

Regine, before we get to the letter, I keep going back a little bit. Since you weren't going out very much, what were you doing every day?

They had a beautiful garden. So we could garden and help in household, whatever they were doing, a lot of sewing, because, as I told you, they were both very crafty people and did a lot of things. So days passed pretty fast.

So did you learn how to do this, or did you know how to se?

Oh, yes, I learned from them, you know? And I liked gardening, and we did the washing. Things were much more elaborate than now because even washing machines were, like, with the handle and things like that.

So it kept us pretty busy, and we tried to have our own vegetable garden because it was the war. So at least we had fresh vegetables. So that took up quite some time.

We had chicken, and we had this type of thing. So it was totally different from what one imagines now, you know?

Right. And totally different from the life that you had led.

Yeah, and then we would sew. We would make a dress, and we would turn a coat into a skirt and things like that. So I learned a little bit of that too.

And-- go ahead. We wouldn't...

We wouldn't dare listen to the radio, so we only got news of where the situation was like to some neighbors we trusted, or then we would prepare the tools and the cabinet for Paul, who had to come twice a week and keep that going, so little household things and different things.

Before you got the letter from your mother, did Germans ever come into the village or--

There were Germans in the village around the village because, once again, Grez-Doiceau was just two miles away from the military base. So we had to be very careful.

But to the house? No. We were remote enough in the village and not near the main road, which connected one city to the other. We were not just in the line of that. It was remote by a little river that passes in front of the house.

So that wasn't too bad, but there were a lot of Germans, a lot. We had to be very careful because, as I said, the military base was taken over by them, and we could hear the planes go off and this type of thing. And you will see later in my story when I go to visit my mother, the searchlights and this and that from the military base was just terrible.

Terrible.

Mhm.

So do you have any idea approximately how long you're staying with Marie and Elise Hanquet-- is that how you pronounce it? An-kay?

An-kay.

Before you get this letter from your mother, is it a month or two months?

Maybe two months. Yeah, two months, maybe even a week more.

Now, did you actually get the letter from your mother, or is Clara-- did you somehow get in touch with Clara [coughs]

I had already got in touch with Clara. And if I remember well, I think it's Clara who sent me the letter my mother had written to her. She sent that letter to me to say someone has to go and get her because they're just going to die. And I remember either I went there-- that might be the time I went and spent the night, saying that I thought she should go because she was the oldest, and I didn't know-- and I had found a place where to be safe.

So I thought the risks and dangers I was going to encounter, again, I didn't think it would be the right thing. But then she said that Jack wouldn't agree. He wouldn't let her go.

Do you think that was an excuse, that she--

I think so.

--she didn't want to go?

No.

She might have been as terrified as I was. She might have realized the risks she was taking, and she had no false papers either. She didn't have any. I had.

You had.

She didn't.

Right.

Her French was, hmm, OK.

So yours was better?

Yeah.

So in some ways you were a better person to go because you were...

Well, it wasn't has broken, if anything.

Yes.

So, anyway, it was a no-- and there was no bending over, and she wasn't going to go.

And how difficult was that for you to go to Brussels?

Pretty difficult because, first, I needed to get a steam train that would get me to the next city, which was Wavre. Then I had to find the train to get me into Brussels. And then from Brussels, from the station, I had to walk.

So I was quite-- you know, for--

That's a strange city also.

Yeah, I don't know. That's how I came to have to ask so often is this the [possibly French; ask Noemi. How far away am I? And they would give me some indication. And then I'd say, do I turn right or left or whatever, until they would just say, go back from where you came.

So off I went again home. I did that twice at least.

Yeah. I really think the way I explain it now, I had guardian angels all over the place because I wasn't supposed to be arrested. I mean, if I had taken a few steps more, I was in the search. We call that in those days razzia. The Germans were doing razzia, and there I was right in the street.

Now, that's not the way they arrested Clara and Jack. They were denounced by his ex-wife. That's how it happened.

So you think he actually got a divorce, but did not marry her.

Yeah.

I see. So she denounced--

And she wasn't Jewish.

His wife was not Jewish?

So he must have got mad over something. I don't know what. So in the middle of the night, they came, and I slip out. Yeah. We were notified and all the things. So many dangerous things happened during the war. No one used their head.

We were notified by the Jewish committee that Clara had been arrested following a denunciation from the neighbors. And if I wanted more information, they could give us more information.

You were notified--

By the Jewish committee from Brussels.

When you were hiding?

So they knew where you were? How did they know?

I don't know.

You don't know?

I don't know how they knew.

And they wrote to the Hanquet's home.

To let us know that she had been arrested. If not, it would have taken quite another while for me to know--

To find out.

--because I wasn't going anywhere anymore. It was just become more and more dangerous. And I probably got more terrified knowing how well I was in the family taking all these risks.

So they notified us, and they told-- they knew who had done the trick. And they said that if any of us came, any meaning probably Marie or me, Clara-- and I don't know the stupid thing she did again, she took her watch off and put it in the hands of whoever was there to give to me.

So we recuperated that.

You had the watch?

Yeah. Later.

So she must have given them the information somehow.

Maybe she's the one who gave the information. She did something which she shouldn't have done either is to write from Malines with the address and the same name.

I mean, if you address Clara Donner to Regine Donner in Grez-Doiceau, you are telling them, hey, there's another Donner there. Go and get her. She didn't think.

So for the next six months, I lived like every day, any one who comes out the door, oh, my god. What if they come to arrest me?

Did she your false name?

No.

So she was in a bind if she wanted to write to you. She didn't know how to do it.

Yeah, and better not to write at all. What difference does it make? See, by that time, we knew much more. '43 this is now. We have already gone through so much knowing what's going on. I have never understood why she did that. As I say, panic. That is the only way I can explain it.

And it had the stamp from the prison, from Malines. So it was just dreadful to live like that.

But now once before, before this happens, you get the letter from your sister that was sent to her from your mother, come to Paris.

Come to Paris. Come to get us.

So your sister is not going to go, and you discussed this with Marie and Elise? Shall I do this? Shall I not do this?

Yeah. Shall I do it? Shall I not do it? They didn't want me to do it.

They didn't?

No. They said, look, you just found safety. How secure is this false identity card. We don't know. If they come on the train, and you show your card, they might accept it, but they might also look at your looks and not go for it.

Now, the next thing, you have no papers for your mother at all, and you have no papers for Henry. So you're really jeopardizing your own safety. And they had already got very attached to me. They didn't want me to go.

So I debated for a while, you know, one day, another day, and then it really haunted me that if anything happened to my mother, I would never forgive myself not having tried, not thinking, again, as I say, we all did stupid things, not thinking the risk I was taking. So I decided I'd go.

So they gave me money. They gave me plenty of money. I took my false identity, a little suitcase, because, of course, even if it's just for two or three days, cause I promised I'd be back in two or three days. Just look out for me. I'll be back.

I don't think there was even a bus that would take me to Wavre. I think I had kind of to walk part of it, and off I went. I brought myself to Brussels. I went on the international train.

Are you feeling less afraid, more afraid, or it does it matter because you have--

I was afraid as I've ever been. Just one. Number one, I don't know Paris. Of course, I'm stupid. I think I'm going to be there in three hours, right?

So at least I see where I'm going. I had an address--

That's all?

--which I've lost since, of course. So I'll ask. I'll find my way.

Now we were on the train, and it is getting dark. And I get more and more panicked. This is even more frightening to me than when I stepped on the train for Maline and I don't know why, there was something I had to do, and I was going.

But here, now, I'm doing it to myself, right? When I saw the night coming, then I really fell apart. I really panicked. When this gentleman-- and I was going up and down. I couldn't even sit still. I was up the train, down the train, sitting, getting up again, looking out through the window, coming back again, not asking anyone how far are we or whatever.

And I believe this gentleman had seen that, and he said, where are you going? Oh, here I am already, like this. I say, I'm going to Paris, but I don't know Paris. Are we far away still?

So he says, hmm, at least an hour or two. The trains weren't running the normal way either. Oh I said, this is it. This is the end of me. But I did ask whether he knew Paris. He said, yes, he knew Paris very well.

So I proceed to show him the address. I said, this is where I have to go. Oh, I'll get you there. I said, so you know where to go? You know the city? He said, yes, I'll get you there.

So that kind of a little bit made me feel a little bit more rested, but the more the time was going, and as I said, didn't look like we were ever going to make it. And when we got there, it was really late. It was pitch dark. So he told me, no, I'll get you there.

Was he an older man, a younger man, ? [crosstalk]

No.

I mean, do you have any recollection?

Maybe 40-something. So we got down from the train, and we went out from the station, and, now, there's Gestapo-- there's Germans all in the street, their guns, and all that, and boots.

And each time I hear the boots, I get closer to the man, and as soon as the boots are passed, I take my distance because, once again, I don't know this man. Where is he leading me? He could have led me anywhere he wanted. I have no clue.

First of all, it was pitch dark, and I have no clue. Paris was not known to me at all. And we walked quite a bit and then up the pavement and up again. So that was an experience, I tell you. I don't know how I survived it.

And he got you--

And we met a lot of Germans, a lot.

[crosstalk].

And no one stopped us or asked us any papers. I suppose there was no curfew for the French people. So there was no reason to stop us.

Could they even see you? It was pitch black.

Probably not. No, probably not, because it was pitch black. But he knew where he was going, which was the most amazing thing.

So we got to the hotel, and I had probably told them now on the way going, by then, I'm going to meet my mother I have to say something. What are you going to do there? I'm going to meet my mother.

But I didn't say who I was, neither whether she was Jewish or anything. I was just going to meet my mother and my little brother. That's the way I said it.

So when we opened that door, 200 people packed in this one big hotel, some with their shawls, saying their prayers. So there was no such thing evening pretending or making up a story. It was all there.

And they were all in one room?

All in one room. And I don't know who came across me and asked me who I was looking for or anything, and I gave the name. And he waited.

He waited till I fell in my mother's arm, and then he disappeared. And I couldn't even turn around and ask him his name or thank him. I turned around because I really wanted to thank him to have got me into those circumstances, I mean, from the train on, but he was gone.

Amazing, that woman and this guy.

Yes, I know.

And the other guy...

And I did feel bad that I couldn't say thank you for, you know, having brought me such safe haven here. But he probably realized what was going on.

Had you contacted your mother?

No.

At all? You didn't do anything, right? Of course not because it would be too dangerous. So she had no idea.

No.

Whether anybody was coming.

No. She was waiting.

So you walked in, and you fell into each other's arms.

Yeah. And we both cried, and Henry was there, and so then I told her, well, I got your letter from Clara, and I came to take you back to Belgium. So she agreed on that, and so we talked, and she didn't know where her husband was, didn't know where my father was, hadn't heard from anyone.

The only address she had was Clara. And that's why she wrote to Clara. She hadn't known what had happened to me either. She had no clue.

Now she knew.

Now she knows, and I tell her I'm hiding. I'm in this family.

And she wasn't angry with you for not having gone to Malines.

No.

No.

No, that didn't even come question, no. I suppose she was happy to see me.

I would imagine.

Yeah.

And there I have much more difficulties over the years to think that Clara was the eldest, and I felt it was her duty to go and rescue my mother and not me because no one came forward, and there was no one else around. So someone had to do it.

But in some ways, you may have been the better person to do it--

Probably.

--because Clara was not even close to your mother.

You and--

That's true.

--you had some connection.

There had been a break, but she still loved Clara a lot. I've seen that over the next months too.

Yes.

Yeah.

But who knows.

Who knows.

You, obviously, in some way, were the right person because you got her out.

Yeah, I got her out. So, anyway, then we started planning. Oh, no, no. We weren't going to go the next day. OK, so we went another day. I don't know what the reasons were. I can't remember that.

And Henry was running all over the place. He was really keeping her alive. He was doing errands for everyone in that room who paid him some money, and with that, he fed his mother because they had landed there with nothing.

Nothing.

But I mean absolutely nothing. So she was lucky that she had Henry with her, and he spoke French very fluently.

How old is Henry about now? You're 14.

Yeah, what would he be? Six, maybe.

Really?

Five, six years old.

And you haven't seen anybody now for what? Six months, a year, something like this?

Oh, yeah, more than a year.

More than a year?

Mhm. More than a year.

Wow. So that's quite a reunion.

That is a reunion, a very emotional reunion. But I realized immediately the danger we're in here. It was a real emotional reunion. I hadn't seen her. I hadn't heard what happened.

She didn't give me much detail. She had no clue of what happened to my dad. She didn't know-- the only one she knew was Clara in Brussels.

Now this time, she's not holding any grudges about the circumstances. She just knows Clara is there, and she's alive. She hadn't known much about me.

And Henry is keeping her going. Thank god.

And, David, is he--

No one knew. No.

Okay.

The least we knew, he was in concentration camp. And, David, we don't know what happened to him at all. Actually, I didn't find out until after the war that David was still--

So it took me at least four or five days, and I was really in pins and needles. Number one, I had promised the Hanquet family, two or three days I'd be back, and I told her that I said, these people have done so much for me. They're going to be so anxious. They're going to think that they're never going to come back again.

I have to go, and it was always-- I suppose it's, again, that fear that's been so strong with her that she didn't feel like going. So I had it all arranged finally. I said, look, you're going to pretend you're sleeping. Under no circumstances are you to talk. She couldn't talk.

So just pretend you're dead asleep. Now if Henry wakes up, that's OK. He was like a little early, but I'll do the talking. And I was the only one who had the false identity card, and I was pretty terrified about the whole thing because one paper for three people? I mean, nothing made sense. I mean, when you think about it afterwards, it's ridiculous.

So we finally decided, now we'll help her packing. And the first thing my mother tends to pack is a Jewish prayer book. I said, no way. If they open anything, even if it isn't for papers, but they want to see what we're carrying, that's it. Our arrest is signed right there. So please promise me you're not going to take it. No, she wasn't going to take it, but she had it.

But she had it.



So you see how she put us in danger? That's what she packed. I don't know when she did it because I thought that really kept an eye on everything, but I didn't.

And what's happening in this one room with the 200 people who were there?

They're just sitting, talking.

Just talking.

Yeah. Praying--

And have they rented this room? Do you have--

Either they rented it, or the Jewish committee paid for them to just be in a place. But it didn't take long that they were all arrested.

I'm sure.

Oh, yeah, that was just like, you know, waiting to be targeted.

And were they surprised that you had come?

Some were.

And come to take your mother out, mother and [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, some were. And we left in the night train. I thought it there would be less control and maybe more schedules for sleeping than taking a day train. So that's what we did. We left at night.

So you've become very calculating, haven't you?

I know. It's amazing, I know.

No, it's very important. I mean, something starts happening to you.

Oh, yes, I started realizing, hey, we have to do that right. I calculated even more during the trip. So we left in the evening, and it was pitch dark, and it's blackened outside and all that. So we are OK.

I can't remember whether the Germans came up and whether they pretended to sleep. I think it can well be, and I just showed my papers, and I don't know how, but it passed. But now what I start worrying-- we're getting closer to the border.

Wait one second. So they didn't say to you, so who are these two people?

No.

Nobody said anything? But they were Germans?

Yeah. There were two controls, were the Germans and the French.

And the French, nobody said anything?

No. I suppose people were used to illegals. I don't know. I don't know. But I was a really terrified, and she never moved.

So that was OK, but more than once did I see my last hour come with all of us, more than once.

And this is where I really started calculating. It's now getting 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, and daylight is starting to show, and we're getting closer into Belgium, closer to Brussels, and I realize if I get down on the platform in Brussels with the two of them, if there is a control, we finished again.

So I decided we're not going to go into the station. The train stops in a field. You know, it does that a lot. Even now, some trains stop a bit before they get in the last.

And I told my mother and Henry, we're jumping off the train here, and we did. And we rolled in the gutters down on the embankment. And when the train passed, this is very, very early morning, 5:00, something like that, we got down into the street. And then we made their way to Clara.

Oh, you went to Clara?

Oh, yeah, where was I going to take her?

Right.

I couldn't take her anywhere else. So that's why I calculated we can't get into the station. They'll probably be controlled from this train coming in from Paris.

And you have small pieces of luggage.

Oh, very little.

Throw the luggage over first, and then you ...

Very little.

Uh-huh. So then you walk to Clara.

Mhm. And I left her there. I said, now, I've done my part. We'll see what we can do after, but I'm going back because they'll be waiting for me for four or five days. They must think that I'm never going to come back again.

And what happens when Clara and your mother meet? Is Clara happy? Is he, like--

Oh, yeah, she's happy.

She is happy?

Oh, yeah, she is happy. Yeah. So there's a kind of reconciliation.

Kind of, yeah. Oh, yeah, I don't think there was any more what we lived through that famous night we went through over there. No, I suppose the circumstances of life and what we have gone through have changed a lot of the optic, and she had the roof, and she was staying there for two or three days to see what was going to happen next.

But while I was away, that's how the Hanquet family was. They had already started initiating a place where they could have my mother hiding.

This is before you even got back, assuming-- so you assumed--

Assuming I'd be coming back, and things, you know, with prayers and all the rest, would go well. So maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to find out where could she be going for hiding.

So the reception, I got back, and that is often the way she referred to Marie. It was like the Prodigal Son had to come back. They had tears.

They had been every day looking out the window hoping to see me come down from the bus station and know another day had passed, and I wasn't back. They didn't think they'd see me again, so it was a big welcome.

So you were away perhaps a week or 10 days or something?

A week for sure.

Did you cry too when you ...?

I didn't think I'd make it.

So they have begun to think about how they could help, if you came back.

Yeah. They knew that she couldn't stay with me.

Right.

They knew it wouldn't be very safe to stay with Clara.

Right.

You think Clara was past trying to pass, and she wasn't wearing a Jewish star.

She could have passed by herself.

But not with her husband.

But not with him. She really could have been saved. And maybe he too, just that he didn't want to separate because she was much less Jewish looking than I was. And we had already found a place for her. She just didn't want to go without him, and that was out of the question.

I mean, it, wasn't safe to do things like that, two people in the same place.

OK, we're going to change the tape. And when we come back, we'll start talking about how you find a place for [coughs] and then what happens. OK.