

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.]

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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 "verboden" 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 evrything 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

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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.