do that again. It's too dangerous, because to be sick for one year..." We didn't want to cause her trouble. So after two months we returned to Paris. In the meantime, the papers saying that we had one day to leave France were too dangerous, because they had expired two months earlier. So we threw them away and were left without a *permis de séjour*, just with our Polish passport with no visa, nothing. We were completely illegal. So we did not know what to do, it was impossible.]

R: We started looking for a prospective husband in France, but it was very difficult to do so, there were many conditions. One had to be registered in a locality for at least one year and of course I could not register, since I was illegally in France. Catch 22. It was Dov Lieberman who gave me the idea to go to Vienna, where matters could be arranged rapidly. I would be able marry

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there. "But you have to find someone, because I don't know anybody in Vienna" I told him. There was a commercial fair in Vienna at the time; I don't remember which. Since I had kept my business card, I gained easy admission to it as Dov's representative and went there legally. But of course, I did not attend.

Edgard:

So, this guy from Belgium [Dov] who sent the money to my mother came to Paris. "I have an idea," he said, "There is a big commercial fair in Vienna. I will appoint you my representative. I will go with you to the Austrian Embassy and I will ask for a visa for you and your son to go to Vienna, because I want to send you there for a very important commercial matter, which was B.S. because he had no business there. The Austrians saw nothing wrong with that and stamped our passports. We went to the railway station and took the train to Vienna. The only concern we had was what might happen at the exit from France. We did not know if the French would check our papers at the border, because if they did, they would see that we did not have a French visa and only entry visas to Austria and therefore something was wrong. Fortunately nothing happened and we arrived in Vienna with a *permis de séjour* valid for two months

Vienna

A friend of my friend Yvonne's father was willing to cooperate and marry me, but he did not want to go alone to Vienna, because he had never traveled alone. Her father accompanied him. Dov gave me the money for this, the tickets, etc. I promised that once back in Belgium and as soon as I could, I would reimburse him for all expenses. And it was not a small amount.

I arrived in Vienna, registered and waited for them to come.

We were married as soon as they arrived in Vienna and the following day I went to the Belgian Embassy and claimed my passport. He [the husband] returned immediately and I left two days later leaving Edgard behind, in order to avoid raising any suspicion. I then started looking for ways to get a visa for Edgard. It had never occurred to me at the time that since he was a minor I could have been appointed his guardian and have taken him back with me, now that I was Belgian.

[Edgard remembers this episode somewhat differently:

Once more my mother thought that during these two months everything would be worked out OK in Brussels. They continued to work in Brussels, trying to get us a visa to return to Brussels. After two months of trying nothing moved. So, this guy from Belgium arranged one more month for us in Vienna. But he said, "This is the maximum, after these three months I cannot do anymore," he said. So, after three more weeks, when he saw that nothing was working, he made a decision in Brussels, where he was the head of the committee that was working to get the visa

He found an old man, Mr. Keymolen, whose wife had died a year earlier. He had never been abroad, he was a kind man. They gave him some money; they proposed he go to Vienna to marry my mother. He was very happy [to do it]. He was very *sympathétique*; he was 70 or 72, smiled a lot. For him it was the biggest event in his life. He arrived in Vienna and the same morning they went to the Belgian Embassy, got married and in five minutes my mother received a Belgian passport. All her life she could not get that, [and now] in five minutes she got a Belgian passport!

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She was looking at that as a miracle. But they forgot one thing: to adopt me!

According to Belgian law, because I was over 18, I don't remember exactly what, there is a special paragraph in the Belgian law for such circumstances... In any case, the man who married them, the ambassador, was supposed to note my adoption by my new father or something like that on their papers at the same time. But he completely forgot about that.

We had thought that we could all go together, I mean Mr. Keymolen, my mother and I to Brussels, but as we left we suddenly realized that I did not have any papers. We went back to the Embassy thinking that they had just forgotten to give them to me. He said to me: "I cannot give you a Belgian passport, I don't have the authority. I'm sorry, I made a mistake...." It was really a mistake, but it was too late. So my mother said: "I will go back to Brussels by train tonight with Mr. Keymolen. You stay here. Because I now have Belgian nationality and you are alone in Vienna, I am sure I can arrange visa in a couple of days."

But she wasn't able to; because the Belgian authorities were so angry that she had made the trip. It was completely legal, they could not do anything to her, he was a full Belgian citizen...

In the meantime I was completely without papers. Just my stupid Polish passport, which was worthless and I started waiting. I was in a little pension. I received money little by little from my mother. She phoned me every three or four days and said: "Look I cannot arrange things. They refuse to issue a visa for you."

They tried several things in Brussels but they did not succeed and I stayed in Vienna four more months, imagine, four more months. In the meantime it was not a bad time, I must confess. I was 18; I was out of the nightmare in Poland. I was in a better situation there. Although I did not know what would happen, I was very optimistic because I had the feeling that nothing dramatic could happen: "My mother is in Belgium, she's in Brussels. Although it is difficult to get this thing, it must have a good outcome." I kept telling myself

[Edgard was arrested during a round-up targeting Hungarians refugees and released. He explains what followed.]

He [the police chief] said, "I am sorry. We made a mistake."

I left the station, went back to the hotel and called my mother and said "Look. I have to [go back] because of this and this incident" and explained what had happened. She answered, "I can't do it. Even if I came to Austria I cannot take you back because I have no visa."

So I went to the Belgian Embassy and asked to speak to the ambassador. It was 10 o'clock in the morning.

"Oh! You are still here?" he asked

I remember answering, "Yes, I am still here because of you. Remember, you forgot to...Look you have to do something." And I explained the whole story.

So he says "I will do something for you. I don't have the authority to issue a passport, but I will give you the opportunity to enter Belgium for one week just to visit your mother. I have the right to do that for one week. And once you're in Brussels...." OK, and he makes out the papers, official papers and I get the visa to go to Belgium.

When my mother left me in Vienna, she had left with me enough money to buy a plane ticket from Vienna to Brussels. I took the first plane to Brussels on the very same day. I arrived at Zaventem and went to passport control with my visa.

"Something is wrong. " said the inspector, "You're one day early. The first day on your visa is tomorrow "

I had taken the plane immediately, but the man at the embassy had not thought that I would jump on a plane that same day.

But then the inspector started laughing and said, "It's OK, we'll let you in. "

My mother was waiting at the airport because I had phoned her when I would arrive, and we went to Brussels and I never left, even though after a week nothing was

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happening and I was left without any valid papers, as in Vienna. But I was in Brussels (which changed everything, because Brussels was my city) finally, after 5 years in Poland where I dreamt every night of returning to Brussels. That's not the end of the story, because it continued for six months during which I was without any papers, without any authorization to stay. But I knew not to go in the night with a nice girl, not to cross the street against a red light, not to do anything out of the ordinary.]

Brussels

M. How were you received by the members of the Belgian Communist Party that you knew, by the people who still did not believe that Poland was not heaven on earth.

R. There were two groups representing two points of view. At first I hardly discussed it [the situation in Eastern Europe]. I would not discuss the pros and cons of the situation. I had to collect my thoughts. I was too anxious and overcome with emotion after one year of travel through the world, to and fro, to find a place in Belgium again.

M. How long did it take you from your departure from Poland to your return to Belgium? About a year?

R. That's right. It took almost one year to return from Poland. [Actually 4-5 months] I had spent several months in France, then another several months in Austria.

Coming back to your question, first there were some Communists, old timers, who had quit the Party and were trying to recruit me, so that I could become their spokesperson about what was going on in the East. It was very strange, because among them were even former members of the Central Committee. They were probably doing it to justify leaving the Party. I found it rather strange. I did not want to be the leader of this thankless job. I was invited to go to meetings. They sometime organized small family gatherings I dropped them.

There was another group, to whom I said that I had gone freely, quasi freely, there were certainly grave errors committed and that I did not want to discuss it with them. These people were more sincere. They themselves had said: "we know that there were many errors and that things happened that should never have happened, It's a good thing that it came out into the open. But we have spent three quarters of our lives in the Party", (and that's what it was, since we were in our 20's when we joined the movement) "We cannot see how we can live without the Party, without the friendships we formed in the Party. So we stay, doing our bit. After all we are from the left." I found that attitude more sincere. I can understand this. It is not at age 60 or 70 that one can form new close friendships. It is very difficult.

As to myself, I remained for a very long time without any human contact because I was avoiding both groups.

Then there was a ridiculous incident. One day I ran into a member of the Party Central Committee on the train to Antwerp. Every year the Party held a fair, a fundraiser, in Brussels as well as in Antwerp. She had visited me in Warsaw. After having confessed to me that it was the Polish Central Committee that had not allowed her to come to my house after we had made a date to meet there (I had wanted to receive

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her and discuss things with her) and that instead they had taken her to visit churches and museums. This same person, now dared to approach me, and after embracing me, said to me "I hope you are going to our fair in Antwerp". You can guess my answer. That is something that I will always remember.

There were others who returned at about the same time who immediately started criticizing everything that was happening there. They had their reasons. I don't want to be critical of them. But, when they asked me to participate in their activities, I refused to have anything to do with them. I don't want to play their game. People who understand, who think, will reach the same conclusion I did. The others, who want to remain with their friends, will stay there. As to those who want to stay and continue to work officially in the Party, to build up a reputation, and perhaps die gloriously 'with banners and flags waving at their funeral', well, let them do what they want. Well that was the attitude towards me and by me.

The hardest part was to get the Jewish Communists off my back, because they wanted to enlist me into the *Solidarité*.²⁰

I must confess, that for me the first years after my return were an ordeal. I refused myself everything those first few years. But finally I found myself so isolated, that I had to find somebody to talk to. There were people who thought like me and continued to call on me. I stopped rejecting them, because I found that after all one could not live alone on an island in the middle of the ocean and that one had to be around people.

I learned to become more tolerant, unlike what I had been in the old days, when I was under Party discipline. Then I believed that we would be able to do something in spite of the weaknesses I had detected [in the Party] for some time. I had shown little tolerance. I kept telling myself this and that and accepted things in the name of solidarity for the classes etc.

I also started thinking about the Jewish problem, about Israel. I do not always agree, in fact I rarely agree, with those who are totally against Israel. Because I find it is again the same Stalinist undemocratic attitude. Nor do I agree with the anarchists who want to destroy everything and start all over from scratch. They will start and make the same mistakes that were made before. That's the way history goes, It has always been thus There is no way of starting with a blank page That's all I have to tell you.

²⁰ A Party-sponsored organization

Epilogue

In the end what occupied me was my daily work. I learned a lot. It was a new page in my life, mostly cultural.

Even before I gave up my business, I started looking for something where I could be useful and at the same time be satisfied in order not to be alone, because being alone, that is horrific. Perhaps it is different for a couple. Yet from what I read about immigrants, Czechs, etc, even a couple can break up after a while in exile, if they are stuck looking at each other all day long. It is impossible to live that way. It is necessary to have a broader view of the world one lives in. That's where I tried to branch out.

I first tried the League of the Rights of Man. I was disappointed there, because progress there is so slow. It is a necessary function, but one must be patient. Nothing happens from one day to the next, except for those who travel in their work and have interpersonal contacts.

Dov Lieberman, among others, recommended *MRAX* ²¹. I must admit that here I find the same thing. The woman who directs the operation is pro Chinese and does not understand that for me what happened and is happening in China is the same as what happened under Stalin. China is even more of a closed society than the Soviet Union, and one knows even less about what is happening there because fewer Chinese come out. They had the 100 Flowers, the Great Leap Forward, etc and there are millions and millions who died about whom we know nothing. I judge that the same way I judge Stalin.

She [the director] influences our life in *MRAX*. She is frequently right. It is necessary to have the right touch, when working with immigrants, in order to fight anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism. There is a political basis for this. But she attracts to the working committee people who think like her. I have told her kidding (I am frank with her. She knows that I don't conceal my thoughts. She knows where I come from) that she almost operates the way they did in Poland, (i.e. when the director where I was working announced in advance how we were expected to vote). It is necessary to do something about that and when I feel that she is making a mistake I tell her so right then and there. One must do so, because otherwise it will end up the same way: some will become *apparatchiks* and others will submit out of fear or personal interest. I won't do either, so I say frankly what I think.

That's all unless you have any other questions..

M. I think that covers pretty much what happened to the present. There are so many young people today who are so sure that they are right, that they cannot see another person's point of view. Are we bound to repeat the errors of the past? It seems to me that things were much clearer in the 30's. At least then, one believed that things were black and white and that one could

²¹ Mouvement contre le racisme l'antisemitisme et la xenophobie

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be sure. Today, so many things have happened. How can we tell between good and evil, black and white, truth and lies? Is it possible to think that way today?

R. I think that the human race needs to believe in something. There is not enough education, the way the ancient Greeks had, with their philosophers. Their discussions were aimed at developing a broader view of the world and allowed room for shades of gray, between black and white. I don't know, but today's commercial society, the lack of time, the lack of caring.... We continue to divide matters into black and white and often flip flop. That is the worst of it. A writer who yesterday was anti-Communist or anti-Marxist or vice versa, overnight starts writing the other way around. Again it is a world in which he starts subdividing things into black and white. How will it end? History never repeats itself exactly the same way. For example, since the socialists came to power in France, the writers and politicians have been following a different path. Perhaps they allow themselves to be co-opted by the President, who acts like any person who has a role to play in the world. But on the other hand, I believe that he has a democratic tradition behind him, that of Mendes France whom he admires. That should keep Mitterand from being dragged down the road like the others. This also applies to ideological movements.

M. Is there anything you regret having done, not having done or that you would do or would have done differently?.

R. It is very difficult to tell. What I truly regret is having caused my parents, and especially my mother so much grief, torment actually, because of my many journeys. But I do not regret my journeys, because I believe it is a law of nature that a young person must find his or her way. It is not a straight path. It must not be straight. Now, I don't know, I suppose I will end up in the nebulous present. But I am certain that I will never allow myself to be placed again in a position of blind obedience to achieve a goal that allegedly will be ideal for the people. Many people now know and also understand that that one must not, one may not, impose an ideological or philosophical goal on people who don't want it. I have become a lot more tolerant.

Now I see I made many mistakes in raising the children. What I regret is that because of work we did not have the time to care for and give the children what they needed. I know that there are many parents among the Party old timers who agree with me. Many children are very disoriented and have to seek help from psychologists or psychiatrists because of this, because they did not receive enough parental love. For us it was not the case. It was the war. Before the war we did spend much time taking care of Edgard. There are families whose children of Edgard's age were neglected and sent to relatives, neighbors or Party members while the parents were away in China, the USSR or simply too busy working on a theoretical paper that required absolute concentration. It is really regrettable.

I confess that today I frequently accept suggestions from my son, from you and other young people who, I believe, are better equipped to teach the young that I am. I was not capable of

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doing so because I did not even think. It was not the problem, it was the *weltsmertz*,²² and the children were almost excluded even though they were ours.

We [the Party activists] indoctrinated them so much *nolens, volens* (willy nilly) that they followed us. We never discussed with them whether they liked it or not. There, they began like we did and it continued. With what joy, e.g. Edgard received the news that we had been awarded a visa to go to Poland. We even went to celebrate in a restaurant that evening. I remember it well. We did not celebrate the return, but we were much happier!

M. Did Edgard blame you or did he ever mention anything to that effect, perhaps that going to Poland was a great mistake?

R. Yes. I think so, but without wanting to admit it openly, not even to himself, because I had asked him if he wanted to go before we left for Poland. If he had said no we would not have gone. I presented the proposition to him and he jumped at it enthusiastically. He was about 13-14 at the time. Of course he had been in the youth movement, as you know. And then his friends were encouraging him. He had become the hero of the day.

M. He was so fully indoctrinated.

R. Precisely. But he sensed very early on that we had fallen into trap.

M. Thus ended my interview with Rachel Gunzig during her visit to Montreal in the summer of '84. Other questions occurred to me but I did not have the opportunity to ask them even though we saw each other several times. She passed away at the beginning of 1989.

²² Pain for the ills of the world.