

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.

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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 *Isak* [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.

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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 *gendarmerie* 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.

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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

THE MISGUIDED IDEALIST

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 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.