

Belgium 1932-36

Antwerp

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

M. Did Dolly also go to Palestine?

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

M. Did you know each other?

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

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

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

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

The Barcelona Workers' Games

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

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

M. Did Hitler hold his own Olympiads?

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

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

³ New York Times, May 17 1936.

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

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

M. What is the ASC?

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

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

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

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

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

R. No, by the Germans.

M. When was that?

R. It was in '36.

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

R. Oh yes, at the request of Franco.

M. While the Olympic Games were in progress?

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

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

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

Brussels '36

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prelude to Spain '36

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

⁸ International Workers' Movement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

M. When did you get the divorce?

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

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

M. What was the charge?

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

¹⁰ The Communist newspaper

¹¹ A conservative newspaper

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Travel to Spain

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Assignment in Spain

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

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

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

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

"No," I answered, "pharmacist."

" You stay" he said.

I felt relieved.

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

The Pharmacy

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

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

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

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

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

¹² Internationally known as *La Passionara*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Highjacking Incident

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

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

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

"No" he answered.

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

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

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

¹³ In Poland after the war.

¹⁴ National Police

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Anarchists

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Drunken Driver Incident

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dolly's Assignment

M. Did you see Dolly from time to time?

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

¹⁷ Local Justice of the Peace or equivalent

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

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

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

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

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

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

La Retirada- The Retreat

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

M. You gave birth in Mataró?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Return from Spain

France

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

M. Where were the men?

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

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

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

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

¹⁹ Mayor

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

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

Return to Belgium, 1938

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Belgium 1939-40

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

M. What did you do for a living?

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

M. When was that? In '39 already?

R. Yes. '39.

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

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

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

R. That's right.

M. What happened then?

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

Marcel provides more detail from another conversation:

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

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

²⁰ Sabine, Bob's mother.

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

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

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

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

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

M. Where did this take place, in Belgium?

R. In Brussels

M. This was during the occupation then?

R. No, during the secret occupation

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

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

M. You mean there was a conspiracy with Belgians?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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