

## France to England via Spain – Three refugees

### Chapter 1

#### Good News: the characters

“This is the B.B.C. Home and Forces programme, and this is Bruce Belfrage : there is some excellent news just in from Cairo. After twelve days of bitter fighting, the enemy is in complete retreat before the Eighth Army”

This was how I learned of the victory of El Alamein, one evening at the beginning of November 1942 at 11 o'clock. My father maintains that it was midnight because there was no scheduled news broadcast at eleven but, as this was a special bulletin, and anyway my father had been in the land of Nod for at least an hour and half, I still believe I was right.

We were in France at the time; in Lyons to be precise. My parents and myself had always lived in France, near Paris, until June 1940. My father was English, my mother French. They both, in normal times worked in insurance. We had left Paris, our home and our friends in June 1940 just before the arrival of the Germans and we found asylum firstly with friends, at the château de la Gardelle and later in a small village on the fringe of the Périgord, at Alviçnac-les eaux. It was a pleasant little village in the Causses and not very far from that better known and highly picturesque village, Rocamadour. This latter is entirely built on a cliff face and its castle, at the highest point, dominates a gray mixture of belfries, churches, the roofs of convents and a few houses.

Near Alviçnac is the famous Puits de Padirac which is a giant sinkhole in the limestone more than three hundred meters deep. It can be visited and most people get to the bottom by means of the lift which has been installed, At the bottom there is a river which can be followed for five kilometres deep underground. You can even take a boat up this river and a good part of the network of caves has been equipped with railings and electric lighting. In Alviçnac, we took refuge in a hotel which could take up to 45 guests in the summer. When we arrived there were a hundred and fifty. In spite of the circumstances, we enjoyed our stay and I particularly remember some wonderful bicycle rides to the well-known caverns nearby such as Lacaze and Les Eyzies. Many others which we explored had not yet entered the tourist itinerary.

After two months in Alviçnac, after the Armistice and with the permission of the local gendarmerie, we were given petrol coupons and permission to proceed to Lyons. Lyons had just been evacuated by the Boches and was on the way to becoming the capital of the non-occupied zone as we called it

at the time (later, once the situation had become clear we called it "the not completely occupied zone"). The city was overrun with refugees of all kinds. After spending some time in the villa of a friend of ours, we managed to find an apartment close to the Rhone where we were relatively comfortably installed.

Until the beginning of November 1942, life in Lyon was more or less normal (apart from the restrictions) Because we were English and registered voters and known to the Prefecture of Police, we had never been bothered by officials.

On the other hand, everyone we knew used to ask us about the intentions of His Britannic Majesty's Government which, they seemed to imagine, kept us informed of its deliberations.. Many of these contacts were very useful because they enabled us keep in touch with the Resistance and to read all the clandestine newspapers such as Combat, Franc-Tireur, Libération, Libre France etc. Thanks to the regular news broadcast by the B.B.C., we were always able to be optimistic. This was not the case with the French public in general. Saturated as it was with Vichy anti-English propaganda, public opinion went from one extreme to the other.

Prominent in the German Propaganda version of the news were events such as the bombardment of the French Fleet at Mers el Kébir, Crete, the taking of Hong-Kong and Singapore. Tobruck did nothing to reassure the French. In my opinion one of the greatest German victories when it came to destroying French moral was the passage of the boats Scharnhorst, Gneisnau and Prinz-Eugen into the English Channel, within spitting distance of the English ports "Ah Ah", someone said, "The English Navy must have completely lost control of the seas since the German navy can come and go as it likes in the English Channel."

But if these reverses were precursors of a wave of pessimism, the other side of the coin was represented by events such as the sinking of the Bismark and these compensated more than a little for the bad news and the newsvendors knew very well what they had to shout to sell their newspapers. My father always remembers a large truck driving down the rue de la République in Lyon with the magic word "Spitfire" written in chalk on the roof.

And so things continued until that beautiful morning, Sunday November 8, 1942. In spite of the combined efforts of Vichy and the Germans to scramble all the wireless programs, everyone quickly heard the news of the disembarkment of the Allied troops in North Africa, followed by General Giraud's appeal to the French nation. That morning, after mass, everyone wore bright and happy smiles, all were anxious to pass on the good news to those rare souls who had not yet been informed. Variants on the theme, "You've heard the news? Not bad, Eh?", were everywhere.

Yes, it was even going very well, after all the reverses we had suffered. I remember a student friend saying to me in June 1942, while the Germans

were advancing on Egypt: "It's a matter of days, maybe even hours till they take Cairo, Alexandria and the Suez Canal ". I never spoke to him again. Good news indeed, but for my family, it meant that complications were likely to ensue. The next day, I went off to work as usual and, apart from the fact that tongues were wagging incessantly things were rather calm. It was only on Tuesday that our adventure started, an adventure which was, in the end, to get us back to good old England.

## CHAPTER II

At this point, I would like to make a few observations on Marshal Pétain.

Pétain had considerable authority and many supporters in Lyons. He had a great reputation and was venerated because of the part he played in the 14-18 war. He had also picked a moment when nobody had the slightest idea what to do to declare his coup d'état and to ask for an armistice. It should not be forgotten that he had been severely reprimanded by Poincaré for defeatism and that, when Clémenceau had to choose an overall Commander in 1918, he said: "Before me were two men: one wanting an armistice (Pétain), the other driven mad by the very idea (Foch); I chose the mad one and we won the war ".

- It was he, Pétain, who before the war severely criticised the books of General de Gaulle on the future of tank warfare.
- It was he who shook the Fuhrer's hand at Montoire.
- It was he who said, "We must help the Germans who are fighting for civilisation ".
- It was he who said, "Every morning, I tell myself that we were beaten "
- It was he who re-engaged Laval after having dismissed him because he was not serving the interests of France.
- Misusing his prestige as "First Marshal of France " it was he, above all others, responsible for the defeat which France had undergone.

## CHAPTER III

Preliminary adventures.

On Tuesday morning, I went to work as usual, but there was a kind of indefinable atmosphere, a funny sort of feeling which I could not escape, and at midday, instead of going back home for lunch, I dropped in at my father's office where he informed me that we were leaving for Grenoble that afternoon. We had chosen Grenoble because rumours had it that the

Germans would only occupy the Saone-Rhone valley and the Riviera. In addition, we had excellent friends there.

In Lyon that day, there were groups of French soldiers wandering the streets with nothing to do and nowhere to go, penniless and, worse, without ration books. They couldn't even go into restaurants as they were all asking for ration coupons. The German soldiers had invaded their barracks that morning and given them five minutes to leave; if they had not gone by then the Germans evicted them, throwing their possessions out of the windows. It would have been the perfect moment for a revolution, in my opinion - although I must admit I am somewhat lacking in practical experience of revolutions.

And yet, I cannot continue without mentioning the demonstrations which I did see. This rather contradicts the foregoing as a demonstration is, in fact, a sort of miniature revolution, and if a demonstration is well planned, it can become a thoroughgoing revolution. Look at South America.

In any case, during the four years of occupation, the French took advantage of every chance to express themselves: May 1, July 14 and November 11 were their favourite dates. These were not enough for French and they dug into their memories and their history books to find favourable dates; a victory over the Germans in the seventeen hundreds; the anniversary of some Marshal who had fought the Germans; anything would do. They could have done with one of my history teachers, a man who would have found them an event for every day of the year.

The biggest demonstration which I remember happened on July 14, 1942. My mother was at Perrache station and I was at the Place de la République. I saw them arrive at the Place Bellecour, completely filling the Rue de la République. Red, white and blue flags floating over their heads, they were singing the Marseillaise. When they reached the Place de la République, hundreds of Gendarmes and Police appeared from nowhere and started to disperse them, carrying off dozens in their police vans. They had the advantage, and the demonstrators soon realised it. They dispersed into the side-streets to regroup later. The police force did a lot of overtime that day to keep things under control.

Another great demonstration had been scheduled for November 11th, but the sudden occupation of the so-called-free-zone by the Germans and the Italians interfered and, this time, in most towns the demonstrations never saw the light of day.

We arrived at Grenoble the same evening in a train which was more than crowded (as they all were then) and found two rooms in the hotel which was to become the Italian Headquarters. While we were there, we saw quite a lot of Italians. The French have never liked the Italians and never will. I always remember the banner that the French had hung on the French-Italian frontier

when the Greeks resisted the Italian invasion and pushed them back:  
"Greeks! Stop here; This is France " said the banner.

We had the privilege of seeing the victorious army Italian parading in the streets of Grenoble, laughing and singing, traditional feather in hat. More of this subject later. After one week in Grenoble, seeing that nothing was happening, we returned to Lyons. The people of Lyons, who had not been very active until then, started to show signs of life. This was sometimes violent; almost every night, a bomb would explode; at the recruitment office for voluntary work in Germany; the office of a newspaper which had sold out to the Germans; a kiosk where German newspapers were sold; the headquarters of the *Parti Populaire Français* even in a butcher's shop reputed to sell to the Germans on the black market. One evening, we heard a bigger than usual explosion. Later, we learned that it one of the arsenals had been blown up. News of this never reached the newspapers.

One could read odd things in the papers then; Rommel was retreating across Cyrenaica and Libya. For fifteen days, the official news repeated with little variation: "Marshal Rommel has successfully carried out his tactic of disengagement." "The English have failed to engage his rear guard". Then, after a pause, at El Agheila: " Marshal Rommel leads the battle towards Tripoli ". And finally the juiciest of them all: " Marshal Rommel continues his advance westwards". I really must insist: this is not a tall story, it really appeared like that in the pro-German press in Lyons.

By now the Germans and the Italians had occupied all France except Toulon which remained the only place in France, or indeed the French Empire, still controlled entirely and only by France. All the colonies were occupied by the English, the Americans, the Germans, the Italians or the Japanese.

This is the moment that Laval called upon French workers to go to work in Germany, an appeal which went under the motto: " I want German victory". Understandably of limited popularity, few Frenchmen of the time will have forgotten this.

Of course there was the other side of the story, at the other side of the Channel where there was a young Colonel promoted Général right at the beginning of the war. If he was still almost unknown in France, he had already earned the respect of the Germans: General Charles de Gaulle. Many French people turned to him in June-July 1940, seeing him, as a saviour. It was he who answered Marshal Pétain's, " Not enough weapons, not enough planes, not enough allies", with the words: " France has lost a battle, but it has not lost the war. Join me, I will continue the combat beside the entire British Empire until France is liberated". These were the words France was waiting for. De Gaulle continued the combat; he would not let go before the obvious superiority of the enemy; he was the man of the moment. France needed a man like him, full of energy: it got Pétain.

There were a good number of partisans in France even at the beginning and in 1942, they were organised and armed. They included the President of the Chambre des Députés, Mr. Edouard Herriot and the President of the Senate, Mr. J Jeanneney. Both had sent a letter to the Marshal Pétain explaining why what he was doing was illegal and that, in a country like France, he could not simply appoint himself "Head of State" without the assent of the People. The majority of the men and women who were to form the Resistance and later the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* (F.F.I.) came from the working classes. They had lived in freedom since 1918 and they saw this freedom was unlikely to survive the arrival of the Germans. Students, who formed a specific group within society were somewhat divided but those who were really for General de Gaulle did a great deal for the moral of France. The peasant population at the time, was still substantial. It is to be regretted that many of them benefited from the occupation to enrich themselves through black market operations with the Germans which left their countrymen more needy than they might have been.

On November 18, 1942, my father and I visited a prison camp where 250 English soldiers and 4 Russians were interned. I never have quite understood how these latter had arrived there as, at the time, the Russian front was several thousand kilometres away. After we had obtained from the French military authorities the permit necessary to visit the camp and also a second authorization to go there by car, this latter being something of a feat in itself, we arrived at the camp on a cold morning of November to learn that we would, after all, not be allowed to visit the camp but only to speak to the senior English officer about the internees.

We had learned that the camp was very badly run but, as it was only an internment camp (France being more or less neutral in principle), conditions should have been a little better than in a prison camp. In fact the poor conditions prevailing in the camp were mainly due to its being moved from its location near Nice to a new site near Grenoble (a move motivated by the massive escape of fifty internees of which only ten were subsequently recaptured). The officer in charge was a Captain of the Royal Navy and, once we had been introduced, we were taken to an over-heated room where we were to converse. We were six in all: the English officer, a French officer, my father, myself, a guard and the official interpreter who was a fellow of about fifty, English by birth but naturalised French and who lived in Calais.

After half an hour's conversation, the English officer seemed to lose interest and kept his eyes on the French officer who, according to him, was a real brute. Conversation languished, my father had taken note of all his complaints, and silences in the conversation became increasingly long and oppressive until the interpreter, who had said nothing so far suddenly announced, "You can say what you like, you know. The two others don't understand a word of English and I don't mind what you say." Thereupon the

English officer forgot all about the French officer and the interview lasted for another hour. The last time that I heard of this officer, he was a parliamentary candidate for B ••••• in England. He had escaped with seven others.

After this visit, we moved about quite a bit to ensure that the occupying forces didn't take too much interest in our presence. Every time we left Lyons on some project to leave France it was with the heartfelt good wishes of our friends, and at each return it was to explain our failure to get away and our plans to try something else next week.

From time to time, we got interesting offers to get us to Switzerland. This, however, did not interest us because, once in Switzerland, one could not leave and what we really wanted was to get back to Britain. The fastest means was obviously by air, but the plan that we had once made to do this had failed because of the weather. Then there was the sea, but this also failed as will be explained in the next chapter.

Finally, my father left for Agen to see whether there wasn't some means of getting to Spain. He came up with something and sent a message which resulted in my mother and I taking the train from Lyons to Perigord on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1942 at 6:18 pm. We had tried the plane, the boat and the train already: this time it was to be on foot.

## CHAPTER IV

The sun, a boat, the moon and commandos.

Before writing about our final departure from Lyons, I should mention that we were involved in another, earlier, adventure:

It started in July 1942 when my father and I were on a cycling holiday in the centre of France. While my mother was alone at the office, a young man came in and announced that he would like to meet us as he was English. Given the activity of the Gestapo at the time this was not a very reassuring statement and the last thing likely to induce confidence in my mother's mind. She sent him away but said he could drop by again when my father was there. Contrary to expectations, this is just what he did and, after several visits, he finally persuaded us of his good faith. He was a spy and had been parachuted into France. From then on, we helped him with his wireless transmissions to England.

He often spoke about getting us out and to England and after November 1942, the situation having become more urgent, we asked him how he thought this might be done. By submarine, he said, and although my mother was less than enthusiastic at this, it was a better solution than to let ourselves be imprisoned. Thus it was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November that André, our young English officer, invited us to spend a few days with him in Nice. We left that very day carrying with us two of his wireless transmission sets. The trip

went very well; we even managed to get seats on the train by the simple expedient of arriving at the station an hour early. We were not, however, very comfortable, given that we were travelling with false identity cards and had two wireless sets in our bags, especially since the train went through Toulon where the French fleet had just been scuttled.

At the beginning, we tried to sleep but it was too hot. We tried to get some fresh air in the corridor only to find that it was just as hot there and that the corridors were just as crowded as the compartments. We tried to open the windows but this was prohibited because the trains did not have curtains. The window glass was painted blue for the blackout which at least provided a unique opportunity to express one's political opinions by scraping them in the paint. The only significant event of the trip was at Toulon where the train stopped. Would the Germans check our papers? Always a bit worrying when they are forged. Would they search the passengers' luggage? Not very reassuring either given that you have your English passports there, not to mention a couple of radio transmitters. Despite our fears, all went well and the train stopped in Toulon only for the scheduled time.

It was an unfamiliar Toulon compared with that which I had known before the war. A huge black cloud emanated from the docks and the arsenal, obscuring the city and its suburbs. Then there were German sailors on the station platforms in their black uniforms and caps with the word "Kriegsmarine" on them in gold. They were somewhat lost as they no longer had a boat to go to. We arrived at Nice only two hours late. Ah, Nice! the Mediterranean, sun, flowers; a real paradise. And what a difference from the dark and narrow streets of Lyons, the surly Saone and the muddy Rhone; rain, cold, snow and fog. Here, broad avenues bordered with flowers, the blue of the sea and a gentle warmth, even at the beginning of December.

The only black spot was the Italian occupation: Italian soldiers, two to a motorized cycle roaring at full speed along the *Promenade des Anglais* or strolling "on patrol" along the shore, cigarette hanging from their lips, smiling at the girls and, on the whole, looking very pleased with themselves. We learned later than they weren't as happy as all that; it seems their food left a lot to be desired.

We spent two days basking in the sun. Then, as we were having lunch on the *Promenade des Anglais*, André turned up to announce that everything was ready for our departure. We left Nice on a Monday and went to an auberge, the "*Moulin à Cros*" at Cagnes some six or seven kilometres along the coastal road. It was there that we met those who were to be our travelling companions, two French police inspectors who had allowed fifteen English agents to escape and who, consequently risked having serious problems with their wives (That is, they were accompanied by their wives, not that their wives necessarily objected to their political conduct), a French officer and

two young Frenchmen who had been parachuted in from England. All in all there were ten of us.

The auberge was pleasant and the owners welcoming. They lit a good fire in a huge fireplace and served us a good meal to send us off. In fact it had everything one could hope for in a first class holiday hotel and it was with some little reluctance that, at 11 o'clock in the evening we abandoned our refuge and headed for the beach. We left in three groups; I was in the last to leave. We went down a narrow and difficult path with many a slip and a fall but finally reached a fisherman's cottage which was our rendezvous to find that one of the other groups had not yet arrived. Somehow we had passed them on the way. It was a worrying moment but they eventually appeared in good order and we settled down to wait.

The arrangement was to be as follows: we were to remain in the fisherman's cottage while, from another location, André and one of his comrades made signals seawards until a boat from the submarine's landed. For some reason, however, this didn't work and it was decided that we should leave in the fisherman's boat and go to meet the submarine, taking advantage of information that the Italian patrol boat was occupied elsewhere.

We must have been a strange sight that midnight. There were 15 of us now, including three women, carrying the fisherman's cobbles on our shoulders across the road and down some steps to the sea in constant fear of being spotted by a foot patrol. Finally, all those due to leave got in the boat. I might add that it was a very ordinary boat, built to take five people. We were eleven. The boat was leaking too and the sea was rough enough to make several of our passengers sick. The conversation during the next two or three hours would have been worthy of a book which would necessarily be titled: "Seven men and three women in a boat" (excluding the fisherman).

The first hour was not too bad: the fisherman rowed seawards in search of the submarine or its boat. André's signals from the shore were clearly visible. We had a nasty moment when a light suddenly appeared. Our first thought was that it was an Italian high-speed motorboat looking for us but the light faded away and our optimism returned.

This went on until one thirty in the morning at which time the moon rose slowly over the sea. Beautiful, you might think, the moon rising over the Mediterranean on a balmy night. To our jaundiced eye it carried another message: silhouetted against the moonlit sky we were far too visible from the shore. Then the signals from André's position on the shore stopped abruptly. For an hour and half, we rowed hither and thither in search of the phantom submarine (Much later we learned that it had actually been there but that it had not seen any of our signals). And if we returned to the beach, in the absence of the reassuring signals from the shore party we didn't know what was waiting for us. Would we find an Italian patrol? Had our friends been arrested and were the Italians quietly waiting for us? In the end, we had little

option and we headed back. Our faithful fisherman brought us to the exact spot on the beach that we had left from.

It was something of a commando landing. As soon as the boat grounded those in front leapt out and dragged it onto the sand. Everyone disembarked in record time and ran for shelter behind a low wall which ran along the road. Sure enough; as we got our bearings an Italian patrol came along and we all held our breath as it passed safely by unaware of our presence. Then the shore party appeared, safe and sound. We pulled the boat further up the beach and once again took refuge in the fisherman's cottage.

There, we were given a much-needed hot cup of coffee and there we spent the remainder of the night, soaked and stiff from our ill-fated trip round the bay.

Our friends who had remained on shore could not understand why we had lost sight of the signals because they had sent them continuously. Upon reflection it would seem that we had drifted out of the angle which they covered. London was contacted by wireless and we were told there was a chance we might be picked up four days later. On the appointed night we spent another night in the cottage but nothing came of this.

Disappointed, we spent another two days in Nice before returning to Lyons to the great astonishment of all our friends to whom we had said good-bye.

## CHAPTER V

A trip by train, car, boat, mule, truck, tramway and on foot

As I mentioned earlier, my mother and I left to join my father at Agen on the 2nd December 1942 by the 6:18 p.m. train for Périgueux. The time is of some importance as will be seen. Most unusually for the period, we had a compartment to ourselves. At one of the stops on the way, Montluçon, we were delighted to find relatives who had made special trip to the station at one o'clock in the morning to bring us cakes and hot coffee.

Then we had to change in Limoges where the train stood two hours in the dark and frozen station. I have been to Limoges twice in my life. The first time was on June 14, 1940 when we stopped there to have breakfast, the second time this one: two hours in the freezing station.

We arrived at Agen at about two o'clock in the afternoon and stayed there for Christmas with some friends. I remember their son bloodthirstily referring to the Germans as "apprentice corpses". These friends had a grocer's shop. One day they asked a newly-arrived young German soldier how old he was. He laughed and answered: "I am 14 years old for my mother, 15 for my Fuhrer, but I am still old enough to kill a Frenchman."

Christmas day fell on a Friday. It was the following Sunday that we left Agen for Pau. There was a change of trains at Toulouse which left us enough time to go to the cinema where we saw *la Kermesse Héroïque* (The Heroic Village Fair)

The next morning, we met the organiser of our passage into Spain. He started by telling us to get rid of our hats and, when we asked what we should do with our luggage which by then had been reduced to a single leather case, a briefcase and a rucksack. He said that was fine: it was a simple matter of a six-hour walk along a footpath and that, in any event we could get mules to carry our things. Once we got to Spain, a taxi would be waiting to take us directly to the British Consulate in Pamplona.

From there, we left for Oloron-Sainte-Marie where we lunched and then to Mauleon where we stayed until nine o'clock in the evening in a hotel where we knew nobody. At last a car came to take us to a Basque farm in the little village of Ossa. Sitting around the fire we listened to the conversation of two guides and the farmer's wife. We understood nothing of it for they spoke in Basque. One of them was able to make himself understood in French and it was to him that we suggested borrowing mules to carry our luggage as we had been led to understand this was possible: When he translated our request there was a general shout of laughter.

Muleless, then, we set off on our crossing of the Pyrenees at one o'clock in the morning. My mother was wearing warm clothes, light shoes, silk stockings and a fur coat/ My father wore what he would usually wear to go to the office in winter. I had an raincoat attached to my rucksack and was wearing a normal overcoat.

Our guides had said that our first objective was a shepherd's hut where they kept their sheep in summer. It was, they indicated, about two hours walk. The first obstacle was the mud. For two hours, we made our way up the mountain in what was undoubtedly a path in summer but which was now alternately a torrent and a bog. As we got higher, we started to see ice. Soon every square centimetre of solid ground or rock was covered with a fine layer of black-ice and for another two hours still we continued, slipping back one pace for every two made upwards. Worried at the failure of the promised cabin to materialise, we asked what was happening. Our guide admitted that he was lost. There was no alternative, however, but to press on and finally, by some miracle, we arrived at the hut after six hours and a half of climbing. We lit a small fire and had something to eat.

We set out again at eight o'clock and continued to walk in frozen rain until half past twelve. We arrived at a second hut where we made a fire again and ate.

We had two guides with us: Gaston, twenty years old who was supposed to be our official guide, and Baptiste, who was about 40. Baptiste had an

extraordinary way of lighting a fire. He took a few pieces of dry wood or, if he couldn't find any, broke up a one or two panels from the walls and started a tiny fire. Then he would bring in some huge wet log from outside and dump it on the little blaze. For anybody else it would have immediately killed the fire. For Baptiste, and against all likelihood, it invariably burst into flame, It was all the more remarkable as there were no fireplaces in the huts.

The afternoon programme consisted of climbing the *Pic des Escaliers*. We left at two o'clock and the climb lasted until five thirty. The morning rain had become hail and a violent wind blew from our right. The melting hail soaked our clothes – even, in my case, through my raincoat and overcoat combined. We learned why the *Pic des Escaliers*, “Staircase Peak” was thus named. It was not a reference to vertical steps but horizontal sections: every time we reached a turning, we could see as much in front as we could behind. This exhausting series of zig-zags lasted three hours and half.

Despite everything, we finally arrived at the top and there the guides informed us that the frontier was not very far. We were all tired, however, even the guides, so we decided to stop at the next hut which we reached at six thirty accompanied by swirling blasts of snow which had started to fall as soon as we had passed the summit. We decided to stay in this hut for the night. Baptiste did his trick with the fire and we soon had a splendid blaze which almost set the ceiling alight. Later that evening, we had a nasty shock when we heard voices from outside. Then we heard sheep baaing and were able to relax. They were only shepherds smuggling sheep. They joined us in the cabin and spent the night there with us. We tried hard to sleep, but it wasn't easy as we were beginning to wonder how this “two hour walk” was going to end. It was, after all some 24 hours now since we had set off and we still hadn't reached the frontier.

It was while we were in this hut that Gaston announced that he was “a bit tired” so he would let us continue without him, but with the two shepherds and Baptiste. As our supplies were running low, we decided to leave a little earlier and we set out again at three thirty. The first three hours were rather pleasant. The snow had stopped and the landscape was beautiful; wild mountains covered with snow, black pines clinging to their slopes contrasting with the white, the whole crowned with a cloudless sky filled with stars. We could have admired it for hours. We didn't.

Trouble came with the dawn. Snow had started to fall again. We had to cross a river four or five times and then pass the German customs station in silence and without being seen. Afterwards there was another mountain to climb in a forest and the sheep (there were 11 of them and they had probably had nothing to eat for days) refused to advance. We each took a stick and climbed this mountain having to lift our feet high out of the knee-deep snow at the same time poking and beating the sheep in front of us. Somehow we

reached the plateau in a snow storm which restricted visibility to four or five metres.

Our situation had become critical. Finally, after a short conference, the shepherds decided to abandon their sheep and to continue without them. For two hours we walked and several times realised that we had gone in a circle without, however, getting back to our starting point.

My mother announced that that she could go no further and asked us to leave her there in the snow; Baptiste had frostbitten hands and said we were all finished; the shepherds wanted to walk as straight and as fast as possible until nightfall; my father helped my mother to advance; I prayed God to get us out of this dreadful situation and did my best to maintain a contact between the shepherds and Baptiste on the one hand and my mother and father who were lagging further and further behind on the other.

The miracle happened at half past eleven. The snowstorm had redoubled in violence and we had lost contact with the group in front. Suddenly the eddies of snow parted to reveal a patch of perfectly blue sky which illuminated part of the plateau and a valley at the bottom of which there was a hut. Baptiste and the shepherds immediately headed towards it. We followed as well as we could for the slope was steep and it was as much by slipping and sliding that we finally arrived at the hut just as the snowstorm resumed, more violent than ever.

After a rest of an hour and half, when the storm had calmed a little, we set out again and at quarter past four on Wednesday December 30, 1942, we crossed the Spanish border. It was with a sigh of relief for we thought our troubles were over. We had no idea what was waiting for us.

At about seven o'clock we reached the first Spanish house where we were able to get a hot meal. The room was lit only by pine twigs burning on a metal sheet and it was cold but we were able to savour the pleasure of sleeping with sheets and blankets for the first time since we had awaked the previous Monday morning.

This first Spanish house was located on a reservoir and it was by boat that we set out again at about midday the following day. We left Baptiste and the shepherds there and went the daughter of the house who would do nothing but smile for no apparent reason. She rowed us to the house of the guardian of the reservoir dam where we had been told there was a telephone which we would be able to use to phone the British Consulate in Pamplona or to get a taxi which could take us there directly. That is what we believed. It's not the way it happened!

At the guardian's house we were given a meal of eggs and bacon (an English speciality we had hardly expected to find on the Franco-Spanish border). We would have to, we were told, walk to the next village because the car had not yet been constructed capable of getting to the dam, even in summer, not to mention winter.

For some time now, we had been becoming a little bitter, a sentiment concerning the world in general and the Basques in particular. My mother was rather tired so we decided to rent a mule on which my mother could ride. To this day she swears she would have done better to go on foot.

We were accompanied this time by a charming gentleman, a businessman to judge by appearances. He talked incessantly during the entire trip, a conversation which was somewhat lost on us as neither my father, my mother nor myself spoke a word of Spanish, a fact which discouraged him not at all.

We were approaching the village when we saw two "carabineros" (frontier police) coming to meet us. Without a word (which would, admittedly have been useless) they fell in beside us. They were dressed in long, too long, green overcoats, rifle on shoulder, cigarette in mouth and each carried an enormous blue umbrella, a surreal addition to their armament. As further security, one of them even had a walking-stick.

Arriving at the first town, Orbaicetta (we had left the Pentano dam), it was with great difficulty that we were given to understand that we could not remain there; we would have to go to the regional headquarters some thirty kilometres further on. It subsequently became clear that what they really wanted was for us to pay for a car to cover the distance and five or six people took advantage of the opportunity to accompany us.

The officer in charge of the region was charming and after having us empty all our pockets (or almost), he showed us to a room which we had been allocated at a farm in the village.

The following day being January 1st, everything in Spain came to a halt and we had to spend the New Year at this farm where the only person who could understand us and whom we could understand was a deaf-and-dumb man. That morning, however, we learned that four Americans had arrived in the night. We immediately went to see them to find that they were no more American than we were. There was an Austrian Jew, two Luxembourg brothers and a Frenchman.

On January 2nd, we were taken from Villanueva to Valcarlos, a village dominating the valley which formed the frontier at this point and from where we could see the German guards. For a few bad moments we wondered if it was not the intention of our hosts to send us back.

Sunday being another day on which everything stops in Spain, we had to wait until January 4th to be escorted to Pamplona. Our group having grown day by day, we were now sixteen including three women and we all arrived in the evening at the Commissaria de Vigilancia (the police station). There, we were all informed that the hotels of Pamplona were full to overflowing and that there was only one solution to accommodate us until our departure for Madrid the next morning. That was the prison.

## CHAPTER VI

Life in prison.

This chapter is largely a transcription of notes taken during our imprisonment on toilet paper since the authorities did not allow writing paper.

1) A stroll around cell 64,

This was cell we had been attributed eleven days before on Monday January 4, 1943 at eleven o'clock in the evening,.

Right from the beginning of this trip, we had been told nothing but lies: Lies when the organiser had told us that we could go directly to the British Consulate in Pamplona. No such consulate has ever existed: Lies when he told us that it was only a six hour walk in the Pyrenees. Still more lies since we got to Spain. Everyone one knew perfectly well what was going to happen to us, from the first farmer who sold us, the businessman who accompanied us, the two "carabinieri" who took us in charge and even the police chief of Pamplona who had the gall to tell us, with excuses, that we would have to spend a night in prison because all the hotels were full.

On leaving the police station, we were escorted to the prison. We went through 5 or 6 barred doors and had to leave my mother at the entrance to the women's section, we were searched (not very thoroughly) and put in a cell where we were to sleep, six of us with one straw mattress and ten blankets.

The cell was on a wide corridor forming the vertical bar of a "T" which was three stories high and guarded from a central office. Above this was an altar. The door of cell 64, ours, was made of wood and 12 centimetres thick. A small opening at chest height allowed the guards to pass us our food. The walls were of solid stone and 75 centimetres thick. The cell ran from East to West, the door being at the western end. It was about 5 metres long, 2,50 metres wide and 3 ½ metres high. On the ceiling was a single small lamp and there was a window 75x50 cm on the eastern wall. On the southern wall was a wooden bed which folded against this wall and in the north-western corner, the W.C. if it could be called that. Above the door was a small shelf on which all our luggage had to be stored, Lastly, on the northern side, was a table fixed to the wall. The remaining furniture consisted of a stool, a bucket and a brush.

On arrival, six of us were allocated to this cell despite our noisy objections. As we settled down as well as we could we comforted ourselves with the thought that at least we were in Spain and, after all, we were to leave the next day.

## 2) Prison life.

The next morning a trumpet sounded reveille at 7 a.m. At five past we were ready to leave. At seven thirty we were handed six metal bowls of tepid and dirty water. Was it to wash? Shave? Perhaps to wash the floor? Some time later, we were given six spoons and we realised that it was breakfast, but by then we had thrown the contents of the bowls down the hole in the corner which served as a toilet.

Around nine o'clock we found ourselves on parade with other new arrivals at the prison in front of the office where, while we awaited our turn, we struck up a conversation with a prisoner who, with that smile that only one prisoner can have for another, told us that he had no idea how long we were likely to stay there but that it could be anything from fifteen days to three months. We couldn't believe that and, when we were returned to our cell after having answered a few questions, we hopefully held ourselves ready to leave at a moments notice.

Our hopes were somewhat dashed when the prison barber entered our cell escorted by a guard with a sinister smile which would have prohibited him from making his living as anything other than a prison guard. The barber successively treated us all to a "zero" cut which left less than a centimetre of hair: It was a horrible sensation and a nasty sight, the only consolation being that a comb was now entirely superfluous.

### The Prison routine:

06h50 lights on  
07h00 Reveille is sounded on a trumpet  
07h15 1st inspection  
07h30 Breakfast (see above)  
08h00 A bucket of water arrives  
09h00 2nd inspection  
10h00 3rd inspection and Patio until midday  
12h30 Lunch (boiled potatoes and broad .beans)  
14h30 Water (see 08h00)  
15h00 4th inspection and Patio till 18h00  
18h15 distribution of bread (200 grams each)  
18h45 Dinner (Boiled potatoes without beans)  
20h25 National anthem  
20h30 last inspection  
21h00 lights out

Sunday routine differed from the other days by the fact that we had to get up half an hour earlier: this was for mass at 8 a.m. At 9 a.m. the prison orchestra replaced the priest on the altar and gave a concert. Lunch on Sunday consisted of boiled potatoes and ordinary (not broad) beans.

The "Patio" mentioned above consisted of a small courtyard. We were allowed to walk there during the above specified times. Clandestine border-crossers like ourselves were grouped together for this walk. There were 450 unshaven men (except Wednesdays, the day we got to shave) walking around trying to keep warm in this patio. They were of all nationalities although all claimed to be Canadian or American. Besides my father and myself, there was only one other person of English nationality in the prison. What amused us was that whether you were Hindu or Buddhist, Moslem or Protestant, you were obliged to attend the Catholic mass. The service lasted one hour and the subsequent concert another during which we were treated to tangos, paso-dobles etc. After the concert, and while we were still standing in the corridors in ranks of ten it was the prisoners turn to sing: first the national anthem, then the fascistic anthem during which we were supposed to raise our arms in salute.

Return to cells was in single file accompanied by a march by Souza. Then the guards closed the cell doors, making sure that everyone was within and crying "*todos*" (all there).

3°) A prisoner's diary.

It was odd how the minutae of everyday events took on an importance out of all proportion. Here is mine for 15 days:

1st day: barber, doctor, showers.

2nd day: beans instead of broad beans for lunch (Epiphany)

3rd day: we saw my mother for five minutes

5th day: we got two parcels from my mother

7th day: distribution of oranges

10th day: visit of the English Consul

11<sup>th</sup> day: change of cell

15th day: distribution of figs, oranges

Such are the events that mark a prisoner: most of them concern his stomach.

4) Personal reflections.

- Having nothing else to do in prison, a lot of time is devoted to thought.
- There is always a lot of noise everywhere: it is continuous, from morning to night.

- The man at the head of the black-market is called the "medico" (doctor).
- The guardiens know only four words: "todos" (all there); "venga" (go); "anda" (quickly) and "manana. (tomorrow).
- After a few days in prison, you start to await the usual events of the day with a certain impatience.

If you want to really appreciate the joys of a normal life I can only recommend that you try to get locked up for a month.

*The above was written at the Pamplona Provincial Prison Friday 22 Jan 1943*

## CHAPTER VII

### More Prison Life

As I have mentioned, on the eleventh day of our imprisonment we were put in another cell. We were still with the four people we had met in the frontier village and now two of them, the Meyer brothers from Luxemburg, who had become our friends, were released, apparently into some kind of house arrest in the city – it was never very clear, even though we met them long after, in London.

We were transferred to cell 85 on the first floor where the four of us stayed together for another two days. Then the authorities decided to put the all English together (a few more had arrived) and four others joined us, replacing the Officer and the Austrian Jew who had accompanied us so far. All four of these new arrivals were English agents who had been parachuted into France on sabotage missions. Shortly afterwards, three of them left us to be put under house arrest and they were replaced by two children 17 and 15 years old who had just crossed the border all alone.

There was also a Frenchman in the prison who had also crossed the border illegally but who did not seem to want to leave. He acted as interpreter for the authorities and therefore enjoyed a privileged existence. It was a matter of public notoriety that he was the prison informer and nobody spoke to him voluntarily.

One of our best friends was the prisoner with whom we had spoken to on the first day. He was a big man and was condemned for life. He spoke a little French and since he had been in jail since the civil war, he was left to do more or less what he liked. According to the snatches of conversation which we were able to get with him and with others, he was known as the "Butcher of Murcie" because he executed nationalists during the civil war.

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, we learned that the American Red Cross was going to make a big distribution of warm clothes, blankets, chocolate and oranges.

The distribution did take place but was initially somewhat disappointing as it consisted of a pair of fur-lined gloves for everyone. Soon, however, this was supplemented by warm underclothes, blankets, chocolate, oranges and condensed milk and it went a long way to improve our standard of living for the few days which we still had to undergo at Pamplona Provincial Prison.

## CHAPTER VIII

A Foretaste of freedom, a Rock and en route for England.

On 26<sup>th</sup> January, 22 days after our imprisonment, we were released at the same time as the only other English prisoner in the P.P.P. We had just finished our lunch, at 1 p.m., when the "Butcher of Murcie" informed us that we were free: "completely free" were the words he used. He seemed as happy as we were about it and embraced me to prove it. We were so overjoyed that we forgot to say goodbye the guard on the last gate as we left. A taxi was waiting for us outside and we jumped in without paying attention to anything else. A few hundred yards further on I turned to look through the back window and realised that we were being followed by another car carrying a British number-plate. It was only then that we really believed it was really happening and not just another Spanish lie.

The Consul himself was waiting at the Police station and after some very brief formalities, he took us to a hotel for lunch and left telling us he would be back at five fifteen to take us to the station for the five thirty train. We had already lunched in prison, but it was with great pleasure that we repeated the operation and afterwards we went into the city to look at the shops and to eat cakes not only to kill time and hunger but just out of sheer pleasure at being able to do whatever we wanted.

As planned, the consul came to pick us up, ran us to the station at top speed and put us on the train. There was hardly time to give us our instructions before the train left. The trip was not very comfortable especially as we were inspected at least six times and that the last inspector told us that we should have been accompanied by somebody from the consulate. In view of this, when we arrived in Madrid, we just took time to kiss my mother who was on the platform and then left as quickly as possible, grabbing a taxi to take us to the consulate.

My mother had arrived in Madrid two or three days after her imprisonment and on her arrival, because all the public offices were closed for the weekend, had to spend another three days in jail, this time at the Central Madrid Prison.

We stayed in Madrid six days. It was six days of rehabilitation for me; not because of the prison, it was something deeper than that, a kind of apprenticeship for a different way of life, a complete re-education; no more

worrying about the Gestapo, no more watching your tongue, able to go anywhere, and no more of that all pervading German propaganda. One of our best memories of that short stay in Madrid was that we were made honorary members of the Anglo-American club (which had a collection of sherries the like of which I have never seen) and it was there that we spent a good part of our time. Another was an invitation to dinner by an embassy attaché at his home. And, of course, we could go wherever we wanted, do whatever we liked.

Here are some notes on my stay in Spain:

In the five weeks I was there, I did not meet a single Franco supporter. The Spanish army, built on the model of the German army, changed the guard in front of the dictator's palace with military band and bagpipes. One of the Meyer brothers who had lived in Spain had told us that anyone could live there as long as he knew three Spanish words: "Dormire" (to sleep); "Comer" (to eat) and "Retrete" (toilet).

I have never seen a piece of paper as disgusting as a Spanish banknote. In the elections before the civil war, there were just 7.000 communists in Spain. But what men: it took Franco two years, with half of Spain on his side, a powerful army and German and Italian equipment to overcome the communists.

Three observations about the siege of Madrid:

- The centre of the city was never bombarded because it was the residential district of the Generals.
- The defenders of Madrid travelled by tram to lunch at home.
- A football match was organised between the lines and between the two enemies: it ended in the victory of the defenders by 4 goals to 2.

After this pleasant stay in the Spanish capital, we left Madrid for Gibraltar the following Monday.

A large rock, a port full of boats, an aerodrome where the racecourse had been, a small city with crowded houses lower down but which spread out from each other further and further as one climbed the rock. That's about all there is to Gibraltar. We arrived there on Tuesday afternoon after a tiring but picturesque trip of some twenty hours.

You would have to have seen the Spanish trains to believe what I have say about them. They must have been the oldest trains in existence; from Madrid to Algéciras (the last station before Gibraltar) it was single track railway which one would have thought would have involved delays for trains in the other

direction. This wasn't a problem: there weren't any. At each station the driver would get into conversation with the station master and sometimes have a card game with him, this was probably to encourage local trade which consisted of a horde of dirty children who descended upon us, offering oranges and figs for sale. And what a delicious fruit the fig is. In prison it was the only thing one could get to improve the diet: dried figs. I gather they are very good for the stomach but unfortunately, there are other parts of the human anatomy for which they are less beneficial. Try eating dried figs for a month at the rate of one every fifteen minutes and see what happens...

This said, let us return to our mutttons. In Algeciras, we were put in three buses which took us to La Linea where our papers were once again checked and from where we left for the free world. On our way we passed anti-tank barrages, crossed trenches, went over a canal and stopped at the gate to Gibraltar. There, a customs officer asked to us if we had cameras, alcohol or firearms and, given a negative answer, allowed us to enter. And there, in all his splendid majesty, a British police officer in familiar uniform opened the passage to freedom for us.

My mother was once again separated from us because, women being prohibited on the Rock, she had to go to the hospital while we were placed in a small hotel in Main Street. As soon as we had claimed our rooms we went back into the street and found a café where we could get a decent beer. Gibraltar Main Street was a curious sight in the evening: hundreds, if not thousands of soldiers, sailors and airmen from all parts of the world were walking around in groups with nothing to do, the military police walked too, in wary groups of six looking out for fights.

After dinner, we went up to our room which at that moment was being subjected to an invasion of ants whose columns converged on our oranges: a substantial battle ensued which we eventually won but with losses on both sides, amounting to three oranges on ours.

The following day, we rose early and were having our breakfast when the owner of the hotel announced that a taxi was waiting for us. As we had so often done before, we threw our things together in a few moments and left for the port. In less than half an hour we were aboard the boat and had already learned that it had no alcohol on board nor, for that matter, any drink stronger than tea.

Making the best of it we went on deck to await my mother who arrived at two o'clock and at four the boat left the quay to anchor in the port. The sight of Gibraltar at night was really splendid because not only did it not have a blackout but the searchlights which criss-crossed the sky added drama to the picture. The next morning, we were on the open sea.

We were in a convoy of ten troopships escorted by two corvettes and an aircraft carrier. We spent seven days on board. The food was first class and everything was done to relieve the monotony of the voyage. On 9<sup>th</sup> February, we anchored in the Clyde, in Scotland.

## CHAPTER IX

### Homecoming.

I have never been so happy to see the British coast as that morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> February. I do believe what most affected me was the sight of a red double-decker bus driving along the coast road. After a few formalities on the boat, we set foot on British soil and were free for the first time for three years and half.

We immediately left for Edinburgh where we had friends and stayed there the following day. I bought myself a hat there, partly because the beret is rarely worn in Britain (I was still wearing the one I had bought in Pau) and partly to hide my "Pamplona" haircut.

That same evening, we left for London and we arrived at my grandmother's as the clock struck nine.

It may seem odd but I was always struck by the frequency with which the figure seven cropped up during our adventures:

Tuesday is the only day of the week with seven letters and that letter 'G' is the seventh of the alphabet: -

It was on Tuesday that we left prison; The next Tuesday we entered the British Empire, Where? Gibraltar; and the next Tuesday we entered the Clyde where we disembarked at Gourock (seven letters) from where we left for Glasgow (seven letters).

Since we had left Lyon on the 18h18 train on December 23 and that we arrived at my grandmother's at 9 o'clock on 11<sup>th</sup> February, our entire trip took Forty-nine days, fourteen hours and forty two minutes – all divisible by seven.

And now, most of our sufferings were over and I could start to think of the time I would be able to return to Paris - but in different circumstances. In the meantime at least we were in a free country, where, in spite of the war and all its troubles, people wore a smile on their faces and kept their sense of humour. Like those two soldiers in their tent woken in the middle of the night by a huge explosion:

1<sup>st</sup> soldier: "What was that? Thunder, or a bomb?"

2nd Soldier "A bomb."

1st Soldier: "Thank God, I thought it was going to rain again".

END