# THE HIDDEN STARS

RÉGINE SOSZEWICZ

Translated by

KIEFER OAKLEY

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Régine Soszewicz (Lilensten) was fond of literature since her childhood and later became a publisher of books for young people at La Farandole and Le Sorbier.

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The author speaks of her book.

“My children wanted to know. It’s mainly for them that I have collected these documents.
“Yes, it’s true, I was that coquettish little Parisian girl, fussing about her clothes, whom circumstances transformed into a farm girl deprived of her parents, relegated with her younger sister into the depths of the French provinces. What a contrast between the two lives!
“That time was a rupture in the destiny of so many millions of people! But it was only later that I was able to appreciate how lucky I was to have escaped the disaster thanks to the simple and courageous people who took me in and to whom I also dedicate this testimony.
“As a passionate lover of literature, I immersed myself in books as a teenager, encouraged by my mother, which naturally led me to pursue my professional life in publishing.
“Later, I met and married Henri, an escapee from the Vel’ d’Hiv’, which is mentioned in the book. Of course, his story and that of my family are true. The years have passed. My grandchildren, also wanted to know…”

Régine Soszewicz

# Part I

# July 1939

If you knew how happy I felt that day! It was the last Thursday before the summer holidays. Simon and Charles both decided that they would come roller-skating with me around the Square des Vosges[1]. Unfortunately, I had to bring my younger sister Marcelle with me[2]. Honestly, she was such a baby. She was only six years old whereas I was almost eight. That was quite a gap. Thankfully, I was not forced to bring my little cousin Josette: she was a four-year-old baby! And to top it all off, her name was Joséphine! I was embarrassed by it, so I decided to name her Josette It must've been a good idea because her mother, Malka, has been calling her that ever since.

I was waiting for Simon. Thanks to our secret code, he told me he would soon be here. I lived with my parents and my whole family on the third floor. Simon lived on the fourth, and whenever one of us had something to say, we banged on the ceiling or the floorboard with the broomstick. Simon was the one who came up with the code. I knew it by heart. Three brief and quick knocks followed with a single long one meant: "I am finishing my snack; I will be here soon."; five repetitive knocks: "I cannot make it." This meant from time to time, I had to watch over my sister and my cousin. For Simon, it was another kind of chore: groceries to do or simply finishing his homework.

Our large apartment located in Rue Jean Beausire took up the of the third floor of a building near the Place de la Bastille. Indeed, we were lucky the apartment was large: that was where we lived and worked: my sister Marcelle, my mother, my father, my aunt Malka, her husband Uncle Gaston and their daughter Josette, my other uncle Michel who was single and me. My father, Gaston and Michel were brothers. My father was the oldest one. Sometimes, my aunt Malka told him that he was too bossy. He replied that was normal because he was the eldest there…

In my family, we liked to change everybody's name. As I was called Régine, I had been nicknamed Rifkélé and my sister Marcelle became Marcellou, Mayerkou or Marcellé. My mother was called Marie, but almost everybody used her Polish first name Mania. My aunt Malka became Malkélé and Joséphine-Josette became

[1] See Appendix 1.
[2] See Appendix 2.

Josettou. Of course, for my sister and I, my parents were simply Mum and Dad. As regards my uncles and aunts, we simply called them by their first names.

The special “mixed” apartment as my father called it was split in half by a long hallway. The workshop was made of two large rooms and overlooked the street. One room contained three sewing machines and two tables for the finishing touches. In the other there were two large tables for cutting and pressing. We said pressing, but really, it was just ironing.

What I liked best of all in the workshop was the damp smell of the warm pressing cloth. Uncle Michel took a large square of soft fabric, dipped it into the basin, squeezed it and neatly flattened it on the part of the garment that needed to be ironed. He grabbed the heavy iron heating on the gas burner and pressed it firmly against the press cloth. At that point, a fragrant scent exuded from the damp, warm garment. When one side of the press cloth got too dry, Uncle Michel took a sip of water, held it in his mouth, and with complete mastery, sprayed a thousand droplets upon the dry part. Uncle Michel was a true artist. I have known all my life that you must not iron woolens without protection if you don’t wish to leave a definitive and disastrous imprint on them.

In the ironing room, the ceiling had long rods mounted on it. It was on them that we hung the clothes that were done. Even with my arms stretched up, I could not touch them. My father was the one in charge of hanging the clothes. The process unfolded as a ceremony. First, the jacket was put onto the mannequin. Dad inspected it carefully, removed any thread that might have eventually stayed permanently, checked that the armholes were not saggy and that the cuffs were ironed impeccably.

He always said: “The cuffs and the armholes of a jacket are delicate and are the hardest part of the job”. Once the inspection was over, he hung the pair of trousers and the jacket on a hanger and with the help of a long pole, spectacularly hung them up onto the rod. I liked this neat row of jackets with their sleeves tightly pressed against one another, just like a military parade.

My parents were “garment manufacturers”. They had always been in the fabric business, or “schmatés[3]” as my Mum said laughingly.

[3] Piece of fabric (informal).

I was well informed of the ins and outs of the workshop. I never grew tired of hearing my mother recalling memories about me, especially the one about the large magnet with which I used to pick up the pins from the floor when I was a child. This magnet still fascinated me by the way. I liked watching the pins and needles being “pulled” in all directions by the horseshoe magnet. I still quarrelled from time to time with Marcelle to be the first whenever Uncle Michel demanded in his deep voice:

“Some pins, come on, chop-chop.” Marcelle and I jumped at the chance. And what did he do with them? As he needed to gather the pieces of fabric that would become a jacket or a pair of trousers, Uncle Michel lifted a pack of pins to his mouth, and took them out one by one as needed, and always without pricking himself! Uncle Michel truly was an artist, and we loved him dearly.

On the other side of the hall, there was the apartment in which we lived. Well, technically two apartments since there was one for each family. So, that gave us two kitchens, five bedrooms and a tiny dining room that was only used on celebration days when my father’s or Gaston’s friends came to drink vodka. Usually, we ate in the kitchen or simply in the workshop.

My parents had only been in France for ten years since they fled from Poland. Their French wasn’t very good. Sometimes, it even embarrassed me. I would rather hear them speak Yiddish, their mother tongue and that of their friend. It was kind of a funny language. I knew it well and I understood every word. I spoke it as fluently as I spoke French. My parents always refused to speak to me in Polish. To be honest, I didn’t really care about Poland where my parents had fled from.

“No more pogroms here,” sighed the friends with relief whenever they came for tea.

Pogroms? What are they?

When I asked my mother, she said laconically: “Pogroms are when Jews are murdered.”

“Why?”

My mother refused to give any more details.

My father loved France.

“Here, we are free,” he often said. “It’s a good country for foreigners; we are happy here”.

And that was true until those hot days of July 1939 when the threat of a war was starting to become all too real.

“Told you, we should have gone to America,” said Aunt Malka to Uncle Gaston. “There won’t be any war over there.”

My father asked her to be quiet.

“We three brothers are here with our family, in our own house with our own business. It’s all that matters.”

So here we were, the last Thursday before the end of the school year. The last session of roller-skating with Charles and Simon should be great. I waited eagerly by the garden square’s fence.

Suddenly, here they were. I rushed towards the two boys.

“Have you not put on your skates yet?”

“I’m doing it.”

“Marcelle, you stay here.”

“Oh, not again!” Marcelle burst into tears. But Charles, being the oldest, was already hugging her.

“Don’t cry. Here, take my whistle. You can be the one that spots who crosses the finish line first. You can whistle every time you see us.”

“What are you eating?” Marcelle asked.

“Bubble-gum.”

“I want some.”

Marcelle knew that Charles would give her some. It was tasty, pink and sugary. She would be able to blow bubbles and make them pop.

The laps around the garden square began. Simon was still faster than me. As for Charles, well, he was a champion. We were so lucky he had agreed to join us this time. During the holidays, he would leave his brother behind. That was why he seized the opportunity to watch over him a while longer.

My roller skates had straps made from real leather. They were amazing. I chose them. It must be said that I asked for them week after week. It was not until Simon promised he would teach me how to use them that my mother finally agreed to buy them. I spun around so fast that I almost forgot about Jacqueline. I would have loved her to be with me right now, though.

Jacqueline was my best friend. We told each other everything. We were in the same class. She was taller than me, spoke louder and knew everyone in the neighbourhood. Every shopkeeper waved to her when we passed by.

People always said to her: “Say hi to your father!”, “My regards to your old man!”, or “Say hello from us!”.

When I had asked Jacqueline to come, she’d replied almost in tears:

“No, my father does not want me to. There is nothing I can do. I cleaned the whole house. We are leaving for Brive where my grandmother lives.”

“By train?”

I had never taken a train, and I would really like to.

“Well, of course,” she said. “We will be travelling in second class. My father says it’s better than third.”

When I got near to Marcelle, she was whimpering.

“I want to go home. No one wants to play with me. I will tell Mum about it!”

She could be such an annoying little brat sometimes!

As he glanced at his watch, Charles said:

“It’s four o’clock, we must go back home. I’ve still got some homework to do.”

But yes, he was right. I took off my skates and held them by the straps the way I had seen older kids do it. We waited for Simon and we quickly made our way back to the apartment.

# August-September 1939

I wished school would start again. I was tired of being alone with Marcelle. Even Josette was gone. Aunt Malka drove her to the Yonne for the holidays with one of her cousins who had been in France for a long time: “Almost a real Frenchie” she said. Malka stayed there for a week and told us all about the wonders of it when she came back.

“If you could see how these French people live, even in the countryside” she said to Mum. “A house! A real beauty with a shower, a garden…”

Mum wasn’t particularly impressed by it. She was not fond of the countryside.

“They are all peasants,” she said.

What she really liked was living in the city, especially the cafés where we went on Sundays. But personally, I was sick of going to the cafés. I was sick of drinking grenadines. What I wanted was Jacqueline, Simon, the roller-skating sessions, school, the new teacher and to put on my brand-new blue apron. Blue was my favourite colour.

Last summer, I registered with the public library. Well, technically Mum registered me. Since then, reading had become a real passion. The library’s director, who was also in charge of the boys’ school, had agreed that I could choose the books myself. I had read *The Little Fadette*, *Ivanhoe*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, but my favourite one, because it had coloured pictures, was called *A Little Princess*. It was a sad story. It made me cry, but fortunately, it ended well. “Little Princess”, believing she had been abandoned, finally reunited with her parents. She lived in India and had a cockatoo. A cockatoo is a green parrot with yellow and red feathers. I told Marcelle and Josette about it, but both replied that they did not care and teased me by calling me “cockatoo, cockatoo” for a long time. Eventually, they would just shout: “cuckoo, cuckoo”.

Simon finally came back to Paris at the end of August. His parents came down to the workshop that night after supper. Jacques the presser, a friend of my parents, was also there. Somehow, everyone looked upset. My father, who a few weeks ago still refused to acknowledge it, now wanted to gather the family together to talk about the growing threat of war.

“I told you, we should have gone to America,” said Malka to Uncle Gaston for at least the tenth time.

The presser pointed out that whatever happened, French people were in a strong position thanks to the Maginot Line[4].

Even though I tried to listen as hard as I could, nothing seemed to make sense. The adults' worried faces scared me. I could feel something big was unravelling. Marcelle was in bed. I did not like going to bed. In the curtains, I saw frightening shapes that grew and were ready to choke me, or sometimes I fell in a pitch-black well, or else I stumbled against a step and jumped. I would rather listen to the adults talking than going to bed. Since then, the wireless radio had been on all day long. Music was out of the question; we only listened to the news. Then one day gasping for breath, Jacques barged in and said:

"We're at war! We're at war!"

"Calm down," replied my father, gesturing towards the wireless[5]. "We have heard about it."

Mum echoed him, "Good Lord, we have heard about it."

Dad rushed out to buy the latest Paris-Soir. Activity in the workshop stopped completely. Everybody gathered, including Marcelle, the presser and his wife, Simon, his brother and his parents.

Charles read the declaration on the front page of the newspaper. No one spoke. Aunt Malka sniffled and dried her eyes with a hanky. My father and my uncles were pale. Eventually, Michel broke the silence:

"I am going to see the boss; we will deliver the finished garments, and we will see."

"There is nothing else to see," said my father abruptly. "I am going to city hall."

"What for?" asked my mother.

"The newspaper says: 'French citizens are called to rally under the flag.'"

"So what? Are you French?" said my Mum.

"I am still going to check it out. The boys said that even stateless people[6] could enlist[7]."

[4] Maginot Line: a line of concrete fortifications built on the Eastern border in 1927.
[5] T.S.F. or wireless radio. We now call it the radio.
[6] Stateless people: immigrants without any legal nationality.
[7] See Appendix 3.

“Ah, if your friends said so, it must be true!” said Mum. “Remember when they caught Hirsch.”

Then I remembered the brutal intrusion of two policemen into the workshop last year.

“Save yourself!” my father had shouted to Cousin Hirsch who had recently taken refuge in Paris.

Too late!

“Identity documents please.”

Dad, Michel and Gaston showed their work permits, thus proving their legitimate situation. But unfortunately, Hirsch’s situation was not. No papers and of course no work permit. He had just arrived, illegally … and on foot, from Poland.

“That’s it, come with us,” the policemen had said. “We are taking you back to the border.”

Dad already stopped listening. He went straight out with Uncle Gaston.

A few days went by like a dream, or rather a nightmare. All the finished garments, cut fabrics, jackets and trousers disappeared from the workshop. Jacques the presser no longer came. People only chattered until the evening when everyone gathered as on the day of the declaration of war. Dad and Uncle Gaston were “foreign volunteers”. The next day at dawn, they had to be at the soldiers’ sorting centre at the Reuilly barracks in the twelfth arrondissement. Uncle Michel did not want to follow them. He wanted to go back to Poland.

Mum and Malka were all over the place. Yet, I could see that Mum was angry, her jaw was clenched. Malka cried and didn’t even bother to dry her tears. They prepared food and put clothes in two brown suitcases placed on the large ironing table.

Dad and Gaston were waiting. Their paleness frightened me. Dad was a bit stern, but no one would dare to mention that. As befitted the older brother, he took his role as head of the family very seriously. He rambled on and on; repeated for the fifth or sixth time that it had been arranged that Mum and Malka would work for the Hechts’ as they were keeping their workshop, and that the war would not last forever, six months at the most. We could not let Hitler do as he pleased.

“Hitler this, Hitler that For some time now, it was the only name that was brought up. He wanted to fight the French; I was aware of that. Once, on the wireless, I had heard someone scream.

“Turn it off, I do not want to hear that,” my mother had said.

Dad had immediately turned off the radio. The man screaming was Hitler.

# October 1939

School reopened its doors as if nothing was happening. I gladly put on my blue apron. I was starting year 4 at Primary School. I would have a new teacher. Jacqueline was back. She had grown up during her stay at Brive. Whenever I mentioned her holidays, she simply shrugged.

"Oh, you know, the only thing we do with my grandmother is make jams."

Jacqueline was glad to have returned.

Nothing seemed to have changed in the city. But it felt so empty at home! So silent! No more garments on the mannequin, the iron was cold and the hangers on the rods were all empty. When I came back from school, I stayed all alone with Marcelle until Mum and Malka came back. Little by little, life was getting organized. Mum and Malka looked as if they were always running everywhere to go to work, visit the shops, prepare the meals. Mum did not look the same. As she worked outside, she put on her houndstooth suit and her pumps. She curled her hair and clipped it in place.

"It's easier to style that way," she said. "You comb it, and that is it!"

Malka decided that Josette would stay in the countryside. Being too young for school yet, who would take care of her when her mother was at work? In the evenings, my aunt was sad and often cried.

"What is my little girl doing right now?" she said sobbing. "*oie, meïdèlè, meïdèlè*[8]."

Weeks went by. The short, cold days of Autumn were settling in. On Thursdays, the roller-skating sessions with Jacqueline and Simon resumed. But Simon had left the boys' school and had begun his Year 7 at the Lycée Charlemagne. I saw him less often. And yet, Thursday was a sacred day. That was when we played and had a snack together. Simon's mother, who did not work, made us hot cocoa and toast.

It was getting dark early now. It didn't bother me. I liked doing my homework on one of the workshop's finishing tables. I lowered the overhead lamp so that it would only light up the books and notebooks and plunge the rest of the room into darkness. Marcelle wanted to copy me. But she only had baby books, and she babbled like one as she read them.

[8] little girl, little girl!

We listened to the news on the wireless. Dad and Gaston wrote regularly. Dad was not happy. They were not given any uniform when they arrived at the Barcarès' training camp.

"A strange army and strange soldiers!" he wrote down. All in all, he seemed to be doing fine and he sent a large photograph of himself[9] surrounded by a group of men in civilian clothes.

Then suddenly, no more news. We had no idea what was happening. Strangely enough, despite the lack of news, Mum and Malka regained hope. As they were no fights, it felt like there was no war!

"Maybe the presser was right," said Malka. "You'll see, in six months, it will all be over."

In November, after several weeks without any news, Dad finally wrote to us again. Mum discovered from the letters that he was now part of a platoon of Jewish volunteers stationed on the Somme. The war seemed to have only just begun. Soldiers were fighting in the Ardennes. The wireless mentioned the courage of our brave soldiers who tried to push back the enemy. This enemy who gained land in Poland, in Russia…

"How far will they go?" worried Mum. One evening, as I was leaving school, I saw men painting the large windows and doors of the courtyard blue.

"That's really strange! I'll ask my dad about it," said Jacqueline. "He will probably know why."

When we got near the archway, the caretaker stopped me.

"Tell your mother or Mrs. Malka to come and see me."

I rushed up the three floors at full speed and Marcelle was close behind me.

"Mum, Mum, you must go down to see the caretaker…"

Mum was not home yet. When she arrived, I jumped on her.

"You must go and see the caretaker."

"I already did. We must go to city hall to get some gas masks. We must buy some paper to stick onto the windows as well."

[9] See Appendix 4.

“What for?”

“In case of bombing: it prevents the windows from breaking. Ah, yes! And remember that at night, you must draw the curtains. Our lights must not be seen from the outside. The caretaker said that some neighbourhood supervisors have been designated to oversee it all.”

Now I understood why the school’s windows had been painted blue.

For once Aunt Malka was well informed, she added that it was called “Passive Defense”. The next day, the four of us went down to city hall. The gas masks were ugly, grey and had a sort of huge nose! We could hardly breathe when we were wearing them. The clerks explained to us that we needed to put talc inside, and he put each mask in a large grey case tied up with string.

“Please remember that whenever you hear the sirens, there is an alert,” he told us. “Everybody must hide in the shelters, in the basements if you are home or in an underground station if you are outside.”

The first alert woke us in the middle of the night. Panic set in! Mum and Malka were running everywhere and didn’t know what to bring. Eventually, we rushed to the basement with the gas masks. The other tenants were already there. No one spoke. I wasn’t showing off. I was scared. This dimly lit room and its mouldy smell… Marcelle hugged Mum tighter.

Where was Simon? He should be here.

“Mum, can you see Simon?”

I could not understand why he wasn’t here. Neither Simon nor his parents came down.

When the alert was over and on the way back to the apartment, Mum told Malka:

“Just understand that I will never go down to the basement again. I do not want to be buried alive with the girls.”

Hearing that made me feel better me.

# May-June 1940

Once again, Dad stopped sending any news. No one knew what was really happening. War had been going on for nine months now and we all wondered how it would end.

That was until a day in May 1940 when we received a letter written half in French and half in German. As Mum knew German, she read out loud easily: “Kriegsgefangener.” Prisoner of war! With a ghastly face, she sat down. Dad was a prisoner of war!

“How? Where?” asked Malka.

“How should I know!” replied Mum. “He’s in a Stalag[10]. The Stalag VII A. That is all it says.”

I looked at this strange letter covered with stamps[11] that I could not decipher. Stalag. That was a word that would come back often in conversations.

A few days later, another letter informed Malka that Uncle Gaston had also become a “prisoner of war” in another stalag.

The uncertainty of Mum and Malka was replaced by fear. They caught their breath again when their boss, Mrs. Hecht, said:

“It’s better that way. It allows the Red Cross to watch over the camps. They have got nothing to worry about.”

I wondered how my father lived in the camp. I often said: “My father is a prisoner of war.” It was quite something! Neither Simon nor Jacqueline could say as much.

We now had to go regularly to city hall. There were restrictions on everything: gas, electricity, food. We were being given ration and clothes coupons[12] as well as vouchers for coal. A ticket had to be detached and exchanged every time someone bought bread, milk, or meat.

Mum kept saying that we were being rationed on everything. “Can we call this eating?”

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[10] See Appendix 5.

[11] See Appendix 6.

[12] Ration coupons were broken down into several categories: E, J1, J2, J3, V they gave rights to various rations depending on category or age. There were also coupons for “conscripted workers”. See Appendix 7.

From time to time, Malka went to see Josette in the countryside and brought back eggs.

The detachable coupons were tiny. The shopkeepers were always complaining about it when sticking them onto the requisite papers.

“What a mess,” said the cheesemonger when I went to pick up a half- litre of milk. “If ‘they’ think we have got time for that!”Fortunately, I’d still got school! There at least, everything went on as usual. They were a few “new kids” in our group. One was called Nicole, blonde and pink. We called her “fatty”. Her father was a butcher.

“What do you think? The restrictions also apply to us!” she replied to a girl annoying her.

Nicole had earrings. Jacqueline and I could not stop talking about it. We were passionately fond of those earrings. We were so jealous to see a girl of our age wearing jewellery like an adult!

This put her in a different kind of category. But truthfully, neither Jacqueline nor I really liked her. Our circle of friends did not grow bigger. The meetings on Thursdays at the garden square with Simon were still happening. Yet, I felt sad. Where was the liveliness of the workshop’s hustle and bustle? Where was Dad? And Uncle Michel who had left so fast? Had he found his way back to his beloved Poland? The place where the part of his family that he longed to see again still lived.

We did not go out a lot, and when we did, it was only to see friends and family. Especially Uncle Marek, Mum’s youngest brother who had also came from Poland with his son. My cousin Victor was twelve years old; his mother had died when he was born.

“Ah!” sighed Marie. “Poland… Poland!”

“Here at least, mothers survive giving birth!”

I did not know my cousin Victor very well. Uncle Marek remarried, and Aunt Flora, who was very strict, did not want Victor to have too much fun. “He must work for school and do his homework.” Uncle Marek liked that kind of strictness, but it was not to Mum’s taste. After those rare visits, she told Malka: “You know, I will end up not seeing Marek. I really get the impression that I disturb them, him and his Flora.”

Out of nowhere, the walls of Paris were covered with posters stating: “PARIS IS AN OPEN CITY”

What could this possibly mean? Charles was not here to comment on the news nowadays. He had met up with his cousins in Toulouse and begun his university studies. He wanted to become a dentist. Mum and Malka were swamped with work, looking for food and preparing the first prisoner parcel for Dad and Gaston. Mum cooked some "Ferfèlès[13]"and added a tin of tuna and some dry biscuits.

"How are we going to do it? There's already nothing to eat here." said Malka. "A parcel every month… Do you realise that, Marie?"

One evening in June, an unusual restlessness could be felt in the workshop where Mum, Malka and I were gathered. Marcelle, Simon and his parents and a neighbour called Sonia, another "prisoner's wife", were also there. The Germans were approaching and were about to enter Paris[14].

Mum and Malka kept their heads down. Day after day, the war became a little bit more real and scary. And now, an army was invading us. An army of enemies was settling here!

Fear could be seen on everybody's face. Moaning, Malka repeated incessantly: "What are we going to do? Will we still be allowed to go outside?"

"Of course." replied Simon's parents. But Malka, with a kind of premonition, began to cry.

"The Germans, Hitler, what did they do to the Jews in Germany, eh? What are they going to do to us here? You will see, you will see."

She scared me. For the first time, I really understood the threat and heard the terror in the way the word Jew was pronounced.

The next day felt like a dead day. First thing in the morning, the wireless had announced that Paris, as it had been declared an open city, would welcome the German soldiers, that no fight would be allowed and that no protests could be made.

There was no question of any of us going outside. We stayed sitting near the window, the only one from which we could catch a glimpse of the Boulevard Beaumarchais. We waited silently. As the morning ended, we heard a drum roll in the distance. The drum roll got louder and was accompanied by a hammering of boots.

[13] Ferfèlès: roasted pasta cut into tiny squares.
[14] See Appendix 8.

I focused on it as hard as I could. Soon enough, soldiers in green uniforms appeared. They were perfectly aligned, marching in step, stamping their feet in rhythm to the sound of a military march. Impressive. The procession seemed to go on forever. Mum wept softly. Malka kept on wailing: "*Oïe, oïe, oïe*, what will happen to us, what will happen to us? *Oïe guewalt*[15] *!*"

[15] How dreadful!

# Autumn 1940

Soon, during those the summer holidays spent in Paris, Malka's worries were confirmed.

Sonia came to see us more and more. One day, the three of them, all tense with fear, were talking about the latest recent news. A notice published in the newspapers on the 27th of September required Jews to go and get registered at the police station.

"You see!" said Malka like a broken record, "I told you it was bad news, right? Marie, I told you so."

Mum nodded and sighed. "But what can we do?"

The next day, they asked for Mrs. Hecht's opinion. She said that they should register.

"What are you afraid of? It's France here. French people are civilised."

"That's all very well and good, but what about the Germans?" asked Malka dubiously.

A few days later, while firmly holding Marcelle's hand and mine, Mum and Malka went to the police station. They were so worried that they were scared they would not understand everything that would be asked of them.

"Listen closely to what they say to us." said Mum.

In fact, we were only asked to show our identity papers and a clerk marked each of them with a large, permanent red-ink stamp reading "Jewish"[16].

Without a word being said, we quickly went back to our house, shameful and relieved this ordeal was over so soon. It was on that very evening that for the first time, I questioned Mum about the Jews.

"What does it mean to be Jewish?" Mum shrugged without an answer.

"What is it Mum?"

I understood my parents were not French and could speak foreign languages, but why were we not like everybody else?

"Why are we Jewish? What is being Jewish?"

Annoyed, she finally caved in:

"Jews believe in God, but not in Jesus."

[16] See Appendix 9,10,11.

I was surprised, but knew that was all I would get that night. Was that it? So, I was like everybody else? I was made of the same wood as everybody else? I was worried that there was a physical difference.

Obviously, I had read books in which the good Lord or little Jesus were mentioned, but these were stories of another time. What had it got to do with nowadays? I needed to talk about this with Simon and Jacqueline.

Simon did not come back from his holidays for another ten days. Jacqueline said that she would ask her father.

But his answers were no help at all.

“Personally, I am a free-thinker,” he said to his daughter, “your gibberish religious stories are too confusing. Don’t worry about it, child.”

In October, school started again. And so did the roller-skating sessions. Simon came less and less often because his homework for the secondary school took him more and more time. Mum was not able to buy roller-skates for Marcelle, so I lent her my pair or sometimes just one and we both skated on one foot.

German soldiers could be seen on every street corner. We deliberately avoided getting too close to them.

A freezing winter set in. I sniffled constantly. Marcelle shivered even more and couldn’t stay warm. To help her, Mum decided we would turn on the gas cooker at night. Sitting on chairs, we rested our feet on the oven door while nibbling on the chocolate-filled stick we got thanks to the ration stamps.

“Don’t eat it all at once,” said Mum, “You only get ten sticks a month.”

I had absolutely no idea how my mother managed to keep up to date on current events. The wireless annoyed her so much.

“The Germans are about to conquer the whole of Europe and win every battle!”

“We should have gone to America,” repeated Malka incessantly. “At least they’ll never go there!”

So, I began daydreaming about America. I knew that Mum and Malka had distant cousins there. Aunt Malka spoke of it as if it were heaven on Earth.

“Over there, everybody is rich,” she said. Mum turned off the radio.

“Oh! these Germans, these Germans,” she sighed while nodding.

At school, we called them “Huns”, “Fritz”, “Squareheads”, “Teutons” or “Krauts”. A poster appeared on the walls of Paris showing a handsome young German soldier carrying a little French child in his arms.

And indeed, the German soldiers looked cheerful and harmless enough.

But still, Mum advised us not to let our guard down:

“Be careful. I forbid you to speak to German troops or take any sweets they might offer you. They could be poisoned.”

“What a fool, a sweet is always a good thing,” said Jacqueline with a shrug.

Jacqueline knew everything and everyone.

One day, with a stern face, she said that she wanted to meet my mother.

“What for?”

“You’ll see.”

“No. Tell me.”

“No. I’ll tell her.”

Jacqueline was not allowed to stay outside in the evening after school. As her father could not leave his bougnat[17] store, she had to take care of the house.

“He makes me feel like a bird in a cage,” she said.

The truth was, Mr. Renard was impressive. He had a magnificent but terrible moustache, and his hands were always black with coal.

We all knew the story. Jacqueline’s Mum had left two years ago with “another guy”. It was forbidden to say her name out loud. Even worse than if she was dead. Jacqueline claimed that she did not care anymore.

“Get it? My father says that he will not let me hang about outside, but I do as I please. At home, I am the one in charge.”

“She’s quite resourceful,” admitted Mum.

The next day before afternoon classes, Mum left work early and came to meet Jacqueline, Marcelle and me in the square

“Hello Ma’am,” said Jacqueline. Then without further ado, she jumped right into the core of the matter: “Here goes. My father agreed that on Thursday afternoon, I could go and meet with the Marshal’s Youth[18]. Can Régine come as well?”

[17] Bougnat: someone who sells coal and wood.

[18] The Marshal Pétain, Chief of State during the German occupation. See Appendix 12.

“Marshal’s Youth? What is that?” asked my mother.

“Come on Mum. You know! We heard about it on the wireless; he graciously gave himself to France…”

I mimicked Jacqueline who always loved mocking the quavering voice.

“Apparently, we settle in a youth club on the Boulevard,” explained Jacqueline. “It’s for the local kids. We can play, sing and we’re given a snack.”

I was bursting with joy.

“Mum, I want to go. Please Mum. Say yes. I’ll ask Simon as well.”

Mum hesitated.

“I’ll look into it,” she said. “I’ll give you an answer by tomorrow… Come on, chop chop, off to school now and work hard.”

When break time came, I wanted to know more. But Jacqueline did not have any other information. Her father, who was still trying to find a way to prevent her from “hanging out”, was looking for any sort of club which she could join. At half past four, as soon as school was over, I was like a cat on hot bricks. I waited impatiently for Marcelle to come out and the three of us ran to the square garden to meet up with Simon. He walked quickly towards us. His presence was enough to reassure me.

“Simon! Simon!”

I did not know what to say next. Jacqueline took the lead and explained it all: the youth club, the youngsters, the Marshall, the snack. Simon interrupted her almost abruptly with a look of disdain.

“Pish-posh! The Marshal’s Youth… There is no point in going. Even worse if the little kids are going. Besides, my parents don’t want to get mixed up in politics.”

“But it’s not about politics. It’s for the local kids and we’ll sing and get to play with toys and games,” insisted Jacqueline.

She repeated exactly what she had said to my mother.

Simon did not reply. I was already less enthusiastic about it myself. The walk back home was not so cheerful; it was almost kind of sad.

“I looked into it,” said Mum as soon as she arrived home. “Jacqueline is right. They will give you a free snack. So, if you want to, Thursday afternoon[19] is fine. I’ll come with you the first time.”

[19] At that time, the day off from school was Thursday, not Wednesday.

I had pushed so much for it that I dared not refuse. On the Thursday, after a quickly swallowed meal, Mum came with us as promised. By now feeling nervous, we arrived in front of a store located on Boulevard Bourdon, quite close to Bastille. Of course, Simon had refused to come, even to see what it was like. Some kids were already there, sitting on row of benches lined up one behind the other. Mum left us on the doorstep after assuring an energetic lady who asked us to come in that we were indeed from the neighbourhood and that we did indeed go to the local school.

Everybody was almost settled. Kids were whispering. Marcelle was getting restless and kept nudging me.

“I want to leave,” she said.

“Shush, it’s about to start,” whispered Jacqueline, as a lady came quickly up to us.

“What is your name?”

“Marcelle.”

“And you?”

“Jacqueline.

“And you?”

“Régine.”

“Fine,” she said. “Sit still for a little while, we’re going to sing. Who knows a song? Who knows any rounds?”

Rounds? Jacqueline and I adored singing rounds.

"*C’est la cloche du vieux manoir, du vieux manoir…*”

The kids were singing their heart out.

“Who knows a whole song?”

“I do,” said Jacqueline.

She heartily sang: “*Sous les ponts de Paris, Lorsque descend la nuit, La, la, la, la.*”

She knew the tune, but not the lyrics.

*”Ha! Ha!”*

Everybody laughed and shouted.

“That is quite enough,” said the lady. “We will listen to some records.”

She was wearing a blue pleated skirt, a blue blouse and a light blue waistcoat.

“She sounds like a Scout leader,” whispered Jacqueline.

The lady turned the crank of the record player and children's choirs could be heard. But it didn't suit a group of youngsters who were heckling at the back.

The "Scout leader" began to clap her hands.

"Who knows the 'Marshal's Song'"[20]?

A few hands went up.

"Me…" "Me…"

"Let us go then! One, two,"

*Une flamme sacrée*

*Monte du sol natal*

*Et la France enivrée*

*Te salue Maréchal…*"

Neither Jacqueline nor Marcelle nor I knew the lyrics, we just recognised the tune from when it was broadcast on the wireless.

Around four o'clock, we crowded round the large table near the wall: a big plank resting on trestles. Bowls of hot cocoa brought by the lady and a young boy were steaming right next to big slices of bread. By some sort of magic, there was also a chocolate stick for each and every one of us.

I asked Jacqueline:

"What colour do you have?" She bit into the stick.

"Green."

"How about you?"

"Pink."

Mine was blue. But all those crunchy sticks which contained such a small amount of chocolate had the same sweet taste, one that was smooth and melted deliciously on the tongue.

When we left, I was quite relieved to hear Jacqueline say promptly that it was "awfully boring". Mum pointed out that if we only went there to get a chocolate stick that could be bought with food coupons, it was not worth the trip.

Hearing Simon say "I told you so," confirmed our lack of enthusiasm to return to the Marshal's snacks. On Thursday, and even though Jacqueline's father still did not approve, the roller-skating sessions around the square garden were back on again.

[20] See Appendix 13.

“Girls, tomorrow we must all look nice! We are going to the photographer.” said Mum one Wednesday evening when she arrived home.

In fact she was later than usual and looked like she had been to the hairdresser.

“Oh no, not again! We went not so long ago!”

“It has already been two months. Your father will be so thrilled to see how we look these days!”

I hated going to the photographer. Smile, smile and pose. Unlike me, Marcelle seemed glad.

“Mum,” she asked, “can we wear our flowery dresses?”

“Yes, you can, with a jacket on top.”

On Thursday morning, Mum looked very stylish. Shoes with flexible wedge heels made out of wood, a blue skirt, a blue embroidered blouse, and on top, the pretty jacket she had made herself from fabric bought at the Saint-Pierre market. I wore the same green and yellow flowery dress as Marcelle. It was one of Mum’s little habits to dress her daughters identically whenever she could. But today, for once, I quite liked it. The dress suited me well.

The photographer already knew us. He often had visits from families of prisoners and produced for them what he liked to call “artistic pictures”. As in every session, first we had to choose a background. The photographer suggested that the three of us should be posed in a large locket next to which would be written: “*For our beloved father whom we love very much…*” There were photos with all sorts of sentences: “*We think about our dear papa*” or “*For our tender prisoner*.”

Yesterday, I had spent a great deal of time posing in front of the mirror and had decided then: I would not smile. Even if the photographer insisted, there was no way I would show my teeth.

Every fortnight, Mum asked us to write letters to our father. But it was always the same old thing: school and roller-skates but this time, I could tell him about the Marshal’s snacks.

I worked a hard at school, but didn’t do very well. And yet, I loved it.

My satchel was always impeccably organised, my notebooks were carefully covered with blue paper and the labels bearing my name were glued neatly on. The most beautiful item in it was my pen case. It was made from pale wood, and it unfolded into

two parts. In the bottom part, I kept a small ruler, a rubber, and some pencils. The top part was where I kept the nibs, the dip pen and the pencil-sharpener. “Pen Box” was engraved on the wooden tab which let you open and close the box.

Unfortunately, I would have been surprised if I had received that year’s honours prize considering that maths really wasn’t my cup of tea. And geography was so boring! The only topics I really enjoyed were history and spelling. We wrote an essay for the final ranking in June.

The topic was: “What job would you like to do as an adult?” I decided I would be a teacher. School embodied a magical place. Lining up, opening the satchel and taking the books and notebooks out of it, the blackboard and the chalk. Being thrilled to bits when one is asked to clean the blackboard and, the utmost privilege, to write on it the moral of the day. Choosing a nib for the dip pen, concentrating on expertly executing the downstrokes and upstrokes of the handwriting. I did not want to leave all of this. And I was quite enjoying the teacher’s authority. I concentrated, remembered everything in my test and got a good grade. The only good grade of this month. Mrs. Legris congratulated me in front of the whole class but reminded me that to be a teacher, one must be knowledgeable on every topic.

Nevertheless, I was filled to the brim with joy. During that period, I spent a great deal of my time observing myself in the company of Jacqueline and Marcelle, the latter trying to copy us on everything. I made poses and smiles. The three of us compared our legs. My Mum always said that I was “paper-thin”. Jacqueline had long legs with well-defined calves. Her father said that she had the calves of a cyclist! I looked at my teeth. They drove me to despair. Large and long, to the point that sometimes, Mum advised me: “Don’t laugh like that. We can see your teeth; put your hand in front of your mouth at least.” I had ginger hair. That didn’t really bother me, and I was surprised when Aunt Malka told me that one day as she caught me looking at myself:

“You know Rifkèlè, when you were just a baby, your hair was so red that to go outside, Mania would hide it under a hat.”

What really bothered me was my name: Régine. No other girl was called Régine. I did not like it one bit. What were my parents’ thinking! Conversely, Marcelle was such a pretty name. But she did not care. She had a delightful temper, pretty brown hair and she laughed all the time with a cute little dimple. Everybody found her adorable. But

“Régine”! I thought hard about different names and decided with Jacqueline that I would now be called Janine.

Jacqueline promised that Janine had a nice ring to it. When asked, Simon just shrugged. He began despising girls, or “birds” as he said with a grin. Janine, Régine, whatever. He was of no help.

# Summer 1941

In the evenings, we often gathered in one of the workshop's rooms. Sonia, the neighbour, Simon's parents, and us. Malka made tea, but each guest brought their own sugar cube as it was rationed like every other food item.

Simon's parents were worried. The discussions were revolving around the shocking roundups of Jews that had begun and were increasing.

Malka, as usual, kept on saying:

"I knew it. Can we trust them? The identification, the roundups. We have registered ourselves; now we must identify ourselves!"

The ongoing procedures in the city hall's offices were nerve-wracking. Fear crippled Mum and Malka and their French became shaky.

Whenever they had to give their name, the clerks kept on repeating: "Spell it out."

One day, one of them even said: "What kind of name is that."

Spelling our name had become such a habit that we now did it almost automatically: S-O-S-Z-E-W-I-C-Z, pausing between each letter. I often went with Mum. What a drag! I was ill at ease. I always got the impression that everybody was looking at us oddly. I wished I could change my name, my life and at the same time, I was ashamed to even think that. I loved my mother, my sister and my aunt so dearly. Obviously, I wished we could stay together forever.

"For now, the roundups only concern foreign Jews," sighed Mum. "Maybe they are just being sent back to Poland or to their native country."

But Simon's father was not convinced.

"Even though we were naturalised French since 1935, we are not going to stay here," he said. "We have decided that we will join Charles."

"Have you got enough money?" enquired Mum.

"Why do we need money? We'd be better off focusing on surviving."

"One needs money to survive" pointed out Mum.

"So what? Do I look like I have two left feet? I can work, can't I?"

I finally got it. It meant Simon would be going away. I started shaking. I couldn't even speak. Every day had its share of bad news that frightened me. Finally, I whispered to Simon:

“Are you really leaving?”

“That is what my parents want,” replied Simon. “I will go to high school in Grenoble.”

Simon did not even promise that he would write. Fortunately, Jacqueline was not Jewish. At least, *she* would not go away.

At the beginning of July 1941, the neighbourhood seemed to be getting emptier. The roller-skating sessions got longer. One evening after school, Mum announced with a falsely cheerful look on her face:

“Here goes. I spoke with someone from the Red Cross. You will be spending a month in the countryside.”

“Who is?”

I could not face reality.

“You and Marcelle.”

“Without you?”

“Of course without me. Things will be just fine. You will be with other kids. You will eat better food. A holiday could do you a lot of good.”

I had never left my Mum before.

“No, I do not want to leave. I want to stay with you. Please.”

I cried and I begged. Mum tried to talk some sense into me, but I refused to go into the unknown.

Marcelle cried as well and held Mum tightly.

“What did we do to you Mum?” she said. “I do not want to leave, Mum please, I am scared…”

There was nothing we could do. Despite her sadness and the tears which she couldn’t hide, Mum was obstinate. Besides, living in Paris was becoming harder and harder. There was less and less food to eat. One by one, people seemed to be leaving the capital. Mum said that anyway, Marcelle and I were too skinny. At least in the countryside, we would eat some eggs and probably some meat. That would do us good.

On the 1st of August, Mum, Malka, Marcelle and I went to Austerlitz station. There, two women wearing white armbands with a red cross were waiting near platform 8. A sign read: “Centre de Cosne”. My eyes were puffy from all the crying, but I had stopped now. I carried a small cardboard suitcase in one hand and held Marcelle with the other.

I had dreamt many times of taking the train and going on a trip. But doing it in this way, without Mum and not even knowing the destination, never!

After kissing Mum and Malka, we climbed into the carriage, and I sat motionless in the car. Marcelle was next to me, our two hands clasped. The suitcase was set in the luggage rack. The accompanying ladies gave each of us very hard biscuits. I did not want to eat anything. The journey seemed endless. No one moved. Marcelle did not let go of my hand. The only incident was a boy asking for the toilet. I already had a plan. I kept on thinking: “I do not care. I will not stay. I will not stay.”

A fat lady welcomed the group at Cosne station. One of the accompanying ladies called a tall boy named Jacques, then Marcelle and me.

“I am Mrs. Mourgue, but you can call me Mother Mourgue” said the fat lady with a large smile.

I lowered my eyes with a sulky look. As if I would call her Mother Mourgue. Dream on!

Mother Mourgue made us climb into a horse-drawn cart and we soon arrived in a large courtyard at the end of which was a long building. Four kids were playing there, including a little girl who might have been around three and who was not wearing any pants. I noticed it straight away, with dismay.

In the courtyard, there were chickens pecking, that I was sure of as I had seen some in schoolbooks, geese I could also identify, but what about the rest of the poultry? A dog was chained to a kennel. A little boy was having fun on a pile of sand.

Mother Mourgue clapped her hands:

“Come on children, it’s time for an afternoon snack.”

She had strong hands, a grey blouse and her hair was tied in a small bun. Her large smile was meant to charm us, the newcomers. She must have thought we would be overwhelmed.

“Oi you, Régine. That’s your name, right? You’re a big girl, help me prepare the toast.”

I followed her, dragging Marcelle with me.

“Leave your sister be, we are not going to eat her,” said Mother Mourgue.

“No. Marcelle stays with me.”

My voice was so feeble that I could barely reply.

“That’s fine for today,” agreed Mother Mourgue, “but tomorrow you will have to play with the rest of the group.”

The long building included a large kitchen and a huge room with small beds in it: it was the children’s dormitory. Each bed had a sheet and a blanket. But no pillow. It smelled like soup and pee.

A few days went by as if in a dream. Like a sleepwalker, I did everything mechanically: helping Mother Mourgue, feeding grain to the chickens…

But my mind was set on only one thing: escaping. On the fifth day, I decided to stop eating. Marcelle stopped laughing; she watched me with her sweet sad eyes. All of Mother Mourgue’s efforts were useless. I chewed a bite, swallowed it painfully, and spat it out at the end of the meal.

“Absolutely not. This cannot go on like this, you are making your little sister cry,” said Mother Mourgue. “Don’t you like this place?” “See how happy all the other children are. Aren’t you happy with Mother Mourgue?” she said heartily.

There was no point. All I wanted was to go back home with my mother. End of story.

One morning, I saw one of the ladies who had brought us walking towards me.

“So?” she asked me. “Are you making trouble? “You know that your Mum will not be happy about that, don’t you? You are responsible for Mrs. Mourgue’s grief. Tough luck for you, and especially for your little sister. I have no choice but to take you girls back to Paris.”

I stayed silent, but inside, I was bursting with joy. I had done it. The small suitcase was packed at once. Marcelle came and we went back on the train. Mum, who had been warned, was waiting for us at Austerlitz station. She apologised to the accompanying lady who, eager to be done with us, promptly left.

No one said a word until we got home. Despite this, I was sure Mum was glad to have her daughters back. Afterwards, she washed us, hugged us and promised us that she would never let us leave on our own again. Malka came back from work, and with a smile on her face, cooked potato pancakes, the famous fried and crunchy “latkes” that we loved so much. And for the first time in a long time, I fell asleep serenely, without fear with Marcelle next to me, listening to the whispers of my mother and my aunt.

The next day during breakfast, I realised that I could not hear the buzz of the wireless. I suddenly noticed that the radio was gone. All that was left on the small round table was the lace doily. Mum and Malka were hurriedly getting ready for work.

“Mum, where’s the wireless?”

“We gave it back,” said Malka.

“Why? Was it broken?”

“No,” said Mum. “I don’t have the time right now, but I will explain tonight.[21]”

And so, back to the square garden. Mum did not want me to play with the skates without Simon. So, Marcelle and I learned to do “French knitting”. Each of us had a hollow wooden doll in which there were four little pegs. We wrapped them with wool, the thread of which was left hanging in the center hole of the doll. You wrapped one thread over the other between the pegs, and you got a nice round ribbon. I had green wool and Marcelle’s was red. French knitting was very fun.

But most of all, I resumed reading my new book, *The Three Musketeers*, which I had to stop during my brief stay in Cosne. My favourite character was Athos. He seemed to be tall, handsome and well-behaved: almost my ideal.

In the evening, as soon as Mum came back, I asked again:

“Mum, why is the wireless gone?”

“We gave it back to city hall.”

“But why?”

“It is what it is. Jews are not allowed to own one.”

“All you ever heard was those Nazis!” intervened Malka. (She does not say Germans anymore. Now it was just Nazis.) “Anyway, we couldn’t stand listening to them.”

“Yes, but I liked the wireless, the music.”

I didn’t always listen to it closely, but its almost constant humming was a gate to the outside world. How silent it would be now while I was waiting for Mum and Malka to come back from work! Did we really have to hand it in?

One day, Mum and Malka decided to start making the clothes themselves again. The four of us had spent an entire morning at the Saint-Pierre market near the Sacré-Coeur. With our clothes ration, we bought floral fabric from which they would make dresses for Marcelle and me; green braid, tartan material with large grey and yellow

[21] See Appendix 14.

checks “for a jacket” said Mum and blue gabardine from which Malka would make a skirt.

“Would you look at that fabric!” complained Malka. “It looks like someone has wrapped some wood in it.”

The saleswoman laughed.

“Don’t walk in the rain wearing that, it will shrink!”

“Anyway,” said Malka, “it will still be better than the shop’s ‘schmatés’”.

Looking pretty was important for Mum and Malka. As there were no more stockings, or they could not buy any, they dyed their legs with a special paint which looked like a tan. Using a painting brush, they drew a thin dark brown line on the back of the leg, from the ankle to the thigh, which replicated the seam of the stocking. Malka was quite satisfied.

“At least it does not move! The seam stays put.”

Mum was beautiful. I often said so to Marcelle and she agreed. I made comparisons. First, Mum was tall.

“Is it true Mum that you are taller than Dad?”

“Only by a thread,” she said laughing. “Why would you care about that?”

I wanted to know. I remembered our Sunday walks on the great boulevards. It seemed like such a long time ago since Dad’s departure, and I still needed to picture my Mum and Dad together. In contrast to Aunt Malka whose thick ankles spilled over her shoes, Mum had long, thin legs. Mum was slim, and I was quite sure, rather elegant. Not like her friend Sonia who in order to keep herself in shape, had the corset’s bones made to measure. Putting on a corset looked so complicated! I witnessed it once.

“Marie, please, pull these laces.” “Ah! I can’t breathe! I am choking!” “Good Lord Marie, how do you stay so thin?”

I painfully watched Sonia’s body being squeezed at the waist and the excess of her flesh being pushed back towards the thighs and shoulders. And yet, there was so little to eat back then! It had to be said that Sonia did wonders with nothing, and her potato pancakes, with more turnips than potatoes, were to die for. I wondered how Sonia managed to make them so fine, crispy and sweet, which we liked so much.

“Eat my lovelies, I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

Her words made us giggle, because mentioning clothes sounded a bit *risqué*. In fact, we quite liked Sonia talking, gesticulating, so generous and who kissed us so greedily.

And Mum used to be quite sporty. She told us about the adventures of her youth. How she had to sneak through the window to go to the gymnasium without her mother knowing.

“But why did you have to sneak out, Mum?”

“My mum used to be swamped with work, ten children and no husband. All the girls had to stay home to help her.”

I knew that my grandfather died after the birth of his tenth child, a boy, and that my grandmother had to continue working on her own selling linens and clothes at different markets.

“So Mum, tell us, what did you do?”

“We lived on the ground floor in two large rooms. One was the kitchen and dining room. That is where my mother slept. In the other room, there were three big beds and a mattress on the floor for the four boys and the six girls. Three in each bed, except for Wolf who slept on the mattress. How lucky he was. He had a fiancée and was about to leave home.”

“And you Mum, how old were you?”

“Seventeen.”

“And you trained in the evenings?”

“I had to; I was busy working during the day. My mother didn’t give me any money. I was the one supposed to bring some back to her.”

“Oh my, oh my…” sighed Malka, who always had to add something. “Life was rough back in our days.”

“Will you stop blabbering? Do you really think it’s easier today?”

She was right, and I pictured her as a young woman, running on the cobblestones to go the “*Gymnasium*” as she said, defying her mother in this small Polish town with a name that was so difficult to pronounce, Wloçlawek, and which seemed so distant to me.

As always, Mum dressed Marcelle and me in the same way, or at least tried to. The workshop slowly began to breathe again. There were at least a hundred sewing threads left. The floral fabric was cut out, and Mum made us pretty, identical dresses with a

green-brimmed bodice, puff sleeves and a skirt gathered at the waist. We were always well shod thanks to an old uncle who was a cobbler and whom Mum still saw. Our white ankle socks were always pulled up. On Sundays, for our weekly walk, Mum made us put on white cotton gloves and take a small cloth bag containing a handkerchief. I thought myself rather elegant and tried to stand straight.

Soon, school would start again. Ever since the whole Cosnes incident, I no longer felt safe. Even though Mum reassured me, I feared above all having to leave again alone with my sister. I immersed myself deeper and deeper in my reading, to the point where nothing around me would exist. My books were the real deal. I wished I could be Milady instead of just boring old Bonacieux. I dreamt of encountering Athos and him greeting me with his “best bow”.

Jacqueline was back from Brive. Blushing, I stared at her with amazement. Jacqueline had grown taller, and she had… breasts! Imagine that! I was simultaneously embarrassed and jealous. I did not recognise my friend anymore.

“You know, my father wanted me to leave Paris,” said Jacqueline. “He says that things are turning into a “fine kettle of fish” and that starvation is close. He wanted me to go back to my grandmother’s house in Brive.”

“Where will you go to school then?”

“Brive, obviously.”

Jacqueline’s departure happened on the day before school started again. I had never felt so alone as now. I was lucky to have Marcelle with me. I dared not complain. I could see that Mum’s plate was already filled to the brim. And I did not want to leave her.

We now spent all our free time in the workshop doing our homework, reading, knitting, and waiting for Mum and Malka to come back.

Winter was just round the corner again. Food was getting scarce. The cold was particularly excruciating. The only source of heat in the apartment was the kitchen and the oven on which we took turns to warm up our feet.

# Winter 1941–1942

One evening during the winter of 1941, at dusk, Mum came home from work with puffy eyes due to crying. Malka was with her, mute.

“Mum, what is happening?”

I was terrified, my heart heavily pounding in my chest.

“It really is awful. What do they want from us?” moaned Mum.

For the first time since the war began, she was losing her nerve. Malka’s face was stern and emotionless. Sonia soon arrived:

“What is happening? Why are you crying Marie?”

“We cannot go out at night anymore.”

“What? What do you mean we cannot go out at night?”

“From eight in the evening to six in the morning.”

“Same goes for everybody?”

“No. Just for the Jews.”

“So what? What does it change for us? Who gets out? Do we go outside? We will stay here, case closed.”

But Mum rambled on:

“Do you realise? The Jews, always the Jews. How far will it go?”

“Listen Marie, calm down. It could be worse.”

Mum interrupted her.“And what if we are sick? What if we need to get a doctor in the middle of the night?

No one was thinking that far ahead. Temporarily relieved, I finally understood why Mum was crying. We were almost prisoners. Mum calmed down. We organised ourselves. We no longer lingered outside after school. We did not want to risk the slightest incident that would prevent us from returning home before the eight o’clock “curfew” (that was the word) in the evening.

To relieve the tedium, Sonia came down two floors and often visited Mum and Malka. The three of them played dominoes or Rummy. They told stories about the past, and sometimes even jokes about when the husbands were there. Their little shortcomings were then dissected: and mine this, and mine that…

“Remember when we went to Brunoy?” Maurice said he knew how to swim. What a load of bunk, he almost drowned…”

I took it all in.

It was during one of those nights that I learned a scary story that still wakes me up at night. A neighbour –who came to stay home for the night as there was so much room now– with that peculiar Polish accent that adds strength to the story by giving it both exoticism and veracity, told the following story…

The Schulmanns had a garment workshop in Warsaw. One day, Sara Shulmann bought an armchair, well upholstered and covered with beige velvet fabric, so that her husband could sit comfortably and read his newspaper in it at the end of the day. Indeed, her husband read his newspaper there every night. One day, Isaac, their nephew, came to see them with his parents. The boy was seven years old, rampageous as ever and sprawled in the armchair. Suddenly, he was startled:

“Mama, something stung me.”

The mother looked at where the sting happened and saw nothing.

“There is no sting nor creature here,” she said.

And we no longer thought about it. The following night, Isaac screamed:

“Mama, Mama, my thigh hurts.”

Once again, nothing peculiar was noticed and the mother calmed the child. The next day, Isaac complained about his buttock, scratched himself, and the complaints went on for several days in a row, the thigh, the buttock, the buttock, the thigh… Finally, they decided to go and see a doctor. Obviously, he saw nothing, asked for a full account of the events, learned that it had all started with a sting the previous Sunday. Puzzled, he asked for an X-ray. And to his amazement, the X-ray revealed a needle stuck inside Isaac’s thigh. Yes, a real needle…”

The neighbour, thrilled with her captive audience, carried on:

“Ever since the needle was stuck in Isaac’s thigh, it had travelled around…”

Shock could be read on everybody’s face. I did not want to hear the rest. How could such a thing happen? A needle was something you notice! What if that needle travelled all over the body and just happened to stick into the heart? If you were to move around an enormous magnet, –much bigger than the one in the workshop of course– over the

whole body, would we be able to bring the needle back into the thigh and open it, not too deep, and remove it...?

“You see,” pointed out Mum. “I always tell you not to sew in your bed. You never know what can happen.”

No need to say it twice. That was a lesson I would not be forgetting any time soon. And if only I knew the rest of the story. But I did not. The neighbour had left Poland, since she was here in the group, and she had lost sight of the unfortunate Isaac and the unfortunate Schulmann family.

Mum did not want Marcelle and me to stay alone in the square garden anymore. She bought us little balls, which we hit in pairs, one after the other, on the wall of the building while singing:

*J’ai des roses*

*Demi closes,*

*Du muguet et du jasmin.*

*Jeunes filles*

*Si gentilles,*

*Parfumez-vous en chemin.*

*Jasmin !*

Day in and day out, time flew. I knitted a jacket and learned how to make socks with four needles. I read a lot: *The Three Musketeers*, then the sequel *Twenty Years After* and *The Vicomte of Bragelonne*. I had no new friend since Jacqueline had left, and anyway, Mum and Malka did not want to see anyone except safe friends, wives of prisoners or work colleagues. Our main focus was eating as well as we possibly could with the ration stamps.

There was a queue for everything: bread, milk, turnips, coal, but despite this, the Sunday morning farmer’s market in rue Saint-Antoine had a festive air.

Mum tried to make the prisoner’s parcels more exciting. Dad wrote on special cards without an envelope that he was in good health and that he was employed on a farm to keep pigs.

“He might even have more food than us,” sighed Mum.

And then, after Easter holidays of March 1942, I bumped into a girl as I was going into the school yard.

“Jacqueline!”

“Yes! Here I am!”

“Why didn’t you let me know?”

“My father came to pick me up. My grandmother broke her leg.”

“So?”

“So here I am, back in Paris. Grandma is in hospital. I will go back to her place for the summer holidays.”

I was so pleased to have my friend back again. I could finally explain to someone what was going on. I would finally stop being completely alone. I told Jacqueline about the curfew, the French knitting instead of the roller skates; perhaps, now Jacqueline was back, Mum would allow me to go to the square garden again.

But Jacqueline told me some big news. Her grandmother had told her father off. And what a fight it was…

“Do you realise that you are raising your daughter like a miscreant! Never at Mass. She is of communion age. What if I were to disappear, eh? I want my granddaughter to make her first communion.”

“You should have seen my dad! He was complaining but he finally agreed to it. So, I’m going to have my first communion.”

“Will you wear a long white dress and a veil?

“Obviously.”

I was stunned. The long dress, the veil, the tiara with flowers on it. What a wonderful day Jacqueline would have! I wished I could do my first communion too.

Jacqueline was quite pleased about what was happening to her. She would have many things to prepare, clothes to buy. Still, there was Mass and the confession. But wasn’t it worth it, to walk around, all day, like a bride?

She began gathering holy cards. I received one of a young pink and white girl kneeling with her hands folded with the prie-dieu resting on a bed of roses. On the back of the card, I read a prayer without remembering it. Mum agreed once more to the roller-skating sessions and Thursday once again became a joyful day.

# May-July 1942

One evening in May, Mum, Sonia and Malka were whispering around the untidy table. I was doing my homework not far from them. Marcelle was asleep. Noise did not bother me when I worked. I was not really listening; but I nonetheless sensed the tension in Mum's tone and words. The word "badge" came back a lot. Yellow patch, Jewish badge. As was often the case, Mum seemed to be the best informed.

"The boss is sure of it. The decree is official: whether married to a prisoner or not, you must go to the police station to fetch some Jewish badges."

Those badges again! I now listened to them closely. Malka nodded:

"Anyway. What is the harm for us? It's obvious we are foreigners."

Mum was revolted.

"Like cattle, don't you get it? Us and the girls being branded like cattle."

"So what? It's not like we have a choice," said Sonia. "You want us to hide? Where would we do that?"

Weeping, Malka sniffled softly.

"*Oïe, oïe, oïe*, may the Lord help us! What is to become of us?"

Eventually, I could not hold it in any longer and I got closer to Mum:

"What is that 'badge' all about? Why are you always talking about it?"

Malka sniffled louder.

"*Oïe, oïe, oïe*, my poor children, misfortune is falling upon us…"

"Shut it, we will just avoid going outside as much as possible."

"So, Mum…" I wanted to know, so I pushed her.

"So, we must go back to the police station."

"What for? We have already registered and identified ourselves…"

"This time, it's something different. Each of us will be given two badges cut out in yellow fabric on which the word "Jew" will be written. No more going outside without having them sewn onto our clothes."

"Are all the Jews going to do this?"

"It's mandatory," replied Mum.

"When?"

"Starting in a few days."

I was puzzled. I did not yet understand how infuriating this distinction would be. Here I was, compelled to wear this badge sewn on my apron for all to see. So much for going unnoticed and looking like everybody else. The next day, I talked about it to Jacqueline who did not understand anything and clearly didn't care.

"Oh, you know, those are old people stories…".

I had no idea how this compulsory badge was going to change my day-to-day life.

That day, I received the strict instructions to be home by six o'clock at the latest. With the roller skates in my hand, I went up the three floors with Marcelle. Mum was already sitting there, silently crying and holding our aprons on her lap. Malka rushed in.

"My poor children, you are too young to understand! What terrible misfortune, terrible!"

I was taken aback and started shivering; seeing Mum in tears, Marcelle also started crying. That was until Sonia came in and slammed the door violently.

"Bastards, pigs!" (She was shaking.) "We even have to give up a clothes stamp for it!"

Here it was, the famous Jewish badge[22]. A square of yellow fabric with a black six-pointed star printed on it. Inside, there was only one word: "Jew".

Sonia fanned herself with a handkerchief.

"Lord it's hot! Wait for me, Marie, I will get my green flowery dress and my houndstooth jacket. We'll sew this piece of crap together."

Eventually, their line of work took over.

"You can see that we are seamstresses," said Malka trying to lighten the mood.

"Dear me," said Sonia, "if we have to sew this every time we change clothes, I am going to do it in big stitches."

Mum was still crying silently. Her pallor worried me. But her movements were meticulous. With her large tailor's scissors, she cut each square of fabric along the black line of the star, leaving a centimetre for the hem. Methodically, she began her sewing work on the two blue aprons, then on the little green velvet camisoles we wore on Sundays, then on her blue blouse, and finally on her jacket with its large grey, yellow and white checks[23].

[22] See Appendix 15.
[23] See Appendix 16.

“Come on girls, it’s time to get ready for school tomorrow,” said Malka. “We will come with you before work, Tonight, we are all having dinner together. I have baked pastries with cottage cheese, raisins and cinnamon.”

I could not help but jump for joy. Marcelle dried her tears.

“But Malka, do you have sugar? Because without sugar…”

“Come on darling,” replied Malka to Marcelle. “Don’t you worry about that. Go pack your school bag. I’ll wait for you.”

On Friday morning, Marcelle and I put on our blue aprons. The badge was neatly sewn on the left-hand side. Mum and Malka were more stylish than ever. The weather was wonderful. The badge stood out on their meticulously well-ironed blouses. Mums wept up her blonde hair and gathered it on top of her head. Malka, the brunette, straightened her neat bun. The shoes with flexible wedge heels made out of wood were clattering on the pavement. I was moved. Marcelle and I were walking in between Malka and Mum, both holding our hands. We had been going to school by ourselves for a long time, and having Mum and Malka coming with us turned this ordinary walk into a solemn one. Strangely enough, we did not see any other “badges”.

When we entered the school yard, something felt odd. Girls were whisperings in groups. Jacqueline soon ran up to me.

“Show me your badge, show it to me!” she shouted.

The “badges” were numerous in our neighbourhood and, against our will, but as if driven by some instinctive need for protection in the face of the unknown, we soon formed a group separate from the other pupils.

As if a ceremony were about to take place, the headmistress soon arrived surrounded by all the teachers. She blew her whistle three times and announced in her loud voice, used to being listened to, that she was going to make a speech.

“Come on, young ladies, don’t linger, come closer. I want to speak to you. You have seen that many pupils are obliged to wear a badge on their clothing indicating that they are Jewish. We know them well. They are your friends. They must remain so. Don’t pay attention to that patch. It has no importance among us. The war is a great misfortune, but as in the past, we must be united, work well, and above all, I repeat, make no distinction. Your teachers and I think alike. The first one I see making an unpleasant remark to a fellow Jewish classmate will have to deal with me…”

During that speech, Jacqueline stayed close to me. The reassuring words of the headmistress were not enough to completely settle me. I was torn between the desire to blend in with the anonymous group of my friends as I had in the past and a slight yearning to be a bit special.

Class began and the school day went on in an unusually studious spirit.

During the first morning break, all the girls wanted to touch the yellow badges and see how they were sewn. I was happy to show mine, but my mother's crying face the day before, and the headmistress' somewhat ceremonious speech had started to make me aware of the strangeness of this situation, which suggested exclusion, difference, and separation.

In the first days of June, Jacqueline went to her first communion. Marcelle and I got a brief glimpse of her. No way we would be allowed to walk next to a communicant with our badge. I knew instinctively that it would be forbidden.

I asked her the next day:

"So, what did you father say?"

Jacqueline chuckled.

"You bet, my grandmother wrote to him that if he were 'scheming', he would have to deal with her. He refused to come to church and reprimanded me because I was showing off."

Jacqueline told us about the confession of her sins. How she had kept a coin she found in the street for herself instead of giving it to her father, and how she had wished many times that her mother, who had been gone for so long, might be lost, abandoned or even sick, so that she could come back to her and her father.

It was getting warmer and warmer. Some new neighbours called Mr. and Mrs. Kaminski now often came in the evening. They lived on the first floor in a tiny apartment with a two-year-old daughter.

They would not leave the baby on her own, so they brought little Ruth with them. I adored her. Marcelle and I rocked her, played with her blonde curls, and sang to her.

Mr. and Mrs. Kaminski's French was not very good. They had only been living in Paris for five years and Mrs. Kaminski was so shy that she dared not go to the shops to buy her groceries.

“You’ll see, when your daughter goes to school, you’ll pick up French really fast,” said Mum. “Otherwise, she will stop talking to you altogether!”

July was just round the corner. The school year was coming to an end. I feared above all one of Mum’s whims that would send Marcelle and me to the countryside. But for the time being, it was the calm before the storm.

Yet, life in Paris seemed full of restrictions. We always walked fast, never strolling, especially since the day, a man said in a loud voice behind our backs:

“Oi you yids[24], go back to your country!”

Mum cried when I told her about the incident in the evening.

There were plenty of opportunities to cry. Mum and Malka, pale and angry, muttered to Sonia that very evening about the increasing anxiety and oppression in which they lived. New prohibitions had been established[25].

I learned, in no particular order, that Jews were no longer allowed to go to shows or to the square garden, that shopping must only be done between three and four in the afternoon, and that in the metro they must only travel in the last carriage!

What I remembered most was the ban on going to the square garden. I asked the question:

“But where are we going to play?”

“Play?” said Malka. “Playtime is over. You should rather ask yourself how we are going to eat if we cannot go shopping anymore.”

“The boss will give us time. She’ll have to,” said Mum.

“We will not have time, one hour is not long enough. What if there’s a queue?”

“Then the girls will help us. School is almost over anyway.”

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” said Sonia. “That is only for French shops. We can still go back to the Jewish shops whenever we want.”

I immediately felt a huge relief.

“What about bread or milk?” said Mum.

“The girls will go,” said Sonia.

The relief was short-lived. I felt anxious and trapped. How could one dare to do something prohibited? What if, after queueing I went over the restricted time in a shop

[24]: Pejorative word for Jews.
[25] See Appendix 17.

without realising it and got caught for that? What about the square garden? Where could we go now? The streets were only for walking. You couldn’t have fun, nor could you sit down in them And why? Why was all of this happening to us? When would it stop?

It didn’t stop.

# July-August 1942

A week later, on one very early morning, we heard some loud knocks on the door. Mum turned pale and moaned. No. It was impossible. Malka rushed over, panic stricken. Frightened, Marcelle and I ran towards Mum. What was it? What was happening?

Eventually, Mum opened the door. Behind it, policemen. French policemen.

“Papers. Ah yes, I see. Your husbands are prisoners of war?”

“Yes, officers,” replied Mum and Malka together.

“Come with us,” said the policemen.

“But why? Why should we? Our husbands are prisoners, here are the papers. What else do you need to know?”

“Come with us. Don’t take anything. It will only be an identity check for you lot.”

“But our papers are right here, check them here!”

“No,” said the policeman slightly annoyed. “The four of you must come. This is a mere formality, do not worry. Don’t bring anything except your papers.”

Mum suddenly had to sit down. Her legs were faltering beneath her. Malka turned red, sweated, and had trouble breathing. I thought the entire world could hear my heart beating. Marcelle began to cry.

“For the love of God, it’s just an identity check,” repeated the policeman. “Go and fetch your coats and let’s go. We will wait downstairs. The Kaminskis have also been informed. But they must take their suitcases. We will leave all together.”

Out of breath as if she had just run a race, Mum stood up and put on a light jacket. We went down two set of stairs. On the first floor, mute and pale, Mr. Kaminski was sitting on a small suitcase and Ruth was in her mother’s arms. Upon seeing them, Malka burst into tears.

“It’s horrible, it’s impossible. What have you been told?”

“To get ready. Gather our belongings and that we will be driven to a ghetto, a camp.”

Mrs. Kaminski said quietly:

“What matters most is that we are together. I will never leave Ruth. What else can we do? We are not French. Here, we know no one.”

“We are cursed,” sighed Malka. “We are cursed.”

In a group, we walked rapidly down Rue Saint-Antoine with the two policemen escorting us. Mrs. Kaminski was almost running while pushing Ruth in her pram. No one spoke. I couldn't see anything, I held Mum's hand tightly. Nothing could stop me from holding it! What scared me the most was Mum's constant shivering despite the heat. Marcelle sniffled during the entire walk. We arrived at a neighbourhood school near Rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier.

A crowd was gathered in front of the door and there were police buses and police officers in uniform. After a bit of a scramble, we went into the schoolyard. Immediately, we were separated from the Kaminskis, who were pushed further into the yard. Many people were waiting there: men, women and children. There was a large table at the end of the yard. Behind it, four men were sitting with an officer on each side.

Holding the identity papers and the documents that would prove that they were indeed "wives of prisoners of war", Mum and Malka went closer. Staring blankly, two of the men looked at the papers, then at Mum, Malka, Marcelle and me, went back to the papers, and looked at us again, as if to intimidate us. They could easily sense what was going on inside us, our anxiety.

After what seemed like an eternity, one of the men said:

"Go, quick, get out, leave!"

And we went; elbowing others coming in without even a look behind us, humiliated by being scared and not knowing how to react to such a situation.

Once outside, Mum and Malka gasped for air. Mum said:

"Home. Now."

And we retraced our steps. I could only think of one thing: we were together, we were saved and tomorrow didn't exist.

And so, it was during the following evening, when Sonia came in to see us, that we finally discussed what had happened the day before. Sonia, who had also been taken and then released, confirmed that it was a big roundup, an exceptional one.

"Do you realise that they even picked up sick women, old people and babies?" she said.

"Yes." said Malka. "Do you know the Sarnas? Isaac hid because he thought his wife and little boy would never be taken. When he discovered that they had been picked up, he wanted to throw himself through the window to kill himself."

“Apparently, the Vel d’Hiv[26] is filled to the brim,” said Sonia.

“We will never make it out alive.”, Malka was in tears.

After that shock, the most severe one we had experienced yet, life moved on, but slowly.

We did not want to stay alone at night anymore. That was why Sonia decided to come and settle on a mattress in one of the old workshops. I don’t know why, but her presence was reassuring.

I liked the long evenings during which the three women talked incessantly, reminiscing, wondering what tomorrow would bring. Some very surprising news was going around. Some were saying that Hitler was dead or that the Americans were joining the war. Hitler’s death… I wished for it as hard as I could. If he died, all of this would be over! What was discussed the most was news about people they knew. Those that were “deported”. Those who fled to the free zone[27]. Those in hiding.

One evening, Malka told us what she had heard at Mrs. Hecht’s, their boss.

“Do you remember Isaac Sarna?”

“Yes, the one who hid when his wife and kid were being taken?” said Sonia. “As if we could still hope for anything else…”

“Come on. Who could have known?” replied Malka. “Who could have imagined that?”

“So, what about Isaac?”

“Well, you see, he almost died, but from joy!”

“What? Tell us.”

“He took hid with some neighbours while waiting for false identity papers to be made in order to leave for the free zone. Yesterday, at noon, someone knocks on the door. Obviously, he did not open it. Until at one point, he heard a whisper behind the door, his son’s voice…”

“His son? But… How is it possible?” asked Sonia.

[26] Vel’d’Hiv’ Roundup (Vélodrome d’hiver): an indoor sports arena with a cycling track for championships. It is in the Vel d’Hiv that the French police gathered the Jews on July 16, 1942. See Appendix 18.

[27] France was divided in two zones: the occupied zone (by the Germans) and the free zone (also called the “nono” zone).

And this was how we learned that little Henri, aged twelve, and his mother had been taken with hundreds of other people into the Vel' d'Hiv. After two days, amidst the children crying and the women wailing, confusion reigned.

Henri's Mum told him:

"Henri, you must get out of here."

"Not without you."

"Yes, you must. I will survive. What can they do to me? You must find your father and tell him we are in good health."

"But Mum…"

"Whenever you can, just run away."

And that was precisely what Henri did. Even though they were well guarded, he slowly got closer to one of the doors.

"And after that?"

"When they glanced away for a moment, he took his chance."

"But how did he find his father?"

"Some neighbours quickly took him to the hiding place."

"It's a miracle!"

"Praise the Lord!" said Malka.

As the square gardens were prohibited, we did our Sunday walks along the banks of the river Seine, where the women carefully avoided the tramps. They smelled bad and begged for money and food. But actually, I kind of liked the banks. There, we had all the space we needed, and we were free to roller-skate and skip with a rope.

The rest of the week passed uneventfully. That was until the day when Mum and Malka brought back some fabric from the workshop to make coats for the winter. Some blue cloth obtained, God knows how, by Mrs. Hecht and from which she had given them a piece "for the girls" who were always cold. Mum cut, Malka stitched it together, Marcelle and I tried them on. I learned to sew buttons. What a joy it was to imagine this new garment, a little long, but with a beautiful pleat in the back!

Mum, Sonia and Malka did not care about missing the shows.

"Who's got money for such silly things?" said Mum.

"Who wants to go and see such silly things?" replied Malka.

The women's minds were rather focused on getting through the day and surviving. One evening, we stumbled upon Mum and Malka having a secret conversation. They were whispering.

"We must be careful Marie; we have got the kids. We cannot do anything."

"What? Do nothing?"

Worried, I asked:

"Mum, what is the matter?"

"Nothing"

"Come on Mum, tell me please, you are scaring me."

"We must not utter a single word," said Malka. "A man called Backermann is going to come here and leave some papers. We must not touch them under any circumstances."

"And don't say anything," repeated Mum. "He will come back for the papers tomorrow morning."

Indeed, a short time later, a small, almost bald man softly scratched on the door of the building's back stairs.

"No one saw you coming in?" asked Mum.

"No, I have been careful."

He did not linger and put down a package wrapped in newspapers before whispering on his way out:

"*Bis Morgen*. See you tomorrow."

His furtive and illegal visits lasted a few weeks. One evening, the little Backermann looked paler and more tired than usual.

"Do not forget," he said to Mum and Malka, "If I am not here at the appointed time, don't even wait a few minutes, just burn it all, understood? Burn it all…"

The following week, this precise scenario happened, and the package took a one-way trip into the cooker, rapidly burnt by Mum and my aunt.

"Something bad[28] must have happened," said Malka. "We have got to stop doing this, it's too dangerous."

We did not talk much about the Germans or the roundups, as if the misfortune should not be mentioned, as if we had to ward off bad luck.

[28] Backermann was arrested with a group of Resistance's fighters and shot dead.

Yet, the roundups were a permanent source of anxiety. Not a day went by without news of someone's disappearance. The metro stations became particularly dangerous. All of a sudden, at the bottom of the stairs, a line of police officers checking papers would suddenly appear. For now, the prisoner's wives did not feel threatened, but one could never be careful enough. The slightest mistake, or a bad information, and we could be taken away without being able to defend ourselves.

Mum forbade us from taking the metro.

The first day of school was getting closer. Mum had decided we wouldn't go to school anymore. Her boss lectured her:

"Come on Marie, school is compulsory. What if the headmistress comes to ask questions?"

Mum made up her mind. After a few days of tension in the air and whispers between her and Malka, she finally broke the news: I was going to leave once again with Marcelle. Mum had made plans with an organisation which was not the Red Cross but a good equivalent of it.

"I am exhausted. We cannot keep on like this. I do not want you to go to school here. The roundups are scaring me. I do not want you girls to be on your own anymore. I am restless and it's killing me…"

Despite my tears, we could not ignore the truth: Mum was indeed exhausted, pale, and somehow surprisingly brave to the point it scared us. Marcelle had night terrors ever since the incident that had tamed Mum's recklessness.

Sometimes, when passing by a "French" shop after the appointed curfew for the Jews, Mum would see food on display that she needed. She would then say:

"Régine, Marcelle, walk in front of the store without turning back as if you were strolling. Do not look towards me under any circumstances." She would then go inside the store while hiding her yellow badge with her handbag. Then, we would quickly walk away. We played this trick a few times until the day when we heard the screams of a young Jewish boy yelling: "No, I am waiting for my Ma', do not take me away, do not take me away." And he was weeping as the policemen dragged him away. His mother came rushing out of the store and was taken away with her little boy under the horrified gaze of a few bystanders.

This came as quite a shock. Mum never used that trick again when we were there.

“Let’s get you ready,” said Mum.

This time, I understood that arguing wasn’t an option. We would keep the yellow badge, but once we arrived at the place, maybe we could take it off. Moreover, Mum knew where we were going: right next to the Loire River in a nice little village at a butcher’s house. It meant that for her daughters, restrictions would be ancient history!

That September day was gorgeous. Champtoceaux, the small town taking us in, seemed cheerful, and when we got off the bus, the accompanying lady left us in front of a beautiful house with a veranda. We were almost thrilled. A rather elegant lady came to greet us on the bottom of the steps.

“What is your name?”

“Régine.”

“And you?”

“Marcelle.”

“Good, please come in, I will show you your room on the first floor and then you will come down for a snack. Brigitte will be here.”

The stairs smelled of polish. The walls were covered with floral wallpaper. I nudged Marcelle to make her realise how nice and comfy this place was. The bedroom was lovely and had a large bed.

“Oh, before I forget, we have no housemaid so you will have to make your own bed. And as you make your bed, so you must lie on it!” said Mrs. Auber jokingly as she went downstairs. I felt good and was ready to do whatever was asked of me. It was the countryside here, but not the real one. The cretonne-covered bed and the wardrobe in which we put our clothes smelled good.

“Come on Marcelle, let us go downstairs. Things will be good here.”

Nothing was reminiscent of Cosne. The chocolate milk tasted delicious to us.

“Hello Régine, hello Marcelle.”

A tall young girl suddenly appeared and amazed me with her long blonde hair and her well-manicured nails.

“This is Brigitte, my daughter,” said Mrs. Auber. “As it’s the summer holidays, she will be staying here for a few days before going back to Nantes to finish her studies when the term starts again.”

The next day, we were introduced to Mr. Auber, the butcher. The butcher shop was just half a mile away. Marcelle and I were allowed to go there. There was a clerk and Mrs. Auber took care of the register.

“This place is boring you to death, right?” said Mr. Auber one day. “Come, I will show you how meat is cut.”

“Leave them be, they will get all dirty,” said Mrs. Auber. “Cleaning them up is a big job.”

I begged her.

“Please Ma’am, we will be careful. We just want to watch…”

We could easily spend hours watching Mr. Auber take huge beef carcasses out of the cold room, throw the pieces on the block, sharpen the long knives, and prepare the mincers.

“Cutting is an art,” he explained.

And indeed, seeing the sharp blade penetrate the flesh, exactly along the bone, delicately detaching the pieces, then removing the skin without leaving any meat behind, seemed to us to be the work of an artist.

“When I am older, I want to be a butcher,” stated Marcelle.

“A lady butcher, silly.”

As for myself, I was not entirely sure I still wanted to be a teacher.

Brigitte had returned to Nantes. We were not of interest to her. We had only seen her during meals. Mum rarely wrote and didn’t give any address. The letters were short, and she only wrote about eating well, wrapping up properly so as not to catch a cold, and obeying Mrs. Auber’s every word.

As soon as we arrived, Mrs. Auber had decided that we would not wear the yellow patch anymore.

“It’s annoying to sew on and I do not have time for this. And who could say anything about it here, right?”

From time to time, some German Soldiers could be seen going through Champtoceaux. We rarely went outside so as not to draw any unwanted attention. I felt relieved when one day, when answering some of her neighbour’s inquiries, Mrs. Auber said:

“Them? You know who they are, they are my little cousins from Montrouge. They could use a little beef-up here, look at how skinny they are!”

The first day of school was getting closer.

It was with great surprise that Mrs. Auber took us to the religious school. At the last minute, right before leaving us, she said:

“Religious school will be better. I don’t want the neighbours asking me questions again. You are on your own now girls.”

I was quite fond of the school. It was rather big with several classes, so I was separated from Marcelle. Quickly enough, I learned the two essential prayers that must be recited in the morning. Hail Mary … and Our Father who art in heaven… The nuns were kind. One annoying thing was the daily good deed that one must do every day before recounting it the next. Mr. Auber was bent double with laughter when listening to me and Marcelle trying to sum up our good deeds.

“Ah, good ol’ priests, they never change!”

“Give it a rest!” grumbled Mrs. Auber. “It teaches them to behave properly.”

How proud I was the day I could tell of how I helped an old lady who had spilled her grocery bag. I had picked it all up and the lady thanked me for it because, she sighed, she could hardly bend over at her age.

On Thursday, we stayed at home and did our homework. Sometimes, before the butcher shop opened in the afternoon, neighbours came to have coffee, or “the juice” as they called it and brought their own sugar cube. They were always dressed in black with black aprons dotted with small purple flowers. They usually discussed diseases, deaths, and funerals.

“We are cursed,” said one of them one day. “Did you know the old Rouard is dead?”

“Of course, it was bound to happen. He’s in a better place now at least. His worries are over.”

“Perhaps, but I know the doctor who took care of him. He had a heart problem. He could have held on for a little while longer, but apparently, he had an old habit he just could not shake.”

“What was it?”

“He slept on his left side. That is what his widow told me. And everybody knows that it is bad luck.”

Until that point, I had not paid attention to what they said as I did not know who the old Mr. Rouard was. But suddenly, I jumped and began listening more closely: “He slept on his left side” the neighbour had said. Marcelle also slept on her left side, that was am sure of because we slept in the same bed! I held my breath. I was not bold enough to ask the reasons behind this.

On that very evening and without spilling all the beans, I told Marcelle that from now on she absolutely must sleep on her right side. Marcelle, who was now used to obeying whatever I said, agreed to it. I let go a sigh of relief.

When bedtime came and after giving Marcelle some further advice, I immediately fell asleep. I woke up with a jolt. Marcelle moved. Even though she promised it, she was sleeping on her left side! I turned her around. She grumbled. I went back to sleep … to wake up a few moments later and again, turn Marcelle over. This went on and on. Not understanding this new and obsessive fad, Marcelle whimpered and cried.

I was exhausted and my begging was useless.

“Mum, I am so tired of it!”

I thought about Mum who relied on me, the eldest, to take good care of my little sister! Eventually I fell asleep and so did Marcelle. We woke up when Mrs. Auber called us.

“You do not look very well this morning,” she said when she saw us. After three nights of agitated sleep and useless demands, I abandoned the idea of regulating my sister’s sleep. She, by the way, did not look ill at all. Maybe it was not that bad, or it only concerned old people.

Mr. Auber listened to the wireless with his ear stuck to it. No one else could hear what was being said on it. When he was done, he turned the knobs in every direction.

One evening, he said to Mrs. Auber:

“Christ, finally! They are done advancing. Don’t you worry: the Russians are going to turn them into mincemeat!”

With her a finger on her lips, Mrs. Auber told him to be quiet.

I didn’t really bond with the other kids in my class. Mum had advised me not to talk too much, and I did not want to answer any awkward questions. Yet, this calm life was soothing. The imposed rituals by the nuns did not bother me. When we left class at half past eleven or half past four, I waited for Marcelle, and we were both glad to go

back to Mrs. Auber's pretty little house. This house was located near the banks of the river Loire. In the distance, on the other side of the river, we could see an old, ruined keep.

"That is the Oudon keep[29]," had said Mrs. Auber. "The last standing part of the great medieval castle…"

We ate and we did our homework. This life felt like it could last forever. But it only lasted a few weeks.

One morning, before breakfast, Mrs. Auber informed us that we had to leave.

"Régine, pack your things."

I was scared and immediately sensed a threat.

"Mr. Auber (she always called her husband Mr. Auber when she talked about him) had to leave."

"Where?"

"Come on, hurry up," she said without giving further explanations before adding: "Peaceful days are over. People are going to start asking questions and I do not want them to see you here. I have enough on my plate already."

Without really understanding why we needed to leave at once, I packed our suitcase. Mrs. Auber accompanied us to the bus. There, a lady was waiting for us. But who had told her? She took us back to Paris and left us in the street at the foot of our building. I started shaking. Please let Mum come soon. The caretaker finally saw us and let us enter her office.

"Don't you worry, your Mum is going to be here soon. You can wait for her here."

Indeed, Mum arrived a few minutes later. Beckoned in by the caretaker, she entered the office, appalled to see us.

"But how can you be here?"

"Mrs. Auber could not keep us with her anymore."

"But why?"

"Mr. Auber was gone!"

"Quiet!" said Mum hastily. "Come."

Without losing a second, we went upstairs to our apartment. Mum was upset. She hoped we would finally be safe.

[29] See Appendix 19.

“Can you believe it?” she said to Malka when she in turn came home from work, surprised to see her nieces. “How are we going to deal with this? I do not want the girls to go out without me. I do not want them to go to school.”

“But why are they here? What happened?”

Lowering her voice, Mum said: “I think the butcher must have run away as a recusant[30].”

Since we left, the hardships of life had become even worse. Rationing was so extreme that there was hardly any food. The roundups were endless. We had to live one day at a time and Mum and Malka looked exhausted.

In the street, we still walked quickly without turning or looking around us. One day a week, at the appointed time, we went shopping together. On that day, Mrs. Hecht let Mum leave earlier. So, on one Wednesday, as we left the shop, we walked quickly and Marcelle, as always, was firmly clinging to Mum’s hand. I stood straight, almost stiff, giving her my arm.

Suddenly, Mum slowed down. I felt her tense up. I saw her face turn pale and I heard her jerky breathing. With a confident, almost brutal pace, two men had passed us and, with long strides, suddenly flanked a lone man I had barely noticed in front of us.

The two men grabbed his arm, almost forcing him to run. Unable to react under the shock, the man was flung violently into a car parked further along the pavement, which started up immediately. The scene was over before it even started, and took place, it seemed to me, in complete silence. It was only after the car had sped off that I heard the sounds of the street again and whether heard or dreamt, a passer-by muttered: “Must be a recusant or a resistance fighter.”

“Or a Jew…” said Mum, aghast. “Quick, let us go back home.”

[30] Recusant of the S.T.O. (Compulsory Work Service). The occupiers had demanded that men, especially young men, go to Germany to work in German factories. Many were forced to go. Other chose not to. They were called “réfractaires” or recusants. They had to hide and some of them went underground, thus swelling the ranks of the resistance fighters, whom the Germans called “terrorists”.

# February 1943

The day rolled by without anything else peculiar happening. Left alone at home, Marcelle and I played with small balls, knitted and ate bread dipped in a bowl of “chocolate”.

Mum came home around five o’ clock, which was well before the usual time, and was closely followed by Malka and Sonia. I noticed their scared and anxious faces. Immediately, the discussion started.

As usual, Marcelle and I were clinging to Mum and watched everything that happened at home.

Mum, Malka and Sonia all started talking at the same time in Yiddish. This was not the time to try and express themselves correctly in French, as they often did with joy and coquetry.

“So, what have you heard?” asked Sonia to Mum.

“Here goes: our boss got some gossip.”

“Oh! Some gossip again. What do they really know? We really cannot afford to give money to these ‘informers’ anymore. You know they do not deport the wives of prisoners of war.”

“Will you shut it?” replied Mum. “The boss says that this time, it’s for real.”

“I am afraid it’s true,” added Malka. “Foreign Jews have already been taken away. Now, the same thing will happen to every Jewish person, even the wives and children of prisoners of war.”

“Taken away, that is one thing, but where?” interrupted Sonia. “Do we really know? As long as they are together…”

“That is precisely our point: where are they?” said Mum. “No one knows. How about when the Kaminskis were taken away? Right? Have we heard anything from them since? No. Personally, I am scared. I will not be taken away. I will not let them take me, nor will they take the children.”

Sonia nodded:

“Maybe nothing will happen this time, but we should be ready for anything. I will not let myself be taken away either.”

“But then, what are we going to do?” whimpered Malka. “It’s a good thing Josette is in the countryside. Who will help us? Even Gaston is happier than me.”

“What do we know about it?” said Marie. “Oh Lord! What have we done?”

There was no more time to feel sorry. Sonia went out with Malka to see an old friend who lived alone in Montreuil-sous-Bois. Feverishly, Mum scolded Marcelle for not getting dressed quickly enough, and the three of us left the apartment.

Shaking, I asked her:

“Mum, where are we going?”

“Come along quickly.”

We left just like that, without any luggage. We did not want to draw attention to ourselves, and taking the metro wasn’t an option either.

“It’s too risky,” said Mum. “We’ll walk to Uncle Wolf’s place.”

I only knew Uncle Wolf, the cobbler, from the stories Mum told me. The old uncle fought during the “Great War”, so *he* had been French for a long time. Out of breath, we arrived in front of the shop in Rue Saint Martin, shortly before curfew. We plunged into the dark and stinky alley. Mum knocked on the door. After a seemingly endless pause, a heavy step approached.

“Who is it?” asked a loud voice.

“It’s Mania, quick, open up!” said Mum panting.

The door opened into a dimly lit kitchen.

“What do you want? What are you doing here?”

“Good evening Wolf, good evening Lipka.” said Mum rapidly to a woman who got up from the table.

Before Wolf could get a word in edgewise, Mum started talking in Yiddish.

“There is going to be a roundup tonight. It’s a sure thing, my boss told me so. We don’t know where to go, you must hide us for the night. You are French, you have to protect us,” said Mum weeping. “We have nowhere else to go…”

And she sat down, uninvited, tearstained, holding Marcelle and me close. After a long pause, Wolf and Lipka both started talking at the same time:

“Do you realise what you are asking? No, you cannot stay here. It’s dangerous for us too. We are not allowed to hide you. Did you think about our daughters?”

At that moment, two tall girls appeared in the doorway.

“Hello Pauline, hello Madeleine,” said Mum. Uncle Wolf thundered on.

“You must leave at once. Find somewhere else.”

“But I don’t know where to go and I can’t go outside now without breaking the curfew.

“Of course,” Lipka added groaning, “you did it on purpose.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” interrupted Wolf. “You know, Mania, that we cannot hide you. Death awaits us all. At the crack of dawn, you will have to go.”

Mum bowed her head, resigned, almost thankful to be out of danger for a few hours. Marcelle and I were petrified, not daring to think about the scene unfolding before our eyes. We had never seen Mum so helpless, so distraught.

Aunt Lipka sent her daughters to bed and suggested that Marcelle and I should sleep on a blanket in the kitchen. Marcelle immediately fell asleep, but I could still hear the muffled words of Mum, Wolf and Lipka sitting around the table.

Early in the morning, without even seeing our cousins again, we left Wolf and Lipka, relieved to see us go.

Not daring to return to the apartment and wanting to avoid the Bastille District, we headed, still on foot and our stomachs knotted with fear, towards the fifteenth arrondissement where Uncle Marek lived. Rue du Commerce was busy with a wholesale market. People were queuing in front of a greengrocer. Suddenly, almost at the same time, the three of us saw Uncle Marek, almost running and flanked by two policemen. Our backs against the wall, Uncle Marek gave us a quick look that petrified us. I felt my legs falter. My heart was racing, and I could not even look at my mother, whose tremors I could feel. A few moments later, we saw cousin Victor stumbling along, dragged by a policeman.

“Do you realise,” said an old lady who had stopped beside us to watch the action, “the young boy tried to flee through the window, but they were obviously going to catch him!”

Mum’s face was as white as a sheet. Holding us firmly by our hands, she resumed her walk.

“We are going back home,” she whispered. “Do not worry, no one will catch us. Don’t cry Marcelle,” she added when she saw her sniffle.

I felt dizzy. I was aware of Mum’s panic despite her apparent calm.

“What are we going to do now?” I kept my eyes down. We must not attract any unwanted attention. If we didn’t look at anyone, maybe people wouldn’t notice us.

We stopped in front of our building. Mum took a deep breath before going under the archway. The caretaker came out of her office almost instantly.

“Do not be scared Mrs. ‘Maurice’, the coast is clear, no one came,” she said sympathetically. “Mrs. Sonia and Mrs. Malka are already upstairs.”

The three women hugged each other and wept.

“This time, it’s really over for us,” said Mum. “I have no idea where to go now.”

“Work. What else can we do?” replied Malka.

“You go then,” replied Mum. “I am staying with the girls. Come back to give us some updates.”

Drearily, the day went on. We were all startled by the slightest noise. Suddenly, an out of breath Sonia opened the door.

“It’s starting again,” she said as soon as she was inside. “Is Malka home?”

“Not yet.”

“The roundups are still going on. If we do not want to get taken away, we have to go into hiding now.”

“But where?”

Malka arrived shortly after and confirmed the news.

“I am not going to flee like yesterday,” said Mum. “I have no one else to go to.”

“Me neither,” said Sonia.

“Nor me,” said Malka.

After a moment’s silence, Malka explained that their boss had taken her aside in the workshop. Someone from the police station had tipped her off about a roundup that would happen the next night around Bastille. True or false? No one knew, but better be safe than sorry. If she wanted to, Malka was allowed to leave an hour earlier to make plans and find somewhere to hide.

Someone knocked on the door. Sonia stopped talking. “Who could that be?” Malka opened the door. A Jewish shopkeeper, a friend of theirs, quickly came in and said hastily:

“You know, word on the street says a roundup is going to happen tonight.”

“Yes, we have heard about it,” said Mum.

“I just wanted to warn you. I know some French people in Ivry’s suburb who will let me stay with them tonight. If all goes well, I will see you tomorrow.”

Dreading the curfew, she disappeared at once.

Mum, Sonia and Malka remained silent, unable to think of a solution. Sonia then said:

“I will stay here with you. Let’s not forget we still have the back stairs.”

“Anyway, we still have to eat,” said Mum.

The meal was made of a thin soup with some grey pasta, two potato- turnip pancakes each and dry biscuits with apple sauce. No one said a word. The women put all their valuables such as papers and jewels into their handbags. There was no point in packing suitcases, we would sleep fully dressed wearing as many clothes as possible. We would see if tomorrow brought another day. Good night.

We were startled by some repeated and brutal knocks on the front door. We had gathered in the same room, lying on the bed and on the carpet on the floor.

“Two o’clock in the morning.” Mum whispered. The knocks intensified.

“Quick, quick!”

Sonia took charge. In a blink of an eye, we reached the backstairs’ door. We arrived in front of a small room that Mum vainly tried to open. This room was the caretaker’s storeroom and Mum had asked her to leave it open at night so that we could hide in it. It was locked. We heard the German soldier’s steps growing louder and we quickly climbed to the fifth floor.

A few seconds later, we locked ourselves in the fifth floor’s lavatory, the five of us crammed into the tiny space. Who cared about the discomfort? Hearts were pounding. There was no need to tell us to be quiet. I felt as if I was in a daze, but at the same time I realised the seriousness of the event. What could the noises, the knocks, the shouts and the running up and down the stairs possibly mean?

The soldiers were discussing in German terms we understood: “Beds are still warm, they can’t be far away.” They knocked on a neighbour’s door who did not open it and they gave up.

We hunkered down, scared. It all seemed like a nightmare. Time slowly went by. How could we dare to get out of here? Pressed against Malka, I could feel the

shortness of her breath, her shivering, and her perspiration. Sitting on the toilet, Mum held Marcelle on her lap.

Eventually, after a long silence, Sonia whispered:

"It's five in the morning. I will take a peek."

Malka said under her breath: "Let us hope the Germans are gone!"

Sonia returned after what seemed like an endless half an hour.

"I saw the caretaker. She must have accompanied the militia, but she did not say anything about the floor's lavatory. The police searched everywhere, in all the closets, and then they left. But they sealed[31] the doors of the apartment. We cannot go back inside."

"What should we do?" asked Malka.

"Mr. and Mrs. Guillaume, the neighbours on the second floor, will keep an eye on the girls while we look for a solution."

Exhausted, I ended the night sharing a big bed with Marcelle. Mum woke us up at eleven o'clock by opening the curtains.

"It's going to be all right, I have found a way to hide you," said Mum. "You are going to take the train with Mrs. Guillaume. She knows where to drop you off. Don't be afraid. Everything will be all right now. I have taken off my yellow badge, but I do not want to go out too much yet. You will take yours off too. I know where you will be. I will join you as soon as you are settled. Régine, you will be in charge, take care of Marcelle. Never ever leave her side. Whatever happens. Under no circumstances. You will be her mother while I am gone. Above all, remember that you must not tell anyone that you are Jewish, understood? You are not Jewish. We will soon be reunited."

Neither Marcelle nor I could respond. Dizzy with fatigue, no longer daring to speak, afraid of the uncertain future, we left with Mrs. Guillaume for the Gare de l'Est, without luggage, our only clothes being those which Mum had been clever enough to make us wear and in which we had slept…

A new life was about to begin.

[31] sealed: a strip of tape glued to the door with an official mark on it to prevent it from being opened.

# Part II

# February-March 1943

The train journey lasted a few hours. There was an identity and ticket check during it. Mrs. Guillaume was calm and reassuring. She told us:

“Sleep or pretend to, that way, no one will ask questions, and anyway, you are my nieces.” The three of us got off at Vesoul[32].

Mrs. Guillaume dropped us off at the train station.

“You must take the bus. The bus driver knows where to drop you off. You will be hosted by people who agreed to welcome refugees. The Red Cross gave us the name of this village. The mayor is aware of it all.”

Mrs. Guillaume got closer to the bus and said to the driver:

“You will drop both of my nieces at the Bucey-lès-Gy crossroad. I cannot join them, but they are expected. Come on girls, be kind and behave,” she finally added while hugging us. “I am leaving, but everything will be alright.”

The bus stopped at a crossroad. Night was falling. The moon, large and red, like nothing I had ever seen before, was rising above the horizon. A cart pulled by a horse was waiting. A man with a cap stepped down from it and said something to the bus driver who pointed at us and helped us climb into it.

We went along a path filled with potholes on which we jolted from left to right.

“We are going to Etrelles,” said the man. “It’s not far away. I am taking you to the Berthiers.”

Marcelle and I remained silent; exhausted by the long journey and fatalistically accepting these wanderings, all alone in this unknown territory.

“Yah!”, the man shouted suddenly, and there we were entering a village.

A few small houses, pathways drowning in water and no pavement. I was shivering. This was not the luxuriant countryside of the Loire Valley. Here, we really were at the edge of the world.

A large building appeared in the dusk.

“The townhall and where you will go to school,” said the man. I’m the mayor of Etrelles. Are you about to pass your elementary school certificate?” he asked me.
I did not reply. He did not persist.

[32] See Appendix 20.

We stopped in front of a small house. The man tied the horse's tether to a post, and we climbed out of the cart. We went up three steps and entered a dark room where one could only distinguish a long table, covered with an oilcloth, and dimly lit by a lamp standing on it.

"Now then Ma'am," said the mayor to a plump woman in a black apron and clogs who appeared in the light.

"Now then," she replied. "So here are our Parisians. Undress yourselves," she told us.

Marcelle and I stood bewildered, barely understanding what was being asked of us.

"Go and fetch a drink for our man here," said the woman to a tall, skinny man who also appeared from the darkness.

The mayor drank a glass of wine and said:

"Sithee lads. Ol' Fonsine, you'll come tomorrow to the townhall, I need to register them for school.

Fonsine, as it seemed to be her name, got closer and helped us take off our coats.

"Come 'round here so I can look at you. And ye are?"

"Régine."

"Alright, and ye?"

"Marcelle."

"Oi Father! How 'bout some plates o'er here. Can't ye see that they are starving at this time o'night?"

I was not hungry, but I nonetheless tried a vegetable soup in which I dipped a piece of bread. And without being able to see whatever was around us, Marcelle and I climbed into a large, high bed in which we sank. I fell asleep right away.

The next day, I got to discover where we lived. The large room: the long table covered with a blue oilcloth, a fireplace, chairs with straw seats, a clock, pans hanging on a wall, a large dresser, a cast-iron cooker and some flypaper hanging from the ceiling in two different places. It was the first time that I had seen a ceiling made of black beams. A small bedroom holding a wardrobe, a wide bed and a large chamber pot equipped with a lid; it probably was the couple's room. Next to it, there was a smaller room, the one in which Marcelle and I slept, also furnished with a bed and a dresser. curtainless windows too small to let any light inside, a squeaking floor in both

rooms, red terracotta tiles in the common room that also had, as I had just discovered it, a sink without a tap. No running water, no electricity, no toilets, no sanitation.

Fonsine, or “Ol’ Fonsine”, took a large pot from the cooker and poured each of us a bowl of coffee with milk.

I whispered: “Not the skin…”

Fonsine pushed it aside and cut two pieces of bread that she crumbled in the bowl.

We ate silently. The room smelled of boiled coffee and smoke. I glanced at Fonsine. “This is with whom and where I will live.” She was fat, but she nonetheless moved like a cat. Her grey hair was pulled back in a tiny bun hidden behind her head. She lacked two front teeth. Yet, she had a reassuring smile, kind eyes, soft and dry hands with blackened fingernails. She fussed around the cooker, threw on another log, and moved a pan. She was probably as intimidated by us as we were by the strangeness and the novelty of this place.

We quickly understood that we might from now on be called Lil’ Marcelle and Lil’ Régine. Fonsine was Ol’ Fonsine; Mr. Berthier was Father Berthier, or quite simply Ol’ Father.

Fonsine took us to the townhall-school. The mayor was waiting.

“Your name,” he asked.

“Régine Sosevic.”

“How do you spell that?”

I spelled it out and replaced the letters Z and W with V; it seemed simpler that way.

I remembered Mum’s last advice and I repeated them to Marcelle: never tell anyone that we were Jewish. Keep our last name so Mum could find us. If we were asked questions about our foreign name, we simply had to say that our grandparents used to live in Belgium. As regards anything else, we had no clue. We were refugees and that was it.

“Your sister’s name is Marcelle, aye?”

“Yes Sir,”

“Do you have any papers?”

“No Sir,”

He shrugged. These flippin' refugees! Anyway, we needed to get hold of ration coupons. Maybe that would not be too difficult. He would take care of this himself. He continued to fill out a form with dates of birth but did not ask for the address in Paris.

Ol' Fonsine left, and the mayor took us into the classroom.

I quickly realised that this room was in fact, the entire school. The room was large and divided into three rows of tables. A blackboard. On the side, a stove hummed.

We were greeted by an intense silence.

"Good morning teacher," said the mayor in a somewhat ceremonious tone.

"Good morning to you Mr. Mayor," replied the teacher, rising to his feet. "So here are the new girls, Parisians no less!" He looked as if he was in awe. "Parisians… You must know so many things!"

The mayor slipped away. The teacher sat me in the right-hand row and Marcelle in the middle one.

The left-hand row was filled with a dozen young boys and girls. I blushed to find myself in a class with boys for the first time. In the middle row, the middle class, girls in the front, boys in the back. The right-hand row was for the eldest, again girls in front, boys in back. Probably only twenty-five to thirty pupils! The teacher, a bit paunchy, quite old according to me, wore a dark suit and a tie, and showed the younger ones letters on the blackboard. The older ones silently wrote an essay, for which I received a sheet of wide-ruled paper and a dip pen along with the subject. The latter was: "A rolling stone gathers no moss."

I was again in the studious atmosphere which I enjoyed so much. The essay seemed kind of easy to me, which was probably not the case for the older boy sitting behind me, who was chewing on his pen with a flushed face.

Little by little, we got to know the village. It was made of farms for the most part. Large, low-rise houses. In front of each there was a well and next to it, a dung heap. Outside ladders led to the attics. Large double doors opened into the barns and stables. In each door, there was a tiny opening in the shape of a heart. There was only one small shop acting as a grocery shop and a small café. There, Ol' Fonsine bought pencils, notebooks, nibs and an eraser.

Winter was cold and damp. During the day, you could hear the carts rolling, the dogs barking and the cows mooing in the stables. By six in the evening, everyone was back home.

Settled at Ol' Fonsine's, we did our homework. Outside, there was not a single sound or light. The dark veil of the night wrapping itself around the house terrified me. Marcelle was very restless and moaned in her sleep. I thought about my mother: I hoped she was hiding well.

I gave her some advice: "Mum, be careful. Don't talk to anyone in the street." I pictured Mum walking flanked by two policemen. I lived with that permanent nightmare, but I told no one, not even Marcelle.

What if the Germans came all the way to here? When I woke up, reassured by the rather small and lost village, I regained confidence. Seriously, who would come looking for us in Etrelles?

Ol' Fonsine took care of the household chores with Father Berthiers as her only help.

"Do your schoolwork," she told us.

Having never learned to read, she respectfully watched us do our homework, almost fearfully. She raised chickens and a few rabbits which Father Berthier fed with grass that he took from a shed. Sometimes, we went with him. I loved the rabbits; they were so soft and funny when they nibbled.

Fonsine had no cat or dog.

"I wouldn't have enough to feed all of them," she said.

When we first arrived, I wondered why the Berthiers had agreed to take in refugees. I dared not ask them, and I just stopped thinking about it and adapted.

A routine set in: a splash of cold water when waking up, milky coffee or actually chicory milk with bread soaked in it and off to school.

The Monday after our arrival, the teacher handed back the essays.

"It's good Régine," he said. "Your essay is not bad at all. Come to the blackboard, and so should you Marcelle."

And right before the eyes of the astonished classroom, the teacher asked:

"Come on, sing us a typical song from Paris." I remained silent, believing it was a practical joke.

"Don't tell me you don't know any Parisian song?"

I took Marcelle's hand and began singing in a shivering voice:

*Sous les ponts de Paris,*

*Lorsque descend la nuit…*

I was unable to go any further as I did not know the lyrics. But the whole class laughed and heckled. At playtime, a small group gathered on the bare ground in front of the townhall-school: they were singing and pointing at us:

*Parisiens, têtes de chien*

*Parigots, têtes de veau,*

*Parisiens, têtes de chien…*

I stood upright gripping Marcelle's hand. Between us, we muttered terrible insults in Yiddish. No one could hear us.

"Die, all of you… Get sick… May ill fortune strike you…"

The teacher called the pupils back and the day ended without any other incident.

Later, and against all odds, friendships were forged. Big Paul became my inseparable friend. We were both twelve and in two years' time, it would be the elementary school certificate. Marcelle always hung around with Bertille, her desk neighbour.

All the children wore clogs. You could hear them clacking from a distance, and the arrival in the classroom was accompanied by a galloping noise. Only Marcelle and I were wearing out our "city shoes". I was more and more fond of Ol' Fonsine. She never ceased to be kind. She didn't speak much, always kept busy and made sure we did not lack anything. Father Berthier was not often at home. He was busy repairing things in the shed or gardening.

The only real inconvenience was the absence of a toilet. "It's at the back of the garden!" said Fonsine laughing.

Considering it was right in the middle of a wide-open space, we always went to the back of the garden together to keep an eye out on each other. Remembering the toilets of our school in Paris, I told Marcelle:

"Hold the door for me."

At first, she did not understand because there were no toilets and therefore no door, but then it became a game.

On Sunday morning, three weeks after our arrival, Fonsine asked:

“D’ye girls go to Mass?” I looked down.

“Not so much in Paris.” Fonsine insisted.

“Well, I’m going, so ye will too.” Father Berthier interrupted her:

“Leave em’ be. Can’t ye see you’re mithering[33] ‘em?”

He himself did not go to church, and remained seated on a chair, his chin resting on his cane, chewing a crumpled, yellow paper-covered cigarette with little sucking noises.

Before Mass, there was a show attended by most of the children. Whatever the weather, the mayor set out on his doorstep a bowl of hot water and a glass of cold water with a toothbrush dipped in it. He shaved, washed his face, neck, arms and brushed his teeth; all of this without the slightest care in the world of the watching audience. This scene happened nowhere else. Everyone did as we did at Fonsine’s, which was a splash of cold water on the tip of the nose in the morning and that was it for washing.

School made me feel like I was on top of the world. Now familiar with the whole class, accepted at last by the teacher who had forgotten his prejudices against Parisian women, I felt good there, working in the soft warmth and the soothing hum of the stove which burned all day long. I was embarrassed to see the teacher dozing after lunch, but the others elbowed each other, silently joking so as not to wake him up.

“Oi Grandperrin, need a hand?” suddenly called out the teacher abruptly striking his desk with his ruler.

Grandperrin bowed down his head in shame. Apparently, the teacher was not really sleeping, and still found a way to watch his class.

“Oi you, come here,” I approached the blackboard.

“You’re going to take care of the little ones while I correct the maths homework of these lazy lads,” he said, pointing to the middle row.

Helping the little ones, being the teacher. My long-awaited dream was finally coming true in here. Moved, my voice choked:

“Right now?”

“Well, of course, right now.”

[33] Mithering: meaning annoying or bothering.

He handed me a small ruler so that I could show the children the words they had to read on the blackboard. They were at the letter M:

“MuM, HaM, Miles, BrooM.”

I had to think of words beginning with the letters that the children already knew. I was thrilled to bits. I would not have given up my role for anything in the world. And so, for an hour each day, I became the "teacher” and, I was convinced, a “good” one too. It was as if life was finally back on track. Before going to bed at night, I spoke a lot to Marcelle. We whispered in Yiddish. I told her:

“We must not forget it.”

We tried to sing Mum’s songs softly.

“*Ot a yid a vabelè*…[34]”

Or:

“*A yiddishè mamè*...[35]”

Or even:

“*Beltz, main Schteïtèlè Beltz*...[36]”

We recited the names of all the people we knew in the family. We had secrets no-one else could share. No news from Paris. I knew that Mum would not write as she had to hide now. Did she even know our address?

Once again, I startled awake in the middle of the night. It was as if I was moaning. Ah! The loud knocks, the desperate flight: always the same nightmare! But here, there were no Krauts. It was like being on the edge of the world.

One evening, coming back from school, we saw the priest in his cassock sitting at the table next to Fonsine.

“Ah, here you are,” he said, getting up as we arrived. “You, the older one, you are Régine. And you, the smaller one, Marcelle, right?”

“Yes…”

I did not know how to address him.

“I have just spoken with Fonsine. You have not been to Mass yet?”

“…”

Ol’ Fonsine got us out of trouble:

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[34] “A Jew has a little wife…”
[35] “A Jewish Mum…”
[36] “Beltz, my small hometown…”

“Mr. Priest, good Lord. They’re refugees, ye know, Parisians no less, they weren’t used to it, but ‘ere…”

“Here, they will have to come to Mass,” interrupted the priest. “Régine, you are a big girl, how old are you?”

“Twelve,”

“I see. You must prepare for your first communion. Agreed? I must leave now. I still have a long way to go. But I will see the three of you on Sunday, understood? May you all have a good evening and may God bless you and your family.”

This requirement, which we had expected, was a bit frightening. We had never been to Mass; we had no idea how it worked. Nonetheless, the idea of my first communion did not bother me. I remembered Jacqueline’s white dress, the religious pictures, the mother-of-pearl rosary. Marcelle pulled me by the sleeve:

“We already know two prayers.”

“Yes indeed, the two prayers that we were taught at the religious school on the banks of the Loire. Maybe it would be enough.”

Mass went on without any incidents. The parish priest was no fool and had figured out that his two new parishioners were no regular attendees. Most importantly, we never took our eyes off Ol’ Fonsine: we stood up and knelt simultaneously without opening our mouths. Big Paul and Bertille, next to their parents, were winking at us. In no time and quite surprisingly, we were already familiar with the Ave Maria and the Our Father: we copied in unison.

We hardly ever saw the priest again who lived in a neighbouring village and only came to Etrelles for Sunday mass. Our parents had never talked to us about religious matters. It simply did not exist. Like all the events of this new life, Mass became an act to be carried out with the rest, without asking questions, because we had to move on. End of story.

# March 1943

The month of March did not get off to a good start. For many days now, Fonsine had been sighing, mopping her face despite the cold outside and dropping heavily into her chair.

"Good Lord, I am so jiggered[37] these days," she moaned.

She walked more and more slowly and with increasing difficulty.

"Ah me lasses, these darn legs I tell ye," she said.

She held her stomach, became pale; unrecognisable. We looked at her with tenderness and fear as we went about our daily chores: making up the beds, washing the dishes, sweeping up. Father Berthier did not say anything, but he pushed back his cap and scratched his head.

The mayor's wife, who was also a midwife, came to see her.

"Well, Fonsine, ye badly[38]? You should rest now."

She made her sit down and felt her legs, which had strange blue marks in places.

One evening, after school, Father Berthier was the only one at home. Struck by the unusual silence, I immediately asked:

"Where's Ol' Fonsine?"

"Our mayor took 'er to the village doctor for a check-up. She'll be 'ere tomorrow."

The next day, she was not back. A week later, we saw her arrive in the mayor's cart, wrapped up, unrecognisable, her face grey, her belly swollen and enormous.

"The hospital could not keep her any longer," said the mayor. She suffers from dropsy!

Dropsy. What could it be? No one would give us an explanation.

Fonsine went to bed. She was shivering. We added more blankets, but she still moaned softly and shivered. Father Berthier went round in circles. I prepared the soup. A neighbour offered to spend the night at her bedside, which Father Berthier agreed to.

We were awoken by the sound of hurried footsteps. The priest arrived, accompanied by the mayor and his wife. The neighbour who was looking after Fonsine was still there. Albertine, another one, rushed inside.

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[37] Tired.

[38] Feeling unwell, not in a good state of health.

“Ye poor lad!” she said to Father Berthier. “Poor lad,”

The priest did not allow anyone into Fonsine’s room. After a while, he came out.

“Our Blessed Fonsine has been called back to Our Lord. May God rest her soul, pray for her.”

The neighbours started crying. Marcelle and I were kept away from the funeral arrangements, which took place two days later. We attended it, trembling with grief and fear. We had become fond of Fonsine and her silent tenderness. We dreaded what was to come. Would we be able to stay with Father Berthier? If not, where would we go?

After the funeral, a wake was planned by the neighbours and one relative from the neighbouring village. First, we ate in silence, then we began talking about the dead woman, about the family, then, thanks to the wine, people talked louder. Finally, they sang; probably a custom done at the end of a special meal.

I was extremely shocked by that.

The next day, Father Berthier sat down on a chair near the window and didn’t want to move. He sucked on his wet cigarette, his eyes watering, his head wobbling. We did not know what to say to him. In fact, we had never spoken to him much. Intimidated and mute, we got on with the household chores that the old man seemed not to notice.

The mayor came back to see us the next day.

“Come on lad, don’t pity yourself like that. This won’t bring her back, God watches over her now!”

Father Berthier nodded silently.

“How about the girls, aye? They’ll take care of ye, won’t ye lasses?”

We promptly answered at the same time:

“Yes, yes indeed.”

But the father shook his head and said:

“That’s the problem, I don’t want ‘em to.”

Nothing could change his mind. He wanted to stay alone. He did not want anyone around him. His silent grief absorbed him completely. A solution needed to be found.

The mayor announced it to us two days later:

“Lasses, I know where ye’ll go.”

My heart was pounding. Marcelle took my hand.

“Come with me, we’re going to La Montbleuse.”

“But it’s far away!”

“It’s just two kilometers, nothing much for two big girls like you…”

“How about school?”

“Ye’ll still go to school obviously.”

La Montbleuse! I closed my eyes. Everything faded to black. Here it was, the worst had happened, everything I feared. La Montbleuse: a few houses and a remote hamlet that we once saw when walking by with Bertille. The “real” edge of the world. Behind, there was nothing besides the woods. No children lived in La Montbleuse. The isolation in which we were going to live from now on seemed absolute to me, endless. I started shaking and silently crying. How would Mum find us? How could we deal again with an unknown place? With unknown people?

Arguing was out of the question.

We packed our things, we kissed Father Berthier who did not want us anymore and the mayor took us to the hamlet.

La Montbleuse, eight houses including five farms, was a dependency of Etrelles. These two kilometres took us even further away from normal life. At least in Etrelles, there was the school nearby, the children, something reminding us of our lives in Paris.

La Montbleuse was about to change everything.

This March day, cold and muddy, was coming to an end.

The cart stopped in front of a low house, slightly set back from the road. Through the porch of the wide-open barn, we saw the cows.

“Aye up! Someone ’ere?” shouted the mayor as he tied up the horse.

The small entrance to the farm was a Dutch door. The upper part was open. A woman appeared.

“Aye up Ma’am!”

“Aye up Mr. Mayor!”

“^Where’s Father Hézard?”

“Both of ’em are at Vaux.”

“Oh aye?”

Mother Hézard[39] opened the lower part of the door and allowed the three of us inside.

“Ye’ll take a glass of wine, won’t ye?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said the mayor. “It’s nitherin’[40] out there.” The room was plunged into obscurity.

Marcelle and I stood there, not daring to look or speak. A rather small dog, black and white, approached and sniffed our legs.

“Oi Taïaut,” said Mother Hézard. “Don’t be scared, he’s a good herding dog.”

“Has Mother Bourgeois been warned?” asked the mayor.

“Oh! She must’ve heard ye coming in. She’ll be on her way. Ye know how bad her legs are!”

I hoped we would not stay here, and we would rather go to Mother Bourgeois’ place who was coming now.

At the same time, the old woman bent over a cane appeared.

“Ah! I was sure I’d seen you people coming in, but ye know, at my age, we’re slow as molasses!”

“Aye,” said the mayor. “Let’s stop faffing about. I need to get home before night comes; there’s still plenty to do. Here are the ration coupons and stamps.”

He gave one half to Mother Hézard and the other to Mother Bourgeois. Marcelle held on tight to me.

“Régine, ye’ll be staying here,” said the mayor. They’ve work to do in the farm, ye’ll help ‘em. Marcelle, ye’re going to Mother Bourgeois’ place. You’ll keep ‘er company.”

I grabbed Marcelle’s hand.

“No, I will not leave her side. Wherever she goes, I go.”

“Eeh by gum, no need to get on your high horse,” said Mother Bourgeois. “I live next door. You can come and see ‘er whenever you wish to.”

“No, I am not allowed to leave her alone under any circumstances.”

I started crying and so did Marcelle. The mayor scratched his head. Mother Hézard took matters into her own hands.

[39] See Appendix 21.
[40] Meaning very cold outside.

“Come on Régine, it’s just for sleeping, aye? There’s barely enough room to swing a cat here. But ye’ll go to school together, ye’ll play together and she can come and eat with us whenever she wants to, sounds good Marcelle?”

I insisted.

“I want to see where my sister will be.”

Relieved and after muttering a “sithee all”, the mayor climbed into his cart and left. Mother Bourgeois, Mother Hézard, Marcelle and I all went out to see how and where Marcelle would be settled.

Mother Bourgeois’ house was tiny. We entered a room also plunged into obscurity. Mother Bourgeois adjusted the wick of the paraffin lamp on the table.

“As ye’ can see, that’s where we’ll eat,” she said to me and Marcelle.

We then discovered a table, a wood-burning cooker, a large chest of drawers, and a sink under the window.

Guided by the lamp, we arrived in a pleasant room with a clean floor, a large bed, a small bed in a corner covered with a pretty flowered blanket and a large clock whose slow ticking could be heard.

Reassured, I said softly to Marcelle:

“You will be fine here. We will see each other all the time as we need to go to school and do our homework together.”

“Aye aye,” said Mother Hézard, “Marcelle will come have supper with us for tonight, won’t she Ma’am?”

Mother Bourgeois nodded approval.

“But ye won’t bring her back too late, aye?”

“Nay, Ol’ Father or Henri will bring her back.”

We went back to the farm which, to be honest, was actually very close. It was dark now. We sat on a bench by the big table and stayed still. The dog was lying down not far from the cooker. A cat, of which I got a glimpse for the first time, was lapping water from the bucket under the stone sink. The lamp made it difficult to make out the contours of the room.

The sound of a cart startled us.

“Oi! Oi!”

A deep voice outside stopped a horse. Then, a man came in and took his cap off. He was unshaven and his grey moustache made him look old. I guessed “That must be Father Hézard!” Surprised, he looked at Mother Hézard and pointed towards Marcelle and me with his chin.

“That’s Régine, she’ll be staying with us,” said Mother Hézard. “And that’s ‘er sister Marcelle. Ye’ll take ‘er back to Mother Bourgeois after supper.” Father Hézard did not reply, took off his jacket, sat down heavily on a bench near the table and began to fill a pipe. The dog immediately approached and rubbed against his master’s legs before lying down at his feet.

A few moments later, I’m not sure where from, two men appeared: one tall and young, the other very short and skinny.

“Robert, ye’ll eat some soup with us, aye?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Everyone sat down to eat. On one side, Father and Mother Hézard with Robert. On the other, the tall young man, Marcelle and me. Mother Hézard had already placed a large soup-tureen on the table. After blessing the loaf of bread, Father Hézard cut a slice for each of us with the tip of the knife he had taken out of his pocket. I noticed that the food was not very different from what we ate at Fonsine’s: soup with bread in it. It kind of reassured me.

Not a single word was spoken.

Everyone gulped down the soup. When he was done, Father Hézard wiped his mouth on his sleeve, closed his knife after cleaning the blade and said:

“How ’bout Blacky?”

These were his first words of the evening.

“Oh! We’ll have to wait at least a dozen days,” replied Mother Hézard.

Marcelle fell asleep next to her plate.

“Take ’er back to Mother Bourgeois,” said Mother Hézard to her son.

The latter took her in his arms and left.

Exhausted by today’s emotions, my cheeks were burning, and my eyes were shutting.

I barely sensed a hand taking me to a bed, and I woke up the next day not knowing where I was. I looked at the room and the bed in which I slept, trying to remember how I got here.

I was suddenly aware of Marcelle's absence, and the events of the last few days suddenly flashed before my eyes. "Oh Mum, Mummy, where are you?" I had never felt such distress before. It overwhelmed me. What was I doing here, alone. Why?

Mother Hézard appeared in the doorway.

"Yer coffee's ready," she said. "Go and say hi to your sister and come back to help me with the work."

I sat down in front of the bowl of coffee, spending a great deal of time pushing away the layer of skin before drinking, and I rushed outside to see Marcelle. I dared not talk too much in front of Mother Bourgeois who cheerfully said:

"See? Things ain't so bad for yer little sister, aye? I'll give her some wool and she'll knit with me. You'll come pick 'er up for school tomorrow."

I went back to the farm. Mother Hézard pulled a bucket of water from the well and carried it back, leaning sideways, hobbling slightly. This morning, it was just the two of us. Mother Hézard called me:

"Come and gimme a hand."

We made the beds in the bedroom. This room was quite large, low-ceilinged, with blackened beams and a very small window. As in the story of *Goldilocks*, there were three beds in it: a small bed wedged in a corner against the wall, mine; a larger bed, "Henri's", said Mother Hézard and finally, a large bed quite high, covered with a large quilt–the bed of Father and Mother Hézard. There was also a heavy, dark wardrobe. Two doors opened onto the room: the one I came in through, and another at the back, leading directly into the stable, from which came the rather pleasant smell of hay mixed with manure as well as the sound of ruminating animals. With the sheets tidy, the blankets and quilts in place, Mother Hézard asked me to do the dishes while she "soaked" the soup.

It was the same at Fonsine's: the bowl in the sink and no running water. The hot water was drawn from the water pan on the cooker and the cold water was scooped with the ladle from the bucket underneath the sink. The black, sticky soap was kept in a small pot. We used the ashes from the cooker to scrub the pots and pans. The sink

was under the small window overlooking the road, but no one passed by. The cat and the dog were nowhere to be seen.

A pleasant smell of cabbage filled the room.

"Oi, set the table," said Mother Hézard as she moved towards a room located between the kitchen and the bedroom, furnished with a sideboard, a square table and some straw chairs lined up against the wall.

"As ye' can see, the plates, the glasses and the cutlery are in the sideboard," went on Mother Hézard. "Don't break anything, tis' bad luck!"

I shrugged. Come on, I was not a birdbrain, I was twelve, I knew a thing or two.

Mother Hézard was not someone you should contradict, though. I hardly dared to look at her. Not very tall, but strong, stocky, with a black apron, a stern look on her face, small, sharp eyes; she straightened up when she walked, which gave her an imposing figure.

Father Hézard and Henri arrived at the same time.

"Hell fire, it's still parky[41] outside!" said Father Hézard rubbing his hands together.

Taïaut ran up behind, barking. I got a better look at the men than last night. Henri, tall and handsome, red-faced, bareheaded, with thick wavy hair.

"I saw Blacky, we'll way'up[42] now."

I suspected that Blacky was a cow, but what were we waiting for? During our stay in Etrelles, Paul had taken me to his parent's stable, so I knew cows were given proper names.

We all sat down to eat at the table. I fiddled with my plate, crumbled the bread. Father Hézard glanced at me furtively, and looked at Mother Hézard who–shaking her head– ended up saying:

"Should've seen 'er coffee this morning! Don't ye like skin on the cream? It means it's proper milk. Not something you'd have in Paris though."

Once done with his soup, Father Hézard poured the rest of his glass of wine into his plate and dipped his bread in it.

After washing the dishes, I took my notebooks and asked Mother Hézard if I could go and join Marcelle to do our homework.

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[41] Cold.
[42] To wait.

“Aye, but be back for five o’clock. Chickens and cows won’t wait for ye![43]”

Mother Bourgeois seemed quite happy to have some company. Sitting on a small chair, she knitted a tiny blanket on her lap and counted her stitches aloud. I wrote an essay. Marcelle read.

We could hear the clock ticking. Everything was calm, serene. But I could not focus on the history lesson I had to learn for the next day. We would have to get up early and walk two kilometers in the rain and wind of the cold spring.

I should have been used to the changes considering how frequent they had been in our lives over the past months. Yet, the only thing I wanted was to stay indefinitely in a quiet place and have Mum back with us. I could not think about her without being overwhelmed by anxiety. Mum in Paris with the roundups and the Germans! Mum, please, hide well. I begged her internally.

Every new thing I had to face frightened me. At least, fortunately, Marcelle was there. I could not even imagine being without my little sister for a second but at the same time, the huge responsibility of having to take care of her was crushing me.

I went back to the farm a little before five o’ clock. Mother Hézard called her hens and all her poultry:

“Chicky, chicky, chicky...”.

She rolled up the corners of her apron to carry the grain that she threw in the air. The chickens came running and pecking. Chickens but also turkeys, chicks, ducks, geese. The geese scared me. The children in Etrelles told me stories of geese biting the calves of those who came near them. I carefully stayed away.

“Oi Régine, take a handful and throw it. That way, ye’ll know how to for next time.”

It was amusing to see the birds’ haste, especially the yellow chicks that chirped.

When the grain had been scattered, Mother Hézard, still silently, went to the stable. I followed her. We could hardly see anything. I could barely distinguish the animals pulling the hay from the racks hanging in front of them. Mother Hézard grabbed a small three-legged stool standing in a corner, sat behind a cow and started milking. The milk spurted out in long streams into the bucket. Whenever she stood up to see another cow, she moaned:

[43] See Appendix 22.

“Tis’ my bad leg. D’ye see Blacky o’er there?” (She pointed to a cow that was bigger than the rest.) “She’ll be calving soon. We’re waiting for it.”

I was afraid of going further into the barn. I dared not enter the house without light either. As it was almost dark, I wondered how Mother Hézard managed to see anything to milk the cows. Force of habit, I guessed. Finally, after having emptied her bucket several times into the big jugs placed at the entrance of the stable, Mother Hézard said to me:

“Don’t just stand there, go and set the table. We’ll be four, including Father and Henri[44].”

Mother Hézard lit the paraffin lamp. At first it was a reddish, flickering light, then the flame rose and illuminated part of the room. Just like in Etrelles at good ol’ Fonsine’s, I would have to learn to find my way around in the permanent half-light. As the previous day, I barely ate. Falling asleep, I managed on my own this time to go into the little bed in the shared bedroom.

The next morning, I was awakened at six o’ clock by Mother Hézard.

“Rise and shine! You’ve got dishes to do. Tidy up afterwards, same goes for the bedroom. Your coffee’s hot. I’ll go and feed the birds. I’ve prepared some bread and two boiled eggs for yer lunch. Ye’ll eat at school.”

I pushed aside the cream layer before drinking it. The bread had a strange colour: white with blue spots here and there.

I left it aside, did the dishes, tidied up, and went to find Marcelle who was already waiting for me.

[44] See Appendix 23.

# April 1943

The mayor was right. Walking two kilometers to school was not as bad as I thought. The annoying part was that my shoes were starting to wear out, though. We walked with a firm step to get there on time and settle in as if nothing had changed.

“So, how’s life at the Hézards’?” asked Big Paul.

“It’s fine, quite all right even.”

I played the proud card. Deep down and even though he had nothing do with it, I blamed Paul and the entire world for being in La Montbleuse. But I would not show it under any circumstances. Nobody asked me further questions.

I withdrew into silence, filled with resentment. As we could rarely play together anymore, we only saw each other during class, and for a few moments before school began in the morning and afternoon. The work to do in the farms required everyone’s help and no one wandered once school was over for the day. I walked away from the other children to whom I could not say anything anyway. “If they want me to be from La Montbleuse, I will be just that.”

Marcelle and I ate our lunch in the corridor separating the offices of the townhall-classroom, and without dawdling on the evening of the first day, we both returned home: I to Mother Hézard, Marcelle to Mother Bourgeois.

The Easter holidays would soon be here, and I was doing more and more work on the farm. But before that, I accompanied the whole Hézard family to church on Sunday morning, Palm Sunday. An important day apparently. Henri hitched up the cart. I insisted that Marcelle should come too.

On the way home, Father Hézard said in his brusque and gruff way:

“They will need some clogs.”

On Monday, Marcelle, Mother Hézard and I went to the clog maker who had a tiny shop at the end of Etrelles. We found clogs our size and the only thing left to do was to nail the leather strap lined with felt, neither too loose nor too tight. I tried walking back home in them. I could not even manage ten steps and bumped into everything. Mother Hézard laughed:

“Eeh by gum lass, how will ye’ run behind the cows, aye?” Me, the roller-skating champion, stomping around like a duck! I felt so stupid! But how the heck did everybody else manage to walk in these?

The first week of the holiday was spent doing housework, rearranging beds, washing dishes, and feeding grains to the chickens. Despite the “good ol’ fresh air” as Mother Hézard called it and the relentless work, I was still fussy; I hated the bread that smelled musty, the cheese that smelled of a cow, the thick milk filled with skin and cream that I always pushed aside every morning. I kept on sulking and Marcelle was the only one spared from it. We told each other what it would be like when we would find Mum, far from La Montbleuse. But where was she? I hoped she was hiding well so she would not get caught!

On Saturday morning, Mother Hézard put on her boots, grabbed her cane, harnessed the cart, and said before leaving:

“Do as I’ve told ye’. I’m going to Vaux, I’ll be back by noon.”

I had prepared the soup: squares of bacon, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, a pinch of coarse salt. The cat, now familiar, rubbed against my leg. The table was set. Henri and Father Hézard were already sitting down when the Mother entered, hobbling.

“Look who’s in a hurry aye,” she said. Handing me a small colander, she said: “That’s for ye, I’m tired of seeing ye nit-picking the cream in your coffee every morning. That sieve will help ye. Then, ye’ll do me the pleasure of taking a spoonful of this syrup every day. It’s Quintonine,” she finally said to Father Hézard’s questioning look. “The pharmacist promised that it’ll give our little Parisian lady an appetite!”

Stunned, I could hardly thank her for it.

Mother Hézard had paid attention to me; she had seen the morning ordeal of the coffee bowl. I immediately swallowed a tablespoonful of greenish, bitter syrup, and started eating cautiously despite the lump in my throat and the tears I tried to hold back.

During the afternoon on Easter Sunday while I was sitting with Marcelle near the path in front of the farm, an old neighbour came to greet Mother Hézard.

“’Ow do! Augustine –that is how I learned her name–, wouldn’t ye have some curd by any chance?”

Mother Hézard went out and started chatting with the neighbour who had a spindle under her arm. The stem was surrounded by a woolly mass from which a thread hung. And suddenly, a trickle made Marcelle and I turn our heads. The neighbour and Mother Hézard had spread their legs underneath their long skirts and a steaming stream of urine was flowing down the embankment. Our astonishment was such that we could barely move. The two women, while continuing to talk, were peeing standing up like horses. Did that mean they had no pants on? Blushing, I looked at Marcelle, lowered my head, holding back the laughter at what seemed so natural here. In Etrelles I had never seen Fonsine, nor any other woman, doing such a thing. Maybe they did it secretly?

The following night was eventful. I heard a great stirring, mooing, footsteps, scraping and Father Hézard saying: “That’s Blacky for sure, that’s a good girl, it’s starting…” The next morning, Henri, who never said anything, told me about it:

“Blacky has given birth to an all-white calf with a black spot on the upper thigh. We named it Spotty.”

Like Marcelle, my feet were scraped by the clogs. We had to get used to them, though. There was no other way to trample on the manure and mud of the paths.

Every night, I went with Mother Hézard to the barn to collect the eggs. We reached it by a ladder placed in the stable. Mother Hézard climbed up complaining about her bad leg. The hens always lay in the same spot., I gathered these warm eggs and gently put them in the basket. One day, I saw one of the hens sitting in a corner as if asleep.

“Leave ‘er be, she’s givin’ us a good clutch,” said Mother Hézard.

I wondered about where all these eggs went. I only had them once in our packed lunch.

Big news awaited us when school started again. The priest would now come twice a week to teach catechism for half an hour before the afternoon class. He had to prepare five “older ones” for the Holy Communion, including Paul and me. The catechism would take place outside, in front of the townhall-school if the weather was good, or in the entrance hall if it rained. A bench and a chair were brought out for Wednesday and Friday. No one would come on Thursdays because on that day everybody was busy with the animals or working in the fields. The weather was getting better, the days were longer and there were never enough helping hands for work.

This welcome news brought some relief from the solitude of our short lunches on the steps of the townhall.

Friday was now a good day. It was the day when bread was baked. Four or five loaves. We ate it all week long. The bread oven, located outside, filled the house with the delicious smell of the baked bread. And when Father Hézard cut the still-warm loaf at supper, I couldn't stop my mouth from watering.

Whether because of the Quintonine or simply the way of the Hézard family who, in their silent and gruff way, had accepted me, my appetite was roaring back. Sadness still invaded me in the evening when I thought of the strangeness of the place and its customs. The feeling of loneliness, the distance from all my family. Despite this, I slowly adapted myself to this new life, and every week, Mother Hézard trusted me a little more, relieving herself of some of the farm work.

First, recognising the dandelions to be picked in the meadow, then, in the evening when I came back from school, giving the grain to the hens, this had become a routine: searching for the eggs in the barn, setting the table. I had also recently learned how to prepare the cancoillotte that we now ate every evening with the dandelions.

In the big black frying pan, I melted a little lard, and when it sizzled, I threw in the hard, grainy white cheese that Mother Hézard kept rolled up in a cloth placed in the hutch. Upon heating, the cheese turned into a soft and yellow stretching paste. I hated it at first because of its strong and sour smell. But I had gotten used to it by now. Anyway, there was nothing else to eat. I put the pan on the table next to the big bowl filled with dandelions.

Each person picked up a square of bread on their fork, dipped it into the pan, swirled it to pick up as much cheese as possible, and swallowed it with a few sprigs of crisp dandelion.

No one uttered a word. From time to time, and I did not know why, Father Hézard simply spouted out his favourite insults: "Blimey, blimey O'Reilly…" There were some twists too: "Blimey, blimey O'Reilly, cor blimey" or even longer: "Blimey, blimey O'Reilly, cor blimey, gorblimey" What was most surprising was that he rarely seemed angry, though.

One evening, before distributing a slice of bread to each person, he hit the table violently and sputtered:

“A bloody drink or I’ll kill the dog!”

Petrified, I stared at him sideways. Impossible! He was not really going to kill his dog, right? I was about to rush for the jug of wine when I noticed Father Hézard’s laughing eyes.

“Got a fright there Régine, aye? “Right, tell me ye love me or I’ll drink some paraffin.”

Since that moment, I understood that these were his favourite words to shout while heartily laughing.

I liked Father Hézard: silent, smoking his pipe at night, petting his dog, and ignoring me most of the time.

One morning, Mother Hézard called me earlier than usual.

“Will ye come now!”

“Where to Mother Hézard?”

“To the barn, obviously.”

Still drowsy, I put on my clogs and rushed to the stable, whose door onto the room always remained open.

“Look at that.”

I saw a ewe lying down, with a tiny lamb suckling hungrily. I crouched and smiled, amazed by the scene. Mother Hézard was holding another tiny sheep, all white and gently wriggling.

“The mother didn’t want to feed this one. We’ll have to bottle-feed it. Here, don’t drop it. Follow me.”

I gently welcomed this quivering ball of warmth. I felt overwhelmed by tenderness. That coat, so soft, and her sleepy face. Just like a newborn. Mother Hézard cleaned the little ewe and filled a bottle with milk and handed it to me.

“Make her drink some.”

The animal immediately found the teat and, when the feeding was over, closed its eyes. I gently rocked her.

“Come,” said Mother Hézard, taking the lamb back in her arms. She gently put her down on the straw, not far from its mother.

While I was still overwhelmed with this new-found happiness, I did not understand why the ewe refused to feed her baby.

“That’s just the way it is, she doesn’t have enough nipples,” said Mother Hézard.

I told Marcelle about this adventure. I talked about it non-stop, all the way to school. I thought about it all day long. I could not wait until tonight to bottle-feed the little “Whitey”. That was what I decided to call it.

Whitey was then bottle-fed for several weeks. Quickly enough, she could walk, and she jumped from my arms whenever I wanted to carry her. She sucked from the bottle of milk while standing with her legs wide apart. I thought my fondness of Whitey greatly helped me get used to the Hézard family.

I was no longer afraid of Taïaut, the dog, I no longer complained at night when the cockroaches ran over the bed, and I accepted, stoically, the pre-supper delousing sessions in the company of Marcelle who came specially to the farm for the occasion. Mother Hézard unfolded an old newspaper on the table, smeared our heads with petrol, gave each of us a small comb with fine teeth, and the combing session was on, head bent over the newspaper. The lice fell out. We trapped them in the newspaper and threw the whole package into the cooker’s fire. The oil irritated my scalp, and the skin of my skull peeled off, but thanks to the petrol, we probably had luxuriant and shiny hair.

We rarely washed. It did not really bother me anymore. Mother Hézard kept a long stick of elderberry beside her bed, and in the evening, before going to bed, she slipped the stick behind her back and scratched herself with it, moaning with pleasure.

“Eeh by gum that’s the stuff!”

But I was not entitled to this special treatment, nor Henri, nor Father Hézard for that matter.

If only Mum could see me right now! She who was always so pretty, perfumed and impeccably clean!

I took a liking to the catechism, I memorised the prayers, but I could not understand the “immaculate conception” and the “work of the flesh”. Every time the priest said these words, I nudged Paul with my elbow and chuckled. I did not really care about it. I still felt like an outsider, or at least, not like a “local”. My sole purpose was surviving to find Mum and the rest of my family.

However, now that I knew the rites of Mass, what a pleasure it had become! I sang in chorus with all the children. I knew by heart the Gloria in excelsis Deo which was so beautifully amplified in the church.

One day, the priest said to me:

"Don't forget to come to confession on Saturday. Sunday, I will give you communion.

I spent my time with Marcelle wondering what we could confess. I talked about it all the time on the way to school. I remembered Jacqueline's communion.

"I will confess to being a glutton, and that I was jealous when Mother Hézard gave my chocolate to Henri."

"What about me?" worried Marcelle. "Well, I will say that I ate Mother Bourgeois' jam without her seeing me."

This little scene was practised and on Sunday morning, in a rather pleasing feeling of peace, I was given the wafer on my tongue –a dry and bland pellet placed by the priest– and let it melt in my mouth.

A few days later, once the catechism class was over, the priest approached me[45].

"Do you have your baptismal certificate?"

"No, Father."

"Then tell me where you were baptised. I will ask for it. I need it for your Holy Communion."

I looked at Marcelle with my heart racing, thinking on my feet. I visualised the church near the school in Paris. That was where Jacqueline did her communion.

I finally answered with my voice choked:

"The St Paul Church, rue Saint-Antoine."

Marcelle looked down.

Would these lies have consequences?

We improvised according to the circumstances, obeying Mum's most important rule: never say that we were Jewish. I could not fool myself: it was a matter of life and death!

School went on. I kept on teaching the young ones. Spring set in with a vengeance, and the journey between school and back to La Montbleuse almost turned into a stroll.

[45] See Appendix 24.

Marcelle and I sang the hymns we learned in church. From time to time, we said words in Yiddish, and above all, we recited a rhyme that Mother Bourgeois taught Marcelle for when she had the hiccups, which often happened.

One had to sing the single stanza at least ten times without breathing for the hiccups to disappear:

*J'ai l'hoquet,*

*Dieu m' le fait,*

*P'tit Jésus,*

*Otez-m' lu.*

*Je n' l'ai plus !*

And so on, faster and faster without breathing, and see who would last the longest.

We didn't even light the lamp anymore. Mother Hézard had hung two fly papers on a beam, and I had to make sure that there was always a plate full of vinegar on the table. The flies struggled there for a while and then died. It made me ill at ease at first but then I stopped thinking about it.

Now, the hardest thing was churning the butter. Mother Hézard put fresh cream in her churn every week, and I turned the wooden crank that bumped hard against the churn's hinged walls. It went "flop, flop, flop", a big soft noise, and became more and more difficult to mix as the butter "set". So it wouldn't melt, we covered it with cold water and placed it above the sink.

I had completely forgotten about our lie as regards the baptismal certificate when one day, the priest arrived and called Marcelle and me aside from the others in the catechism class. He had a stern look that intimidated me:

"My my… Régine, the Saint-Paul Church have replied that they had never baptised you nor your sister.

I stared at my feet.

"You must have made a mistake, then. In which parish were you baptised?"

I was not expecting this. I was racking my brain, but I could not think of any other church.

"Good Lord Régine, you are not a child anymore. Surely you remember that. Have you ever been baptised at least?"

"Yes, Father."

Little by little, I lost my composure and could only whisper my answers.

“But where?”

“…”

If only he knew the ins and out of it all.

“You are a Catholic, are you not?”

“Yes, Father.”

The priest did not insist, raised his eyes to heaven and said: “My God, my God, forgive me” and left, almost running, and raising his cassock as he went. I remained petrified, alarmed, without understanding the priest’s reaction. His insistence seemed threatening, but I could not figure a way out of this tricky situation.

I kept on attending the catechism class in front of a parish priest who hardly looked at me; we were both concealing our worries. Two weeks later, the parish priest asked us once more to go to the church immediately after class. Pale and agitated, he was pacing the floor as he waited.

“Régine, you lied. You are not baptised. You made me commit a mortal sin because I confessed and gave communion to you and your sister. I met the bishop. So, you need to be baptised immediately.”, He sighed, “I will mention it Mother Hézard on Sunday. We will find you some godmothers, but your Holy Communion, my poor Régine, will have to wait another year!”

During his long speech, the both of us held our breath and stared at our feet. What would Mother Hézard say? What if she asked questions?

She did not ask any. After Mass, which I did not attend, Mother Hézard had a discussion with Mother Bourgeois, and that evening at the table, she announced to the crowd:

“Did ye’ know that this lass o’er there had no clue where she got baptised! She has caused quite the embarrassment for our dear ol’ priest … Well, moving on now! Lucienne Colin will be your godmother. Marcelle’s will be Germaine Coudot. We’ll organise it after the Holy Communion, at the end of school. You’ll have to go and see Lucienne,” she finally told me.

I went over to Lucienne’s whom I had seen chat once or twice with Mother Hézard.
Lucienne did not give me time to open my mouth:

# June-July 1943

Summer had set in, hot and buzzing with flies. The Hézard family left the farm early in the morning and I was being given increasingly more tasks to do when I came home from school. On Sundays, no one went to Mass anymore. There were too many things to do in the fields. Apart from milking the cows –"Ye fingers ain't strong enough," said mother Hézard , finally– I could hardly take a break on Thursdays and Sundays.

On Thursday, we woke up at six: feeding grain to the chickens, grass to the rabbits, swallowing coffee, washing the dishes from the previous night, preparing the soup at noon, looking for dandelions for supper, making up the beds, doing the dishes again, tidying up, and often polishing the cutlery that was never used, but that Mother Hézard held dear. I once heard her say to a neighbour: "I make 'er polish everything, she's no thief." I still wonder what I could have done with spoons and forks, even silver ones!

And the cycle resumed: doing homework with Marcelle, feeding grain to the chickens, picking up the eggs. The bucket of water from the well was too heavy to carry. I always spilled half of it on the cobbles. Might as well make more trips but do it right.

We started hay making. One Sunday, I met the haymakers who had already gathered the grass mown the previous day into a stack. The cart on which I was riding stopped at each. There, Henri passed the hay up to me in batches at the end of his fork. I had to spread it out on the cart and climb higher and higher on it as it piled up. It smelled good. At night, we plunged into it on the way back to the farm.

Obviously, the Holy Communion of the older ones took place without me. I didn't mind. My godmother offered me a rosary made of pretty white beads which I hung on a chair beside the bed. That was one gorgeous gift. Marcelle got the same from Germaine and we were both getting used to praying the rosary and saying the prayers bead by bead as we were shown.

One Saturday, the priest came specifically to baptise us at the church. Suzanne took Marcelle and me over there with Mother Hézard and Mother Bourgeois. Marcelle and I were holding our rosaries. The women wore straw hats: black for Mother Hézard and Mother Bourgeois, a paler shade for Lucienne and Germaine.

The walk was full of fun and laughter. The women joked about this unexpected and man-free occasion!

The ceremony was short. We gathered around the font filled with holy water at the church's entrance. The priest dipped a finger in it, made the sign of the cross on my face, then on Marcelle's, and said: "I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." The godmothers were moved, the priest was happy, and reminded us that we must attend Mass every Sunday.

The end of the school year was quite hectic. The older ones who had made their communion were distracted, they would only be sitting their certificate the following year and they were not thinking about it yet. I had trouble managing the little ones whom I now made do counting. The teacher relaxed and dozed for a good hour after lunch. There would be no Prize Giving.

The last day, –like every morning I wrote the date on the board: July 13, 1943– ended in a great hubbub after the teacher clapped his hands. Every pupil went to see him and said: "Goodbye Mr. Teacher."

We picked up our notebooks, pencils, eraser, dip pen. We chatted for a few minutes with Paul and Bertille. We would probably not see each other again during the holidays as the farm-work would absorb most of our free time.

That evening, Mother Hézard welcomed me home by saying:

"Go and see Mother Bourgeois. If she agrees to it, ye and yer sister will come with me tomorrow. I'll show ye girls where we pasture the cows. Tell 'er to bring 'er food. We'll be there for the whole day."

I knew the cows like the back of my hand. I could call them by their name. But herding and driving them was a whole different kettle of fish. Mother Hézard led the herd out with her loud voice.

"O'er here Brunie. Oi Oi Whitey! Flippin 'eck you beast! Taïaut, o'er here!"

The dog rushed towards the animal's leg to force it back into the herd. Mother Hézard held a stick. She liked using it quite a lot. So here we had Browny, Whitey, Gingery, Blacky and her little calf Spotty, Limpy, Pinky, Biggy, Cornetty and finally Speckly. White cows with black spots. Gingery was the only ginger and brown one. They slowly moved forward, their rumps covered with crusts of dried dung and mud,

flicking their tails to chase away the flies. Behind them came the ewe with her two lambs, including the pretty Whitey, now all grown up, and five unnamed sheep.

“Remember the path for when you come on your own,” advised Mother Hézard.

We walked at the slow pace of cows. From time to time, Mother Hézard tapped a cow to make it hurry up a bit. The cow then trotted for a short while to match the general pace. The dog barked, jumped, and ran around. We finally stopped in a freshly mown meadow without fences and bordered by a small wood.

The cows started grazing and Mother Hézard, Marcelle and I followed them while keeping an eye out. When a cow strayed too far, all Mother Hézard had to do was point it out with her stick to Taïaut and he rushed in to make it come back.

Mother Hézard had brought along some knitting. She was finishing a pair of chunky woollen socks for the winter. I didn’t fancy sitting down. We were bored to tears. The herd was slowly moving away. I whispered to Marcelle:

“Let’s try remembering where we are.”

At one point, we were walking alongside a clover field and Mother Hézard watched her herd more closely while shouting at her dog.

“Taïaut! Taïaut! Blacky! Limpy! Be extra careful Régine, don’t let ’em eat clover. They’d swell up and die. We wouldn’t want that, would we?”

Finally, Mother Hézard took out the slices of bread and hard-boiled eggs of the basket.

I asked:

“Will we have a stick too?”

“Sure thing lass, Father Hézard will make one for you.”

I observed the little Whitey. It was the only thing I enjoyed. Guarding the cows seemed boring to me. Mother Hézard did not say anything. We could hear the flies, the grazing, the rumbling. In the afternoon, the cows lay down, but the cowherds always stayed awake to keep an eye on them. From time to time, Mother Hézard slightly spread her legs and peed while continuing her knitting.

The journey back to the barn was as slow as when we came. We met Father Brioux’s cart.

“Aye up, lads!”

“Aye up!”

We paused by the trough at the entrance of the hamlet and then the cows and sheep quietly settled down in the stable undisturbed by Taïaut's useless barking.

The next day was the same as the previous one. Except that we had company. In the afternoon, Albertine's smaller herd came to join ours.

Mother Hézard and Albertine chattered and gossiped constantly about the people of La Montbleuse and elsewhere. We listened to them, even if we did not know who Jeanette, Pierre or Father Ginoux were. It was more fun than watching the animals until we dozed off.

Suddenly, Albertine lowered her voice:

"D'ye know that Jeanette had an abortion!"

"An abortion! Good Lord," said Mother Hézard, making a quick sign of the cross. "Dear God! What a dreadful story."

"She's not the one who told me, but I sure was going to know about it."

"Who's the father? D'we know?"

"I might have an idea."

Seeing that I stared at her, baffled by the sign of the cross, Mother Hézard said laughingly:

"D'ye know what an abortion is?"

"No Mother Hézard."

I blushed without knowing why.

"Look at her, as she is right now, all young and innocent, she's probably never had the rags on[46]!

Had the rags on? I gave Marcelle a puzzled look.

The next day, we only led the cows out and we left them in a fenced meadow before returning quickly to the farm. In front, Father Hézard was chatting with a man wearing an old hat. The cart and the horse tied to the fence probably belonged to him.

"Aye up, Father Thouard!"

"'Aye up, Augustine!"

"'Ow do at this fine time o' day?"

"Jolly good, jolly good. Always some work to do but the arms are getting jiggered."

There were two huge tubs in front of the house.

[46] Rags on: when a woman has her period.

“Let’s get started,” said Mother Hézard.

She went inside the barn with the old man and they came out heaving a sheep. The animal bleated.

Sitting on a stool that had been brought out for the occasion, Father Thouard wedged the sheep’s rump between his thighs, Mother Hézard held the front legs and in just a few minutes, the shears made a “clac! clac! clac! clac!” sound and Father Thouard had stripped the sheep of all its wool, which fell limply to the ground. Finally, he let the animal escape and it returned, all pink, naked and trembling to the stable.

“Put all o’ that in the tub,” told me Mother Hézard.

I picked up the sticky tufts of wool, greasy and rough with dirt, straw and dung.

The shearing carried on in the same way. Being too young, Whitey and her brother were spared. The two tubs were filled with wool. Father Thouard put away his shears went into the house, drank a glass of wine, and after wiping his mouth on his sleeve he said:

“Sithee in a bit[47], I’m needed elsewhere!” He climbed back in his cart and left.

Mother Hézard drew buckets of water which she poured into the tubs. Every day the wool was taken out and the tubs were emptied and refilled.

With Marcelle, who worked with me on the farm during the holidays, I did as Mother Hézard taught me: hung the bundles of wool, twisted them to drain them a little, fluffed them up and hung them on the hedges along the path, transforming them into tufty white patches.

“In this heat,” said Mother Hézard, "it’ll soon be dry.”

Meanwhile, the cows were grazing in an enclosed meadow. For the purpose of milking, they were brought in the morning and again in the evening.

A few days later, the bundles of dry and still rough wool were put back into the tubs.

“Go fetch Marcelle, it’s time to card. Bring the chairs outside.”

Marcelle arrived as well as Mother Bourgeois with her eternal knitting. We settled outside in front of the house.

“I’ll keep ye’ company” said Mother Bourgeois.

[47] See you soon.

Mother Hézard gave each of us a pair of hand-carders which I had never seen before. Two large wooden carders with quite a round handle. The inner side was lined with fine, sharp spikes.

“Just do as I do,” she said.

She took a small bundle of wool, put it in between the pair of carders and rubbed them together. I tried. It was hard. It rubbed, pulled the wool away, and squeaked.

“Come on, harder than that!” said Mother Hézard, teasing me.

Finally, the wool became softer, fluffier, and whiter. All the little scraps of dirt, wood chips and straw fell out. The carded wool soon filled a large jute bag.

“There’ll be plenty for this winter,” said Mother Hézard.

We kept on doing it all day long. Marcelle tried her best. I was exhausted: my elbows were stiff, and my fingers numb. Blisters appeared. Mother Hézard finally stopped and stood up groaning.

“Tomorrow is another day.”

And indeed, the next day was the same old story.

The days following the carding were among the most difficult of these “holidays” for Marcelle and me. When we were doing it on our own, keeping the cows together was a constant ordeal. It was as if they sensed that Mother Hézard was not there; the cows escaped in turn, and I shouted out “Taïaut, Taïaut”, pointing with my stick to the cow he had to bring back into the herd. The dog opened an eye and quickly fell asleep again. Nothing worked. He did not acknowledge my authority. Marcelle and I ran around, stumbling in our clogs, out of breath, shouting, with sobs in our voices, “Gingery! Browny!”

At last, we returned to the farm, taking revenge on the animals by giving them big blows with our stick. The cows, or “flippin’ beasts” as Mother Hézard called them, barely reacted to the blows. Then came the time when the herd was left for the day in the enclosed meadows. The harvest time was about to start: that would give us a break, surely.

# August 1943

I watched the preparations for the harvest. Father Hézard and Henri had returned several evenings in a row holding some corn on the cob. They seemed happy, but they stared at the sky.

"It's fine as long as it's not raining," said Henri.

One evening, coming back from the meadow, I saw a huge piece of machinery in front of the barn. Father Hézard circled around it, touched it and inspected it. I asked Henri what it was.

"That's the combine harvester, we're starting tomorrow."

That night, Mother Hézard kept on nagging me. Everything needed to be done really quickly.

"That's because we have to be up at four in the morning tomorrow," she said.

"Who will mind the cows?"

"Father Colin. Poor ol' bugger with his 'arthwitis'. His harvesting days are over now."

The next day, at four in the morning, I woke up to a big commotion. The day was just dawning. We could already hear the harvester rattling. On his own, Father Hézard settled down on its high seat to drive it. Henri had hitched up a huge cart, the big one, the one used for haymaking.

"D'ye bring your hat?" asked Mother Hézard. It's gonna be maffin'[48] out there."

Three carts arrived on the road. We had to harvest the Hézard's wheat, but also the Bougon's, the Chavard's, the Colin's, one after the other. Hurrah! My godmother would be joining us. Marcelle would not come. Mother Bourgeois did not get up that early!

Straining the milky coffee, dipping the bread into it, quick, quick, we had to leave.

Everyone had hats on, the women wore light-coloured blouses, the men wore knitted vests that left their arms bare.

The harvester, hitched to two horses, left first and was followed by the four carts, each pulled by a horse. It was quite noisy but apart from the harvesters, the hamlet was silent. Even the dogs were lucky enough to still be sleeping. At least, we didn't hear them. We stopped in front of a wheat field, the end of which I could barely see. Everyone climbed down, except Father Hézard, who was on the harvester.

[48] Hot and clammy weather.

Henri, Father Bougon and Father Chavard grabbed the large scythes they had laid carefully in the carts. I had seen Henri sharpening his the day before. They spaced out at a reasonable distance from each other and began to mow the edge of the field. Their sweeping movements were wide and accurate. The mown wheat stalks tumbled. Regularly, the mowers sharpened their scythes. Behind them, the women picked up the wheat to make sheaves which they then stood in stooks. Five sheaves per stook. When the row was done, Father Bougon and Chavard continued at the field's other end. Henri and Claude Bougon came back to Father Hézard.

"Let's do it," they said.

The harvester then started. The large blades on the right side were going "tac, tac, tac, tac, tac", mowing the wheat and –I did not understand how– gathered them into bunches. Claude and Henri were keeping an eye on the whole process. With the women, I picked up the bunches and stacked them neatly in piles. At noon, in the stifling heat, I left the harvesters, relieved. Lucienne came with me.

"You'll come back tomorrow," said Mother Hézard. "Don't ye worry lass, there'll still be plenty o' work to do!"

The next day, the harvester was gone. But we left with four carts, harnessed to two horses this time.

We returned to the field we harvested yesterday. Mother Hézard drove slowly. The women followed, each of them carrying a fork. I wanted to climb into the cart next to Mother Hézard. Lucienne gave me a hand and climbed in as well. With their forks, Mother Bougon and Chavard passed us the sheaves of wheat gathered in the piles one by one. We had to hurry, pile them up in a precise order and stack them so that the cart was not unbalanced. It was exhausting me. It was too fast, too hot and too heavy.

"Oi, can't ye see you're in the way?" said Mother Hézard. "Go and see Alphonsine. You'll be in charge of picking up what's left behind."

I ran towards the other end of the field. Running with clogs was not an easy task on that uneven ground filled with hollows and bumps. The stubble scratched my ankles.

Alphonsine was collecting the remaining stalks left behind the harvester and made small bundles of them which she bound with a straw. I helped her stack the bunches in a stook.

It was hot as hell. The air was dusty and unbreathable. We could only hear the insects buzzing. Alphonsine worked fast but often sighed.

“Good Lord! I feel as old as the hills.”

That was a sentence I heard a lot around here!

Finally, Alphonsine straightened up and I became aware of the silence. Work was over. The hot air was vibrating. The harvesters had gathered under the few trees bordering the field. When I got there, Father Bougon and Chavard were sitting in the shade and drinking wine from the bottle. The women were distributing bread and hard-boiled eggs. My mouth was so dry that I could hardly swallow. My fingers were cut in places; the pain made me cry. There was no way I could do that again tomorrow.

After lunch, the men took a nap. Silent, the women sat around. I slumped against Lucienne.

“Not quite in the prime of ‘er life yet,” said Mother Hézard. “You’ll leave with the first cart”.

Mother Hézard drove the huge cart, which was difficult to guide.

“Easy, easy.” She slowed the horses down. Sitting next to her, I looked forward to the moment when, finally, I would rush to drink a glass of cold water from the bucket under the sink.

The next day, after leaving the herd in the enclosed meadow, and without too much fuss, I went back to collecting, this time with Marcelle. Two days later, two new machines[49] were parked in front of the Hézard’s farm. A man turned up and inspected them, a belt here, a nut there.

“Set an extra plate for supper. Marcel will be eating with us,” said Mother Hézard.

The discussion during the meal revolved around the order of threshing the wheat, the quantity that had been requisitioned. Obviously, we would begin with Father Hézard’s harvest. Before going back to looking after the cows all day with Marcelle, I saw the sheaves being tipped[1] into the top of the enormous machine and the grains of wheat being poured into jute bags, while the chaff[50] fell directly onto the ground.

[49] Traction engine and threshing machine.
[50] Chaff: the husk of grains.

The threshing machine stayed for a few days. Everyone came with their harvest. Marcel had supper at the Hézard's and slept in the barn.

August stretched out under the blazing sun. While tending the cows, in the quiet emptiness, I realised with astonishment that nothing was happening. No German soldiers, no news of the war, as if it did not exist. The cows also kept us like prisoners. They were our everything. I did not take part in the oat harvest or the rape harvest. Day after day, I looked after the cows. The September mornings were cold and foggy when I got up.

"Tomorrow you'll drive the cows to the pasture on the Bucey rise, towards the wood, ye' know?"

I knew.

"We'll go and collect some plums. We've got to make jam." Something was finally changing a bit.

Mother Hézard made a fire outside the house in a small rusty cooker that can't have been used often. She took out large copper bowls. Marcelle and I were in charge of stoning the Quetsches and the Reines-Claudes. We licked our sticky fingers, and it was delicious! Wasps were hovering around the basins. Some fell into it. Too late! In spite of their confused attempts, they could not get out. Mother Hézard made them hop overboard with her big wooden spoon. Then she added sugar and molasses and began to stir. She continued stirring the plums in the basin placed on the fire. It bubbled up and made a "Plop! Plop!" noise as the fruit burst. We would have plenty of jam for this winter. I had occasionally tasted last year's jam on dry biscuits after Sunday lunch.

I was growing. In every direction. My clothes, always the same and patched up, grew tight around my arms and waist. Henri let me go from with the horse time to time, hitched to a cart, to the end of the hamlet and back. I was thrilled when I could boss the horse around like those living here:

"Oi! Giddy up! Yah!"

One day, we went to visit Father Robineau. Henri put six empty bottles in the cart.

Father Robineau lived in a dirty hovel which made me shudder. I was so lucky I had not ended up here! In the cellar –technically not a real one as it was just three steps down– I saw Father Robineau busy in front of a smoking machine.

"Aye up; Henri."

“Aye up Louis, here are the bottles. ’Ow do?”

“Jolly good, jolly good. The little bugger with ye won’t spill the beans, aye?”

“Don’t worry, she’s clueless.”

That was how I discovered the still. Henri picked up his “hooch” order as he called it. Father Robineau owned the only still that provided for a few hamlets, and I knew well, having heard it from Father Hézard that people came from far and wide to have him make plum brandy, as well as potato or grain brandy.

I did not understand how it worked. All I could see were pipes that wound upwards like corkscrews, steam escaping through a small outlet, and at the bottom through a tiny tap, the liquid dripping down.

“D’ye have some tobacco too?” Louis took a quick peek at me.

“A little. We make do, aye?”

# Autumn-Winter 1943

October rolled round and school started again. I was looking forward to it. I spent some time with Marcelle getting our things ready. We were almost waltzing with joy on our way. The two kilometers seemed so easy after the exhaustion of these long “holidays”.

I met up with all the pupils. Paul had grown up. His voice had changed. I laughed when I heard him and he blushed. Marcelle took her place next to Bertille and they chatted whenever they could. The teacher did not want me to teach the younger ones anymore.

“Next year is all about the certificate, I am going to make you work hard for it.”

I almost cried with disappointment! I never talked about school to Mother Hézard, who did not ask me anything about it either. The farm and the school were two separate worlds. My life here was the same as all the other kids from Etrelles. Doing a bit of the farm work in the morning, in the evening and on Thursday; every day, homework before supper. I did mine at Mother Bourgeois’.

It was quieter, and the best part was the clock with its pretty chime that told the time without you having to think about it.

My eyes still glued shut by sleep, I dozed. Mother Hézard moaned, as she always did when she had to get off her high bed:

“Good Lord! I feel as old as the hills!”

We could hear the gentle ruminations of the cows and the hooves trampling on the straw coming from the stable. I thought about my dear Whitey. That month had been such a happy period. But Whitey had been frolicking with the rest of the herd for quite a while now and had forgotten her young and devoted nurse.

I waited for as long as I could before opening my eyes. It was so early. It was probably still dark outside.

Suddenly, a sizzling sound in the kitchen startled me. Oh! Bugger. The milk must have spilled out again. At the same time, I heard Mother Hézard shout:

“Oi, Régine! Come o’er here will ye? Can’t ye hear yer milk burnin’?”

I jumped out of bed, rubbed my eyes to remove the eye goop that formed while I slept, quickly straightened my hair which I tied back with my hair clip, put on the smock I had thrown on the bed the day before, some thick socks, and, with my feet in my clogs, I finally got to the kitchen and took hold of the pan of milk that I put on the table. In my haste, I bumped into the flypaper hanging from a beam, and a fly fell into the milk. Darn it! The sieve would take care of it.

The sweet smell of coffee that had been heating up for an hour put me back on track. I poured just a little into the milk to colour it. I was slightly disgusted by the state of the slices of bread. It was only Thursday, and they were already mouldy!

Nonetheless, as I was hungry, I ate some of it. I was upset because today we were picking the grapes on the hills of Vaux. Father Hézard said it the day before, reminding me that I would also "join the festivities" and that I should not forget my hat.

People from the hamlet were arriving. They were so noisy. The Bougons, father, mother and son Claude as they called him; Alphonse and Léontine Chavard; my godmother Lucienne Colin, her father bent in two by his "arthwitis", which, for the harvest, he said laughing, was quite useful because in any case, one was forced to walk bent over.

The Hézard family's cart started first. The dogs were barking, jumping around the horses and carts before returning to the farms.

It felt like a celebration. The exhaustion from the harvest was long gone! I was not even saddened by Marcelle's absence. She was staying with Mother Bourgeois. "It's far, and it's hard," said Father Hézard. Talk about brutal honesty.

The cart bumped along. No one spoke. I held on to the basket in which Mother Hézard had put the food. But that was not for right now. A one-hour drive in the chilly sunrise that gradually dispelled the golden mist.

"Ho! Ho Blacky" said Father Hézard, pulling on the reins.

The horse came to a halt, scraping its hooves. The whole cavalcade did the same and everyone jumped to the ground. Father Colin grumbled:

"Ah, what's left of us, we're getting older and older, aren't we, old girl?" he said, stroking the rump of the mare harnessed to his cart.

Father Hézard glanced at his pocket watch.

"It's high time," he said.

And everything fell into place. The animals were fed, and a few bottles of wine were opened.

“Come on, just a sip before we start, that’ll give us Dutch courage.”

Everyone took a few sips from the neck, before wiping their mouths on their sleeve. Obviously, I was not allowed to. Then five men slung huge buckets on their backs and set off between the rows of vines. Two pickers followed them.

Mother Hézard handed me a bucket and a pair of scissors. Like everyone else, I had to cut the bunches of grapes, put them in the bucket and once it was filled, empty it into Claude’s who was in front. He only cut the bunches at the top and threw them over his shoulder, with a precise gesture, right into the bucket.

I rushed my work. I wanted to be the first to fill mine.

“Oi lass!” said Alphonsine, with whom I was partnering, “don’t forget the lower bunches.”

My pace slowed down. The basket got heavier Once filled, I shouted:

“Claude, Claude, here’s one!”

Claude waited for me, bent his knees, and with satisfaction, I poured the full basket of purple, sticky bunches into the bucket.

When we began harvesting, I tasted a few grapes, but I quickly spat them out. This thick-skinned, pungent-tasting grape was good only for wine.

We finally got to the end of the row. There, on the unhitched cart, was a huge ringed wooden barrel. The men poured the full buckets into it, and everyone went back to work.

The sun was now high and hot. The pickers were silent and paused from time to time to mop their brows under their big hats. All you could hear was the buzzing of bees and flies, the distant neighing of horses, the clacking of scissors. My pace had definitely slowed down.

“Not so quick now, aye?” joked Alphonsine.

The earth stuck to my clogs and made every step heavier. My stained, sticky fingers clung to the scissors and became an absolute nuisance. Sluggishness set in. Even though my back was bent and my legs were stiff, I kept on going like an automaton.

“Eeh by gum,” suddenly shouted Claude.

And he bent down, untied the straps of his bucket and put it on the ground. At once, everyone stood up and started talking.

"It's maftin'[51] in 'ere!" said Father Colin

"Aye, it's maftin'," sighed Mother Hézard in turn, arching her back with her hands on her hips and her legs spread wide.

We gathered around a cart. The women unpacked the baskets that had been protected from the sun by a tarpaulin, and took out bread, cheese, squares of bacon, boiled eggs, water and wine.

I was so hungry I could eat a horse! With dirty hands –who cared anyway– I grabbed a slice of bread with a piece of bacon, and with trembling legs, I slumped against the bank. I bit into the bacon. The greasy, fragrant, and melting mouthful mixed with the bread (whose mould I had forgotten!) was succulent. I was ravenous! I could hardly catch my breath and kept on greedily biting into the bacon, again and again.

"Look at that beast," teased Alphonsine, "you could lose a finger with her!"

"Well, that sure is different from before," said Mother Hézard giving me a hard-boiled egg to finish the meal.

Everyone laughed and talked. Claude giggled with Lucienne.

"Oi ye lovebirds!" shouted Father Chavard, "At least wait until yer married."

"Leave em' be," said Mother Hézard, "you're only young once."

I knew that Claude was going to marry Lucienne. They were "engaged". The wedding would take place this autumn at the end of the ploughing, before the pig was killed.

After the break, the division of labour changed.

"We have to stomp the grapes," said Father Hézard.

Promptly, Henri and Claude rolled up their trousers, took off their clogs and socks, climbed into the cart and in front of everyone gathered around, jumped into the barrel. I could not believe my eyes. With their dirty feet, they were going to stomp the grapes! I could not see them, but I could imagine their feet slipping over the grapes, crushing them, the burst grapes slithering between their toes.

"It's coming along nicely, as fine as wine," said Claude proudly.

His legs were splashed to the knees.

[51] Hot weather.

“Tonight, we’ll have plenty of plonk[52],” added Henri.

Sadly, I reflected: I probably won’t get to taste it, but they might give me some.

Henri and Claude kept on stomping the grapes. Another cart was brought with an empty barrel and the teams went back together.

“We’re usually a bit slower in the afternoon,” said Alphonsine.

I figured that out quickly enough. I was overtaken by exhaustion, the hours were taking their toll on me; I was tired, I was hot and every cut with the scissors was an ordeal. My hands would be blistered again, that was certain! Because of the task that seemed to never end, I was not far from losing it. Tears were nearly building up … when, relieved, I saw the pickers stop one after the other at the end of their row. They all stood up with loud groans.

“Animals don’t wait,” said mother Hézard, hurrying, thinking of the cows to be milked. “And you have to care of your chickens anyway.”

She began nagging me.

The buckets were emptied, and the horses harnessed. Henri and Claude had jumped down from the cart and were putting their clogs back on, without the socks. Everyone had taken their place and we set off down the bumpy road to the village.

Curled up on my empty basket, I was aching all over. The blisters on my right thumb seemed to be getting bigger by the minute. What had happened to this morning’s cheerfulness?

I rushed the chicken’s feeding. I barely had time to say “chicky, chicky, chicky” to them. I usually liked doing it, but not today. That night, I crashed on to the bed and went out like a light. I would not be going back to harvesting grapes until next Thursday. In the meantime, there was school.

Time seemed to go faster. The days were getting shorter. One Saturday, before dinner, instead of lighting the paraffin lamp, Henri was carefully fiddling around with another lamp. A wheezing sound was heard, then a hissing, and suddenly a strong white flame rose.

“At least that lights the room nicely,” said Henri.

“Lights it well indeed, but it stinks!” snapped Mother Hézard.

[52] Cheap and bad-quality wine.

Indeed, the pungent smell of this lamp tickled your nose. You could taste it on your tongue. It was a weird lamp.

“It’s a carbide lamp,” explained Henri.

I did not like it at all and as Mother Hézard did not get used to it either, “It wheezes in my ears,” she said, we soon abandoned that novelty and went back to the good ol’ lamp.

“Besides,” announced Father Hézard one evening, “won’t be long now. They’ve installed the system in Gy. We’ll have electricity before spring. All we’ll have to do is flick a switch, like in Paris, aye Régine?”

Eventually, the preparations for Lucienne and Claude’s wedding began.

“You’re very lucky to be here. You’ll take part in the wedding party,” said my godmother.

As they were relatives, Mother, Father and Henri Hézard would also be there. For the occasion, the Colins’ shed in which the carts were stored had been cleared out and boards had been set up on trestles with white sheets spread out on top.

I did not attend the religious ceremony, to which, according to Mother Hézard, hardly anyone went: “Ain’t a season to celebrate!”

Yet, we did celebrate. The Sunday meal brought together about thirty guests. I did not know them all. I was seated next to Henri and a tall girl of perhaps sixteen, a relative of Claude.

A sheep was killed. The leg of lamb was delicious, the beans melted in the mouth, and for dessert I was allowed to have some more mirabelle-plum tart.

I was a little disappointed to see Lucienne wearing her Sunday clothes and not a traditional long and white wedding dress. She was wearing a light grey dress and a white blouse.

Everyone’s cheeks were flushed, either from emotion or from the wine. The men drank and took turns outside to “take a leak”, as they said, and came back re-buttoning their fly, rubbing their belly. Father Hézard said:

“Let’s do it all over again,” and, tapping Mother Hézard on the shoulder, “right, old girl? Come on, we ‘ve had our time. Make way for the younger ones now.” And he raised his glass in honour of Lucienne and Claude.

It was getting cold. Mother Hézard announced that we would have a harsh winter. The onions had grown a lot of skins: it was a forewarning. We had to knock the nuts down.

Mother Hézard took a very long pole and told us to come with her to the walnut tree. She tapped the branches and Marcelle and I picked up the fallen nuts which we took back to the farm in a wheelbarrow. In the evening, before supper, we peeled them and then the clear skin appeared. Our fingers became sticky. This shell was like glue, and my hands were black for several days. The nuts were dried and then stored in a large potato bag.

“All of this for Winter, just like with the jam,” said Mother Hézard.

We certainly were making a lot of things for the winter!

And she was right. Winter was here. The first snow fell in the middle of December. It was dark when we came back from school and the hamlet huddled into a slow existence, without the work in the fields.

One Thursday, Mother Hézard set up a spinning wheel in the small room where she kept her “silverware”. She brought the bag in which the carded wool had been stored during the summer. This spinning wheel had a treadle, like the sewing machine in the workshop, and a driving wheel made from wood. Mother Hézard sat in front and pressed the treadle, activating the wheel.

“Come on, it’s not that hard,” she said, placing a chair in the right spot.

She took the fluffy wool, put a little on the spindle that protruded from the wheel, and started treadling. The wheel made the spindle rotate very fast. Mother Hézard pulled on the wool, stretched it: the thread formed slowly by twisting again and again on itself.

“This winter, we can knit socks.”

That darn winter again! Sometimes Mother Hézard treadled so hard that the wool thread broke.

“Ah flippin’ eck!” she said.

She took a bit of wool, connected it to the thread already formed, and things were back on track.

“Yer turn now,” she said to me. “Yer fingers are thinner than mine.”

I applied myself and did such a good job that all I could think about then was my spinning wheel. I had become such an expert that Germaine, Marcelle's godmother, wanted to learn too. Look at that! Régine, the "fancy Parisian", now giving lessons to a true Montbleusaise. There I was, treadling and treadling! Mother Hézard was thrilled.

"Lord Almighty if I've ever seen such a spinner! Learning fast at that age[53]."

The winter solstice was an event in the life of La Montbleuse. It took place at Mother Hézard's.

"Lass, you'll have to spin, Germaine will be here."

Everyone arrived after supper: Mother Bourgeois and Marcelle, the Bougons, the Chavards, Lucienne and her new husband, Father Colin and his cane. We settled down in the small room adjoining the bedroom, lit by two paraffin lamps. Groups settled down. The men around the square table started playing cards.

After a while, Father Hézard brought a bottle, glasses, and the five men drank while telling the events of the year, talking especially about the good or bad harvests, the cows that had calved, giving news of the relatives.

I also heard a story about a wild boar that had hidden in the nearby forest and that needed to be hunted down one of these days.

The rifles would be of some use. Strangely enough, war was never mentioned. As if it did not exist. After all, without any wireless. or newspaper, how could one know? I was frightened only once:

Claude had said:

"Don't ye know that the Krauts have taken a beating in Besançon? People say the city's power transformer has blown up!"

I didn't understand what that meant, and as no one really took interest in what Claude said, I calmed down. For a brief moment, war had invaded my life once again. I thought about my mother, where was she? About my father, whose face I could hardly remember. When would I see them again?

The women, all with knitting in their hands, sat in a circle, around the spinning wheel. I showed off by spinning incredibly fast sitting straight up.

"Look at her thread go," they raved.

[53] See Appendix 25.

“I used to be that fast when I was young,” said Mother Bourgeois. “If only my fingers weren’t so broken!”

Germaine tried the spinning wheel. Her clumsiness was hilarious.

“Save your fingers for something else,” heckled Léontine. Germaine blushed.

“Eeh by gum I can’t believe it, but I’ll have to make it work somehow,” and Germaine persisted.

Mother Hézard placed the bag of nuts beside her. She opened them with the tip of a knife, broke each nut in half and distributed the kernels around. I liked them, but only a bit. The nuts irritated my tongue and my whole mouth. Besides, I was too busy with the spinning wheel. Filled with pride, I wanted to show that I was the best spinner. Anyway, no one could compete with me. All the other women were knitting.

The Christmas holidays started in a big snowstorm. The day before, Marcelle and I came back soaked, shivering, still choking from all the swirling snow that obscured the road and the fields. Luckily, we knew our way!

When he opened the door that morning, Father Hézard was baffled: the snow had reached the lintel.

“Eeh by gum, look at that! If the snowplough does not come… Well, we’ll start shovelling our way out.”

To give himself some courage, he peed in the snow.

“At least that part won’t need to melt,” he said.

Life shrank to the size of the house. The warmth of the stable was greatly appreciated.

The snowplough piled up the snow on the roadside in huge drifts.

# January-May 1944

1944: a new year began. There was no New Year's Eve party at the Hézards' to celebrate. The evening gathering went on as usual. And then we went to bed early, well before midnight. The hugs were saved for the next day. Then, everyone embraced. We went to the Colins' for coffee. The discussion was lively. It revolved around preparing the pig that was to be killed soon.

"We have fattened it up nicely," said Father Hézard.

The pig killer lived in a nearby village and would come especially for the occasion. Mother Hézard had already prepared basins of all sizes. A large amount of coarse salt and the two large vats in which she would preserve the pieces of the soon-to-be-killed pig for the rest of the year.

On Thursday at ten o' clock, Antonin came in from Bucey in his cart with his knives. Mother Hézard had put some vinegar in the basins. Large pots of water were already heating on the cooker. In front of the table, Antonin finished his glass of brandy. He inhaled loudly and said:

"Time to get to work, I guess. Let's do this."

The three of them, Antonin, Henri and Father Hézard could hardly haul-out the beast. A fat pig that I knew well: pink, grey and dirty. The whole hamlet must have heard its squeals. It was as if he guessed what was to become of him. Despite the extreme cold, Father Hézard had settled on a chair and was holding the animal firmly, helped by Henri and Mother Hézard. At one point, Antonin asked:

"Ready?"

"Ready."

And before I could even see the blade glinting, Antonin thrust his huge, sharp knife into the pig's neck on the left side. I shuddered, closed my eyes, covered my ears. The pig squealed and oinked. Then, he started grunting less and less loudly, squeaking weakly. Mother Hézard placed her basin of vinegar under the stream of blood, which was flowing thickly, pouring hot steam into the air.

"Come here ye."

She handed me a stick and we started to mix and stir the blood in the basin.

"The blood mustn't clot," said Mother Hézard.

I felt nauseous. The metallic smell of blood, mixed with that of vinegar, disgusted me. I was still shivering from the horrible squeals. Fortunately, Lucienne arrived with Claude.

“Eeh by gum, it’s ’bout time!” grumbled Mother Hézard.

Things happened fast. It was easy to see that this was everyday work. Scalding the pig and scraping off the hair with a sharp knife, hanging it up by its legs against the wall of the stable, disembowelling it, removing all the guts that fell into the buckets as they unrolled.

“Go and tend your chickens instead of standing like a peg. Look at ’er, her face is white as a sheet!”

For once, the smell of the hen house seemed tolerable. I was shocked by the pig’s death. Of course, we did kill some animals. Sometimes a chicken, sometimes a goose. I remember how Mother Hézard had killed the goose. Pretending not to care, she let it come near to get some grain, then, in the blink of an eye, she grabbed it by the neck, spun it around, and promptly hit it in the back of the head with a stone, knocking it out immediately and permanently.

But this! Those never-ending pig squeals…

Outside in the cold, Antonin was cutting and butchering. Henri and Father Hézard put the pieces in the vats: a layer of meat, a layer of coarse salt, a layer of meat, a layer of coarse salt, and so on until reaching the edge. Henri had told me that salt preserved the meat. Mother Hézard and Lucienne emptied the guts, taking them by one end and flattening them until there was nothing left inside.

I went back to them.

“Ah! Feeling better already?” You’ll forget how upset you are when you eat the pudding. But first, call Marcelle and go wash those guts.”

Like everyone else, Marcelle had heard the pig’s squeals. She would not have come out for anything in the world and only agreed to follow me if I guaranteed that everything was over. Lucienne and Mother Hézard were turning the guts inside out over a stick. Their fingers were dirty and sticky. Again, I shuddered with disgust upon seeing all that “crap”!

“Go to the wash house[54]. You have to soak all this in water and scrub it until it’s clean,” said Mother Hézard, handing me a brush.

I grabbed the wheelbarrow filled with guts, and left with Marcelle who carried an empty bucket, trampling the snow and mud with her clogs. The wash house’s running water was cold as ice.

I didn’t know how to do it. Mother Hézard never gave enough instructions. We had to figure it out ourselves.

So, I grabbed the guts by one end and began scrubbing with the brush as if they were laundry. Marcelle picked up the cleaned parts and dropped them in the bucket.

“I cannot take it anymore,”

I blew on my blue fingers, numb with cold.

“I cannot do it anymore.”

Marcelle started scrubbing and quickly stopped. I tried again. The cold was unbearable, but the grease was just as worse, making the brush slippery, freezing on my hands and worsening the cleaning process in every possible way. We both ended up crying, our feet and hands freezing with cold.

The feast with the pig announced by Mother Hézard took place on Sunday. The Hézard family and all the regulars. What a meal! The hot and crispy puddings, the pâtés, the fresh sausages, the roasts. The meal lasted all afternoon. One after the other, the guests got up to stretch their legs and came back to eat. The bitter cold did not seem to bother anyone. The men went out in their shirtsleeves and came back for a drink to warm themselves up: eeh by gum!

Nobody slept at the Hézard’s the following night. Pale as a ghost, Henri held his stomach and whimpered.

“Will ye chuck yer guts up[55]!” begged Father Hézard.

“I can’t, it doesn’t work,” heaved Henri.

The next day, Henri’s moans frightened Mother Hézard who, without waiting, hitched up the cart and set off into the snow carrying Henri in it, trembling with fever, and wrapped in blankets.

I did my homework with Marcelle. Always well informed, Mother Bourgeois told us:

[54] See Appendix 26.
[55] Throw up.

“Poor Henri. Talk ‘bout a situation. Someone like that who eats like a horse. It doesn’t come out anymore: whether by the top or the bottom!”

And she nodded.

Henri was back a week later; he had had some kind of intestinal obstruction. He had to eat like a bird and work cautiously.

The days were getting longer, spring was coming, and the air was filled with a gentle breeze. I was now part of the Hézard family. I no longer spoke Yiddish with Marcelle. The thought of mother and father, so far away, was no longer haunting. It was as if life had paused here.

“Don’t ye worry Régine, if your mother doesn’t come to pick ye up,” Mother Hézard told me, laughing, “we’ll marry ye to Henri.”

This prospect woke me up from my torpor. No way I would allow that! I would not stay if that was going to happen. A shiver went down my spine.

Catechism started again. The parish priest set the date for the Holy Communion in May.

But in May, a more important event took place. Pylons were erected across the fields. Men planted poles along the road to Etrelles, then to La Montbleuse. Beyond that, there was nothing anyway!

Electric wires were strung between the poles, then from the poles to the houses. Father Hézard had already bought bulbs. Finally, as he had announced the previous autumn, “All we have to do is flick the switch”.

The naked bulbs were hanging in all the rooms. We did not turn on the lights much, the days were long, and we went to bed early. But during the first evening, we extended the meal to be under the lamp, until the moment when mother Hézard said:

“Let’s not forget to turn ‘em off, it ain’t cheap.”

Electricity reminded me of the life I knew before, such a long time ago, a life in which there was electricity, running water, a life surrounded by Mum, Dad, Marcelle, Aunts, Uncles… I remembered the hanging lamp under which I was doing my homework with Marcelle, and Dad repeating to his brothers: “It’s a modern place here, we have electricity in every room…”

Would all of that resume one day?

I was very disappointed by the Holy Communion. Marcelle came with me. She was not old enough yet, but the priest wanted her to.

“That is the way it’s going to be, since you are good Christians now[56].”

We wore the same clothes as usual, minus the schoolgirl’s smock, and what clothes! Those from Paris, dragged on day after day, mended, shabby. The only details for the ceremony were the rosary and a small veil given to me by Germaine fastened on my head.

There were only four of us: Marcelle, the two godmothers and me. Lucienne had once again put on her wedding clothes, but she said it was to “honour her goddaughter”, because she had grown fat and could barely wear it anymore.

The communion was given, and prayers were said as a formality. There was no shortage of work, and everyone was needed on the farm.

[56] See Appendix 27, 28.

# June-September 1944

In June, the news was in, announced with great excitement by the mayor who bought a wireless.

“The Allies have landed, the Allies have landed! Those bloody Krauts! They are up for a serious beating!

I was left speechless, overwhelmed. I ran towards Marcelle. It was true then, it was going to end soon, it was going to end and Mum would come.

It was the only thing in my mind. Would she be able to find us? If the war was over, maybe I could write to her and give her the address? I began plotting and making all kinds of plans.

For a long time after hearing this news, nothing new was heard. Hope faded away. I did not dare ask where these Allies were and if the Krauts were gone already. I had not seen a single one here anyway. However, once again, rumors were circulating, mostly transmitted by the mayor. The Americans were advancing towards Paris, and in August, we learned that Paris had just been liberated.

May it be true… I started losing it again. Ah! Leaving, joining Mother, going away with Marcelle, finally be in Paris!

The behaviour of Mother and Father Hézard slowly went back to square one. I went back to being the little Parisian who, when war was over, would leave them. All I could think about was how Mum would find us. I hardly remembered her face. I was afraid I would not recognise her. I was scared. Marcelle cried for no reason.

Then, one morning of September, we heard deep and thunderous blows.

“The cannon!” shouted Claude as he ran down the path, "Quick, let’s save ourselves, the Krauts are coming.”

In an indescribable rush, all the inhabitants of the hamlet left their cows, horses and sheep, and rushed into the forest. We heard another cannon shot, then on the road appeared, I didn’t know how, a soldier, a German soldier who walked bent over holding his stomach before disappearing without anyone trying to find out where he went. The mayor arrived that night and said:

“Eeh by gum, that was close. It’s over now, the Krauts are retreating We won’t see them around here anymore.”

So all the inhabitants of the hamlet, followed by cows, horses and sheep, returned to their homes.

And life went back to normal, calm, as if nothing had happened. I silently went back to work on the farm. Where was the hope of these past days after hearing about Paris's liberation?

I told Marcelle:

"You know, we will have to write to Mum."

But to write, we were going to need some paper and an envelope. I dared not ask for it.

A few days later, in the torpor of the afternoon, I finished the dishes, and then I saw through the small window the mayor's cart stopping in front of the farm. He jumped down and helped a lady getting off it.

I went out with Mother Hézard to the doorstep, and there I stood still, speechless, with a thumping heart and trembling legs. A lady, that lady, Mum… I stared, not daring to recognise her. Mum, so strange in this setting; dressed like a city woman, thin shoes, blonde hair, almost white, a bag slung over her shoulder made of the same material as the jacket. I saw it all in the blink of an eye. This lady was my mother. Paralysed, I could not move. No one spoke. Eventually, the mayor said:

"Come on you silly lass, d'ye not recognise your own mother?"

"Mum, Mum."

I burst into tears.

"Where is Marcelle? Where is your sister?" asked Mum before even hugging me.

The mayor shouted:

"Come on Marcelle, come o'er here."

Marcelle did not recognise Mum, blushed and finally understood. Then Mum rushed in, took us in her arms, red-faced, crying, laughing, speaking incoherently.

"You look healthy. Thank you, Madam, thank you Sir, thank you Madam…"

Mother Hézard remained silent. The mayor finally shepherded everyone into the farmhouse and explained:

“She just got in from Vesoul. She got jammy[57]! There ain’t any buses. She met men patrolling, resistance fighters from the Besançon area who brought her. They’re coming back to pick her up at Etrelles. Her train leaves tonight. The roads are too busy at the moment. So, I’ll take er with the girls. The F.F.I[58] will wait for them in a car in Etrelles.”

Unable to say a word, paralysed by the suddenness of the event, Marcelle and I were clinging to Mum’s arm. Mother Hézard suddenly proposed:

“You ain’t gonna leave before having a drink with us, aye?” Once again, the mayor cut in and said:

“Leave it be Augustine. Go and pack their things. Their mother brought a suitcase.”

“We will come back Madam,” said Mum hurriedly. “Thank you again for everything, thank you a thousand times. I will bless you all my life for what you have done. I will write to you as soon as we are back in Paris. Won’t we, Régine? We will write to tell her everything.”

Mother Bourgeois finally arrived.

“But what, Marcelle is leaving? Just like that? But it can’t be true!”

Mum wanted to leave. We had to take the train that very evening. It was hard to get around and to get tickets. She was already incredibly lucky to have made it here and to have been able to travel through all the chaos.

This scene felt like a dream. I simply erased all the months spent here… Finally, Mum regained her composure and pulled three scarves from the suitcase. She gave one to Mother Hézard, one to Mother Bourgeois and one to the mayor: “For your wife, and again, I cannot thank you enough for everything…”

We would not wait for Father Hézard and Henri’s return and would not see them[59]. We embraced Mother Hézard and Mother Bourgeois, both of whom were still stunned. We promised them we would write, we climbed into the mayor’s cart and the farm disappeared around the corner.

[57] Lucky.

[58] F.F.I.: French Forces of the Interior. In 1944, they grouped together all the military formations of the Resistance engaged in fighting for the Liberation.

[59] See Appendix 29.

# March-August 1945

Our Parisian life had been back on tracks for several months now. I went back to school and I could not help but smile every time I walked past St Paul's church. I was amazed to be able to walk around freely, to go everywhere, to take the metro. How beautiful they were, these days of spring 1945! I repeated to Marcelle, who was as happy as I was:

"Can you believe it; we can bump into policemen without being afraid! There is nothing to be afraid of anymore!"

As soon as we arrived in Paris, I had asked Mum if she had any news from Dad.

"We know nothing. The Americans are in Germany. People say the prisoners of war will soon be released."

It made me happy. Everything would be like before! A real family with uncles, aunts, and friends. This time, finally, I was preparing the elementary school certificate.

The first few weeks of living in Paris were rough. Mum reclaimed the keys of the apartment. The seals should, in theory, have prevented people from entering. But somehow the apartment had been completely emptied. The stove was the only thing left in the kitchen; at least we could cook.

"It does not matter," said Mum. "Let's go to the city hall."

A colleague from the garment factory where Mum worked had lent us a hand cart. With Malka, who had also returned, the four of us went to city hall. There, we were given a mattress for each of us, a table and four white wooden folding chairs, which we took home, laughing as we pulled the hand cart like horses.

"It's like being at La Montbleuse," said Mum, laughing. La Montbleuse! It already seemed so far away!

The day after our return, Mum also wanted to wash us in the kitchen, as usual. But the sight of our stomachs made her panic.

"Malka, come and see this!" she shouted.

Malka rushed in.

"What's that on your stomach?"

"Nothing, Mum."

"It's just dirt."

“But that’s not possible!” moaned Mum, slumping into a chair. “Haven’t you EVER washed yourselves?

We had to face reality… and the showers. Several scrubbing sessions were needed to remove the layer of dirt.

Then life went back to normal. We still used the ration stamps. We bought clothes. Mum and Malka were working. Every day we waited for the return of the prisoners of war, from whom we had no news. There was little talk about the people who were taken away by the police, the Kaminski neighbours, the neighbour Sonia, the “deportees”, as they were now called.

Malka had brought Josette back from the countryside, where she stayed during the war. I did not recognise her, she had grown so much. The weather in Paris was nice. We were happy with everything. Even the scabies and the treatment at the Saint-Louis hospital to cure them seemed a trivial incident.

August 1945. It was scorching hot. Paris, liberated a year ago, was celebrating its first anniversary. The bells were ringing. The war was really over. The Germans, the Nazis were defeated. Hitler was finally dead. Joy was bubbling around every corner. Who could think of the hardships, the lack of food, the fear, the mistreatment? We prayed for the safe return of the absent, the prisoners of war, the deportees…

The day passed feverishly. Mum had decided that this evening we would go to the Place de la Concorde, like all her colleagues from the workshop. We would celebrate the Allies’ victory there. Malka did not want to come.

“There will be too many people. Josette is still not used to it yet. I would rather stay at home with her.”

Supper was replaced by Nescafé at five o’clock, and slices of cake made by Mum this morning. We could not get enough of the very expensive Nescafé. Those incredible Americans! All you had to do was pour hot water over the coffee. Mum and Malka could not stop raving about it and the nylon stockings we would soon be able to afford.

“Nylon stockings do not wear out,” said Mum. This winter, we will have nylon stockings and it is said that they are supposedly warm!”

From six o’clock in the evening, we could no longer stand still. To ease our impatience, we went downstairs to take the metro. As the train travelled towards the Concorde, people had flocked to the stations, squeezing into the cramped and heaving

cars. At the Opera station, during a bigger rush, the windows shattered. Frightened, Mum grabbed us firmly by the hand and decided we would finish on foot.

“It’s not that far,” she said. “We will walk in the fresh air.”

Outside, on the boulevards, people moved forward as if in a parade. Everyone was heading for the Place de la Concorde. Groups of young people were singing. Some still wore their F.F.I. armbands. There were American soldiers. No cars and no bicycles could get through.

The area around the Place de la Concorde was already teeming with people. In the sky, flood lights projected a big luminous V. The V for Victory. We heard the beginning of *La Marseillaise* in some places, but it mainly was an indescribable hubbub. We were jostled around in every direction as if carried away by an ocean of people that never stopped ebbing and flowing. After almost losing her bag, Mum began worrying.

We must not let go of each other, otherwise we would not be able to find each other again, she said.

Mum really wanted to join in the general jubilation. But she started panicking and feeling oppressed in this crowd. Despite the overwhelming excitement, the singing, the joyful shouting and the laughs, a sense of anxiety was slowly creeping in.

We decided to go back towards the boulevards, if we could. It was not easy to swim against the tide without elbowing a way through. We were almost there when a scramble knocked us off balance. Mum clutched at a man who burst out laughing.

“Come on beautiful, go ahead, take my arm, I’m strong.”

Everybody used the familiar form now. But Mum blushed, stood up, grabbed us, clutching her skirt, and … stunned, noticed that she had no shoes!

“I have lost my shoes, my shoes where are they?” she screamed.

But who would take any notice of her? People passed by without paying attention to anything. Mum then said:

“We will get trampled. Quick, let’s get out of here.”

Finally, we were able to lean against a wall, opposite the Madeleine church. Mum was barefoot. What a story! She could not believe it. Her feet were dirty. Thankfully, they were not squished. Marcelle and I looked at Mum’s feet and we could not help but laugh.

We wanted to walk barefoot too!

Immediately, we took off our shoes and, arm in arm, waddling, we went along the boulevard to go back home, first along the walls in order to avoid the crowd which had taken possession of the road, then along the whole width of the pavement as we moved away from the Concorde.

We walked and waltzed joyfully, bare feet being an additional freedom.

Finally, we passed under the archway and climbed, still barefoot, the three floors. Malka and Josette were waiting. They had spent the evening leaning out of the window to see and hear what was happening in the city.

“But, Marie, what happened to your feet! Where are your shoes?”

“Dancing in the street,” said Mum. “I have lost them.”

And when she saw her black feet, mine, Marcelle’s, she burst out laughing. Malka said:

“You know, Marie, we will survive this too,” and she began to laugh.

Josette looked at her mother and could not help but join her laughter without really understanding why. I got closer to Marcelle, and then the five of us embraced, kissed, with tears in our eyes, we laughed, laughed, laughed…

# Epilogue

At the end of August 1945, Maurice, Régine's father, returned from Stalag VII A, unrecognizable. He had lost forty kilos!

When the Germans saw the Allied advance and knew they were going to lose the war, they subjected the prisoners to a severe regime, depriving them of food and forcing them to work hard.

Shortly after, Uncle Gaston also came back. Life in the workshop resumed. Sewing machines were borrowed, and Régine heard the familiar humming again.

There was no news of Uncle Michel, who returned to France only two years later. He had married in Poland, lost his wife and son in a bombing raid, and fled to Russia, to a remote province in Asia, Birobidjan, a region allocated to the Jews. Uncle Michel had developed strange habits resulting, as he said, from the privations and sufferings he had endured: he drank alcohol from the bottle, and when there was none, he drank cologne. Perhaps only to impress those around him!

Sonia did not return, nor did Uncle Marek, nor Cousin Marcel, nor the Kaminski neighbours, whose little daughter Ruth Régine had loved so much. As time passed, we learned in horror what had happened to them: the camps, the gas chambers, the crematoria.

Aunt Malka, Uncle Gaston and their daughter Josette now lived in Canada.

Marcelle and Régine had grown up, they were now grandmothers! They had told their children this story. The children greatly admired their grandfather Maurice for having enlisted[60] from the first day of the war to defend France, thus saving, without knowing it, his wife and daughters; and their grandmother Marie for having had the courage to face down fear and danger to protect Marcelle and Régine.

[60] See Appendix 30.

# ANNEXE

*The garden square of Place des Vosges in the fourth arrondissement of Paris.*

**Appendix 1**

Marcelle and Régine Soszewicz in 1940.

**Appendix 2**

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

# ORDRE
## DE
# MOBILISATION GÉNÉRALE

Par décret du Président de la République, la mobilisation des armées de terre, de mer et de l'air est ordonnée, ainsi que la réquisition des animaux, voitures, moyens d'attelage, aéronefs, véhicules automobiles, navires, embarcations, engins de manutention et de tous les moyens nécessaires pour suppléer à l'insuffisance des moyens ordinaires d'approvisionnement de ces armées.

LE PREMIER JOUR DE LA MOBILISATION GÉNÉRALE EST LE *Samedi deux septembre 1939 à zéro heure*

Tout Français soumis aux obligations militaires doit, sous peine d'être puni avec toute la rigueur des lois, obéir aux prescriptions de son FASCICULE DE MOBILISATION.

Sont visés par le présent ordre TOUS LES HOMMES non présents sous les Drapeaux et appartenant aux ARMÉES DE TERRE, DE MER, ET DE L'AIR, y compris les INSCRITS MARITIMES, les hommes appartenant aux TROUPES COLONIALES et les hommes du SERVICE AUXILIAIRE.

Les Autorités civiles et militaires sont responsables de l'exécution du présent décret.

*Le Ministre de la Guerre* *Le Ministre de la Marine* *Le Ministre de l'Air*

Appendix 3

*Maurice Soszewicz, temporary volunteer.*

**Appendix 4**

*Barracks in a stalag.*

**Appendix 5**

Kriegsgefangenenpost
Correspondance des prisonnier de guerre

Antwort-Postkarte
Carte postale de réponse

An den Kriegsgefangenen
Au prisonnier

Gebührenfrei! Franc de port!

Absender:
Expéditeur:

Vor- und Zuname:
Nom et prénom

Ort:
Lieu

Straße:
Rue

Kreis:
Département

Gefangenennummer:
No. du prisonnier

Lager-Bezeichnung
Nom du camp

Deutschland (Allemagne)

*Pre-filled correspondence card for prisoners.*

**Appendix 6**


*Ration coupon. "Meat and meat products."*

**Appendix 7**

Swastika on Paris, 14th of June 1940

(Anonymous photo)

**Appendix 8**

DOCUMENT CONFIDENTIEL

11

Projet

LOI PORTANT STATUT DES JUIFS

ARTICLE Ier.- Est regardé comme juif, pour l'application de la présente loi, toute personne issue de trois grands-parents de race juive ou de deux grands-parents de la même race, si son conjoint lui-même est juif.

ARTICLE 2.- L'accès et l'exercice des fonctions publiques et mandats énumérés ci-après sont interdits aux juifs :

Chef de l'Etat, Membres du Gouvernement, Conseil d'Etat, Conseil de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'honneur, - Cour de Cassation, - Cour des Comptes. Corps des Mines, - Corps des Ponts et Chaussées, Inspection générale des Finances, Cours d'appel, - Tribunaux de Ière instance et toutes juridictions d'ordre professionnel. Justice de paix.

Toute assemblée issue de l'élection.

Les Juifs ne peuvent être agents relevant du Département des Affaires Etrangères, Secrétaires généraux des Départements ministériels; Directeurs généraux, Directeurs des Administrations centrales des Ministères; Préfets, Sous-Préfets, Secrétaires généraux de Préfectures; fonctionnaires de tous grades attachés à tous services de Police;

Résidents généraux, Gouverneurs généraux, - Gouverneurs et Secrétaires généraux des colonies; Inspection des colonies.

Recteurs, Inspecteurs généraux de l'Instruction publique, Inspecteurs d'Académie, Proviseurs ou Directeurs d'établissements d'enseignement des ordres secondaire et primaire; Tout personnel enseignant.

Tous officiers des armées de terre, de mer et de l'air.

**Appendix 9**

paragraphe 6 de l'art 2



ARTICLE 3.- Les Juifs ne peuvent remplir les fonctions d'administrateur, de Directeur, de Secrétaire général dans les entreprises bénéficiaires de concessions ou de subventions accordées par une collectivité publique; ils ne peuvent occuper aucun poste à la nomination du Gouvernement dans les entreprises d'intérêt général.

ARTICLE 4.- L'accès et l'exercice de toutes les fonctions publiques autres que celles énumérées aux articles 2 et 3 ne sont ouverts aux Juifs que s'ils peuvent exciper de l'une des conditions suivantes :

a) Être descendant de juifs nés français ou naturalisés avant l'année 1860;

b) avoir été cité au cours de la campagne 1914-1918 ou au moins être titulaire de la carte de combattant 1914-1918.

c) avoir été cité à l'ordre du jour au cours de la campagne 1939-1940.

d) Être décoré de la Légion d'Honneur à titre militaire ou de la médaille militaire.

ARTICLE 5.- L'accès et l'exercice des professions libérales, des professions libres, des fonctions dévolues aux officiers ministériels et à tous auxiliaires de la Justice, sont permis aux juifs dans une proportion fixée, pour chaque catégorie, par règlements d'Administration publique.

Dans les professions ci-dessus fixées, des règlements spéciaux détermineront les conditions dans lesquelles aura lieu l'élimination des juifs en surnombre.

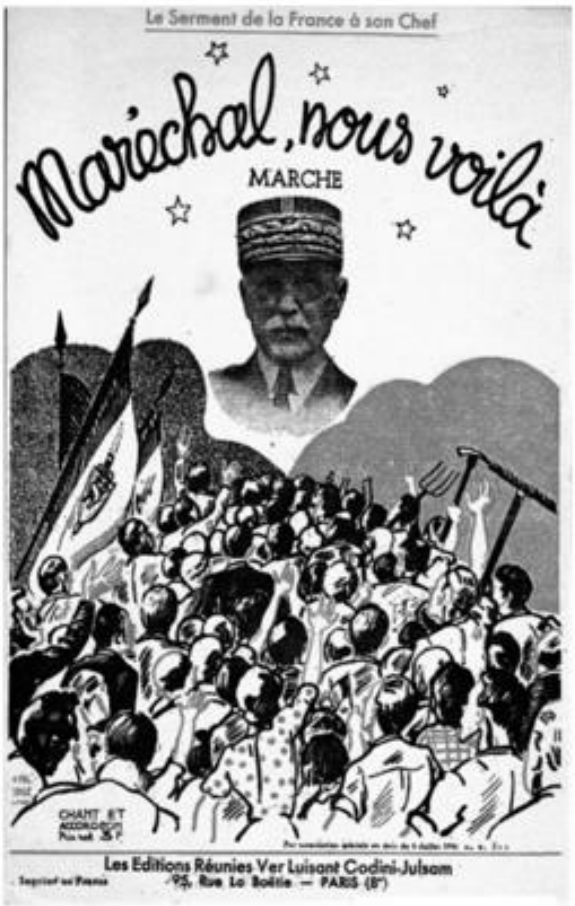
**Appendix 10**


The stamp "JEWISH" in permanent red ink.

## Appendix 11

*The Order of the Gallic Francisque was a medal given par the Vichy Regime as a distinctive mark of appreciation of the Marshal Pétain. It was also the symbol for the Marshal's Youngsters or in French "Jeunes du Maréchal Pétain."*

**Appendix 12**




The march dedicated to the Marshal Pétain.

**Appendix 13**

## List of all the prohibitions

And duties forced upon French Jews by the following German and Vichy government texts.

* exclusion from French nationality
* exclusion from the army, the civil service, the press, cultural activities, the professions (numerus clausus)
* Aryanisation (= confiscation) of Jewish businesses, confiscation of cars, bicycles, radio sets, etc.
* prohibition to change residence.
* prohibition to leave one's home between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m.
* prohibition to visit restaurants, cafés, public telephone booths, cinemas, concert halls, museums, libraries, swimming pools, sports grounds, racecourses, garden squares, municipal shower baths, markets, fairs, shops (except between 3 and 4 p.m.), hospitals.
* obligation to sit in the last car of the metro.

**Appendix 14**

## L'étoile jaune

**29 mai 1942**

Paragraphe 1er

*Signe distinctif pour les juifs*

I. – Il est interdit aux juifs, dès l'âge de six ans révolus, de paraître en public sans porter l'étoile juive.

II. – L'étoile juive est une étoile à six pointes ayant les dimensions de la paume d'une main et les contours noirs. Elle est en tissu jaune et porte, en caractères noirs, l'inscription « Juif ». Elle devra être portée bien visiblement sur le côté gauche de la poitrine, solidement cousue sur le vêtement.

Paragraphe 2

*Dispositions pénales*

Les infractions à la présente ordonnance seront punies d'emprisonnement et d'amende ou d'une de ces peines. Des mesures de police, telles que l'internement dans un camp de juifs, pourront s'ajouter ou être substituées à ces peines.

Paragraphe 3

*Entrée en vigueur*

La présente ordonnance entrera en vigueur le 7 juin 1942.

*Der Militärbefehlshaber in Frankreich.*

AVIS

Les juifs (...) devront se présenter au commissariat de police ou à la sous-préfecture de leur domicile pour y recevoir les insignes en forme d'étoile prévus au paragraphe premier de ladite ordonnance. Chaque juif recevra trois insignes et devra donner en échange un point de sa carte de textile.

*Le chef supérieur de la police et des SS.*


The Jewish badge

**Appendix 15**

*Marcelle on the left, Marie Soszewicz (in the middle with the Jewish badge), and Régine.*

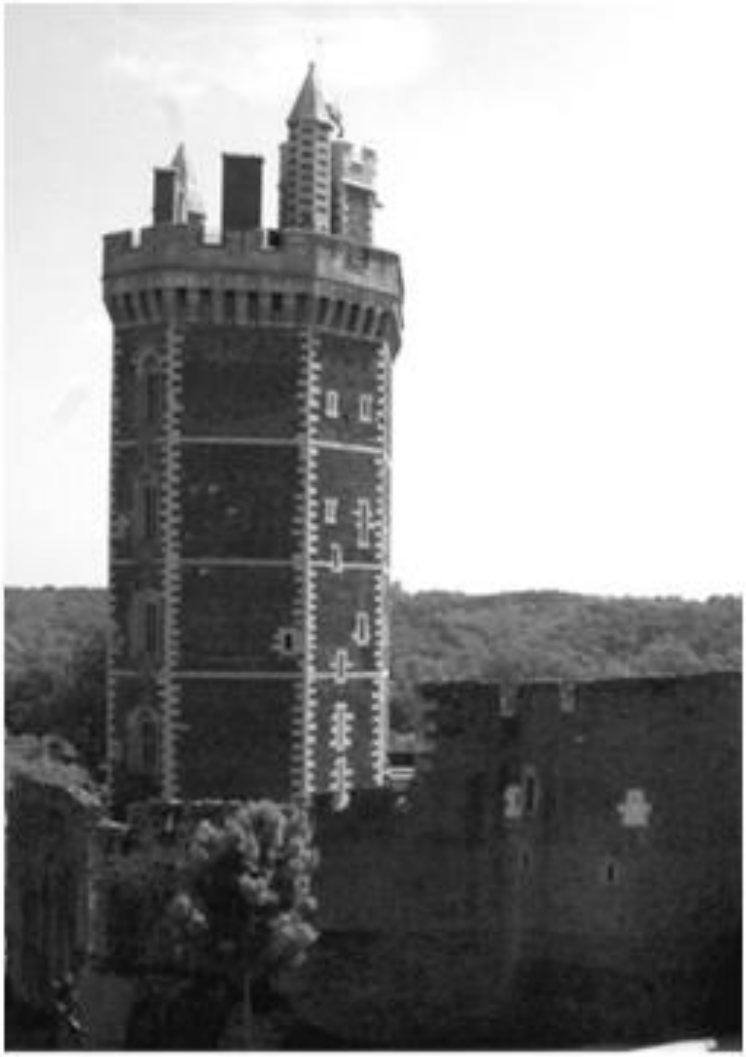
**Appendix 16**


*Forbidden to Jews.*

**Appendix 17**

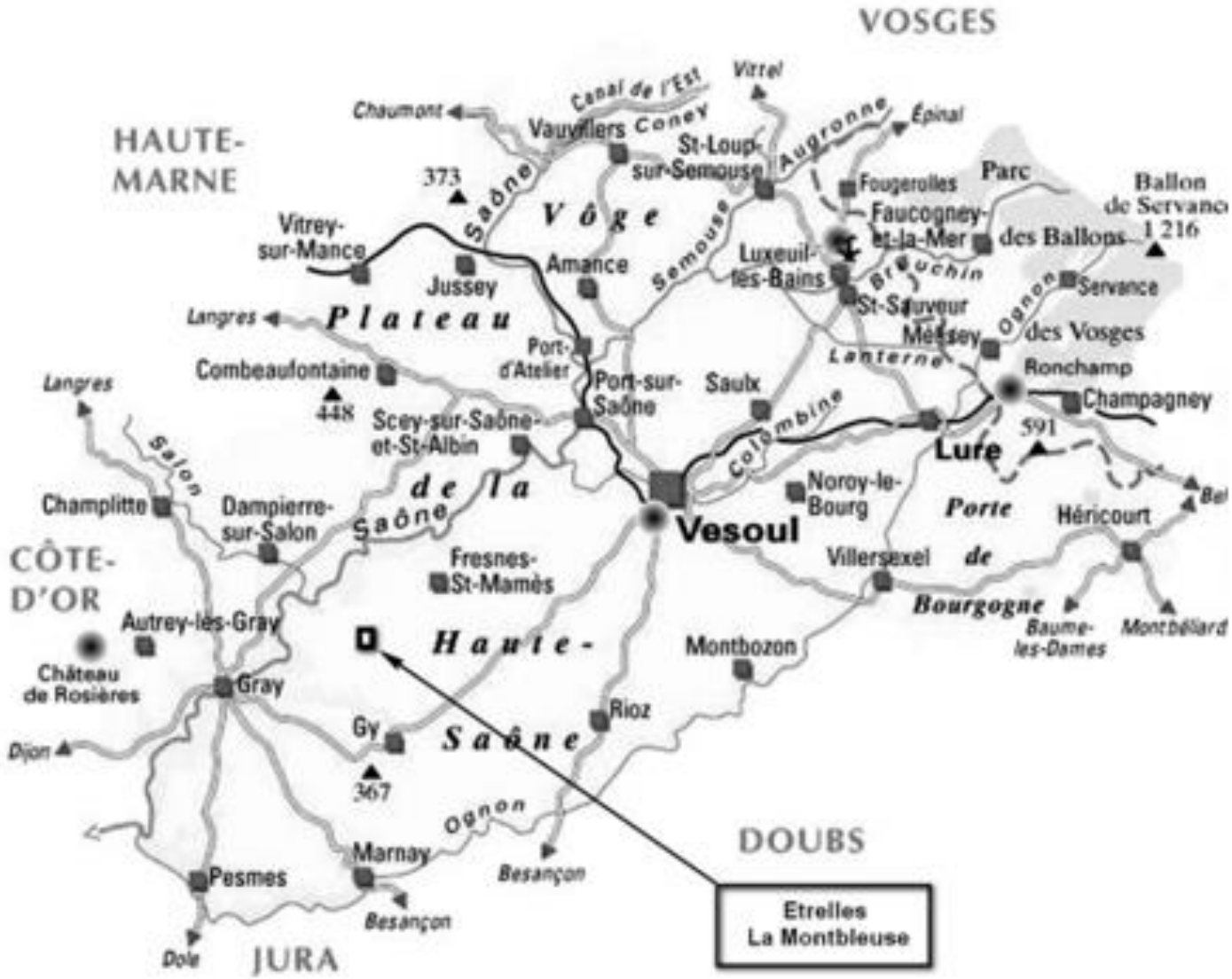
*Inside the Vel' d'Hiv', 16–17 July 1942.*

**Appendix 18**

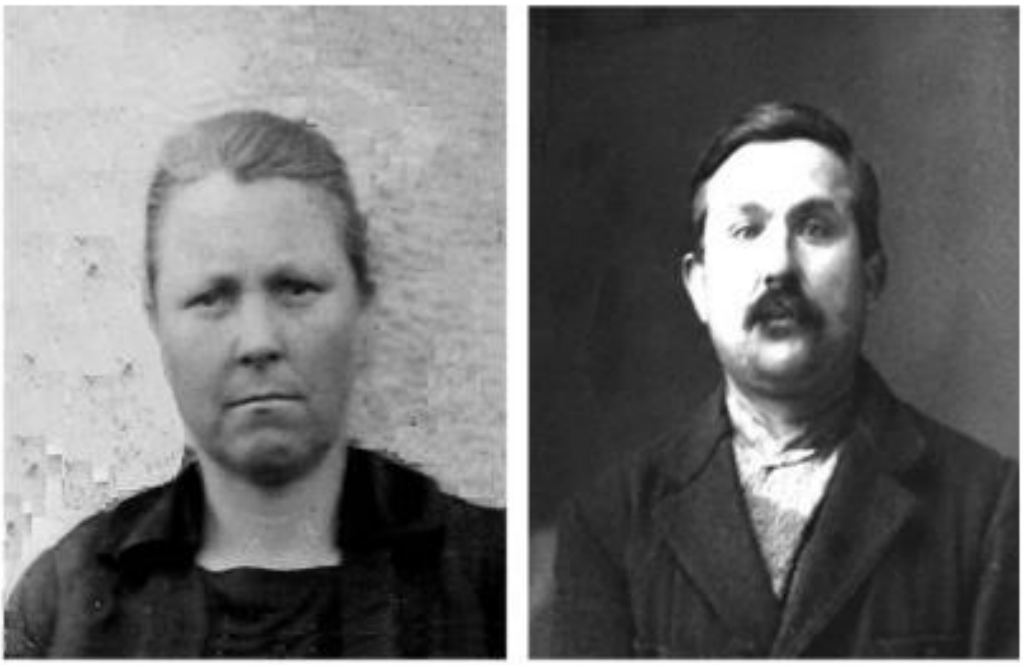


*Castle of Oudon's keep as seen from Champtoceaux.*

**Appendix 19**


VOSGES
HAUTE-MARNE
Chaumont
Canal de l'Est
Vittel
Vauvillers
Coney
St-Loup-sur-Semouse
Augronne
Épinal
373
Saône
Vôge
Fougerolles
Parc
Ballon de Servance 1 216
Faucogney-et-la-Mer
des Ballons
Vitrey-sur-Mance
Jussey
Amance
Semouse
Luxeuil-les-Bains
Breuchin
Servance
St-Sauveur
Ognon
Langres
Plateau
Port-d'Atelier
Melisey
des Vosges
Lanterne
Combeaufontaine
Port-sur-Saône
Saulx
Ronchamp
Champagney
Langres
448
Scey-sur-Saône-et-St-Albin
Colombine
591
Lure
Salon
de la
Champlitte
Dampierre-sur-Salon
Saône
Noroy-le-Bourg
Porte
Héricourt
Vesoul
CÔTE-D'OR
Fresnes-St-Mamès
Villersexel
de
Autrey-lès-Gray
Haute-
Bourgogne
Baume-les-Dames
Montbéliard
Château de Rosières
Montbozon
Gray
Rioz
Gy
Saône
Dijon
367
Ognon
DOUBS
Marnay
Besançon
Pesmes
Besançon
Dole
JURA
Etrelles
La Montbleuse

**Appendix 20**



*Augustine and Marcel Hézard*

**Appendix 21**

**Appendix 22**

An entrance of the Hézard's farm.

**Appendix 23**

The church

**Appendix 24**

Spinning wheel.

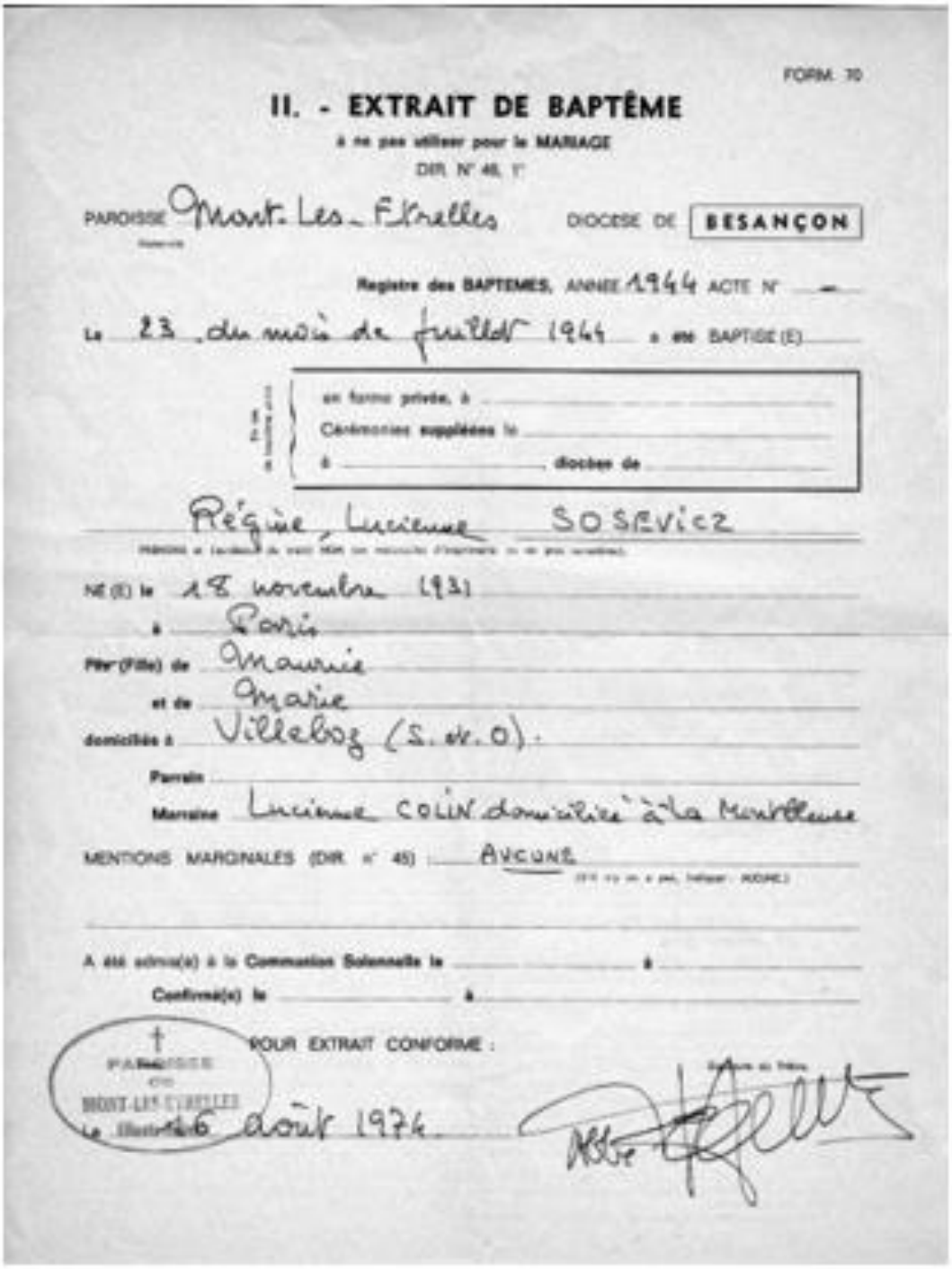
**Appendix 25**

The wash house

**Appendix 26**

*Marcelle (on the left), Régine and their godmothers.*

**Appendix 27**



FORM. 70

## II. - EXTRAIT DE BAPTÊME

à ne pas utiliser pour le MARIAGE

DIR. N° 48, 1°

PAROISSE Mont. Les_Etrelles DIOCESE DE BESANÇON

Registre des BAPTEMES, ANNEE 1944 ACTE N° —

Le 23 du mois de juillet 1944 a été BAPTISE (E)

en forme privée, à

Cérémonies suppléées le

à diocèse de

Régine, Lucienne SOSEVIEZ

NE (E) le 18 novembre 1931

à Paris

Fils (Fille) de Maurice

et de Marie

domiciliés à Villeboz (S. et M. O).

Parrain

Marraine Lucienne COLIN domiciliée à la Montheuse

MENTIONS MARGINALES (DIR. n° 45) : AUCUNE

A été admis(e) à la Communion Solennelle le à

Confirmé(e) le à

POUR EXTRAIT CONFORME :

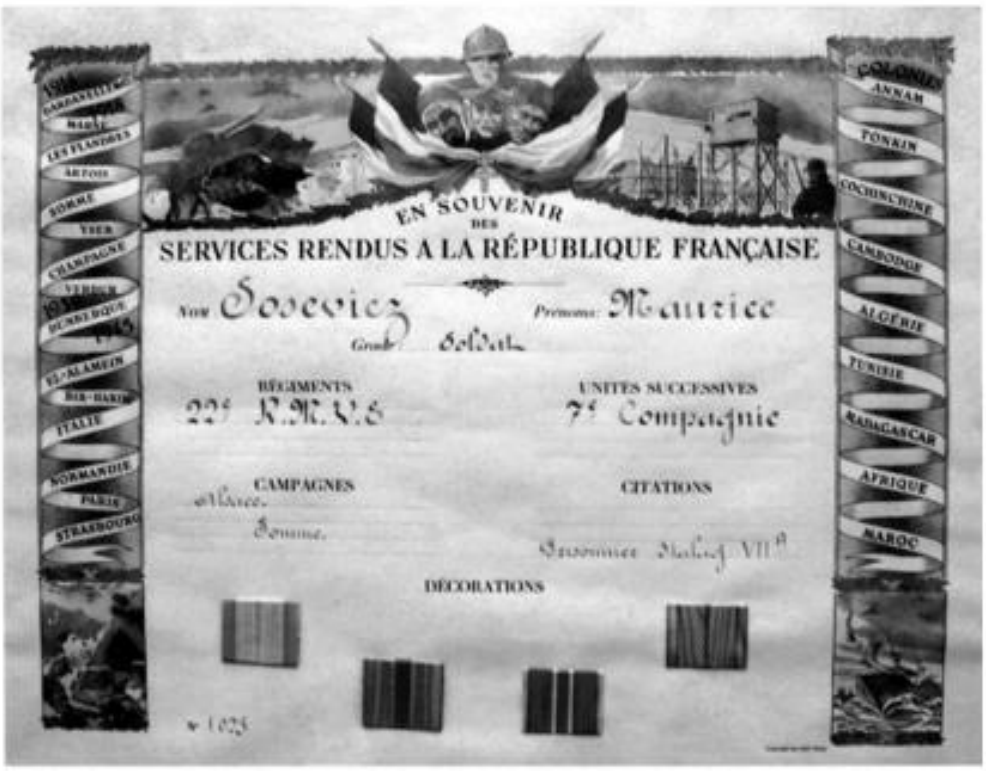
PAROISSE MONT-LES-ETRELLES

Le 16 août 1974.

**Appendix 28**

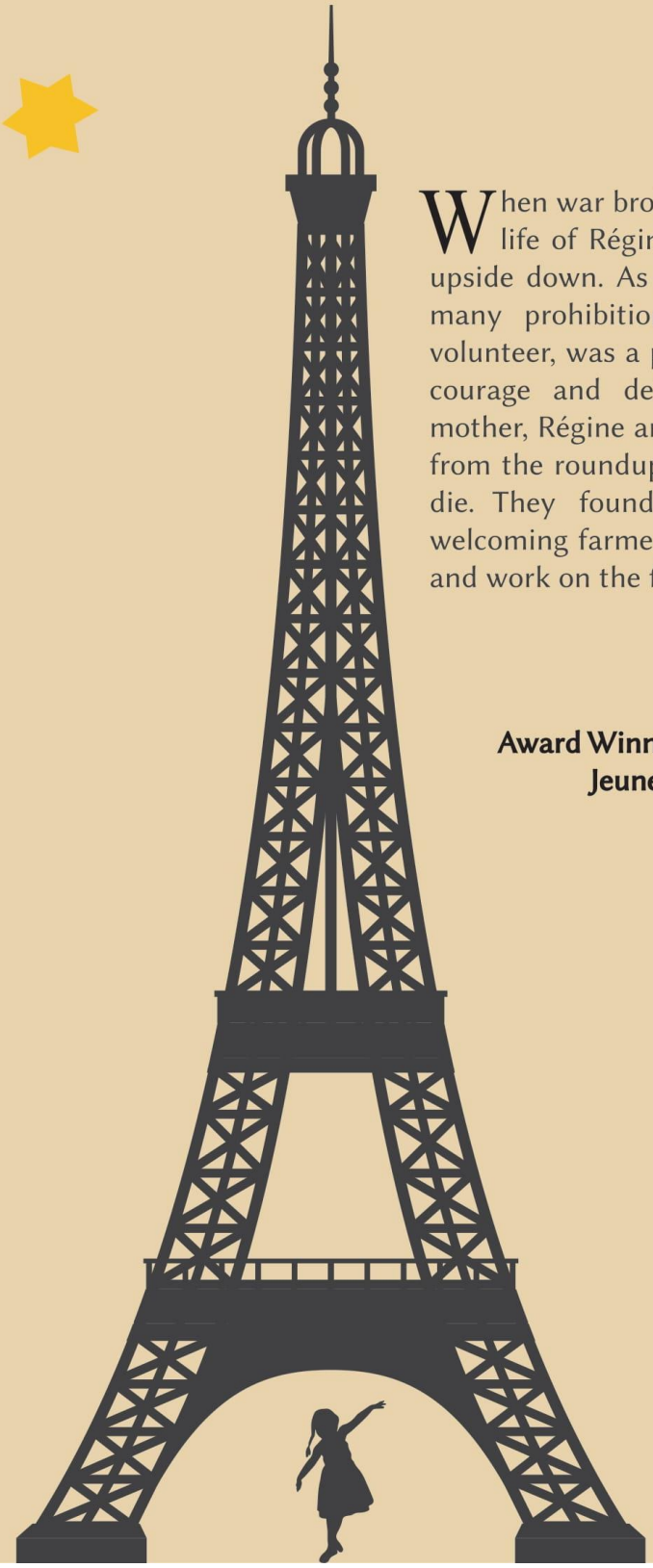
*Jacky Hézard, grandson of Augustine and Marcel Hézard, has become the mayor of Etrelles-La Montbleuse*

**Appendix 29**




Maurice Soszewicz's medals.

**Appendix 30**



When war broke out in September 1939, the life of Régine and her family was turned upside down. As Jews, they were subjected to many prohibitions. Their father Maurice, a volunteer, was a prisoner of war. Thanks to the courage and determination of Marie, their mother, Régine and her sister Marcelle escaped from the roundups where they were certain to die. They found refuge and safety among welcoming farmers. They shared their daily life and work on the farm. Régine tells us her story...

**Award Winner of the Grand prix des Jeunes Lecteurs in 1990**