

SURVIVING RAVENSBRÜCK
“Forgive, Don’t Forget”

A memoir by Jacqueline Péry d'Alincourt

For ten years, most of us who survived deportation have remained silent, powerless to relate an unspeakable experience. We had no words to express it. Little by little, however, the wall of silence that imprisoned us cracked. Some were bold enough to ask us what happened. The need to speak, to stave off oblivion, became obvious. I still hear the scream of a companion being trucked off to the gas chamber: "Tell it to the world!" Those words will forever echo in my mind. Mindful of that cry, I will try to describe my experience during the Second World War. First, however, I must provide a setting for the events to follow.

At the end of the Thirties, having concluded my secondary studies at Poitiers, I was drawn to the study of psychology. We were not unaware of the danger menacing us from the east. Even the youngest were aware of the gravity of events, while still refusing to believe in war. I recall the stupor that gripped us, my friends and me, when, at about fourteen years of age, we heard for the first time Hitler yelling over the radio. "He's a madman!" we thought.

The eldest of a large family, I was just twelve years old when my father died as a result of wounds sustained during World War I. It was a terrible shock. At thirty-two, my mother was widowed with seven children. She became a model of courage for us.

At age nineteen, I was engaged to Joseph d'Alincourt, an officer in training at the École d'Artillerie at Poitiers. Our wedding was set for September 1939. We prepared for the event at my family home near La Rochelle where Joseph, having just graduated, was to join us. The political situation was becoming more alarming by the day. The Nazis had marched unimpeded into Austria, then Czechoslovakia.

One evening, Joseph appeared unexpectedly at the door. Though war had not yet been declared by the Western Powers, as an army officer, he had just been mobilized. He was to leave the next day for his post in eastern France. Without hesitation, we decided to marry at once. It was already late at night. We awakened the mayor. He agreed to officiate in the little town hall that also served as the village school. Early the next day our parish priest celebrated the wedding mass, and Joseph left immediately.

A few days later, I decided to seek him out. He was stationed in Toul in the province of Lorraine, far from our home in Western France. Communication was not easy. I took one train after another. Having finally reached my destination, I went from barrack to barrack—and found him. Our time together was short: the cities of Poland had just been bombed. We snatched a few moments here and there to be together a little. And then—I remember it as though it were yesterday—we were walking side by side, when one of his comrades came to meet us, his face grim. He bore fearful news: "*C'est la guerre.*" We had to part. I went to my parents-in-law who lived in the region called "the Army zone." Being housed there, I could at least hope to see my husband occasionally. In fact, we did meet from time to time during that winter of intense cold and inactivity that became known as "the phony war" (1939-40). In May, the Belgian frontier was violated, the invasion was on, lightning fast. Joseph vanished.

In the village where I lived with my family-in-law, news reached us through refugees. People were flocking towards the south. It soon would be our turn to set out, leaving everything behind us.

After days and nights of wandering on the roads, we were engulfed by the enemy. Green uniforms, black uniforms, caps with the skull-and-crossbones insignia, armored trucks bearing the swastika, barked orders, the clatter of boots: the Occupation had begun. Overwhelmed though we were, we survived. No news of Joseph. Was he still alive? This uncertainty persisted for two months. Finally, through one of his freed comrades-in-arms, we learned that he was a prisoner in Saint-Dizier. I left at once to look for him. A woman who lived in the town pointed out the school building where officers were held captive. I persuaded the guard to alert Joseph. He allowed us to spend a few minutes together in a shed near the main entrance. I returned the next day, only to learn that the prisoners had left for Chaumont. The captives—by now there were many—were held in several barracks surrounded by high walls and patrolled by armed sentries. Friends and families were instructed to stay

on the opposite side of the road. I called out Joseph's name. I heard "D'Alincourt! D'Alincourt!" echoed by his comrades from building to building. After a moment, which seemed to me an eternity, Joseph appeared behind the entrance gate. I rushed towards him. We barely had time to touch hands through the iron bars before the guards separated us, threateningly. I was never to see Joseph again. The next day, he and his companions left Chaumont for Nuremberg, a camp where there were thousands of prisoners of war.

I returned to my mother's home. Everyone tried to bear his misfortune patiently, convinced that the prisoners would return in a year at most. They now numbered nearly two million. Every family waited for a prisoner to come home. The women remained alone, assuming the responsibilities of daily living. Refugees, stripped of everything, arrived in great numbers at our family home in the west, where my mother, brother, and sisters welcomed them. News from the camp at Nuremberg was scarce. Under threat of censorship, the prisoners had to print their messages on prescribed forms and in the most impersonal style. In March 1941 a letter arrived from Germany addressed to my mother. It did not come from Joseph, but from an uncle who was also a prisoner of war in the same camp. It stated that Joseph had just died of a sudden and terrible illness. It was my mother's wrenching duty to break the news. We had lived until then in the hope of his return. No one imagined that the prisoners might not come back. At twenty-one I was widowed, deeply saddened, but also deeply resentful.

From the inception of the Armistice of June 22, 1940, my one wish had been for an opportunity to act. Back in Poitiers, my sisters and I—four girls, the youngest only 15—went out each morning at the end of curfew to tear down the propaganda notices, which then became trophies. We drafted leaflets against the occupying forces and posted them near grocery stores, bakeries, wherever lines formed. Stealthily we watched the reactions: spiritless faces lit up, people discreetly nudged each other. They read, outwardly impassive, yet imperceptibly jubilant.

After receiving the offer of a job in Paris, I went there only to discover our nation's capital defaced. Everywhere in occupied France, walls had been covered with placards giving notice of executions and threats of reprisal on families and friends of anyone daring to revolt. Such notices caused great consternation but, far from intimidating us, they aroused our indignation.

When I reached Paris after Joseph's death, I was seized with anger upon seeing for the first time a child wearing the yellow star. What would happen to these children? I had no idea. But the situation was sufficiently clear for me to feel their humiliation, to realize that persecution had begun. Then the first rumors of arrests emerged. Men, women, children suddenly disappeared. *Should one resign oneself to bow one's head in submission?* I knew that I would rather die. The shock gave me a resolve that nothing would destroy, for the enemy is powerless over him who has no fear of death.

In 1942, the opportunity I had been so desperately awaiting presented itself. In the course of a discussion on our attitude as Christians toward the occupying forces, one participant was struck by my determination. Taking me aside, she asked if I was in a position to conceal pilots. At the time, I was sharing with another young war widow a large apartment belonging to the famous scientist Louis Leprince Ringuet. One of his cousins, Claire Chevrillon, was also there. Feeling that I could trust her, I told Claire about the request. Unbeknown to me, she was already in the Resistance, but had kept silent, as was the rule. My query induced her to relax her reticence. She arranged a meeting with a visitor to whom she had already introduced me, a certain Gautier. (Only later was I to learn his real name: Jean Ayrat.) At the time, he had told me that he had been a naval ensign. "And now," he had added, to my astonishment, "I sell ham-slicing machines." I was now meeting him a second time. Another surprise: he disclosed that he was dropped by parachute from England to organize the parachuting and landing areas of the Northern Zone. (Jean Ayrat fulfilled this duty as regional chief of the Office of Aerial Operations.) To my great joy, he asked me to join his staff. I was vested with the responsibility of translating into code messages destined for the *Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action* ("Central Office of Intelligence and Action") in London. The BCRA was the umbilical cord between the Resistance in the interior of France and the supporting organizations across the Channel; its messages detailed the most pressing needs—guns, munitions, money—and gave the location of the secret landing fields that made possible the comings and goings between England and France. Each and every operation referred to in our messages was identified by a code phrase that we improvised as we went along. Some were highly surrealistic; for example: "The elephant wears heliotrope-scented perfume." When the expected operation was about to take place, the

BBC repeated over the air waves the nonsensical bit about a perfumed elephant, of which we alone knew the meaning and which would perplex many a listener hanging on every word spoken by the voice across the Channel.

Gautier took orders directly from "Max." It was under this name, borrowed from the poet and painter Max Jacob, that I heard Jean Moulin mentioned for the first time.¹

Gautier introduced me to Daniel Cordier, who headed the team of Max's secretariat in Paris. I was enlisted. Much more than a secretary, Cordier was a true disciple of Jean Moulin, whose passion he communicated to us. The first meeting of the CNR (National Council of the Resistance) took place at 27, rue du Four in May, 1943. The meeting marked the fulfillment of the unification mission entrusted to Jean Moulin by General de Gaulle. There, side by side, sat persons representative of the most diverse, even antagonistic, political and social currents. Such was the miracle of the Resistance that it brought together rich and poor, believers and agnostics, communists and conservatives, suddenly propelled from their differing worlds to fight as one an enemy that embodied absolute evil. A unique moment in history. Such unity ran counter to the inveterate individualism of the French people of which General de Gaulle, during his later presidency, said, "How can one govern a country that has two hundred and forty-six kinds of cheese?" Without the steadfast will of Jean Moulin, the Resistance would have dispersed in a thousand directions, and on D-Day would never have become that effective force that General Eisenhower considered equivalent to fifteen divisions.

From the very onset of the 1940 invasion, when serving as prefect in Chartres, Jean Moulin had been made to suffer for his convictions. The authorities of the Occupation had attempted to force from him a false declaration accusing soldiers from black Africa of mutilating the inhabitants of the city, inhabitants who had in fact been the victims of a German bombardment. Because he categorically refused, he had been imprisoned under such conditions that he tried to take his own life by cutting his throat. Finally freed, he submitted his resignation as prefect and later undertook the difficult trip to England. In the autumn of 1941 he at last met General de Gaulle. The two men, coming from such different worlds, shared the same vision of the future. Delegated by General de Gaulle to lead the Interior Resistance, he landed by parachute in January 1942 near Aix-en-Provence, Moulin became "Max." In the seventeen months that followed he managed to fulfill his mission. Arrested at Caluire, on the outskirts of Lyons, on June 21, 1943, tortured by the "Butcher of Lyons," Klaus Barbie, Jean Moulin died seventeen days later, on July 8, on board a train taking him to Germany. Nothing is known of what he endured throughout his interrogation. But to the end he yielded no secrets.

We experienced Moulin's disappearance as a catastrophe. His endeavor nonetheless had to be continued. Claude Serreulles took over, together with Daniel Cordier, who was only 22 years old. There was no age requirement to be active in the Resistance. All were volunteers: young or old, parent or single, man or woman.

We were totally involved, without restriction, day and night. One of my tasks was to seek out the indispensable *boîtes aux lettres*, that is, persons at whose house our couriers could pass on messages that they collected throughout France. It was through our couriers and this network of "mailboxes" that information was forwarded to be finally sent on to London by radio. Persons willing to serve as mailboxes, being stationary, ran considerable risks. Our couriers were liable to being tailed. Everything had to be done to avoid awaking suspicion, and vigilance had to be unwavering. One of my friends, Josette, a public relations director for a celebrated couturier highly esteemed by German officers' wives, was one of these mailboxes. Thanks to the coming and going of many women on the fashion house's premises, our couriers passed unnoticed. No one could conceive of Resistance activity going on in the heart of this *grande maison* frequented by the upper crust of the army of occupation. After several months without incident, however, the Gestapo raided the place and Josette was arrested, to the amazement of her employer. She succeeded in pretending ignorance and by sheer luck was freed. But she was lost to us. The slightest sign of danger made it imperative that the activity of this or that "mailbox" be halted and relocated.

At the same time, we were bound to provide the housing and living necessities of agents coming from London, such as Jean Ayrat, my first contact, who would be killed in 1944, and Pierre Péry, who would survive Buchenwald and whom I would marry after the war. Both, following the 1940 Armistice, escaped from France. Secretly trained in England to realize their objective in occupied France, they had arrived by secret landing or by parachute and from the very first night they had had to be kept in a safe place. Staying at a hotel was out of the

question. In Paris, we had to provide their lodging and furnish them with false identification papers, food stamps, and some professional cover. That was one of my jobs. Searching out lodging was an unceasing task. Given the urgency of our situation, I was obliged to rent in my own name. That meant if someone was arrested in one of my apartments, I would be too. The risk was unavoidable.

A potential replacement for my job was being prepared, but there would not be enough time to put the new person in place. Tragedy overtook us quickly.

One of our agents, Marchal, recently arrived from England, was arrested on September 23, 1943. (His true identity, as I later learned upon my return from deportation, was Colonel Morinaud, sent from London as military delegate [*DMR Zone Nord*] in replacement of General Delestraint.) I had an appointment with him that day at the Pont de l'Alma, where I waited for forty-five minutes, in accordance with prescribed rules. He did not come. On an off chance and with an eye to receiving the reward promised informers, his landlady had informed against him. When the Gestapo arrived, he swallowed cyanide. Unaware of what had happened, I continued my day's round of appointments until evening. When I returned home, no one had gotten wind of the drama.

Very early the next morning, one of our couriers knocked on my door to tell me of an immediate meeting with Daniel Cordier at the Vavin metro station. I pulled on a sweater; it was still chilly in the early hours. This woolen garment would be my one protection against the cold for the next six months. I rode my bike rapidly toward Montparnasse where Daniel Cordier was waiting for me. He spoke about a valise that was delivered to me the day before. Its contents were of the utmost importance. I had to find it a secure hiding place. Before going back to the house, I stopped at the Café du Palais to telephone my friend Claire. She was due back from a trip that very day and could relieve me of some of my urgent tasks. But the operator could not get a line. *If I had had a connection, would I have realized that the Gestapo was there on the line?* Unable to reach Claire, I returned home as quickly as possible and, from the entrance to the large apartment, called out, "Claire, Claire!" No answer. I ran toward my room. Several men were waiting for me there. They rushed at me. I attempted a desperate escape toward an inner stairway leading to the roof, but I was overtaken, handcuffed behind my back, and the interrogation began then and there. I tried in vain to overcome the trembling that took hold of me, head to foot, distressed at the idea that the men would notice it. Questions rained down on me thick and fast, and, because I refused to answer, one of them yelled at me, "We have ways of making you talk!" I answered immediately: "I am sure you are capable of anything." I was slapped in the face and the trembling stopped. A feeling of relief came over me. The strength now within me would not abandon me throughout the five long days and nights that awaited me.

At the time of my arrest in the apartment that I shared with Claire and another friend—a war widow like myself—I had hoped that the studio at the other end of the courtyard would remain undiscovered. What I had stored there could be compromising. I was taken there, however, duly surrounded by the Gestapo operatives. I could only muster my courage and say nothing, cost what it may. They found plastic explosives in a cupboard, brass knuckles in a drawer, bank notes crammed into a valise. The men were not reassured. But when they discovered in the bathroom a pharmaceutical flask on which the label proclaimed "Dr. Churchill's pills," general hysteria broke out. The small bottle, like the brass knuckles, had been left by a previous lodger, perhaps Jean Ayrat himself. The "cops" did not dare go near it. They feared an explosion. I relished a moment's breathing space. Soon they would have new cause for fright: on the desktop, there lay a large hunting knife. It was my one souvenir of Joseph. (Like many Ardennais, he was expert at boar hunting.) I offered no explanation. The Gestapo agents looked at me with fright and went wild. The questions rained down, the blows, the threats. Finally I was dragged off and thrown into a black Citroën, the vehicle that haunted the streets of occupied Paris. I thought of those of my comrades who knew my address where quite evidently a trap would be laid. *At all costs, I must try to warn them of my arrest, must try to provoke an incident to attract attention.* From the back seat of the auto, I threw myself on the driver. Outside the Citroën someone shouted, "What's this?" Anxious faces leaned in; I was pushed down onto the floor. On arrival at the rue des Saussaies, seat of the Gestapo, I was thrown into an elevator, head first. Days and nights, one after another, would follow. Always handcuffed, deprived of sleep and food, standing on my feet most of the time. Sometimes I was locked in a dark cell, but because of the handcuffs I was unable either to stretch out or sleep. Gangs of agents came, one after another, each one applying its own method: violence, blackmail. "Your comrades are all captured," they told me, "and tortured because you won't talk." One colleague who took the shift seemed to pity me for having fallen into the hands of such brutes. Night came. A record player droned on a table somewhere. A Brandenburg Concerto. I

listened, totally caught up in the music. Thinking he had softened me up, the agent again started interrogating me. I remained silent. Rage.

Before long my tormentors informed me that I was to be shot. This did not appear to make an impression on me. They then added that my mother, brothers, and sisters had been arrested. They left, except one who had remained silent and now was staring at me intently. "Your sacrifice is useless. The others are talking." This time I replied: "I know one thing only—that I must keep silence, even if I must die." The man changed his tone. "As a member of the Gestapo, I would prefer to face some other woman than yourself. But as a soldier, I salute you. You do honor to your country, to your family, to your training." He stood at attention before me—I was still handcuffed—and suddenly left. I never saw him again.

On the fifth night they took off my handcuffs and I was taken to Fresnes in a patrol wagon together with other prisoners. We sang to keep up our courage. The faces of my companions bore the mark of what they had suffered. Upon arriving, we waited for a long time, lined up in a vast, dank hallway. Germain, one of our comrades, stood opposite me. I had seen him nearly every day before our arrest. He had changed a lot. No doubt I had too, for he did not recognize me. I tried to catch his eye and murmured my Resistance name: "Violaine." He seemed to come to and recognized me at once. We whispered the news—what we had been able to find out from one other; who had been arrested, what the Gestapo knew. We were quickly separated. They took me to cell number 131 on the third floor. There I would remain in solitary confinement for six months. The first night, at sunset, a woman's voice shouted out through a window: "Tomorrow, seventeen of our comrades will be shot. Let us pray now. At nine o'clock: *La Marseillaise*." The huge hive that made up Fresnes was plunged into deep meditation. The prison had but a single thought—of those who were about to die. Suddenly, at nine o'clock, *La Marseillaise* burst forth. Drowned out, the enraged guards locked the prisoners in dungeons, confiscated sleeping mats. What did it matter? The anthem was sung to its very end. The prison exploded this way each time one of ours was led out to be executed, each time we heard of an Allied victory.

At Christmas 1943, a sonorous voice reached the depths of our hearts with "*Minuit, Chrétiens*," which brought us back to life. The entire prison listened, silent, in suspense. "The lovely song rings true." Our guards flew into a rage. Packages were confiscated, books withheld, the cold transfixed us, but from other voices again arose other Christmas carols. Greetings were blurted out. "Courage, we'll get them!" "Here anything is allowed, except the blues."

One day the door opened. A man wearing a German officer's uniform entered. I was on the defensive. To my astonishment, he took my hand and looked at me with an expression of deep kindness. I sensed that I had nothing to fear from him. He was a chaplain bringing me communion. In the distress and solitude of our life as prisoners, this unexpected visit moved me deeply. He came again and brought me a Bible. At last, I was able to read! The days seemed less endless. Inside the cover of the Bible I found the stamp of a monastery where a priest lived, a friend of my family. A signal from my people. My fate was not unknown. And it was also proof that the German chaplain, at the risk of his own life, was trying to help the prisoners.

Another surprise was about to change my life. I was feeling ill, lying on the straw mat. It was late afternoon. The guards were handing out "coffee." Suddenly I heard a voice that came from the air vent. "Take your mat. Roll it up. Put your chair on top of it. Try to climb onto the shelf to reach the air vent. We are going to send you something." I hurried, trying again and again to reach the very high shelf, but, being much too weak to succeed in this acrobatic exercise, fell repeatedly. Finally, I reached the height of the opening and put my arm in. Groping, I found a very small package—a piece of sugar, a paper handkerchief, a pencil lead, and a message: "We will send something everyday at this time. To send news outside, write on the paper handkerchief. Give it back to us tomorrow." This miracle came from a cell two stories above mine. The women not in solitary confinement were allowed to receive parcels and to send out their laundry. The messages were hidden in the hems of their clothes and thus made their way outside. Answers came back by the same means. As everything was carefully searched both going out and coming in, I did not write explicitly, but ask that they send me a thread of a certain color if my mother had been arrested, of some other color if she had not been apprehended, if my brothers and sisters were free, if Daniel Cordier and Claude Serreulles had escaped capture. By means of my new friend, the answer came in the next bundle. Reassuring colors. My family was safe, Daniel and Claude had not been captured, our struggle continued. I was freed of a great anxiety. Also at Christmas time, I received by the same means a message from my friend Claire. So she, too, was free! She

wrote to me in veiled terms that the Allies were expected by Easter. To me, the date seemed beyond waiting for: I was becoming weaker each day. Fortunately, these women, not in solitary, remained undiscovered, all the while playing a very dangerous game by helping us.

At the end of March 1944, however, I was unexpectedly taken from my cell. This time, not for another interrogation. I found myself with a group of women prisoners taken to Romainville, a military installation east of Paris. A radical change of "life style" ensued. I went abruptly from complete solitude to an ambience of warm friendship. Certain of the women received packages that they shared. Little by little, I came alive. We had many discussions with Mère Marie, a nun who enlightened us through her faith. (She would be gassed at Ravensbrück in 1945, on Good Friday.) At Easter, mass was celebrated in a bunker in the presence of a delegation from the Red Cross. Reduced to silence, powerless, the S. S. looked on intently. We sang Bach and Palestrina, defiance and grief hurled toward heaven. Suddenly, on April 18, the news that we so feared burst out. About 500 of us were singled out to be taken away—destination unknown. Transported to the Pantin station where cattle cars awaited us, we were crammed in. The track skirted along the Grands Moulins (the great flour mills) of Paris. The waiting was interminable. We were hoping something would happen, that we would be freed. But nothing happened and the train got under way. The trip was to last five days. I prepared a message, a last attempt to rejoin the world of the living. It had to be thrown from the small window of the cattle car before we reached Lorraine, the annexed region where the clampdown was yet more cruel than in the occupied zone. The moment arrived. Along the track someone pounced. It was one of the railroad workers doing what he could for the deportees. The message would now reach my friend Anne de Vogüé in Paris. What railway man thus risked his life for us? Nearly all messages thrown from the trains reached their destination this way.

The days and nights followed one upon another indistinctly. I was barely conscious when suddenly our convoy stopped. The doors were flung open noisily. We were unloaded in the middle of nowhere. Fürstenberg. We knew nothing of this place. We were forced to step out amid the yelling of guards accompanied by their dogs, tugging at their leashes, showing their fangs. Fists rained down upon us. We were faced by beasts whose only purpose was extermination. We arrived at the entrance to the camp. This hell had a name—Ravensbrück, in northern Germany, near the Baltic. (We were to learn this only later.) We were gripped by a terrible anguish. Midnight. We remained standing until morning, frozen stiff. The guards and their ubiquitous dogs prevented our stepping beyond designated boundaries. The next day we were ordered by the male and female guards to undress. This for the first time. We were stripped of everything linked to the human condition: clothing, wedding rings, the few books we had been able to save, the simplest keepsakes, letters, photographs, everything was confiscated. Heads were shaved at random. Naked, penned up, pressed one against the other, all ages thrown together, we went to the showers. We avoided looking at each other before being handed the striped bathrobe, before learning by heart in German the number assigned to each of us, sewed on the sleeve. We no longer had names. I had become number 35243. A red triangle was also sewn above the number: it indicated our category — we were *les politiques*, "political prisoners." Now completely stripped, we were cooped up for three weeks in a quarantine block. We got up at three-thirty in the morning and left for roll call, which could last for hours, and stood in the cold of dawn, come rain, snow, or wind. When the siren sounded, marking the end of this torment, we returned to the block, but the space where we were confined was so small that at no time were we able to sit down. To one side, the dormitory was empty, but we were not allowed to go there before nighttime. One of us was near death: she would be the first to die.

Following the period of isolation, we were integrated into the general functioning of the camp. I rejoined my friend Geneviève de Gaulle, the General's niece. For many months we were to share the same straw mat. Until her removal to the camp's prison, we buoyed each other up as much as possible. In this fierce determination to help each other, we found the strength to resist being worn down by the ordeal that each successive moment brought.

I was assigned to labor in the camp area with many comrades of various nationalities. We left in the morning, shovels on our shoulders, harassed by the guards and their dogs. The conditions under which Geneviève worked were no better; she was with the women prisoners who originally drained the marshes and built the camp in this desolate region of Mecklemburg. Would we be yoked, like beasts of burden, to the enormous stone roadroller the very sight of which spelt fear? That was exactly what happened. Beasts of burden we were indeed: the streets of the camp had to be flattened. The day's toil lasted twelve hours, with a

half-hour pause for midday rations. Because we were not assigned to a set job in a workshop, we risked being sent to a munitions factory. The prospect of making arms against our allies was intolerable. Twice I was selected and managed to get off. When a third departure was organized, I learned that "mangy women" would not be taken. I made myself look as if I had scabies by gouging my body with a pin and methodically infecting the scratches. When we were inspected by the S.S., naked, as was the practice, my false scabies did the trick and I was sent back. With Geneviève, however, we knew that the threat of being sent to a munitions factory was always present. We succeeded in escaping this possibility thanks to a prisoner who worked in the administration of the camp. She had us enlisted in a clothes-mending workshop where we patched uniforms gathered from the battlefields. Everything was retrieved, even the smallest button. We worked for one week by day, for one week by night. It was exhausting work. Sleeping during the day in our overcrowded block proved impossible. The following week, the rhythm was reversed, and we continued to lose sleep. The S.S. responsible for our workshop yelled at us, struck us mercilessly and even killed by kicking us. Nevertheless we continued to work, or at least pretended to do so. *What mattered was hanging on, despite the exhaustion, not being intimidated, not yielding to despair.* The possibilities of resistance were minimal, but vital. We had sung in prison, we continued to sing in the camp, profiting from the least break in surveillance. It was often only a whisper, some old-time songs, some popular tunes. We managed to pray together: a prayer book had been rescued from the rubble of the roadwork. Another inestimable treasure: an anthology of poems. One evening, one of our friends, Anne de Bauffremont, joined me on my mat on the fourth floor. She had just been shorn and her face was deeply drawn, the sign we had come to recognize: her end was near, inescapable. Pressed close to each other, we shared the precious prayer book. She left me. We knew, each of us, that we would never see each other again. She was soon swallowed up in that frightful tent where the latest arrivals were crammed together.

Imagination, tenacity, even fury were our only weapons with which to battle despair, and each of us helped the other. In the course of my labor in the workshop, I succeeded in secretly making mittens for my comrades. One risked one's life in doing so; one could not afford to be caught. The strategy consisted of breaking down each step of the work into a series of quick and fleeting movements, always separate. This could last all night—or all day. First, upon entering the workshop, spotting a cloth of neutral color, in order not to attract attention; hiding it under the pieces to be mended; drawing the pattern with chalk; cutting it; passing it to a prisoner who sewed by machine; retrieving and hiding it until one was beyond the threshold of the workshop, as we were searched at the conclusion of our work. Once the danger was past, the mittens were furtively passed to some comrade in our block, whom they kept warm until the next roll call. *The inexpressible joy of defying our tormentors in this way!*

Exhaustion, however, overpowered me. I could see only one solution: to demonstrate openly my ineffectiveness in order to have myself sent away. Perhaps I would be killed. If not, I would have a chance at survival. The S.S. overseer hesitated and at last decided to dismiss me without reprisal. Thus, I found myself once again in the vagrant mass of prisoners without occupation. Geneviève de Gaulle was already locked up in the camp prison. When she was called by her name, instead of by her number, to appear, nearly blind and covered with sores, before the camp commander, we trembled for her. Such a summons was, for the greater part, the forerunner of execution. We learned of her fate through Czech friends working in the administration of the camp: she was living near us in the bunker, guarded in absolute secrecy. Impossible to communicate with her. Thus had I lost a twin sister—so close had we been. Sent back to the shop where we had worked together, I no longer had any specific duty, which rendered me liable for the dreaded "selections"—the gas chamber, the murderous marches into the unknown, a fatal assignment.

Constantly on the alert, we had formed a team of five comrades and each morning we thought up all sorts of stratagems to escape the horrible manhunt that rounded up victims for the gas chamber: jumping out the glassless windows, hiding in the false ceiling of the block or under the bunk-beds. Survival depended on the speed of our reactions. I was to experience a period of respite thanks to a privileged prisoner who allowed me to spend secretly several moments each day in her block. This was forbidden because I belonged in one of the overcrowded sheds where perpetual chaos reigned. All social classes were reconstituted in the camp. In block 31, two or three prisoners shared the same sleeping mat. We were more than one thousand on three levels. One had to summon courage to push one's way through the mob in order to get to one's mat or to leave it. Upon getting up in the morning, before the siren summoning us for roll call, we would dash to the filthy toilets, nearly all of which were unfit for use. Dysentery was endemic. The place was a sewer. Punished by our block chief

for I knew not what, I was assigned there for some time. Nostrils closed, breathing blocked, I pushed the broom, repeating to myself mantra-like, "Since it must be done, let's do it well." Not without result, my comrades affirmed. It was quite another thing to get to the washbowl in the hope of finding a thin thread of icy water over which clusters of women were quarreling. Electric power was cut off and daily rations arrived only well after sunset. In near-darkness, one had to throw oneself into a free-for-all in order to grab scraps of food and get back to one's mat without spilling the bowl. This was the price of survival. How to withstand the cold during the terrible winter of 1944-45 when there was no glass in the windows and not even one blanket per prisoner? In the "privileged" blocks, each woman's mat had a clean cover; she had use of a storage closet and of a table with benches in a room adjoining the dormitory. Employed by the administration or in the kitchens—a status enabling them to benefit from supplementary rations—they were required to speak German and, for the most part, had been in the camp for a long time. Some of them used the opportunities afforded by their privileged position to help their comrades secretly. One of these, a Polish woman, sheltered me in her block one or two hours each day. I got in through the window, without being noticed. Thanks to an Austrian woman who had succeeded in stealing a bit of paper and a pen for me, I began to draft what would become the publications of the Cross of Lorraine—tiny collections of poems that we had been able to call to mind: Claudel, Ronsard, Verlaine, passages from *The Song of Songs*. This foreshadowed the Truffaut film *Fahrenheit 451*, in which, all books having been burnt, everyone is obliged to recreate them from memory. Other collections sprang up elsewhere, in particular cooking recipes. In our regimen of famine, these were veritable fairy tales. For my part, seated at a corner of the table in the block, nearly motionless, trying to make myself invisible, I wrote my scribbles as small as possible to economize on the precious paper. Suddenly a prisoner in the block started to inquire about me. Unable to hide that I belonged in the miserable block 31, I had to disappear as quickly as possible, that is, through the window. A Czech friend, Anicka, saved my life at this moment. She managed to have me enrolled in a work gang that sorted clothes worn by prisoners when they arrived at the camp. Each day, I managed to leave, hiding under my dress some skirts and sweaters that would strengthen a little the perseverance of my comrades. Each night I was compelled to return to the hell of block 31, but at least I escaped it during the day.

On the morning of March 2, 1945, the siren suddenly sounded. It was an unusual roll call. All prisoners were told to gather outside and then march past the S.S., who assigned some to the line on the right, others to the line on the left, we did not know for what fate. The rumble of cannon fire could be heard in the distance, the Soviet army was approaching. The camp was going to be evacuated, all this commotion revealed it. Our group of five comrades decided to do the impossible in order not to leave, for we had seen the women prisoners from Auschwitz and those from Budapest reach the camp in such a state of exhaustion that very few survived. We would meet the same fate if, at the end of our strength, we were forced to go on foot day after day. Our only hope was to wait on the spot for the liberation that seemed so close.

The official communiqués of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the S.S. publication secretly translated into all languages, reached us thanks to the women prisoners working in the administrative offices. The communiqués obviously disguised the truth, but we guessed at it without difficulty: the end of the war was imminent. Chances of our surviving, however, were minimal in such a sinister place where the will to exterminate remained the ultimate obsession of the S.S. We continued to labor as if the war would last a thousand years. Women died of hunger, they died of exhaustion, they died in the gas chamber or by injection. Even so, it was better, we thought, to try to remain where we were than to be cast out on the road. Here, we knew our hell; who could tell what the next one might be out there? I profited from a moment of inattentiveness on the part of the S.S. opposite me to disappear around the corner of a barracks and little by little regain block 31 in order to hide in the false ceiling. My comrades were already there. We remained there for fifteen hours, motionless, holding our breath. Throughout the length of the day we heard the hammer-like beat of a crowd on the march. Then silence. The block was deserted. We were alone. Outside a guard walked back and forth. A gunshot snapped at a shadow, which disappeared. Was the camp empty? It was impossible to know. In hunting for something to eat, we found chick-peas hidden under the roof, and the wherewithal to cook them in the cubbyhole abandoned by our block chieftain. An unforgettable feast. We had barely finished it when the barracks was suddenly invaded by a mob of female prisoners, Russian peasants captured at the time of the German advance. They had escaped massacre only to be deported. Female soldiers of the Red Army, although prisoners of war, shared the same fate. All were indiscriminately destined to die. The invasion of the block was, for us, a critical moment; we were obliged to reveal our hidden presence to the new female guard. She was hesitant; the situation was

dangerous for her as well as for us. Because we were not listed on the roll for the block, she could not justify our presence. We no longer had the right to daily food rations, but if we provided them, she was willing to close her eyes and not denounce us. No longer having legitimate existence, we at once became the "*maquis*," or underground. Friends came to our aid. Lydia, who worked in the kitchen, left a drum of soup outside the building every day. We went to fetch it, not without difficulty. Some of the captives, reduced to the state of starving dogs, attacked us. The container was overturned, the soup disappeared into the ground. From then on, we had to defend ourselves against these gangs, and we formed a group of our own comrades-in-misery. Soon barbed wire isolated block 31 from the rest of the camp. It became a storehouse from which to fetch victims for the hardest labor or for immediate extermination. The S.S. guards came many times a day to choose their prey. We called it "the hunt." We never knew what the destination was: gas chamber, murderous forced labor, transport to another camp. We remained watchful in order to hide ourselves at a moment's notice. On the outside of this "storehouse" my friends were worried, knowing that I was in such a perilous situation. One of them succeeded in having me accepted into her block. But to become a member, one had to be registered in a regular work gang. I became a woodcutter in the forest neighboring the camp, the lone French woman among tough and stout Russian peasant women with whom I had no way of communicating.

The end of March 1945. The cannon fire was getting closer, flying fortresses roared high in the sky. When returning from wood chopping and walking toward my block, I could barely stand erect; I was burning with fever. To pull through, to see my family before I died—that was all I hoped for. A French comrade met me. She worked in the infirmary. At a glance she sized up my situation and whispered: "I'll try to do something." On the following day I was authorized to remain in the block without working. (She had stolen the permit for me and did so yet another time.) Thus I survived for two weeks, motionless on my mat, not even moving my fingers, as if in hibernation. My friends watched over me.

At Easter 1945, the incredible news burst forth: trucks marked with a red cross had been seen near the camp. Was it really the Red Cross? We dared not believe it. And then the French prisoners were called. Once again we marched past the S.S., fearful of being chosen for who knew what fate. We were divided into two groups: the one of which I was not a part was sent to the showers and returned clothed in new dresses without prisoner badges: no more numbers, no more triangles. They waited for several more hours before passing through the gate of the camp. This first group of 118 survivors arrived in Paris at the Gare de Lyon on April 15, where they were welcomed by General de Gaulle.

Meanwhile, for us who remained, the implacable routine continued. Death was everywhere. Those of our comrades who were at death's door and had not already succumbed had to be carried to roll call and held upright. Corpses were piled like logs on a prisoner-drawn cart and then dumped, pell-mell, on a heap that grew larger each day. The crematory ovens were no longer adequate, even though one that exploded from overuse had been repaired. The mortal carousel went on, the Red Cross trucks were at the gate. Now we knew: It was the Swedish Red Cross trying to save us. Twice I was chosen to leave. Twice I was called back before reaching the gate. Thirteen of us were held back. One of us, Aunt Colette, an intrepid German-speaking woman from Lorraine, decided that we should go as a delegation to confront the *Oberaufseherin*. She picked me to accompany her, together with our friend Christiane. At first, the chief overseer was stupefied by our audacity. How dare we speak to her? "We are keeping you as hostages," she told us. "You will be executed if there is any trouble." Then our impudence gave her an idea: our lives would be spared if we signed a declaration certifying that we had always been well treated. Enraged by our refusal to comply, she dismissed us. This encounter left us with no illusions about the fate awaiting us. Our last French comrades, about to leave the camp, saw that we were pulled from their ranks at the very moment of exiting through the gate. Alarmed, Anise and Kouri alerted the Swedes. One of them, Victor Ankarkrona, entreated the commandant, Suhren, on our behalf, but the German professed ignorance of the matter and instructed his henchman, Pflaum, to find out. Pflaum was one of the most feared of the S.S., always on hand when victims were chosen. He returned and announced that we did not exist. Realizing the extremity of the situation, Victor Ankarkrona insisted, threatened, and finally wrenched us free. Furthermore, another officer, Lieutenant Harald Folke, who slept in lodgings outside the camp, reported that an unknown hand had slipped the list of our names under his door. Who had risked such a thing? No one ever found out. At the moment we finally left, we passed in front of Suhren. With a sweeping gesture he pointed in the direction of the crematory ovens, then, laughing at this his last joke, pointed to the road where a group of Belgian and Dutch women were awaiting the Red Cross trucks. Much later, we learned that Himmler

had tried to arrange a meeting with General Eisenhower, and that he had sought, among other things, to use us as a means of blackmail, reserving for himself the option of having us killed. Our Swedish friends had saved us *in extremis*. (Under the direction of Count Folke Bernadotte, the Swedish Red Cross saved more than 27,000 deportees at the end of the war.)

On the road, we anxiously awaited the Red Cross trucks. They finally arrived. Night fell. The drivers explained that it was too late to be on the road and suggested returning to the camp for the night. We pleaded: "Do not abandon us here." Standing in the trucks, we finally left and spent the night a few kilometers further on, under cover of the forest. No one dared speak or sleep this first night. I walked alone, in silence, breathing deeply, far from the pestilence of the camp, far from the flames of the crematories. The stars shone through the branches. The night was beautiful. However, we were still in Germany, surrounded by danger.

The next day, April 25th, we arrived in Lübeck, then on to the Danish border. Young girls in spotless white welcomed us and offered us milk and cookies; they gave us clean blankets and fresh straw to lie on. We crossed Denmark by train. But the war was not over. At each check point, German sentinels were mounting guard along the platforms. Access to the stations was forbidden to the public, who, gathered behind windows and behind barriers, cheered us. We answered with resonant *Marseillaise*. Finally, on April 27th, in Copenhagen, we boarded a ferry for Malmö. The sentinels had disappeared. The crew welcomed us and served us our first real meal with such respect and benevolence that we were filled with wonder. The sea sparkled in the northern light. Gulls followed the boat, swirling in its wake. Suddenly they rushed forward. We threw them bread. There was as much as they wanted, as much as we wanted. Was it possible? We were returning from the other world. It was true. We were still alive. *We were free.*

EPILOGUE

When you return
For one must return
There will be flowers,
As many as you want:
There will be flowers.

Louis Aragon

Free, in Sweden!

A splendid bus, crossing Malmö, an enchanted city with no trace of war. Passersby strolling by, well nourished, well clad. Suddenly they saw us and stopped short, startled. In the bus, there was silence: they knew where we came from.

The Museum of Natural History opened its doors to us. Here, each woman was issued her own sleeping mat with paper sheets and a woolen blanket. We asked our first visitors for a mirror and comb, wishing to rediscover our human faces. Soon we were taken to a huge changing room, a veritable Ali Baba's cave filled with clothing of all sorts, to choose a dress and coat according to our fancy. *We have shed our convicts' outfit and become human beings again!*

May 8, 1945. We had been transferred from the Museum to a school in the middle of a garden surrounded by an iron grille. A hubbub reaching us from the outside put us on the alert. Still in quarantine and not allowed to leave the building, we rushed to the windows. A crowd gathered along the fence shouted the news: "Peace is signed!" Wildly happy, we hastily fashioned a tricolor made of odds and ends. We burst into cheers and the *Marseillaise*. Time passed and we waited. No one knew when we were to return to France.

The generous Swedes wanted to help. But how? A mission arrived from Paris. It tried to find solutions. Finally, with a few friends, I offered my help. We were accepted. I was to be sent from Malmö to Stockholm, together with Christiane, one of thirteen women condemned to die and saved at the last moment. Repatriation was slowly achieved, usually by means of military aircraft. But all the deportees were due to leave, save those women so enfeebled that they were in a hospital.

My turn came in the middle of August, in a motor convoy across a Europe in ruins. At the border of the British-occupied zone in Germany, I was kept alone, guarded by an armed soldier. A young English non-

commissioned officer questioned me at length: "You were in Germany?" That seemed to him very suspect. My companions intervened and not without difficulty extricated me from further anxiety. The journey continued.

In devastated Hamburg, emerging from the rubble, a lonely little boy stared at us, seeming in despair. He held out his hands to us. I will never forget him. Arriving in Holland, along a canal, an emaciated woman tugged at a barge. Her bare feet slipped in the mud of the towing path. Around her, a swarm of children. None of them wore shoes.

At last in Belgium, the promise of France, that moment so desperately awaited. At the French border, the sole customs officer seemed like a good lad. He was intrigued, however. Who were we? Two French prisoners of war who escaped from Germany into Sweden, a Swedish diplomat on his way to his post in Paris, and a woman who survived the concentration camp? Moreover, our papers showed no trace of passage from Holland into Belgium. Finally, the customs officer offered a solution: if we paid a few francs for a stamp, everything would be in order. So it was agreed. Everyone shook hands cordially. We moved on.

In the middle of the night, on a road peppered with holes, we arrived in Rheims. No hotel could accommodate us. The American army had requisitioned every one of them. A sympathetic MP suggested the one recourse, a whorehouse. The doors to the rooms closed, after a fashion; the quiet of such places was only relative. We contented ourselves with a short night's sleep and at dawn took to the road.

August 19th, 1945. In a few hours we would be in Paris. My heart was pounding.

My traveling companions dropped me off at the Hotel Lutetia, where all deported persons were to stop upon their return. Another interrogation. Then, at last, free! "But where shall I go?" The parents of my friend Claire lived close by on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. I hurried there and rang. And it was Claire who opened the door! By an unlikely coincidence she had just arrived from Germany, where she had been helping with refugees, only a quarter of an hour earlier. We embraced. Her parents were healthy and safe. And my family? Claire told me that they were still living in the west of France. By wire I announced my immediate arrival by train.

At the city of Niort, at six o'clock the next morning, my sister Ghislaine was waiting for me. We boarded a local train that took us to our village. Nearly there, I noticed that our speed had diminished. The train circled around the wood where as a child I had played with my brothers and sisters. A few minutes more and the little station appeared, like a toy set up all alone in the middle of the fields.

As usual, I assumed that the train would pass the station, which was nearly always deserted. But, no, it slowed even more and, before my eyes, the platform was teeming with people. "What's happening?" I asked Ghislaine, who smiled without answering. The locomotive ground its teeth, panted and puffed, and then, with a great noise, stopped. We got off, the only travelers to do so.

One of my brothers and Maurice, our neighbor and childhood companion, ran toward me, lifted me off the ground, and carried me more than led me toward the crowd. They were all country people, silent, with tears in their eyes. Flowers, flags, armbands proclaiming membership in the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur*! I moved from arm to arm. People were weeping. I would have liked to cry, too. I did not realize what was happening. It was as if I was soaring on a cloud.

We walked along the road toward the village: six hundred meters to the first houses. I gave my arm to my grandfather; I had been so terribly afraid of not seeing him again. Intense happiness! My brothers and sisters walked with me. The youngest, Monique, was only twelve when, in 1943, I had come from Paris for a short family visit. It had been our last reunion before my arrest. When I left, Monique had climbed onto the step of the railway car to hug me once more. During the days and nights of interrogations at the hands of the Gestapo, I tried to think of her sunny face to help me gather strength. And now here she was, near me, a young adolescent. She told me that my sister Anne had just had a baby, and mother was with her to help.

How did all these friends know that I was coming home at last? When my telegram arrived from Paris, the village constable had spread the news and the village policeman beaten his drum to announce my arrival. And here in the village everything was decked with flags. The church bells rang out. On the square in front of the

church, we placed flowers on the monument to those who had died in war. I gave thanks. We continued toward my family's home. Children at the main gate welcomed me with more flowers.

Another surprise awaited me. While my family was at the station, some women had outlined on the ground, over the whole expanse of the courtyard, a huge Cross of Lorraine—in flowers! I moved toward the threshold, taking care not to disturb this meaningful testimony of love and faith. My sister Marie whispered to me: "We've been able to save some champagne, but there's not enough for everybody." Despite the dearth of wine, everyone had his share—as at the Wedding in Cana.

¹"When I am called 'Max,'" Jean Moulin said one day, "it is always of the poet, writer, painter, mystic—Max Jacob was all of these—that I am thinking. It is he whom I see. He is alone in my heart, in my thoughts, he is indeed unique." (These observations, reported by Max Jacob and recorded by Mme Camille Armel, are cited by Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz in "Max Jacob and Jean Moulin," Espoir:119, June 1999, 13-15.)