



Flight from war-time Paris

Historical background:- In Europe World War II started Sept. 2, 1939. Yet there was almost no fighting in France till May 1940, when the Germans suddenly launched their "Blitzkrieg". They circumvented the impenetrable French Maginot Line by marching through defenseless Holland, and Belgium. Within days they were in France, heading towards Paris.

I was a student at the University of Paris, due to graduate in June 1940. For my summer vacation of 1939 I went to the historic seaside town of La Rochelle, and was still there when war was declared on September 2.

Trainloads of Alsatian women, children and old people started arriving at La Rochelle every day. They were being forcibly "relocated" to this Western part of France. Even though they were French citizens, and their draft-age men were serving in the French army, their ethnic background was German, so the government had used its war-time power to move this population away from the border, and to demand that local municipalities house them. In La Rochelle the police department was assigned the task to house this mass of arrivals in the homes of local citizens, even though these citizens resented the demand that they offer accommodations to strangers, most of whom spoke German rather than French.

Since I was fluent in languages I volunteered my services to translate. When he heard that I was a student in psychology, the kindly but overworked and understaffed Police Commissioner insisted that I be in charge of "social problems", giving me full authority over the team of five policemen who were to "settle" the new arrivals.

I need not elaborate on how heart-wrenching were the situations we encountered. Here were scared, dislocated families, many of whose men were now serving somewhere in the French army, while they themselves were pulled out of their homes and neighborhoods against their will. And now they were the objects of suspicion and resentment by those who had to house them.

Although our priorities had to be for meals and housing, which meant negotiating by means of a complicated system of meal and housing tickets and then taking people to their assigned facilities, the policemen and I developed a good team spirit and used all the ingenuity and creativity we could muster to match

unwilling "hosts" and "guests" as well as possible. In many cases it was difficult to get "host" families to offer even elementary courtesy, let alone welcome, particularly when there were language problems. Yet we had to allocate housing for large numbers of people with almost no prior notice. I was particularly concerned about the effect on the children, although it turned out that it was they who became our best "helpers". People who were otherwise surly responded to their unhappy faces with the impulse to feed and comfort them even when they were hostile to the grown-ups. In concrete situations people do seem to have reservoirs of kindness, and children show resilience. Often it was thanks to the children that we were able to establish some communication and obtained accommodations that had seemed impossible. So in spite of many mistakes we made due to pressure and lack of experience, relatively humane resolutions were achieved for most of the awful crises we encountered.

By December 1940, with almost no fighting at the border, the French government decided that the Alsations posed no threat, so they reversed their orders. Displaced persons were authorized to return home by Christmas. So my team and I then had the happy task to help set up return journeys, and to witness that quite a number of unlikely friendships had developed. The university reopened in January, and I returned to Paris to continue there.

Then, in May 1940, came the "Blitzkrieg", and daily news of German troops advancing. With air-raid sirens blasting, our professors shepherded us students to the basement of the Sorbonne. Those of us due to graduate that year were given handwritten diplomas, and all were urged to leave Paris before it was invaded.

So, early in June 1940, like thousands of others, I left Paris on foot, wearing my best wool suit, for there was not much I could carry in my small bag. After trekking from one railroad station to another, and hours of waiting here and there for transportation, I managed to squeeze onto a tightly packed train which disgorged me at La Rochelle. There, on the overcrowded platform, was my old friend, the police commissioner, waving his arms as he gave directions to masses of disoriented people. "Ah, Mademoiselle Blumberg!" he waved at me with a faint smile on his strained face. "Quelle Pagaie! Yes. We need help. Refugees have been streaming in for days from Holland, Belgium, and now the North of France. They have not eaten for days. We take people by bus to a feeding station outside town before they go on. You will run it, n'est-ce pas? Please allow Pierre to take you there." And before I could protest that I myself had fled from Paris and had not eaten or rested for

two days, he beckoned to a policeman near him, and I was whisked across town in his police car. I was so tired from standing for hours in the train that I dozed off during the brief ride, rather than ask Pierre any questions.

When we stopped, there was quite a sight to behold. In an open field were rows of rough wooden tables and benches at which people were seated, gulping down what turned out to be a sandwich and a cup of coffee before going off hastily, then replaced by others from a long line of people behind them, in a continuous process. At the side was a big table with a "production line" of Boy Scouts in uniform making sandwiches by cutting bread and inserting ham. Beyond that area were camp fires with large vats of boiling water into which other scouts were dipping sacks of coffee and chicory, while still others ladled the resulting brew into cups and brought them to the tables. This activity was relatively orderly, but there was much commotion in the lines of waiting people and confusion in getting cups back from the tables and rinsing them in buckets of rather dirty water.

Trying to maintain some semblance of order was Janot, one of the policemen who had been in my September team, looking utterly exhausted. Pierre took me to him through the crowd and drove off. Janot greeted me like a long-lost friend who was fresh from vacation, rather than as someone who was herself disoriented, hungry and sleepy. He told me that he had been on the job now for twentyfour hours almost without rest, and was overwhelmed with the major immediate problems of organization. Distribution of food and coffee had worked well enough before the flood of refugees had grown to unmanageable proportions, and fights were developing in the crowd. The Belgian Boy Scouts whom he had recruited from early arrivals were now desperately in need of relief, if only to sleep a few hours in the fields, but people were hungry and in panic. All were pushing to eat quickly before moving on southwards as fast as they could. Fortunately there was a steady supply of bread, ham, and bags of coffee, sugar and chicory, thanks to Georges Simenon, the mystery book author, who was a resident of La Rochelle. Both he and other residents were driving into town and back constantly, bringing supplies in their cars.

Challenges bring on reserves of energy even under exhaustion. With sandwich in hand, while Janot continued to hold the crowd at bay, I combed down the lines of people at tables and was able to recruit a number of volunteers who agreed to stay on a few more days rather than continue their flight immediately. Thus we set up small open-ended teams to relay each other on assigned tasks. This

allowed us and the scouts two hours of sleep in the fields every six hours, for the flow of hungry people went on day and night. Fortunately the weather was mild.

The system worked well enough in that quantities of hungry people continued to be fed without increase or escalation of the previous eruptions of violence. Also, none of us there collapsed from fatigue, although at times we had to renounce even limited sleep because of an increase in bomb alerts. Whenever the sirens wailed we had to extinguish our fires and disperse in the fields. I remember that at those times I was surprised to note that rather than feel scared while waiting for the "all clear" to sound, my principal concern was whether the hot coffee in the vats would get so cold that we would have to reheat it, and how long it would take to re-ignite our campfires.

One day, abruptly, the huge flow of refugees trickled down and then stopped altogether. The invading German army had sealed off the border between northern and southern France. No-one could come through any more. Janot drove me into town before going home. I rented a room in a small hotel, where I slept for twentyfour hours. I had experienced eternity in about a week.

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