

Ariela Palacz

I Love You My Child, I'm Abandoning You

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*I would like to thank all who have encouraged me  
to write this book and every step of the way:  
Rina Neher who unfortunately left us and is not  
able to read it, Haim and Bithia Cherki,  
Moshe Roth,  
And especially my husband Eytan.*

*I dedicate this book  
To my father, Sucher Sacha Szenker  
And to my mother, Esther Rachel Szenker*



## Foreword

Unbelievable!

I thought I would read the autobiography of Ariela Palacz and I realized, to my surprise, that she has written mine!

She was born to the Yiddish people, the Jews that came from Russia, Poland, and Germany to live in France, “in a place where God was happy.” The impressions of her early childhood were warm, happy, and sometimes a bit intense, with a habit that was common to those families who raised their children at the dining room table, which was also used as a theatre stage. It had all started well for her: her father, the tailor; the piano of course; books, love and conflicts.

When all of a sudden in 1942 they tell her big brother, “From now on, you are not to be called Isaac any more, but Jacques. If you make a mistake, you will be slapped.” Isaac became a name that points out the Jewish boy and sentences him to death. The yellow patch was a target for cursing, pushing, and expressions of contempt, waiting to be arrested by the police or the army. What a shame!

Memory is not going back in time; it is a representation of it. If so, why do Ariela and I have similar representations? The

shattered happiness, the disappearance of loved ones, the loneliness, the shame...death...

Why do we share the same memory of the social services (*Assistance publique*)?

Brave villagers who took care of us, who had an easy hand on the stick that beat us or slapped us, who did not hesitate to say deathly sentences like “your parents abandoned you.” They, of course, related all of their troubles and problems to the Jews, who are responsible for all wars and illnesses. However, they were brave villagers! Ariela tells the story of my childhood when she steals candy from the buffet; wears the big dark blue gown with the hood; hunts Doryphores, flying beetles that devour potatoes; and doesn’t notice how filthy she is. But mainly, the little girl encounters an interesting experience that has always amazed me - this outstanding student, as long as she is surrounded by a loving and stimulating family, becomes an absolute failure when abandoned. She does not go back to being “first in class” even when accepted by a kind teacher.

To this day I am surprised by this phenomenon. I could not go to school during the war. After a few years during which I was running away from the Gestapo and the German army, I was placed, at the end of the war, in a class where I did not understand a word. The teacher was making the other students laugh at my ignorance. Afterward, a few unreasonable administrative decisions had me move every few months. Following that chaotic time, I came back to that same school, in another class, with another teacher, gentle and attentive. Starting from the first month, I was always the best student in class in all of the subjects, positively surprised by my intellectual metamorphosis. I

will have to speak about this phenomenon with Ariela. Moreover, a few decades later I became a psychiatrist and was called to accompany people who were placed, too, in what was called “The children deposit” of Denfert-Rochereau, Paris, and who experienced comparable evolutions!

Can an institute, an emotional envelope, therefore daze or awaken a child to the pleasure of thinking?

This experience leads us away from the hierarchical view of the human being which is still dominant in many cultures. French anthropological culture of the XIX century played a crucial role in classifying humans. But in England and Germany, this racism had developed tremendously reaching Sweden and the United States. Indeed, racism is the prototype of lazy intellect, the victory of the feeble minded, and arrogance, which allows mass murder where political circumstances enable the recruitment of the police and the army to this service. However, just like Ariela and I, who after being ignorant, became outstanding students; it is possible that an arrogant ignorant person could have been a model student in the past, like Himmler and Speer (who were close to Hitler) or Alexis Carrel (who received Noble prize in medicine). They learned by heart the same stereotype that leads to crime with clean conscious, free of any guilt. In the name of racial hygiene comes the superior need to destroy those who contaminate our beautiful biological nature: the Jews, of course, but also the Gypsies, the Slavs and the mentally ill. Because of this kind of thinking, the mentally ill sometimes were locked in psychiatric hospitals in Germany, deprived of food, like in France where the death rate in psychiatric hospitals was horrifying. There was less discussion around cunning racism, the one

that probably cost the life of Ariela's mother.

Our ways departed with Israel: Ariela and her husband wanted to go to Israel, whereas as far as I am concerned, I cannot feel anything, but French. The adventure, the creativity and the battles of this small nation interest me and concern me. However, I think my parents have given me an enormous gift by allowing me to be born in France before they disappeared.

I admired Ariela Palacz's authenticity, her elegant style, her clarity of thought:

I will never dare to be as honest as she was. Here, finally, a small difference.

**Dr. Boris Cyrulnik**

August 2009



*It is December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1997.*

*Soon I will be 64 years old. Maybe it's time, finally, to write?*

*I ought to leave a testimony before it is too late, my friends say.*

*I have promised. But one needs to know how to write. I don't know if I know. I am also anxious. What purpose does it serve? I am content now, so why go back? Ask my memory to open up doors I have locked?*

*And I do not know where to begin.*

*I cannot back away. It feels like stopping on a green light, and the cars honking behind forcing me to move ahead.*

*And this white page in front of me, teases me, terrifies me.*

*My dear friend, Moshe Roth, gave me a fountain pen. My dear friend, Rina Neher, suggested that I should get a colorful binder that would be tempting to open up.*

*Anything to lay down my broken childhood.*

*No, not yet, not so fast. I do not think I am ready yet.*

*I have already organized my desk, though, facing the window, facing the mountain. My fourth-floor apartment is as high as one of the majestic mountains of Jerusalem. The tomb of Samuel the prophet is right in front of me. The neighborhood of Ramot is to my left, white and pink stone houses harmoniously merging with the curves of the mountains. The Desert of Judah is to my right. And very close to me, almost touching my window, there is a big pine tree. In the summer time, it protects me from the sun.*

*It is winter time now, but it is not cold. The sun is somewhat pale. I observe: the pine tree is swaying delightfully with the light cold wind.*

*I wait. I think I will take this step.*

*My page is no longer white.*

*It had all started so well.*

I was born on February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1934 in Paris. My parents were Jewish immigrants who came from Poland. I came to the world seven years after my big brother, Isaac. It explains how much they have been waiting for my arrival. Think about it, a daughter after such a long wait!

My mother's tongue is Yiddish. My mom calls me, *ma Payèlè*, my Payèlè, and my dad calls me *Payèlè*.

I am proud of my brother. He is tall, and I think he's handsome. He speaks French with me, plays the piano

and his room is packed with books. Isaac teaches me to read and play to piano. I am about four years old; I don't go to school yet, but already know how to read words and musical notes. I also sing beautifully, apparently, and my dad says all the time that one day, he will take me to the radio to sing. I look at the radio box, wondering how I will ever fit into such a small space!!!

Dad is a tailor; he works at home with Mom. My parents always sing while they work, they sing in Yiddish and Russian. Sometimes Isaac will accompany them on the piano while my dad plays the harmonica. I dance and hop on one foot, and then the other. I am a happy little child, loved by my big family. I am capricious as well; nobody will dare to say "no" to me. On my birthdays I am cradled by my aunts and uncles, and my parents' friends cover me with kisses. They all say I am beautiful, and smart and that I will grow up to be a famous pianist, singer or even...a distinguished professor...

Isaac does not like these gestures of love. He says it's too much.

I, on the other hand, believe that it will all come true.  
**I will be on the stage.**

"Isaac, you should be happy to have such a gifted little sister," everybody says to him.

No, Isaac is not happy...he had enough with me and my whims. Isaac only enjoys school, where he excels, and with his piano teacher who claims that "Isaac is my most gifted student."

And he is; my big brother succeeds in everything he does. He has many friends, but he does not want to invite them over because of my parents' heavy foreign accent. He tells me it embarrasses him. He demands that I speak French as it is written in the books.

For my fourth birthday, I receive a present...a little brother. Claude.

I do not know how it had happened. I came back from a few days at my Aunt Endel, Mom's sister, and Mom came home holding a baby, covered with a blue blanket.

Where did she find him?

I am thrilled to get this "real" doll. I am a big sister now.

Mom sings Yiddish lullabies. I sing with her. I know them by heart. I'm telling myself that I must have been as tiny as Claude, and Mom repeats the same movements, the same words. Isaac is upset. Maybe he's jealous?

It's normal, because he must have turned into a big boy right away. I have never seen Isaac little, and Mom couldn't have put him on her lap.

A year later, I am five years old. Again, I go away to spend a few days with one of my aunts.

Coming back home I see my mom with a tiny baby covered with a blue blanket...but... I have seen this before!!!

My mom tells me I have a little sister, Nicole.

I become a big sister again, and I enjoy pretending to be a mom. I become very jealous, not of my younger brother and sister though, but I cannot stand it when someone else, other than me, carries them. My brother and sister are my possessions.

One day, Dad decides we need to go to have our pictures taken. He explains to me that in Warsaw, Poland we have *Boubèlès* and *Zaidé*. They are the parents of my parents.

Soon, we will all go to Warsaw to visit them, Dad says. We will go on a train, for a long long time, and in order for *Boubèlès* and *Zaidé* to recognize us, we'll send them our pictures.

*I was very young at the time, but I remember this experience clearly and precisely.*

Our neighbor, Madame Dupont, knits a beautiful red dress for me. Dad buys me shiny shoes. I put on short white socks, and a ribbon is tied in my hair. Dad turns me around to make sure all is perfect, and we walk hand in hand to "Grilik" the photographer located on Boulevard Voltaire. The photographer hands me a small wheelbarrow filled with flowers. He tells me about a bird that is just about to fly. He asks that I smile.

Dad is speaking with the photographer, and I leave the shop with the wheelbarrow. Soon they catch up to me and I am being asked, very gently to give the

wheelbarrow back. I scream. Dad tries to release the wheelbarrow from my grip. I struggle. I scream, "It's mine, it's mine!"

Passersby stop near us. Finally I find myself in Dad's arms. I sob, I cannot understand why they took back my gift. I refuse to walk and Dad carries me home.

That night, I sleep in my parents' bed, between them.

Following Nicole's birth, my bed is moved to Isaac's room. A sacred and honorable place. A museum for books. Books are everywhere. On the shelves, on the desks, on the bed, on the floor. There's also comic magazines, pages of musical notes, notebooks, pencils. I am fascinated. Isaac allows me to touch everything. At night, I am allowed to read in my bed, just like him, but I bother him because I cannot read unless I read aloud. Isaac teaches me how to read only with my eyes. I discover with much joy the Countess of Ségur, and when I enter first grade, when I turn six, I already know *Sophie's Misfortunes*, *Vacation*<sup>1</sup> and more.

I become a good student as well. I go to school at 32 Rue de la Folie Méricourt, in Paris's eleventh quarter. When I am given the book *Line and Pierrot*, it looks babyish because it has a connecting line over every two words in order to teach how to correctly spell pairs of words. But I like the stories, like the ones on the fruits and vegetables in the garden, the trees in the orchard, the seesaw in the park and Pierrot's fingernails that

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1 Books written by the Countess of Ségur (SA)

have black hats that need to be removed before coming to the dining table – a lovely way to teach children how to clean their nails and wash their hands.

My parents cannot refrain from lifting me onto the table. Every time guests come over, they ask me to recite the multiplication table, poems. They probably don't understand a word of what I am reciting, but in their eyes there is so much pride that I think I am such an important person.

At school I am called Paulette. Maybe it's a translation for the name Payèlè. The name Paulette doesn't stand out. The name Payèlè might draw attention.

Slowly I become aware of the worlds that separate; life inside the house and life outside the house. I would not dare speak Yiddish with my parents in the street. I speak Yiddish with my aunts and uncles as well, but always in the house.

We are a big family.

I have memories of family visits: heavy quilts on the floor for the kids to sleep on, the sofas are open, numerous extensions for the dining room table, one can hardly pass by it all but the joy is consuming.

We, the kids, love it. We spend summer breaks together at Chelles, in one big house.

I have a picture where you can see the whole family together. It was the summer of 1939.

**The last time we were all together,** Uncle Bernard,

Aunt Frida and their three children, Uncle Avroum, Aunt Endel and their four children, Uncle Binem, Aunt Rivké and their daughter Eliane, Dad Sacha, Mom Esther-Rachel, and the four of us kids.

Mom's dress was the shade of the color of the cabins on the beach.

I was so happy.

Uncle Binem, Aunt Rivké and their daughter Eliane live close to us. Aunt Rivké is Mom's younger sister. One day Uncle Binem went away. He is a prisoner of war in Germany. Aunt Rivké is alone and helpless. Her French is not good. Mom supports her sister. Eliane, my cousin, is three years old. She grows up with us.

We, the kids, are not too excited about this extra kid that we need to share everything with.

Eliane is capricious. It always has to be her way.

She doesn't have a dad, Mom says, and protects her. As far as I'm concerned, I'd like to pull out her hair, pinch her, push her, but Aunt Rivké is keeping an eye on us. Mom would never take my side, but I think we can do just fine without her. Oh forgive me, God!

*I must stop. I will continue tomorrow.*

*It is very cold in Jerusalem; it is the beginning of January 1998. It is nighttime outside.*

*I draw a flower on the frozen window.*

*Suddenly, I feel the urge to hear my footsteps on the frozen ground.*

*I go out.*

*Rainy wind lifts and drifts remaining autumn leaves.*

*The rain did not quell the storm. My beautiful pine tree loses its mind. It does not know where to sway, right or left. It is trapped in the wind, in the rain, and now the hail.*

*My beautiful pine tree does not resemble the king of the forests<sup>2</sup> any longer; it looks more like a witch broom that bangs on my shutters.*

*The winding path toward Samuel the prophet's tomb is glaring beneath the lights of the driving cars. It seems that the sky is touching the top of the mountain. The sight is striking.*

*I am cradled with a soft sense of warmth. My little dog, Begonia asks me to pet him and lies on my feet. Begonia is a mixed breed. He responds to human beings, to the feelings of family members. I talk to him. To be honest, I am trying to buy some time, to postpone the moment I will have to go back to the past.*

*It is too late now to back away.*

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2 There is a famous Christmas song in French, *Mon Beau Sapin*, which crowns the pine tree, the most prominent symbol for Christmas, to be the king of the forests. It is the French version of "O Christmas Tree." (YE)

I am six when Dad tells me war has been declared. We are coming back from a stroll, my hand in his. I hop from one foot to the other. Dad explains that war is a very serious thing. We will not be able to go to Warsaw, in Poland. I am disappointed. War is a bothersome thing. *Boubèlè* and *Zaidé* will not be happy with us.

I am not totally conscious of the fact that we are at war, but I am beginning to get it, slowly, that it is absolutely not a good thing. My family does not gather anymore. We need food stamps. There are long lines at the front of our bakery and the dairy shop.

One day Isaac comes home furious, "From now on you will not call me Isaac but Jacques instead. If you slip up, I will slap you hard."

Unbelievable!

"And what about me? How will you call me?"

"For you nothing changes. You stay Paulette, at school and on the street. Claude and Nicole stay the same as well."

The weird thing is that my parents support Isaac. Sorry, Jacques.

I am frequently slipping up but my parents will not allow my big brother to slap me. Why is it my fault that he doesn't like his name anymore?

When we fight, I look him straight in the eyes, and to tease him I say, I-S-A-A-C, and then I run and hide in Mom's dress.

One day, when I come back from school, I see that Dad is busy bringing our sewing machines up to

our neighbor's, Madame Dupont, apartment. I must explain that for us, Madame Dupont is so much more than a neighbor. She adopted our family right from the beginning. Her life story is unusual. Madame Dupont is German. When she was very young, she fell in love with a Frenchman; she married him and moved to France. In 1914 her brothers were drafted in Germany, and her husband was drafted in France. Monsieur Dupont was killed on the battlefield and Madame Dupont became a widow of a husband that died for France. Now, for the second time because of the war, Madame Dupont is being torn from her family.

Her nephews are in the *Wehrmacht*<sup>3</sup>.

They are our enemies, but Dad is hiding our most precious possessions in Madame Dupont's apartment.

I am eight years old now. The year is 1942. Sometimes I get the impression that our parents are whispering so we will not hear what they're saying. I am a bit worried, but when Dad cradles me in his strong arms, he's so tall, he's so strong, I know I am safe from danger.

One day Mom sews a star on my clothing. It is yellow and in the center, written in black is the word *Juif*, Jew.

The first time I go out to the street on my way to school with the star on my clothing, I am very embarrassed. On the way, some people I know stare at me, others turn their heads away. I think they are turning

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3 The Wehrmacht was the unified armed forces of Germany from 1935 to 1945. (SA)

their heads away intentionally. I am surprised to find out that in my school, at 32 Rue de la Folie Méricourt, there are other girls that have the yellow star on their clothing, but I don't get what's going on.

I don't get so many things anymore.

One day I go to school, one day I am told to stay at home. Another time I am sent to the boys' school, at 1 Rue Pihet. I see there other girls from my class; all of them are wearing the yellow star. We are placed in Jacques' class. I remember the teacher's name: Monsieur René! Monsieur René asks us not to make noise, not to disturb the big kids. To keep us occupied, he gives us books. I don't like all these changes that only confuse me. At home, Jacques talks a lot about Monsieur René. He says his teacher likes Jews and although it is dangerous, he helps them out.

I don't get all this.

From now on I do not go to school anymore. I stay at home with Claude and Nicole. Dad and Mom do not allow me to play on Rue Pasteur. I am bored.

One day, my school's principal, Mademoiselle Vieillot, comes to our house. She speaks to Dad and Mom. It looks like Mom does not understand what she says, and I do not understand what my school's principal is doing at our house, but I feel very proud. When Mademoiselle Vieillot says goodbye to my parents, she kisses me, which surprises me, and says to me, "You will be a very good girl."

I ask myself when I will go back to school.

**And then came that night.**

*I need to put my pen down. I cannot write anymore.*

*I look out through the window. Oh, I am dreaming!!! Big snowflakes, soft as silk, dancing as they fall. Snow is falling in Jerusalem.*

*In no-time the mountain is covered with a white carpet and my beautiful pine tree is collapsing under heavy snow.*

*It is quiet outside. Traffic has stopped completely. No more buses, no more cars.*

*I grab my hat, my mittens and my coat and join the kids that fill the streets roaring with joy.*

*It has been five years since Jerusalem has experienced such a spectacle.*

*It is January 12<sup>th</sup> 1998.*

*I linger for the longest time, observing the kids building snowmen. I preserve a picture of the diverse beauty of Jerusalem on a snowy day.*

*Words are superfluous.*

*I go back to my desk.*

*The most difficult things to write are still ahead of me, nevertheless I begin to like the sound my pen is making as it glides across the unused paper.*

*I remember.*

*It is 1942, I don't know which month. That night, nothing could have indicated that my childhood is about to turn upside down.*

Just like every night before I go to sleep, I kiss Dad and cuddle with Mom, and go to bed with the book I have started, *Poor Blaise*, written by the Countess of Ségur. I always fall asleep with a book.

It is dark when Dad wakes me up. He puts a finger on his mouth and says "Quiet! Don't make noise and get dressed quickly." I hear whispers from the other room. When I enter the living room, I see two women wearing black gowns. Claude and Nicole are already dressed. Jacques stands next to Dad. They are all looking at me quietly.

Keeping my voice down, I ask, "Where is Mom?"

One of the women tells me that Mom is very sick, she's in the hospital. When she gets better I will return home. In the meanwhile, they will take us someplace.

But, last night Mom was not sick!!!

The two women ask us to kiss Dad and Jacques. Jacques hands me my book, *Poor Blaise*. The two women leave, Claude and Nicole follow them. But before I pass the threshold, I turn around. I look at Dad and Jacques, trying to understand. They don't say anything. I don't understand anything.

The detachment within this silence is brutal.

When we leave our home, Nicole is three years old, Claude is four years old, and I am eight years old. Outside, the darkness is complete. A car is waiting with open doors.

They tell us to get in. We are driving though the empty streets of Paris. I get worried.

Jews are not allowed to leave their houses past eight o'clock at night, and I am breaking the law.

Claude and Nicole don't say anything. And as for myself, from the moment I asked "Where is Mom?" I have not said a word.

It seems as if we weren't driving that long before the car stops in front of a big gate.

The two women help us get out. It is still dark. We enter the building and the two women leave.

Suddenly, I notice that Claude and Nicole are no longer with me. I don't know when or with whom they went.

A woman is holding my hand and we climb many stairs. The woman turns to me and says with a harsh tone:

"Do not cry, do not make a sound, there are sleeping children here."

But I haven't said a word yet.

I find myself in a large hall. There are many beds. Beds along the walls, beds in the center. My bed is at the furthest end. They tell me quietly to take off my coat and my shoes, and get into bed with my clothes on, I will get different clothes tomorrow morning. Now I need to go to sleep. I pull the sheet up to my nose and try to locate myself when suddenly I hear a scream, more like a cry of despair. A child is crying.

A woman comes. She is looking to see where the cry is coming from. She wants to shut this child up but is

not succeeding in doing so, so she lifts the sheet, slaps with one hand and then the other, and then silence. The woman is leaving. I am hiding under the sheet, shaking. I am scared to death. Moments later, crying sounds are coming from another bed. The same scene: yelling, slapping, silence.

I wish I could stop breathing. I wish to be unseen.

I am terrified. I must not sleep. I might scream as well.

I must have fallen asleep, because I am being awakened the next day. Quickly I put on my shoes and my coat. The woman who stands in front of me picks up the sheet and says with a threatening tone, "Ha! You didn't pee in the bed tonight!"

For the first time since I left my home, I speak. I say that I do not pee in the bed and that I have arrived at night. Since I am wearing "civilian" clothes, the woman believes me and asks me to come with her.

We go up what seems to be endless flights of stairs, quickly, without saying a word. Finally I enter into a small room where a nurse asks me to take off my clothes.

She needs to vaccinate me against diseases. I am frightened, I am scared of shots. I tell her I was already vaccinated at the clinic. No answer. Since everything happens so fast, I do not move as I am being vaccinated, but I hear my heart beat pounding in my chest.

Still, it is really true that I have been already

vaccinated. I was even in Mom's arms sobbing and the nurse was cheering me up. This nurse does not speak with me. She does not look at me. I ask her, "Where am I? Where are my little brother and sister?"

*It is very hard to relive this moment. My mouth is dry. Outside the sun is shining. I go out to look at the melting snow.*

*I return to my story.*

"You are in a social services institute (*Assistance Publique*). Your parents have abandoned you, and your brother and sister. Your sister is in the nursery and your brother is with the boys. You will never be able to see them again!!!"

I am mute.

I get uniforms, and around my neck they put a necklace with a medallion, on it there's my license number.

Somebody packs my belongings. I want my book *Poor Blaise*. They say I will get another one, and now I must join the other little girls in the dining room.

**Social services- abandoned- dining room- civilian clothes.** I do not know any of these words.

I am escorted to the dining room. It is a very big hall. There are many little girls; all of them are dressed like me. I cannot hear a thing other than the noise of the iron plates, iron cutlery, iron cups. This noise is frightening, it echoes out of the silence. They say it is forbidden to speak during meal times. A tall girl is sitting at the end

of the table. She makes sure that everybody is respecting the silence, otherwise, we are smacked.

The meal is over, we are escorted to a very big hall. Everything here is so enormous, even the ceiling. The hall is empty; there are only a few benches. I run to get a seat. I don't want to move too much. I have a problem but I don't dare to talk about it. Anyway there's no one to tell it to: when I got my underclothing, the underpants did not have elastic. Since the morning I am holding them by attaching my hands as close to my waist...the girls are called to make a circle and sing. Every time someone tries to get me up to join the circle, I hold onto the bench. Suddenly I am slapped so hard I am shocked. I am so shocked that I leave the bench and let them drag me to the center of the hall. I knew what will happen to me. My underpants are falling down. The little girls are laughing so hard. "She doesn't have underpants, she doesn't have underpants, oh-ah!"

Some of them lift the apron and my dress. I am so miserable that for the first time since I got here, I sob, it only encourages a new wave of wild laughter.

Suddenly, a tall girl takes my hand. She drags me so fast that I have to hop over the stairs. She open the door in a brutal way, gets in without knocking, throws my underpants on the desk and says, "You give this little girl clothes that fit her right away!"

And I get another package with new underpants. I put on one pair that holds on wonderfully. Still I am led by my protector, finding myself in the dancing circle

with the other girls. I am filled with great joy. Somebody who does not know me took the risk of protecting me.

I turn around and around in the circle without stopping. I sing with the other girls:

*The one that will dance the best,  
The best!  
The one that will dance the best,  
From the two of us!*

And my underpants don't fall down.

Can I really understand all that has happened in one night? In one morning? The fall is so brutal that I am sure it is all a mistake and that Dad will come and pick me up soon.

The next day, and the following days, nobody takes care of me. I am with the others in the dining room, and then in the big empty hall where we dance in circles. We never get out, we don't learn, there are no games. I heard we are at Denfert-Rochereau. In Denfert-Rochereau nobody calls me by my name, and I don't call any girl by her name. The girls fight violently, I am terrified. I have never experienced violence and do not know how to protect myself, I become their prey.

Nighttime is the most difficult. The girls scream, they have nightmares. The slaps of the supervisor don't wake them up. They cry. Cries of despair.

At moments like this I think most intensely of Claude

—only four years old, and Nicole — only three years old. They are so young. Are they far away from me? I have no information about them, because the adults don't talk to me. Here, everything is so, so big. I feel lost. In the sleeping hall I have counted twenty beds on one side of the wall, twenty on the other side, and twenty in the middle. The beds are white and very high. I have to place one foot on the iron bar to climb into my bed. There are bars in both ends. The mattress smells like pee.

I want to tell someone that at home, my initials: P.S. (Paulette Szenker) are engraved on my headboard, but no one will believe me. Anyway, the girls who sleep next to me are changing all the time, so I don't speak. In the sleeping hall we are not allowed to speak or to whisper, and mainly, we're not allowed to cry. I want to stay awake but eventually I fall asleep, because they have to wake me up in the morning. Sometimes they slap me because I do not wake up fast enough. I do not respond. I do not know how to protect myself.

I have noticed that in the big empty hall where we dance in circles again and again, there is a door that is always closed. I go back and forth, what if someone will open the door?

Maybe I will briefly see Claude and Nicole? Maybe Dad will come out of this door and take us back home?

No, I did not see Claude and Nicole, and Dad did not come...

I don't know how many days, weeks or more I have stayed at Denfert-Rochereau. One morning, a woman

enters the sleeping hall. It seems like she is looking for somebody.

She gets closer to me, and checks the number on my medallion. The woman smiles at me.

She asks, "Is your name Paulette Szenker?"

Did I hear it right?

The woman says, "Tonight you will sleep in a room with a little friend. Tomorrow morning you will be going to the countryside."

Is it true?

*I need a break. I put down the pen.*

*I look through the window. A thunderstorm is on its way. There is electricity in the air.*

*If I was a painter I would use a paintbrush instead of words. The mountain is shimmering. To my right, bubbling light, white and bright. Against this backdrop, the local stone, Jerusalem stone, is deep pink. The windows of the houses shimmer like diamonds. Heavy clouds are coming closer from the left, some are black, some are silver, a threatening color. In the middle, Samuel the Prophet's tomb, lit with a violent stain of the remaining sun, hang in the air. A magnificent biblical image. No sound. The thunderstorm is about to begin. The top of my beautiful pine tree is swaying.*

*I go outside to listen to the wind.*

*The wind is screaming and goes through the barren trees. Suddenly, large raindrops come down along*

*with the thunder. I look up to the sky to receive the benevolent rain.*

*The blessed rain, very quickly becomes torrential rain. I walk in the storm, bending my head, slapped by the wind; the lightning and thunder make me vibrate with joy and fear. Drenched with water, freezing but calm, I go back home.*

*I am ready to go back to my story.*

You will sleep in a room. With a little friend. You are leaving to the countryside. I heard well. She was really referring to me. To my “license” number. I am filled with joy.

They will probably give me back my “civilian” clothes and my book *Poor Blaise*. Maybe, even my parents and Jacques will come to part from me and will take back Claude and Nicole with them? This day never ends. Finally it is nighttime. I am escorted to a bedroom, it has two beds and a desk, and there is a pile of clothes on the desk. With my eyes I am looking for my real clothes. A little girl enters. She smiles at me, reaches her hand out and tells me her name is Paulette Robinet. I tell myself that I will never forget her name: her first name is similar to mine, and Robinet<sup>4</sup> is a peculiar name. We get some details regarding our trip. They will wake us up very early in the morning, we need to hurry up and go to sleep. The moment we are left alone we rush to

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4 Robinet in French means faucet.(YE)

our clothing pile. Suddenly, I feel I'm choking. I don't see my "civilian" clothes. These are the same clothes I am wearing, and a dark blue gown, with a hood. There are also long socks and a small skirt with four hooks. I have no idea how to wear it. I am so disappointed that I feel the tears rolling on my cheeks, I cannot stop crying. I am ashamed of my helplessness. Paulette Robinet shakes me with a know-all smile. She explains that the "skirt" is actually a bodice, and the "hooks" are suspenders that hold the long socks, that are called stockings.

I try it on and realize how easy it is to tie the stockings. But it is not cold, why do we need to take all this? I wish tomorrow will be here already. The supervisor comes to turn off the lights, but Paulette and I keep whispering to each other in the dark.

Suddenly, Paulette is telling me a story that leaves me breathless:

Her dad is a very rich prince. One day, he met her mom, a beautiful girl, but also very poor. The prince wanted to marry her but his parents did not want a poor girl, so the lovers kept meeting secretly. One day, the beautiful girl got pregnant, and she has to hide the truth, and when the baby is born, she needs to abandon her. She is the baby. Paulette.

Robinet is not her real name, she says, but because she kept on crying they gave her that name, because her tears ran like water from a faucet. Later, when Paulette will grow up, her dad, the prince, and her mom will

look for her and will take her back.

I cannot believe it. Paulette Robinet is a Princess? I can imagine her, a few years from now, rich and beautiful like her mom (now Paulette is not pretty at all), in a beautiful palace, and on her head she has a tiara and she wears a long dress with a train.

Maybe, in Denfert-Rochereau there are many little princesses and nobody knows about them. My story is not so beautiful. It is also much sadder because Paulette, the princess, doesn't have a brother and a sister. I worry about them.

I don't think I slept at all that night. It is still dark when the woman who came to wake us up asks that we get ready. She says she is an escort; she will escort us on our trip. I am happy to get dressed because I know how to wear the bodice and the tights. The gown is covering my feet. The escort is smiling at me, it makes me very happy. She escorts me outside where a big car is waiting. A few kids are sitting in the car already. They are much younger than me. We all wear the same clothes. We are driving toward the train station.

*Every time I need to deal with traumatic images, my pen gets confused. A jog around the soccer field, between the mountain and the sky, will calm my irregular heartbeat. The clean and cool air of Jerusalem in March blushed my cheeks lightly, froze my ears, and oxygenated my lungs and my mind. Supreme Jerusalem, I love you so much.*

*I get back to my desk.*

We arrive at the train station. How to describe the indescribable? Chaos, yelling, pushing. French policemen with German soldiers and their dogs. The soldiers and policemen are shouting. The dogs are barking and revealing their molars. Men are running all around. Some of them are being caught, pushed to the ground, and roughed up with the rifles' handles. I smell blood and feel nauseous. The sound of bodies being beaten up. I panic and shiver. I decide to run away. I want to go back home, to Mom and Dad. In this chaos nobody will notice my absence. Outside I will ask someone to take me to my address. I am ready to jump.

**I am not moving.**

I try to put one foot in front of the other.

**I am not moving.**

I am glued to the ground. Paralyzed. Nobody pays attention to me. I try again.

**I am not moving.**

Our escorts found an empty cart for luggage and put the kids on it. Since I am the oldest, they ask me to keep an eye on them while they go and get the tickets. The moment the escorts leave, all the kids start crying. I stand in front of them.

**I am not moving.**

Suddenly, I notice a little boy. I look at him. I look at him again and again. I can't believe what I see. It's Claude! It's my little brother Claude! Through the

chaos, I scream as hard as I can: Clauuuuuude!

The little boy raises his head. I understand that he is responding to his name. I start talking in an unbelievable pace: "I'm Paulette, your sister, I have finally found you, and we will never be parted again, look at me, talk to me, recognize me!" Claude doesn't respond.

I cry.

And then, at the other end of the cart I am sure I see Nicole. Again, I scream as hard as I can: Nicooooooooole!

The little girl lifts her head. She too, is responding to her name. It cannot be a mistake. This is my sister. I am overly excited.

When the escorts return, I say, with a scramble of words, that I have found my brother and sister.

"You don't have a brother and sister!"

I don't know what happened later. I might have had a nervous breakdown. I am on the ground screaming and kicking. I see that one of the escorts is checking my "license" number and those of Claude and Nicole, looking for something in her bag, and checking again our medallions.

"You are siblings!"

I don't know if my heart stopped beating at this moment, or maybe it had just started to beat again.

On the train, I am allowed to sit between Claude and Nicole. I hold their hands very tight.

I need to touch them. I unbutton their gowns, and then button it back. I put the hood on their heads, and then take it off. I straighten their collar, tighten their

shoe laces. I hold their hands, that way nobody can separate us again. Claude and Nicole are totally indifferent. I don't think they recognize me. I am not letting go and say again and again that I am Paulette, their big sister.

I need to go to the toilet, but I will not risk leaving my brother and sister. I'd rather hold it in. The trip is long. Finally the train stops. I read the sign: "Cosne S/ Loire." The escorts help us get off the train and count us numerous times. I hold Claude and Nicole's hands tightly. A bus is waiting for us at Cosne.

They tell us that we need to go 20 kilometers more to get to a village named "Saint-Amand-en-Puisaye." I sit again between my brother and my sister. I look through the window and see cows in the fields. This is the first time that I see cows. They are big, much bigger than what they seem to be in the books. The bus is slowing down as we go uphill and accelerating as we go down the hills. I laugh out loud because I am scared, especially during the turns. We are at Saint-Amand, the bus stops. We get off; Claude and Nicole are beside me.

**Without any compassion, they immediately separate us...**

Desperate and helpless, I see them go away from me. I guard them with my eyes until they become a tiny dot, and....disappear.

A scream is rising in my throat. It swells and swells.... but it doesn't let out. A terrible and muted scream. I did not know pain like this was possible. Words will never be able to express this pain. The separation is cruel.

They hand me over to a woman that looks very old. She puts my package in a wheelbarrow.

"I am your foster mother, she says. You will call me Mémère<sup>5</sup>. If you are nice, I will keep you until you turn fourteen, otherwise you'll go back to where you came from."

Mémère is speaking French that I don't understand very well. I panic. What should I do so that she will not send me back to Denfert-Rochereau? What does it mean "to be nice"?

We walk on the road, because the sidewalk has stairs that makes it hard to push the wheelbarrow. I look at Mémère. Her hair is totally white, and tied in a small ponytail.

She is wearing a long black dress, and over it a big apron with blue and black flowers.

She is wearing clogs that make weird sounds on the ground, because when she walks she leans heavily on one side, as if one leg is shorter than the other. Regardless, she looks pretty to me. On the way, she gestures with her head to the people who stand in their yards. One of them asks Mémère, "Did you get a little one from the social services?"

Mémère responds, "What can we do, we have to."

I want to cry but Mémère might think that I'm spoiled, so I smile to the people who stare at me. I'd like

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5 A common name to call a grandmother. (YE)

her to hold my hand, but she holds the wheelbarrow, so I walk behind her.

We enter a yard with two houses. Mémère goes to one of them. She opens a wooden shutter<sup>6</sup>, and the door that has a window covered with a white lace curtain. I go down one stair. Mémère says, “It’s here.”

I look, surprised. It looks like a doll house. Everything is so small, I feel safe. Mémère places my package on a straw chair. We are in the kitchen. They say it is the main room.

“I will show you your bedroom, you will sleep upstairs,” Mémère says.

I see a flight of stairs that spirals up, and suddenly I turn around and see a little boy squishing his nose against the door’s window. I love him immediately. He looks at me with smiling eyes, full of life. I am shocked. This is the first time in a long time that I see a “normal” little kid. He doesn’t have the weird scared glance. His cheeks are red and chubby. He has a head full of hair and his bangs fall into his eyes. Mémère signals him to come in. She hugs him and gives him big, loud kisses.

“This is my grandson,” she says. “His name is Guy, he is seven years old.”

“And you are from social services?” Guy asks.

I want to kiss him. I want Mémère to kiss me. Everybody says I am from social services. Is it so obvious? I

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6 The houses once had shutters not only on the windows, but also on the doors. (YE)

have a uniform, and Guy has “civilian” clothes. Maybe they don’t kiss kids from social services?

I am about to cry so I look through the window.

I see an old man crossing the front yard. In his hands he is holding a basket full of cherries.

He gets closer to our house, pushes the door, and with him comes a scent of fruits that I have forgotten.

“This is Pèpère,” says Mémère.

He smiles at me. I think I’m dreaming. I ask if the cherries are real. In Paris you cannot find fruit anymore.

“Here,” Pèpère says and as he keeps smiling, “they are very sweet, they are called Bigarreaux.”

I want to eat them, but I have needed to go to the toilet for a while now.

“I will take you there,” Mémère says.

We cross the yard and go into a garden. I ask myself how far we will have to go. It seems very far from the house. Finally.

“This is it,” says Mémère.

I am shocked. I am hesitant upon entering this hut. It is so stinky, with big flies, and a black open hole. I am sure that I will fall in. I am holding myself, I want to scream, but through the half open door I notice a tree with large green plums. It is so beautiful that immediately I calm down. So unpredictable.

When I get out, I look around me. Another tree with black plums, another one with pears, and another one that’s branches are collapsing under the weight of the cherries, I mean the Bigarreaux. On the ground lettuce,

strawberries, flowers. Next to the hut – Mémère says I need to call it a toilet – so next to the toilet hut, there's a small pen. In the pen there are four chickens and one rooster. Mémère also shows me rabbits. I am dazzled. The garden looks like a picture book. Everything is so beautiful that I forget the big black hole.

On the way home Mémère gives me her rules. There is no bathroom in the house. There is no running water. She will teach me how to bring water from the pump with two jugs that are located under the stairs. This is going to be my job for now. Then, Mémère will teach me to do other things because nobody eats for free. In the evening, I will get soup made out of the garden's fresh vegetables, home-made soft cheese, a pickle, and a soft egg that is taken daily from the pen. Mémère adds that speaking is not allowed at the table or in the home. Only outside is speaking allowed. In a few days, she will get another little girl from social services; this will add to her load of work, and she will not tolerate "squawking"...

While Mémère is speaking, I look at the kitchen, the main room. Next to the window, there is a table covered with red plastic cover. Over the table a light bulb hangs with a wire. Across the table, a stove and over it a large pot, an appetizing smell of soup comes from it. Wooden logs are stacked nicely under the stove and a big bowl with silverware. Every now and then Pèpère lifts the cover of the stove and throws a log in. It creates sparks. It is very hot. On the wall there's a shelf covered

with a lace doily that flows down like a garland. On the shelf there are porcelain pitchers, each one with a label: sugar, salt, coffee, chicory. Next to the stairs there is a big cabinet with dishes. In every corner in the kitchen there is a straw chair and another small one that looks like it was for a doll. Mémère says it's her chair. The floor has red and white tiles.

I kind of like this house. Like the garden, it looks like a picture book. I think Guy is handsome. He runs around me and tries to make me laugh. He says I have a funny Parisian accent. I hold myself not to laugh at his accent.

From this very strange day that I have gone through, I remember every detail. The joy of leaving Denfert-Rochereau; the horror in the train station; the shock of reuniting with my little brother and sister; the despair of them being torn almost immediately away from me, the arrival at Saint-Amand; Pépère, Mémère, Guy, the garden, the toilet, the rabbits, the chickens that I have not ever seen for real in my entire life. I am exhausted.

When it got dark, Mémère closed the shutters and turned on the light over the table. After that, I remember a big silence.

"You will go to sleep. I will show you your room," says Mémère.

She takes a candlestick made out of blue glass, and lights a candle. Mémère says that the Germans are staying in Saint-Amand and they are very strict when people don't keep the blackout rules. "Blackout," she

explains, “means that at nighttime there should not be any light seen from the houses, otherwise people will be punished severely.” Mémère goes up the stairs that squeak under her footsteps and mine. I follow her. The candle flame shivers and creates scary shadows on the wall. I am frightened. I see shapes of creatures that twist their faces, monsters go up with me, but when I enter the little room of the attic, I relax. The wallpaper looks like a field of flowers in the candlelight. There is a big wooden bed, very high, that is covered with a thick red comforter. Next to it, a straw chair that will be used as a ladder to help me climb up into the bed. The window is sealed so nothing can leak in from the outside; it is covered with wooden shutters.

“The bedpan is under the bed,” Mémère says as she leaves.

I hear her heavy footsteps going down the stairs.

I find myself alone. All alone for the first time in my life. At home, I slept with Mom and Dad or in Isaac’s room, sorry...Jacques. And we always had people over when I went to sleep. It was never quiet. In Denfert-Rochereau there were forty little girls in the sleeping hall. We had to be quiet, but every night it was interrupted with crying and yelling. And here I am, all alone, in a completely dark room. I am not afraid; the contrary. I imagine myself in a nest and decide not to sleep at all. I have the whole night, without any disturbance, to go back to Dad, and Mom and Jacques with my thoughts, and I make a plan to find Claude and Nicole. When I

think of them I have a lump in my throat. And then, nothing. Black hole.

I am startled from my sleep with a sharp yelling, "Get up, there!!"

I don't know where I am. I cannot remember anything. I must be dreaming. The memories from yesterday slowly come back to me. From the kitchen, Mémère yells at me to open the window and the shutters. I see the whole room, I like it very much. From the window I can see the path from which I came yesterday. I see children walking by; they have backpacks on their backs. Mémère says I need to hurry up because she needs to sign me up for school and order clogs in my size. When I hear the word "school" my heart fills with an overwhelming joy. Going back to school, that means I go back to being a little girl just like everyone else. Finally I will go back to the notebooks, the pencils, and especially the books. I know I am a good student.

On the way to school, I see other little boys and girls dressed like me, with uniforms from social services. I don't want to look like them but I understand I will never be like the other kids, who are dressed by their parents.

My entrance to the classroom is met with wonder and curiosity amidst the students. My teacher, Made-moiselle Malaigre sits me at the end of the room, next to the exit door.

"Another one from social services," she says in a non-sympathetic tone.

Again my feelings are hurt, but the smell of the ink in the inkwell, as if they planted flowers in the desk, and also the smell of my new books, and the “crr- crr” sound that the tip of the pen is making when I write my name in the notebook, I feel how it all brings back my pride. My new teacher still doesn’t know that in my school in Paris, I am first in the class. Mademoiselle Malaigre doesn’t look at me, doesn’t speak to me. I notice that the class is divided into three groups. One row for the youngest, one row for the intermediate age, and one row for the older girls. I am with the youngest. I listen to the teacher attentively. I do not understand a thing. Not a thing. I am horrified, but believe that my memory will come back to me. During the break, I lean on the wall in order to see my new school. The yard is not big. On one side, the girls’ toilet, the doors are wide open. Next to it, the teachers’ toilet, the doors are locked. Across the classroom is an internal yard with wood logs. In the center of the yard, birds are swinging on the branches of a chestnut tree. It is all very beautiful but I want to cry.

The girls are gathering by age and what they wear. Those who wear the checkered apron, like me, do not mingle with the others. We, those with the checkered aprons, all have the same golden necklace, each one with her “license” number. I hate this necklace that pinches my skin every time I turn my head.

I want to integrate, have “civilian clothes,” but I don’t dare. I prefer to be alone. At the end of my first day of

school, I still do not understand any of the lessons. I also don't understand why I have to give back the reading book "Fauvette" and keep math, history and geography books in my backpack.

Mémère is waiting for me when I get out of school to take me to the shoemaker. She asks me if I'm a good student. I tell her I am a very good student. She will find out soon anyway. She will be proud of me like Dad, Mom and Isaac-Jacques were proud of me.

At the shoemaker's workshop there's a good smell of wood. He measures my foot. Mémère orders two pairs of clogs for me: one for every day wear, and one for Sunday Mass.

What is that?

Mémère says I am at the age that I can go to *Catechism*.<sup>7</sup>

What is that?

I don't understand the word "Mass" or the word "*Catechism*."

I don't say anything to Mémère. There are too many things that I don't understand today, and Mémère might think that I'm stupid.

Getting the clogs make me very happy, as opposed to the aprons, the skirts, the corset, the tights, the gown and even the books; social services don't have clogs. All

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7 Catechism – classes that teach the Christian belief system and morals. These classes are extracurricular and are taught to kids who are eight years old and up. (YE)

the clogs look the same, so I am a bit similar to everyone else.

Mémère signed me up for *Catechism*.

I saw churches in Paris, but I have never gone into one. This is the first time I go through the threshold of a church, and I have a strong urge to run away. A smell that I don't like chokes me. Although it is dark, the light that comes from the many long candles creates distorted shadows on the walls and the ceiling, which is even higher than the one in Denfert-Rochereau. I am scared. It is so quiet. I tip toe.

Someone has moved a chair, it makes such a loud noise that it seems like he wants to run away from the ceiling, as he bumps into the walls. I want to run away. Huge drawings with many characters are displayed, but my eyes are drawn to a statue. It is a statue of a beautiful mother that holds a little child in her arms. I like this image. It's like my mom holding Nicole or Claude in her arms. I want to touch the statue or even kiss it. A woman get closer to me, she smiles at me, holds my hand and asks what my name is. I relax.

"My little Paulette, I will teach you your Catechism."

Her eyes are soft, I love her voice, she speaks with "rrr" but I understand what she is saying. Her name is Madam Auger.

I join a group of children, girls and boys. They give me a *Chaplet*, rosary. I don't know what to do with it.

“This is for you to do your decades<sup>8</sup>.”

What is that?

The kids are reciting the lesson in one united voice. Instinctively, I sense danger. I know I have to hide the fact that I am Jewish. I move my lips, as if I know the lesson like the others.

My life at Saint-Amand has begun. I think that for me, nothing will be like before, but I am still convinced that this is all a big mistake. One day, Dad will come to take me.

Sometimes, I think I see him from far away but when I get closer, no Dad. I tell myself: maybe tomorrow...

In the meantime, I am adjusting, but not in school, there I don't understand a thing.

I am a complete loser in every subject. Nothing gets into my head. I am too young to understand that my mind is very disturbed with everything that has happened to me. Maybe it is impossible for me to learn as before, separated from my parents and siblings, but I don't know that yet. I think I became dumb, like Mémère is saying. Anyway, Mademoiselle Malaigre says that kids from social services are stupid, and grow up to be criminals and thieves. These things bring tears to my eyes.

*Even when I write these lines...*

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8 The Christian prayer that matches ten beads from the rosary. (YE)

It is spring time. Jerusalem is even more beautiful. It will be nice to take a walk. I abandon my sorrow for a little while. I go out.

Outside, girls with their bellybuttons exposed, shake their bare beauty. God! They are so beautiful with their thick long hair, flowing on their shoulders or braided on their heads like a tiara. The boys are “gobbling” them with their eyes.

I sit on the terrace of a coffee shop, a marvelous place to observe, to drift away. I love this spectacle of life. Exposed legs or long skirts, yamakas or black hats, jeans or long coats, what a mix! The street is bustling. Tomorrow, the Sabbath, the buses are not going to run. The stores are going to be closed. I will not write. I will enjoy the silence and the calmness of the Sabbath in Jerusalem.

On Sunday, my pen will take me back to Saint-Amand-en-Puisaye.

I learn Catechism. Oh, the shock...I am the best student. Madame Auger loves me very much. She even uses me as a model for excellence. I know the prayers I recite every night very well. With my rosary I do “decades” and sing “Je suis Chrétien, voilà ma gloire,” I am Christian, this is my pride.

I enjoy looking at the little boy’s statue in his mother’s arms. His name is Jesus, and his mother’s, Maria. Madame Auger says Jesus is the son of God, and we can

talk to him and ask for things we want very much. I have many things to ask from him. They call him “little Jesus,” and since I am also a little kid he will understand and help me find Claude and Nicole. Afterward, we will all go back home.

On Sundays for Mass, Mémère puts a ribbon in my hair, and on my feet I have my “Sunday clogs.”

One day, Madame Auger asks me to bring her my baptism certificate.

What is that?

I begin to know Mémère. She's a bit weird. Her hand is fast, so if I want to get away from the slaps, I need to stay away from her when she comes back tired from work.

She cleans the houses of very rich potters. Mémère says she needs to work very hard to bring money in; Pépère, who used to be a painter, cannot work anymore since he developed asthma; the money she gets for me from social services is not enough. I know that she also gets food stamps to get sugar, chocolate and crackers because of me. I feel Mémère's pain, so I enjoy giving her the things she likes, since these things are locked in the buffet.

Mémère says she's doing everything she can to feed me. That is absolutely true: I am never hungry. She also says I am lucky to be assigned to her, because the other foster mothers beat their foster kids harder, they don't feed them well, and in the winter they have frost bites

at the tips of their fingers and toes because of the hard work they need to do on the farm.

When Mémère says that, I feel a stab in my chest. I immediately think of Claude and Nicole. They are so little; they will never be able to defend themselves. Are they together or separate? Will I ever see them again? Will I recognize them?

It is a horrible nightmare for me.

In order to have Mémère like me, when I come back from school (where I'm still stupid) I do the chores she gives me the best I can. Now, I know how to scrub the floors on my knees, like Mémère, with black soap and a brush, but she "shakes" me because I don't squeeze the mop enough. But, I squeeze it as hard as I can. I also wash the dishes with water that needs to be lukewarm in order to get rid of all the grease. I shine the pots by scrubbing them with sand. I go to the pump to bring water with the two measuring jugs, while telling Mémère that it is not at all heavy for me.

I wish, sometimes, to get a compliment from Mémère, that she will say something nice to me. I am always looking for the slightest hint for a cuddle. Sometimes I want to cry but Mémère cannot stand whining, so when I feel the tears are choking me, I go out with the excuse that I need to pee (in the garden). Luckily, it takes a while to get to the garden, enough time for me to calm down.

But what am I going to do in regards to the baptism certificate?

I don't dare to talk about it with Mémère.

It seems like it's been a while since I came to Saint-Amand. I came in the spring, the weather was nice, and there were cherries; now it is summer. Summer break will come soon, and I am still not improving at all in school. Nobody will believe me that I was the best student in my class. I miss reading. We read our book Fauvette in class, and when class is over, Fauvette goes back to the cabinet. I could have read over the break. When I talk about it with Mémère, she says I will have other things to do. Is she going to have a break?

On the last day of school, we have a party in the school yard. We set up circles and sing:

*Hooray for summer break  
No more punishments  
The notebooks are set on fire  
The books in the center  
Good bye and hope not to see you again,  
My teacher who made me cry so much  
Who punished me with stale bread  
And I didn't deserve it  
Happy, happy is the student  
Tonight I am leaving.*

But for me, summer break did not start very well.

The school's principal asked all the parents and the foster families to send, if they wish, their kids to collect

doryphores<sup>9</sup>. Since I don't have any idea what it is, I am happy that Mémère agreed to send me. I tell myself that for me, it will be a fun day. We need to be in front of our school. A school without kids is a sad thing. A small group of boys and girls gather, and we start walking as we sing: Hooray for the summer break, no more punishments...

I walk in the burning heat.

We reach a potato field. Each one of us gets an iron box with a hole. Our job is to remove tiny creatures that are attached to the potatoes' leaves, and throw them into the box. These creatures smell very bad. I am stricken by the heat, I am thirsty. I can't see the end of the big field; I can't see the end of the potatoes or the end of the doryphores.

For the first time in a very long time, I rebel. This is not fair. So many kids go to this school, so why only a few are doing this job? Furthermore, almost all of us belong to the "checkered aprons." All the foster families agreed to send their foster kids, but the real parents didn't want their kids to get tired.

I will tell that to Dad and Mom!

I calm down when the farmer lady, the owner of the field, let us into a large dining room that smells so good from milk and cheese. We are entitled to a big smile and a glass of a sweet and cold drink. The farmer lady explains to us that the doryphores are damaging

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9 Doryphores - Flying beetles that feed on potatoes.

creatures that eat the potatoes and somebody needs to do this job (the potatoes are for the Germans that occupied Saint-Amand).

I don't really care who will do this job, but I cannot tell it to anyone. Other than my friend, I finally have a friend. Her name is Ginette. She lives on a farm in the potters' suburb, really close to Mémère's house. I really like her even if she has real parents. She plays with me... that makes me very proud. The moment I am done with my chores, I run to play with Ginette. I feel like everybody else with Ginette. I laugh, fight, make up, play with toy dishes, and pretend to be a cashier, like all the girls that have nothing to worry about.

But reality kicks in fast.

What will happen with the baptism certificate?

After collecting the doryphores, Mémère says that if we want to eat white bread we need to go and glean.

What does it mean to glean?

Early in the morning, before the sun comes out, and with a harsh yelling "Get up, there!" Mémère wakes me up, and also the other little girl that Mémère got from social services.

If I will have the courage, I will tell the story of this little girl.

Each one of us gets a wheelbarrow and a bag, where Mémère puts a bottle of cool water wrapped with cloth to keep it cold. The reason we leave so early is so we can

glean easily before the sun becomes too hot. Although it is very early, gleaners are already in the field. I am barefoot in my clogs and I have to be careful not to hurt myself when I hop over the cut straw, which is thick and sharp. In the fields, the combine left out some oat wheat. To glean means to collect this oat wheat. I learn helpful things in Saint-Amand. Mémère tells us to come back only when the wheelbarrows are full. When we go back, we go through the potter's suburb. Women standing in their yards smile at us and tell us we are brave girls.

I tell myself that Mémère will also be happy with us. And indeed, I am getting my first compliment. I am happy and promise myself that I will get a larger bunch tomorrow, and the next day, until the end of summer break.

I want to go back to class, to walk in the path that leads to school. On my way from the suburb, I go to the town crossing, La Vrille Bridge. A big area of lotuses looks like a floating carpet as the water trembles to the touch of the dragonflies. Sometimes I catch one that sat on the bridge rail. I hold its long wings. That way I can look closely at the beautiful colors, as beautiful as its name. It is beautiful. Slowly I let go of my holding, and the dragonfly races away. I linger, dream, walk slowly...and then, I was always late to school. When that happens, I get kicked out of class and have to wait in the hallway.

Going back to school soon, I plan to get better, to

listen, to do my homework and to become the best student in my class, as I was when I was living with Dad and Mom. Mémère will be surprised, as well as my teacher, and all the other students. I am impatient to go back to school already.

Her name is Paulette Huet, the little girl from social services that came to Mémère and Pépère two months after I arrived to Saint-Amand.

I was hesitant for a while. Will I bring up the painful memory that fills me with shame to this day?

When Paulette comes, I am happy and jealous at the same time. I have my habits and I don't want to share Mémère and Pépère with a stranger. On the other hand, I will have a little friend to share the chores with, that way I will have more time to go and play with my friend, Ginette.

Paulette is an abandoned child, like me, but she was abandoned when she was a baby. She's my age, eight years old. Before she got to Mémère she stayed with a few families.

Right from the beginning I notice that Mémère doesn't like her. Paulette has a strange look. As if she's looking far away at an invisible object. She never smiles; she speaks only when she's spoken to. At school she's a –loser. In Catechism she's a – loser.

She's in no way a threat to me. I think I don't like her either, but I get used to her. We do everything together.

Mémère gives the chores: stack the wooden logs for the winter, bring water from the pump, wash the dishes, mop the house, dust the furniture, and so on. While we're doing the chores, Mémère is not home, she's at her employers. Before she leaves for work, Mémère always checks that the buffet where she hides her marvels – lozenges, sugar, crackers, and chocolate – is locked with a key.

One day, when I was busy dusting the furniture, I see the buffet door is half open. Carefully I look around to make sure nobody sees me, and I sneak crackers and chocolate. I am not hungry, but these forbidden things have such a delicious taste that makes me so happy. I close the buffet door, nobody saw me. I am careful not to take too much, I don't want anyone to suspect, and I keep working as if nothing happened.

In the evening, when Mémère gets back home, I am confident. I even expect to get a compliment from Mémère on my work. No compliment. The evening goes by following the ritual that was forced by Mémère: after the shutters are closed, speaking is forbidden.

Then, eating the soup quietly. The only sounds that are heard are the rattle of the cutlery over the dishes, and Pépère sipping his soup. I look at Paulette and try as hard as I can to hold in a wild laughter, I know that if I let it out I will be slapped. I look under the table as if I'm looking for something, I want to think about a sad thing, but I cannot stop the wild urge to laugh. I cannot even say that I want to go and pee in the garden; this

is done before we enter the house. I want to go to my room badly, but when I get there, when I am alone and the ban is over, my cheer immediately expires.

The next day I wake up to the sound of the “get up, there!” but I have the impression that there is something different in Mémère’s yelling. Scared, Paulette and I dress quickly and go hopping down the stairs. Mémère is in front of us, furious.

In a scratchy voice she asks:

“Who was stealing from the buffet?”

My heart is pounding so hard that I am afraid Mémère will hear it. I say very fast, “It wasn’t me.”

Mémère looks at Paulette. No answer. Paulette lowers her head.

But she will defend herself, she will deny, she will cry, she will blame me. Nothing.

Paulette says Nothing. And then she lifts her head and looks to a different direction.

Mémère says:

“OK, I get it.”

And as she refers to Paulette she says, “I can’t stand you anymore. But before I kick you out, I will ask my son to punish you, so you will learn not to steal ever again.”

I don’t understand why Paulette doesn’t defend herself, and I don’t believe Mémère’s threats. We go to school. On the way, I think that the crisis is over and I am spared.

In the evening, when we come back from school,

Mémère's son is in the house.

Without a word, he grabs Paulette, puts her head between his legs, lifts her dress and her apron, and starts beating her with an unbelievable violence. Mémère's son beats, beats, beats. No sound, no cry, no grown comes out of Paulette's mouth. I am shaking with horror, I want to scream stop! stop! I want to cover my ears, not to hear the beating anymore, not to see anything anymore, but I don't move. Mémère looks apathetic.

I can't believe it. Nightmare. I will wake up.

Finally Mémère's son stops.

"I don't have any more energy," he tells Mémère, "give me some brandy."

And he goes back to his house in the center of town.

Paulette face is very red; her hair is wild, but there is not a single tear in her eyes. She doesn't have a name anymore; Mémère calls her "the thief." When Paulette and I are finally alone in the room, I wait for her say something. Paulette undresses without a word, goes up to the bed and turns her face to the wall. I feel uncomfortable but I don't think that it is my conscience that bothers me. I don't know this feeling. Not yet. I just know that I was spared from a horrible punishment. And suddenly, I feel a horrible pain in my stomach and my head. I see Nicole, my tiny sister, her head is held between Mémère's son's legs and he beats her as hard as he can. I see Claude, my tiny brother, his head is held

between Mémère's son's legs and he beats him as hard as he can. I feel that I'm going crazy. I fight to push away this image. It goes away, it comes back, it goes away, and comes back. In the room, complete darkness. The quietness is frightening; this is a night of horror.

I wake up to the usual sound of the "get up, there!!" I am surprised that I fell asleep.

Paulette and I go down together. Everything looks normal in the kitchen. Just as it always is, the soup pot is in the corner of the stove, a blue metal bowl is placed on a small chair, half-full with lukewarm water to wash our faces. First Mémère, then Paulette and me. Mémère doesn't look angry other than when she talks to us, she says Paulette (that's me) and the thief.

A short while after the buffet incident, a woman came to take Paulette. I looked at her leaving, covered with a big dark blue gown that reaches her ankles. Paulette did not turn to look at me; she didn't get a kiss from Mémère, no word of farewell.

"Good riddance, the thief has left," Mémère said.

Her name was Paulette Huet. In 1942 she was eight years old. She never knew any dad or mom. I have never heard of her again.

*Today, spring of 1999, I let my pen run on my white paper to bring back your name- Paulette Huet- and tell you that I don't want to - I cannot forget you.*

*I am overwhelmed. Consumed with my writing, I haven't noticed that it has started to rain. It is an invitation for a walk. My memories need a break.*

*Had I been a poet, I would have found majestic words to describe the beauty of Jerusalem in the rain, on a spring day. The local stone, Jerusalem stone, cannot be more beautiful than when it is covered with waters of rain. A touch of a shy ray of sun, and the stone glimmers like a ruby. Mother Nature, undoubtedly enthused by my excitement, offers a rainbow as a gift. I walk, with no purpose other than postponing the moment I get back to the turbulence of my childhood.*

Summer break is over. I am excited to go back to class, the town, the church, the Catechism. I will observe the people who come on the bus from Cosne. The bus always stops in front the post office cafe, real close to my school. My parents must come from there, and I will go back to Paris with them. To my home. All the people of Saint-Amand will see that I don't belong to social services. It was a mistake. A huge mistake.

Mémère will make a face, and also Pépère, and Guy, and even my friend Ginette, and my teacher, Made-moiselle Malaigre, who doesn't like kids from social services, and even the principal, Mademoiselle Brisset, whom I like, and Madame Auger, who teaches me Catechism and who loves me. And for all the school kids it's going to be a big surprise. Finally I will be able to tell that at my home, in Paris, I have nice clothes, flapping

dresses, shiny shoes. I also have a bed and my initials are engraved on it. I also know how to play the piano, and in my report card from my school in Paris, it is written: "First in class, very good student."

On the morning of the first day of school Mémère irons my checkered apron as she threatens to punish me if I get it dirty. My clogs are shiny, my backpack is ready.

I have no doubt that I will go back to being the best student in my class, and my friends will be the best students, obviously not the ones from social services. On the way, I smile to myself. It is the month of September, 1942.

With much pleasure I meet again the beautiful yard and the chestnut trees, the inner yard, the toilets which are very clean in the first few days. Again, I meet my class with the smell of the chalks and the ink, the smell of the old books. I have been moved to a different level but I still have the same teacher. I smile at her. She does not smile back. Mademoiselle Malaigre dislikes bad students. But I will become one, or even better, I will go back being the best student.

I cannot forget that day of going back to school, when nothing had happened. I didn't understand any of the classes, none of them. And it did not change over the next few days, weeks and months. My report card - it is all F's. The location of the student: last. I am desperate. Well, is it really true? Have I become stupid? But why? What about all of the books in Isaac Jacques's room that

I have read? The music notes that I knew by heart? The tunes I memorized and played on the piano? I am sure that I haven't dreamed all of this, it was me!

Luckily, I still have the Catechism. Nobody cares about the good grades I get there, but it gives me back a bit of self-esteem.

I love to go to church. Often times I run there after school to find shelter, to ask little Jesus to find my family for me. Of course, I do it secretly praying that Mémère will not notice the detour I take and my late arrival.

I lost my craving to go to school, because now I am stupid. But I love the path that leads to school. I learn to observe nature. I know the flowers that border the trail; I like to call them by their names: Primrose, Pansy, Anemone, Daisy, Lily, and Buttercup. I compare them to children. Each one has an apron with a different color. I find parents for those who grow taller like hollyhocks, boxwood, rose hips, and wisteria flowers. I daydream. I don't pay attention to the time passing by, and I am almost always late for class. Mademoiselle Malaigre doesn't let me in. For what I'm doing, or better, what I'm not doing in class, she says, I can stay in the hallway. So I sit on the floor, between the coat hangers, and sing out loud "Je suis Chrétien, voilà ma gloire." Mademoiselle Malaigre opens the door roughly and slaps me because, "Unlike you, there are students here who want to learn and you are distracting them."

Autumn is coming. I experience the change of seasons intensely.

I saw the spring pass by with the revelation of trees and cherries blossoming.

I saw the summer pass by, the heat, the flying bugs, and the sheaves of wheat. And now the fairground is covered with the trees' large leaves. It looks like a yellow, brown and orange carpet. I want to roll in it. I love this smell, wonderful. I pick up a leaf, separating its outline as I smooth it with my fingers, leaving only the veins. It resembles a skeleton of a palm or a spider. Autumn is a beautiful season!

Getting ready for winter, Mémère orders wood logs that come in a cart that I need to unload with my wheelbarrow. Mémère and Pépère teach me how to stack the wood logs correctly under the shade. I complete many rounds with the wheelbarrow, but I like this chore, even though I get painful blisters on my hands afterward. I imagine that stacking the wood logs is like building a palace for my parents, my brothers and sister, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, my grandparents. My piano will also be there, and my books and my bed with my initials engraved on it. I continue dreaming this dream in my room, the door is locked. That way, my thoughts cannot run away. They stay inside me.

Time goes by.

Since I accepted the fact that I'm stupid, I don't expect better grades in school, but I continue my brief visits to the church at the end of the school day. By myself, I can talk to little Jesus, and look at his beautiful mother. This

is even better than going to Mass and *Vespers*.<sup>10</sup>

Madame Auger will ask me again:

“When will you bring your baptism certificate?”

And I will answer:

“I lost it on the train; it must have slipped from my bag.”

How long can I keep this secret?

I think Madame Auger, a gentle woman, a believer, Christian, who loves me, surely knows that I am lying. As for myself, I know I cannot possibly have a baptism certificate. I know very well that I am Jewish, but nobody should know. Never. If Mémère would have known! Mémère doesn’t like Jews. She says that the 1914 war happened because of the Jews; this war is also because of the Jews; the captives, the food stamps, the black bread, the Rutabaga<sup>11</sup>, it’s because of the Jews; even Pépère’s asthma, it’s the Jews fault that Pépère got these bastards in 1914 during the war.

I believe everything Mémère says because she’s always right. I need to think like Mémère. I love Mémère. I have no one but her. I hate Jews.

The first frost has come. I had never experienced such a penetrating cold in Paris.

In the morning, nothing is left of the flowers; they are all covered with white frost.

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10 Vespers – religious evening services

11 Rutabaga – European turnip

The naked trees make me feel sad, no more dragonflies, and my fingers are frozen.

I have nothing to look at on my way to school, so I walk fast and am not late to class anymore. One morning I am surprised by an unusual silence. I don't hear the sound of the carts, or the clapping of horseshoes. When I open the shutters I see the potter's suburb all covered with snow. Magnificent. Mémère didn't get to yell her "get up, there!" and I am already in the kitchen. I have to pee. I can't recognize the garden: the narrow trail, the vegetables, the flowers, they are all gone. The trees are wearing a bride's dress. I go to say good morning to the rabbits. The babies are attached to their mothers inside their hut. I touch the net, they don't come to me like they usually do, and they'd rather stay inside where it's warm. They are funny with their twitchy noses. I love them very much, they are my friends and I confess my secrets to them, whispering. When I look at them, I never want to grow up.

*I will explain this later.*

Soon it is Christmas time. At the Catechism we sing "Il est né le divin-e enfant" which means "He was born the divine child." Mémère says we'll go to the midnight Mass, and tomorrow we'll eat with her son, daughter-in-law and her grandchild where they live in the city.

I am very excited by the idea of going out at night for Mass, and experience a family holiday. It is a refreshing

change to my life in Saint-Amand, where nothing special ever happens.

On Christmas Eve, Mémère is as excited as I am. She changes her clothes and puts on holiday clothes. I put on a dress that I haven't had a chance to wear before; it is only for very special events.

It is very warm in the house. Pèpère, who cannot join us because of his asthma, places two bricks on the stove, it makes a lot of noise, and the round cover is red from the heat, lighting the kitchen slightly. The bricks are still very hot, and Mémère covers each one with a big towel and places them in a bag. We will put them beneath our feet, because it will be freezing in church. I am happy.

When we leave the house, the darkness is absolute. There is no light because of the blackout rules, we are even forbidden to use flashlights. We only see shadows that move slowly, and hear the sound of footsteps on the gravel. I can walk with my eyes closed. I know the way by heart and know how to go around the obstacles.

When we get there, the church is packed. I leave Mémère and find my way among the crowd to see up close the restoration of the barn where they placed the little Jesus. We were talking about it for weeks in the school yard and at the Catechism. I have no idea what they are talking about.

It is a big shock.

I see Jesus completely naked, placed on straw, in the freezing cold church. A baby. Jesus is cold. Jesus, who

doesn't know that he's about to die, that the Jews will kill him.

I am flooded with hate. I hate the Jews. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them. I honestly thought that the midnight Mass was a big celebration, and I want to cry, badly. I want to go home already. When we leave Mass, it is dark, and even colder. I cannot let go of the image of little Jesus lying on the straw. What if my little brother Claude, and my little sister Nicole are also cold? Nightmare. Again, a big mess in my head.

Nevertheless, the next day I am happy again because I am also invited to the holiday meal at Mémère's son. It's "as if" I was Mémère and Pépère's real grandchild. When we get there, there are many people around the big table which is covered with a white table cloth and has nice dishes. There's a good smell coming from the kitchen. I stay in the hallway so I can hear the radio. I haven't listened to the radio in such a long time. Mémère doesn't have one. A woman is singing "Bonsoir Madame La Lune, bonsoir," Good evening, Mrs. Moon. I listen closely.

Before the meal, Christmas gifts are given to the children. I don't get anything. Like everyone else, I say "oh, this is so beautiful" but my voice is shaking. I feel that I'm about to cry. I say that I have a big speck of dust in my eye and I need a napkin to wipe my tears. Guy got wonderful gifts from Mémère and Pépère, but because I love him like a brother, I think it is normal. I am not jealous, I'm just sad.

My birthday is coming soon.

Mom and Dad surely will not forget the day I was born. It is impossible. Maybe they are planning to surprise me? Maybe they will send a small postcard? Maybe a big letter or even a gift? Maybe they will come to pick me up and take me back home? And what if they pass by me and do not recognize me? And if I, myself, do not recognize them? I am very worried. I pray, and every day I run to church to be comforted by the calming image of Jesus in his mother's arms.

February 23rd is here.

I am awake long before the "get up, there!" I hop down the stairs, making sure not to spill the bedpan, I run to empty it in the garden, and run back to the kitchen. Mémère is busy adding wood to the stove and warming up the soup from yesterday.

I pay close attention to her movements trying to detect any difference in her habits.

I search for her look hoping to make her look at me. When she looks at me, her look is neutral. Not mean and not loving. Nevertheless, I think she's rushing. Maybe it's because she wants to welcome my parents? Maybe she's saving my surprise for when I get back from school?

I remember every detail from this never ending day.

I see myself moving from Dad's arms to Mom's. Mémère kisses me and tells me, "My sweet!" On the table there's a big cake with nine candles. I slide my

finger in the frosting and put it in my mouth. I am the happiest child in the world.

I do not waste any time when I leave school, at four-thirty. I don't even stop at church, I am in too much of a hurry, and anyways I have prayed enough. I run all the way, and I breathe heavily when I get home. I see Pépère, sits next to the stove, rolling a cigarette. Mémère works over her sewing machine. I look at them. I look at one, and the other, I am wondering and staring. It is hard for me to get my breathing back to normal.

There is NO surprise!!!

And all of a sudden, like a rock in my throat, I feel an enormous cry rising, rising. I do everything I can to stop it. It is absolutely forbidden to cry, but my tears come out on their own. Mémère looks at me and asks, surprised, "What is going on with you?"

I cannot answer. Mémère insists. I cannot answer. And then, before I can realize what is happening to me, I am slapped so hard that I think my head is detached from my shoulders. I don't know if it hurts, I am in shock. My tears stop immediately.

Mémère says, "Now you know why you whine?!"

When I finally can speak again, I say, "Today is my birthday, I am nine years old."

"So what," Mémère says, "Maybe you want me to give you a present? It's not my fault that your parents abandoned you and don't even know your age."

Again my tears fall down. I have tears in my eyes,

my nose is runny, and I cannot stop it any longer. I let myself go, it makes me feel good. It feels like a big burden is taken off my chest. I finally realize that I am abandoned, it is not a mistake. My parents will never come to take me. There is no point in going to watch at the bus stop.

I remember at that moment, I feel an intense feeling toward Mémère. Love. I have no one else but her. I am fearful that she'll get sick, that she'll die, and then I will have no one; I will not have a home. I want to fall into her arms, to ask for forgiveness. I don't even know why. Again I have a mess in my head. It's like I am not myself. I am someone else that I do not know. Maybe I was born in Saint-Amand, maybe I have a baptism certificate, maybe I never spoke Yiddish, and maybe my parents might not be my parents? I cry, I cry, I want to stop but I cannot.

"Whine," Mémère says, "you'll pee less."

From this event and on, my life changes. I no longer expect anything. I have integrated totally into the village, knowing that at age fourteen I will leave Mémère to go and work in the farm, just like all the other girls and boys from social services.

But I will come back to Mémère frequently; I will give her my pay check. At the age of twenty one, I will not belong to social services any longer, I will marry Guy, and become a real granddaughter, and I will have my own family.

This idea calms me down. In the daytime.

At nighttime, it is a different story. Nevertheless, I love the night. I feel safe. I can think about anything I want. I am not afraid of Mémère's slaps and threats, the other girls, "the normal" girls, making fun of me, or my teacher's insults. In my room, from the moment the shutters are shut and the door is closed, it is very dark, but I see everything. I know every corner, the exact location of the chair, the closet, the huge suitcase, the bedpan. I can move without touching any furniture, anything. At night, I have all the time to think of Claude and Nicole, to weave plans to find them. I will go to the police station, the policemen will help me, and I will tell them that I know how to take care of my brother and sister by myself. I see myself going from the suburb to the city, holding Claude and Nicole's hands. People are smiling at me, they tell each other, here is Paulette Szenker who found her brother and sister.

In my bed, I go over this scene, again and again, to be able to preserve it inside of me as long as possible, I fight the sleep... until the "get up, there!" startles me out of bed.

*This is the first time that I bring up memories from those nights in the attic. My memory brings me pain, but the pen and paper allow me not to hear my words.*

*I have to get out.*

*It is a while since I have looked at the top of my*

*beautiful pine tree. It sways slowly, no energy is needed. It makes me assume that outside it is easier to breathe than inside the house.*

*It is halfway through the month of August 1999, the heat is burning. In Jerusalem, in the shade of the trees, the temperature reaches 39 Celsius.*

*On the pedestrian street of Ben-Yehuda, I find a coffee shop that is located in an area where there are slight gusts of wind. Lucky me. I indulge in an enormous chocolate ice cream. I tilt my head and allow the frozen sweet cream to wander, sliding slowly down my throat. Heavenly. The tables are empty around me. The residents of Jerusalem are waiting behind their closed shutters for the heat to become friendlier so they can go out. Only brave tourists deal with the blasting sun and window shop.*

*I crave an enormous roll of thunder and torrential rain, but I know that the wind will come with the evening, and it will become cooler. We might even need a sweater. This is Jerusalem that allows us, every summer night, to recuperate and to wake up to a new morning rejuvenated.*

*Right now, I cannot move. I have no incentive to do so. I have plenty of time to go back home. I have plenty of time to go back to my memories.*

*On my desk, my fountain pen placed on the white paper teases me. I can almost hear it say, "Come on; go on, you are not planning to stop now!"*

*OK, OK, I am going back to Saint-Amand.*

My first winter in Saint-Amand is almost over. Soon I will not have to wear the long blue gown, the suspenders and my wool socks. I hate this uniform that is noticeable from far away, that indicates where I came from, who I am; whereas the truth of the matter is that no one really knows where I came from, or who I am.

Here comes my first spring in Saint-Amand. They call it “the beautiful season.” The flowers are being reborn with scents, with colors. Nature is powerful. It brings death, it brings life. I observe it, listen, it gives signs, and I understand these signs since I spend most of my hours outside. Guy helps me recognize the kinds of birds and the sounds of their singing. Their names captivate me. There’s the crow and the robin, the warbler and the woodpecker, the songbird and the owl. I know how to distinguish a frog from a toad and a groundhog. I know how to make crickets (cricri) leave their hiding place, by moving a straw in their home. I love making wishes as I blow ladybugs to the sky. (I prefer calling them *Bête à Bon Dieu*<sup>12</sup>, the pet of God, it works better for wishes). I don’t like the flying cockroaches! They make a horrible noise when they fly, but they are less frightening to me than the hornets, the bees and the horse flies.

The bats terrify me when, in the early evening hours, they fly around my head. They say that if one of them will touch one of my hairs slightly, it will stay hung on

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12 *Bête à Bon Dieu* - a French name for a ladybug (YE)

my head. I run and hide under the shed until it's dark, then they go away.

I love flowers. Mémère grows some in her garden. There are gorgeous dahlias, a few kinds of roses, yellow and white daisies, and red peonies. I prefer chrysanthemums because they look a bit sad. These flowers are not cut nor put in a vase. I am not allowed to touch them.

"Don't you dare get close to my flowers," Mémère says. But I defy her when no one sees. However, Mémère sends me to pull out carrots, leaks, radishes, string beans, oxalis that I really love, and spinach which has a strong smell after the rain that makes me nauseous. I hate spinach but I refrain from admitting it.

In the evening, when I look at the sky, I know what the weather will be for the next day. I am truly a farm girl. I speak le patois, the local dialect like Mémère and Guy. Paris is far away, and I am pleased to live with Mémère. I know she doesn't like other people's children, but I love her. Sometimes she makes me laugh so hard... against her will, and especially against my will.

I remember that evening when she came up to tuck us in, the other girl from social services and me. We already lay in bed, the wooden shutters shut, when Mémère hears a voice. She extinguishes the candle quickly, and walks quietly towards the shutter to look and listen. She orders us to be quiet. I hold my breath, but the moment Mémère is about to figure out the secret...I sneeze loudly. Mémère, outraged, attacks me and beats me. I am wrapped up in the sheet, and cannot

get out of it. I have a laughter attack trying to cry, which makes her even angrier. The more she beats me, the more I laugh; the more she tries to pull the sheet, the more I get wrapped up, which makes me laugh even more.

Finally, exhausted, Mémère goes down the stairs as she mumbles curses.

Time goes by.

Only when summer arrives, I realize that I have lived in Saint-Amand for a year now, a year without my parents, without Isaac-Jacques, without Claude, without Nicole. It is too long.

I am very sad. I don't understand why this thing has happened to me, to me. One day, when I'll grow up, I will go back to my family. I will have many children, and I'll tell them that I will never abandon them.

These thoughts go through my mind mainly at night. I try to not remember the kisses, the cradling, and the gifts from my uncles, aunts, cousins, so I won't hurt. I feel more comfortable with feelings of anger and revenge. Because, I will get my revenge. I also think about my cousin Eliane. Right now she's probably cuddled in her mom's arms protected all the time. At least, I don't have to worry about her.

It is summer break again. I know I will have to collect doryphores, glean in the fields, and carry sheaves of wheat to the mill to make them into flour. We need to earn the bread, as Mémère says.

During summer break I cannot run away to the church. I go to Sunday Mass, but there's a big crowd in the church, and Jesus doesn't have time to hear my prayers. I miss it very much. But meanwhile, nobody asks me for my baptism certificate.

When the break is over I go back to school reluctantly. To my regret, there's no change as far as my level of achievements. I remain a very bad student, but I have gotten used to the F's, to the mockery, and to the teasing. I am moved to a different level, but I stay in the same class, with the same teacher. I know very well that I am stupid and a loser. But to work later on the farm, the fact that I'm stupid doesn't mean anything, Mémère says.

Here comes another autumn. This is the only season that I love. Everything is beautiful in autumn. I love the red, brown and maroon colors; the leaves that have turned yellow are blown by the wind in a dance, before they reach the grass that has turned into a red carpet. I love watching the birds that stick close to each other on the electrical wires. They create circles in the sky as they tweet, as if saying good bye before they fly to other countries. I want to leave with them.

I have a dream that often recurs: people and children are chasing me to beat me up, but at the moment they are about to catch me, I fly to the sky, looking at them from the top, and saying that I was saved at the last minute.

I have already arranged the wood logs under the shed. When the big chill comes we are going to be warm in the kitchen. And here comes another winter. I hate it. My fingers are frozen, the wool tights, the suspenders, the gown that shows from afar that I belong to social services; I hate Christmas, the frozen church, naked Jesus on the straw, he must be shaking from the severe chill; I hate the Jews; I hate my birthday, when it is so cold in February and no one thinks of me on that day.

Here comes another spring. It is not as cheerful for me anymore. Nevertheless, I still admire the blossoming apple tree, the bursting buds. The violets and the buttercups reappear on the path that leads to school.

I hate holidays.

Today Mémère kills a rabbit. One of my rabbit friends that I followed as she grew up, patting her nose through the cage. It is such a horrible cruelty that I feel like throwing up.

Mémère ties the rabbit's feet to the ladder; with a stick she strikes its head with a big blow; then she pulls out one eye with a knife, through which the blood drains into a bowl underneath.

"This is for the stew," Mémère says.

The rabbit spasms a few times, and finally it stops when the blood no longer comes out.

"Look carefully," Mémère says, "when you're fourteen, this will also be your job on the farm."

My God, my God, please grant me the wish to never grow up.

I haven't spoken about Pèpère yet. Actually, he doesn't have a real role. He's suffering from asthma and most of the time he stays in his bed. Rarely does he leave the house, and if so, it is only to the garden. Pèpère speaks quietly. He always tells me the same story. He served in the army at Bourges, and when he was a soldier he dated girls. He obviously knows life. He's not like these people who have never stepped a foot outside of Saint-Amand, these are pitiful farmers, he says, that haven't even joined the army. Obviously, he knows what he's talking about.

But Pèpère always supports Mémère. Every evening, after the meal, Mémère says, "I am exhausted, I am done, I am the one who is plowing, killing myself at work, oh it is so hard for me, oh I am so done."

And Pèpère answer with sadness, "I know, my Jeanne, I know it's all on your shoulders."

Every evening the same complaint. My heart aches for Pèpère.

However, one day I didn't recognize Pèpère, or Mémère. It was winter. I was sound asleep when I heard voices in the kitchen. I got up, opened the door carefully, and froze on the spot. I hear Mémère, "I beg you, Eugène, I beg you, there's a curfew."

Pèpère turns all the lights on and screams, "I don't give a damn for the Boches<sup>13</sup>, I fought in the 1914 war, let them come and take me, the Boches, I want to pee wherever I want!"

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13 Boches – a disgraceful nickname for Germans (YE)

He opens the shutters and the door, and goes out to the yard that is suddenly illuminated by the house's lights. Pèpère's gone mad. He yells, "Death to the Boches!"

Mémère, with panic, says soft words that I have never heard her say, as she gently tries to get him back inside the house. And as for me, barefoot in a nightgown, shaking from the cold and the fear. I tell myself that in the quietness of the night, Pèpère's yellings were heard at the police station, Pèpère and Mémère will be taken by the Germans for violating the curfew, and I will be left all alone.

When Pèpère finally calms down, he agrees to go back into the house. Mémère locks the shutters and the door. It is quiet again. I go back to my bed. No one knows that I heard and saw everything. I sense a threat over my head. I no longer feel safe with Mémère and Pèpère.

The next day, I wake up to the sharp yelling: "get up, there!" I go downstairs and look at Mémère. Nothing has changed. The same movements, the same words, the same soup, the same habit.

Coming back from school, I find Pèpère sitting in his seat in front of the stove. It looks like nothing had happened last night. As for me, since that event, I am on stand by.

However, when I'm with my friend Ginette, I go back to being a girl without worries. I love visits to her house. There are her dad, her mom, her grandfather,

her younger siblings, and also all of the farm animals, the smells of the hay, the cow's dung, the milk, the soft cheese, and the cider.

One day, in Ginette's room I find Bécassine's books which awaken in me a strong urge to read. For the first time in a long time, I turn the pages of a book that is not a textbook. I swallow the lines at an unbelievable pace. My favorite book is *Bécassine, A School Teacher*. I love one sentence especially that made my laughter turn to tears. Bécassine refers to her students and says, "I cannot hear the ones who don't say a thing."

When I must resist crying, I'll think of this sentence that will make me laugh.

I quickly finished Ginette's whole library, so I read them again from my memory. I know exactly where each comma, each exclamation mark is located, I know the story by heart. At Mémère's there is nothing to read, not even newspapers. Every now and then a friend loans her a *For Every Heart* magazine.

The days pass by. The seasons pass by. The time passes by.

Every day resembles the next, as well as every Sunday, every morning and every evening.

But one day, one specific event will shake the ordered and obedient life that rules Mémère's house.

Her niece from Paris is coming with her fiancé to get married at Saint-Amand. Indeed great news!!!

Mémère panics. Only very little time is left for her to clean the house thoroughly and prepare a special meal. We will eat in the dining room, and if the niece and her fiancé will stay over for the night, we'll give them the room with the parquet floor that is located next to my room. This room, that is always locked, is designated for very important guests. I am overly excited by the idea of meeting such very important people, which creates a big mess when it comes to my usual habits.

When I get back from school, the dining table's drawer is upside down and all of the silverware is scattered all over. Mémère is waiting for me with the dust wiping cloth and cleaning detergents. I need to scrub and shine the knives, forks, spoons, ladle, and strainer. Everything is thoroughly cleaned, even the corkscrew, the can opener, and the shoehorn that is found there, although it is not in its place. Mémère places a nice colorful paper in the drawers, and I put the dishes back in perfect order.

There's no time, we have to rush. The next day, it's time to wash the lace doilies and the curtains, to starch them, to iron them and to hang them back on the windows. I scrub the floor with black soap as Mémère prepares the special guest bedroom with the parquet floor. On the bed she spreads brand new sheets and covers, with embroidered initials, hers and Pépère's. We still have to polish the buffet, the chairs and the table. I scrub and polish, Mémère removes the dust from the lampshade that has green pearls.

I am happy with all this fuss, literally.

Finally, the big day arrives. I set up the table in the dining room. Mémère takes out four nice plates, four nice glasses, four nice sets of silverware, four starched napkins, and sets four chairs around the table. I do not dare tell her that she forgotten my place, but I am very worried.

We go outside to welcome our guests. I am full of excitement, as if it was my own family.

The moment the niece and her fiancé arrive, Mémère rushes toward them. Kissing and big hugs, and then it's Pépère's turn. I wait. The guests haven't noticed me. Since I go inside the house with them, the niece asks who I am.

"This is the girl from social services that we foster," Mémère says.

The niece taps lightly on my cheek, and smiles. As for the fiancé, I don't remember. Mémère signals me to sit at the table, in the kitchen, while everybody else enters the dining room. I hear them conversing, asking questions, laughing. Nobody pays attention to me. I cannot believe it. Mémère comes back to the kitchen to pour me a bowl of soup. And then, just like it was on my ninth birthday, I feel a lump rising in my throat, it grows and grows, it is probably going to explode. I am shaken by the sobs I try to hold in. Don't cry. I run towards the stairs to find refuge in my room. I try as hard as I can to think of *Bécassine* stories that make me laugh. I say quietly, "Bécassine can't hear her students

who don't say anything."

But nothing helps. I go up and down the stairs, up again and down again. I tell Mémère that I forgot something. I curse my tears that will not stop on command. They blind me. I put the end of the apron on my eyes. I am in such pain! I want Mom, I want Dad, I want my big brother Isaac-Jacques, and also Claude and Nicole, my uncles, my aunts. I want Dad to take me to Warsaw to my grandparents, I want to be far away from Saint-Amand, but mostly I want to cry without having to hold it in. Mémère is so busy with her guests that she doesn't pay attention to me. I am lucky.

I don't remember how this day ended but I know that the niece and her fiancé did not sleep in the room with the parquet floor. Mémère returned the sheets and the covers, the pink porcelain pitcher and bowl, the white porcelain bedpan, the towels and the soap.

Her work was for nothing. She deserves this. My work was for nothing as well.

The wedding celebration will be in a few days. Everybody at Saint-Amand is talking about it, and my sadness expires because I am invited, and there were even talks about me singing. Mémère asks the neighbor's daughter Jacqueline to teach me a song. I learn by heart:

*When everything is reborn to hope  
And when the winter is running far away from us  
Under the beautiful sky of France  
And when the sun becomes gentler*

*And when nature becomes green again  
And when the swallow returns  
I will go again to see my Normandy  
This is the land where I was born.*

How delightful these evenings are with Jacqueline, who teaches me stanza after stanza. She sings in a piercing voice that I try to imitate. Jacqueline is pretty; she must be twenty years old. I want to be like her.

On the wedding day, I am ready to sing. I will never forget this wedding celebration. I wear a new dress, white socks, a big ribbon is woven in my hair, without the big gown.

I look like all the other “normal” girls. Furthermore, I am allowed to walk around the tables, and try the food and hang out with everybody else. After the meal, I am raised standing on a chair, and I sing. “My Normandie, this is the land where I was born.” They applaud for me. I am scared that I’ll wake up and all this will not be real. But I am not dreaming. They even take a picture of me at the front of the gate of Saint-Amand’s Chateau.

The next day and the days that follow, I tell my friend Ginette about the wedding that I was invited to. I don’t get tired from telling any detail. There’s even a story about suspenders that made everybody laugh, but I didn’t get it.

The routine of everyday life is back, but the wedding resides in my head. This is also a story I can tell, anybody

will believe me. They have seen me at church, with the bride, they have seen me at the parade, and they have seen me at the front of the chateau. This is all proof.

I experience more moments of calm and great joy. Like when the people from the suburb gather, once a year, at Marie's, Guy's mother, for Vigil. We'll peel walnuts to make them into oil. In Saint-Amand this work is called "Délisser les calons." Marie prepares a large table with trestles and wooden boards. It goes from the entrance door to the staircase that leads to the bedrooms. The wooden boards are covered with white tablecloths, on top of them there are plates, nut-crackers, bowls for walnuts, and bowls for shells. The participants come with their own chairs, and then the long night begins, much to the delight of the kids. Our job is to throw away the shells and bring walnuts from sacks that are filled to the brim. We constantly go back and forth; push, laugh, and we are allowed to eat as many walnuts as we want. And we do, until we want to throw up. During Vigil, the adults speak among themselves about the war, transferring information in a quiet voice, telling stories that are not meant to be heard by children's ears, but we understand in our own way.

At midnight we take a break. Marie, with the help of Mémère and the other women, serves a big meal accompanied by cider bottles and a few bottles of "goutte." To help us regain our strength. A few men who had too much to drink are cursing like carters.

Pépère, who Mémère supervises through the corner

of her eye, asks me to discreetly serve him some “goutte.” This is what I do, like with the cigarettes, when suddenly Pèpère begins to suffocate from a coughing attack. He can’t breathe anymore, and I will be responsible for his death. When he finally gets his breath back in order, I breathe in relief with him.

Vigil night goes on until dawn. Vigil. I love saying this beautiful word. Vigil is to be with one another; Vigil is to talk with one another, to tell. Vigil also means we’re warm, around the illuminating fireplace when we’re not allowed to turn on lights because of the blackout. Vigil makes children happy. This is my own private Christmas.

There are many more things I love about my life in Saint-Amand. For example, when Mémère puts a straw basket under her arm, she puts in it her sickle and knife, and we go to pick out dandelions for the salad, and grass for the rabbits. Mémère knows all of the lush areas filled with these things, it is a secret. The paths and trails we walk have a wonderful smell of trees, moss, and hazelnuts. If only Mémère would have agreed to hold my hand, I would have been happy. Sometimes I pretend that I fall so she will take care of me, but she grumbles saying, “You can’t be careful, my idiot?”

We go back home when the basket is full. In the evening, in a big sand stone bowl Mémère makes a salad with the dandelions, as fresh as can be, she dresses it with home-made cider vinegar and walnut oil (that was produced on one of the vigils). She also adds a few garlic cloves and shallots. When I will be a farm girl, I will do

the same thing, like Mémère.

I also love laundry days. Mémère puts the tub on the wheelbarrow for boiling the laundry, knee guards and her bat, and we go out to the public laundry place, next to the fair's field. There she meets friends and neighbors. I love hearing them gossip about the ones that are not around – how convenient. This is how I learn, for example, that the child of someone is not from her husband, but the husband doesn't know about it; another one is pregnant, and no one knows who the dad is of the unborn baby; and that one is a tramp that sleeps with other women's husbands, and if we were really mean, there are many things to tell about here... but we are not mean!!!

When we're done soaping, scrubbing and batting the laundry, we go and wash it in the Rio River. The Rio is a beautiful river that flows like an unrolled ribbon, gliding over the river stones. It has lots of tadpoles, and sometimes frogs that come out of the high grass, and make a splash. Mémère gets ready with her knee guards and we both dip the laundry in the clear water, until there's no more soap-foam. When we return, we hang the laundry in the garden. I adore the smell of laundry, wet soil and dripping water. I adore the wind that slaps the sheets, the tablecloths and the shirts. When I'm sad, when I'm worried - which often happens before it's time to go to sleep - I allow these images to pass through my mind, and I relax.

Jacqueline continues teaching me new songs. I love

to sing, so I sing and sing, and that makes Mémère angry.

“Stop squeaking like this,” she grumbles.

But how can you sing silently?

One day, coming back from school, a very nice surprise is waiting for me. Jacqueline, on the threshold of her house, discreetly signals me to come in. In the attic, she found a doll from her early childhood.

“I give it to you as a gift,” she says.

I can’t believe it. She insists.

“She’s yours.”

I run to Mémère with my doll.

“This is a beautiful Cinderella,” says Mémère in a serious tone, “she’s still wearing her rags.”

I understand that in Saint-Amand, they call a doll “Cinderella,” so I name my Cinderella “Jacqueline.” I believe I have never gotten such a beautiful gift in my life. I don’t sleep alone anymore, but I don’t get to play much with my Cinderella, because Mémère always finds some work for me to do, or she punishes me and takes Cinderella away from me.

The days pass, time passes.

I don’t know what to do to make Mémère love me. She never smiles at me. When she calls me she says “Hey Paulette!” But the worst thing is when she says “tramp.” It predicts a storm, and I hide my head in my shoulders. But, it seems to me that I am a good and obedient

girl. Well, let's say almost always. I am so scared that Mémère will send me back to Denfert-Rochereau before I turn fourteen.

For Mémère, an act of stupidity is when I tumble and my apron gets dirty, when my clogs are filled with mud, when I accidentally spill water from the pitcher. My nightmare is emptying the bedpan in the morning. Sometime we are two girls and then the bedpan is overflowing. It is impossible not to spill pee on the stairs. Then we need to cross the kitchen and get to the end of the garden. When I get to the toilette, my hands are covered with pee. I wipe them in the morning dew and in the snow in wintertime. We empty the bedpan, the other girl and me, each one has her turn. I bless the day when it is not my turn. In the end, I'd rather be alone. Sometimes, when Mémère is very upset, she goes to visit her friend Marguerite, in the evening after dinner. To calm down, she says. This is the best moment for me, I stay alone with Pépère. Then, again and again, he tells me about his regiment at Bourges, and how he used to hitch up women. I ask him what does the word "hitch up" means. He explains to me. I am embarrassed but it is funny to me. I am sure Mémère doesn't let him do these things to her. And she is absolutely right.

*Today it is December 29th of the year 1999.*

*It hasn't rained yet but it is very cold. My beautiful pine tree sways with the rhythm of the wind. All of a sudden, a powerful wind blasts opens my window and*

*scatters the pages of my story. Bent on all fours, I collect my story. Outside, the bright spectacular sun could not really care for the storm or my past.*

*I go out.*

*Large clouds are pushed by the wind and leave behind them gray, water-green, and night-blue colors. I wait for one little drop. Maybe it will come at night. People still water their lawns and their flowers with sprinklers. Although the big worry is about severe draught, late showers could still save the agriculture crops. I walk in an attempt to empty my head. Impossible. Saint-Amand, Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Saint-Amand.*

*In the evening, they show us on TV, the images from the catastrophe that hit Europe. The beautiful villages of France that are buried under the mud, hundred years old trees ripped out, the sea is polluted with oil, torrential rain. Devastation.*

*Today the sun is shining on Jerusalem, and we still lack rain.*

*I sit again next to my desk. My pen runs and squeaks on the white page. I get to a difficult moment in my story. Being naïve, I think that the big lump that is rising in my throat is a cold. I breathe heavily. Even Bécassine, A School Teacher cannot awaken a laughter attack in me.*

*I am three years in Saint-Amand. Already.*

*Rumors are spread around about the close proximity of the Americans, and the Germans running away. Something is happening.*

Suddenly, a cheer is rising from town. Without Mémère's permission, I follow the people who rush to get the update. I see trucks, cars, the German motorcycles covered with leaves, running away with extreme speed through the road that leads to Cosne. People are leaving their houses, and very quickly the streets are black with a crowd. Someone yells to ring the (church) bells. Valentin, who is in charge of the bells ringing, says it's too early. He stands at the church's gate, arms stretched to the sides, trying to prevent people from entering. Then he is pulled by a few raging men and thrown to the ground. Valentin slides down the church's stairs on his back. When he reaches the sidewalk, he is beaten up. I am frightened.

Now the bells are ringing at high volume. An unbelievable commotion. I cover my ears. I only know the gentle sound of the bell ringing for the *Angélus* prayer.

A new cheer rises, this time from the potter's suburb. Everybody is running in that direction. Reaching the Four Roads intersection, it is impossible to advance. People are yelling, "The Americans are 10 kilometers from here, no, 5 kilometers, no 3 kilometers!"

Others say it's not true. And then a big quarrel starts with fist-fights, yelling, cursing.

**Here they are!** Someone yelled. **Here they are!**

And it's really true! On Arquian Road, a convoy of vehicles is seen, the convoy is getting closer.

The first Americans are entering Saint-Amand.

A hollering crowd is cheering for the liberators. Mémère rushes to her garden. She comes back and her hands are full with dahlias, peonies, and daisies. Now the suburb is jammed with trucks and jeeps. Mémère throws her bouquets on the trucks, other women show up from everywhere, their hands are also filled with flowers, girls are hanging on the soldiers' necks to kiss them, mothers are handing their young children towards the soldiers. God, how handsome they are, these soldiers with their uniforms and their helmets! They laugh and reveal their white teeth, throwing lollipops and chocolate towards reaching hands. Saint-Amand is all cheer and joy. The crowd, drunk from happiness, gathered in the suburb, musicians came with accordions and trumpets, saxophones, and even the village's guard with his tambourine. Everybody sings, clapping their hands hard. Kissing, and yelling, "The war is over, long live France!"

And the bells are ringing, ringing...

With my back leaning on the wall of Mémère's house, I look around.

Slowly, I feel an immense sorrow rising over me. An infinite sorrow. An absolute despair.

I look at the others' happiness. The war is over, but for me nothing is changing.

I no longer have a dad, a mom, brothers and sister; I have no one.

The war is over but I stay an abandoned child.

I look at the others' happiness and tell myself that I am the most miserable girl on earth.

The tears fall down on their own. I run and hide in the toilette in the garden to cry until the tears dry up. I sob hard over the open hole.

I must have stayed there for a long time, but no one paid attention to me. Throughout the whole night I hear the voices of celebration. Through my room's window I see the kids walking following the music, holding burning torches. Behind them, grown ups recite the song "Long Live the Torches Parade, Long Live France."

And my heart has never been as heavy.

The war is over. No more curfews. At school we learn a new song. I still remember the Couplet:

*A bit of blue in Provence, beautiful skies*

*A bit of white in the slops of Poitou's hills*

*A bit of red from France's blood*

*And here are our colors*

*Hand in hand we go back to life*

*And the quarrels of the past will be over*

*We will salute the flag of France*

*Blue, white, and red that unite us!*

I also learn new words: "collaborator" and "terrorist." Mémère says that collaborators are those who helped the Germans, and terrorists are those who punish the collaborators.

Now people are afraid to talk, suspecting one another.

Mémère still complains as ever. She says life is just as

hard as during the war, and there are still food stamps.

It is funny, yesterday people still said, "Before the war," and today they say, "In war time," in the past tense.

War prisoners are returning from the camps, and again that stirs up great expressions of joy.

The days pass. The seasons pass. The time passes.

Where are Claude and Nicole?

Will I ever see them again?

Will I recognize them?

Their faces are fading in my memory. In my imagination, I see Isaac-Jacques play the piano with Dad, Mom and Eliane. Compared to me, they are probably happy together.

I cannot understand why they put us in social services. I pray so hard before I go to sleep. The day will come and Jesus will answer me, even though the Jews killed him, he was resurrected.

Lucky for me that I have Mémère, I wish she would love me. I always say "Pépère and Mémère," but they never say "our little grandchild." When they speak about Guy, they say "our little grandchild," when they speak about me they say "the Paulette." That's the way it is. But I love Mémère, I love Pépère.

Sometimes I get sick. Then Mémère takes me to Dr. Fié, who takes care of the social services' children. Mémère doesn't have to pay. Tonsillitis again. Dr. Fié says that I have to stay in bed and Mémère needs to put a disinfectant on my tonsils. He gives Mémère

a little bottle with purple liquid and sticks that are covered with cotton on one end. At home, Mémère dips the sticks in the purple color and makes me open the mouth so she can swab the white big dots in my throat that prevent me from swallowing. I try hard not to complain or move despite the pain and the nausea, and by the end of the treatment I fall into a deep sleep.

When I wake up, Mémère is gone. I am forbidden from getting out of bed so I look at the wall which is covered with flowery wallpaper. With my eyes, I draw imaginary characters as I follow the lines and curves on the flowery wallpaper. I listen to the voices that come from the outside. I recognize almost all of them. Here is Father Dionne coming down from the suburb dragging his clogs. He clears his throat and spits. Here, Jacqueline opens her door and waters the curbside. I hear bicycle wheels go down crushing the gravel, others hardly climbing uphill. And this must be the horse Bayard that is being taken to the blacksmith to fix his horse shoes, since the sounds of his claps are not even. Every now and then, a car climbs towards the suburb. Maybe it's Dr. Fié's car going to take care of a patient.

I also hear Pèpère dragging his chair. He is coughing and losing his breath. I hold mine to hear his. Scary! What if he dies while Mémère is away? No, no.

Pèpère must miss me, since I cannot secretly go and buy him tobacco and papers for his cigarettes. Mémère forbids him to smoke. I don't tell on him, this is our secret.

The way I see it, time passes by slowly. I want Dad, I want Mom. I want Mémère close by, I think of Claude, I think of Nicole, I think of Isaac-Jacques, but I fall asleep all of the time.

I know that it is half past four in the afternoon because I hear the children coming back from school. From the smells that come from the kitchen I understand that Mémère is back. She doesn't come to see me, and that makes me want to cry. I hear her getting closer to the stairs and then she goes away. I follow every sound, waiting.

Finally the wood is squeaking under Mémère's heavy steps. She brings me a bowl of soup.

"Drink it while it's hot," she says.

Her voice and look are almost soft. Maybe she's worried about me being sick? I wish for it to be true.

Coming back to school with a note that explains the reason for my absence, Mademoiselle Malaigre does not ask me how I feel. She always asks the girls that have real parents. She even refuses to accept the cherries I bring for her, because I put them in my ears, she explains. I think I am going to cry. Quickly I think of Bécassine, that she can't hear those who say nothing. I manage to laugh secretly.

Mostly I love the Catechism classes. I make sure to do all of my homework and Madame Auger always greets me with a smile.

Maria too, the holy virgin, smiles at me when I look at her. She, at least, doesn't ask me for my baptism

certificate. Nevertheless, I hope to celebrate my first communion.

I already imagine myself in a beautiful white dress with a long veil. I will look like a bride. Mostly I will look like all the other girls. Mémère will put some money in the charity wallet that will be hung on my aumonière<sup>14</sup>, they will have a special dinner for me and I will get gifts. It will be a big, beautiful day. But this day is still so far away.

The days pass, the seasons pass. And even three and a half years have passed.

I am getting more and more dirty.

I don't know why Mémère decided, since my arrival to Saint-Amand, that I must wash myself in the cellar, a place that is used as a pantry.

The first time she escorted me with a small pail full with water, soap, a cleaning mitten, a towel, comb and clothes to change. When she opened the door I heard and saw mice running away. I screamed. Mémère slapped me. She said that small animals don't eat big animals. She went out and closed the door behind her.

It is dark in the cellar. Only a tiny beam of light comes through the small opening. Huge spider webs come down from the ceiling. I think that mice and other animals are crawling on my head and body. I panic.

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14 A special kind of belt. (SA)

I splash water on my face. I put the soap in the water to create foam to fool Mémère that I have washed myself. Quickly I change my clothes and go out with wet hair. Washing day becomes a nightmare. It is every Sunday, before we go to Mass.

Mémère never found out my scam.

One day, I start to scratch.

“Go get rid of your fleas outside,” Mémère says.

I go to the toilet to look under my cloths and in my under pants. I must have a considerable amount of fleas. Regardless of my stubborn search, I can’t find a thing, not even one flea. After a few days, the scratching becomes unbearable, especially between my fingers. I scratch until I bleed. One morning, I wake up covered with wounds and Mémère decides to take me to Dr. Fié. After a short checkup, Dr. Fié says:

“The child has scabies. It is a very contagious disease that is caused by poor hygiene.”

I see Mémère’s face changing shape. Her lips are trembling with rage. She snaps the doctor’s prescription from my hand and we cross town almost running. Mémère pushes me ahead without a word. I understand that I am to expect a heavy punishment.

When we enter the house she turns to Pèpère and hisses between her teeth:

“I present to you the scabby.”

To my big surprise, Mémère doesn’t beat me up, but she rushes to her medicine book to look up the word

“scabies.” I want to go up to my room, Mémère screams, “Don’t move!”

I wait, frozen in my place. Mémère, leans over the book, flipping the pages with rage. She probably found what she was looking for.

“Come...come here,” she says in a threatening tone as she moves away.

“Look well, and read.”

Across the word “scabies” I see a drawing of a small animal. It looks like lice.

“Look well.” Mémère repeats. “This animal is in your body, it eats you from the inside.”

Is she serious???

Mémère continues, “You got this disease because you are filthy. From now on, you are not to come close to me, Pépère or Guy.”

And for a conclusion, she adds, “You disgust me.”

But what have I done???

My world falls apart. I have nothing. I no longer have anyone in the world.

When Mémère roughs me up, she has to touch me, and then I exist.

I prefer being slapped than being nothing.

In these moments I would so much like to be in Mom’s arms, I would also like to cuddle in Mémère’s arms, ask her forgiveness, I want to be cuddled. I am so scared of the scabies, of the animal, to be alone, to be nothing.

Why is this happening to me? Why me?

Mémère puts her medicine book back. I look at her face. Her face was never so stiff. From now on, I evade her look.

I will go to church. I will tell everything to Jesus. But I don't want him to punish Mémère. Poor Mémère! To refrain from having any physical contact with me, she needs to take big steps that make her lose her balance. This is so funny that I cannot control my laughter. I hide in the corner; I cry and laugh at the same time.

Mémère can send me away but she doesn't do so. Maybe she loves me a little bit after all?

One evening, I look at Mémère reading a magazine that her friend Marguerite has lent her. Mémère is sniffing and wiping her nose and her eyes. Her nose is red. I ask her, "Why are you crying?"

"The story is so sad, there are people that are so miserable!"

Well, I don't understand a thing about grownups. Mémère's heart aches for people she doesn't even know. Why doesn't she cry when I am miserable? She knows me, and nevertheless, her heart never, ever aches for me.

And what about Dad and Mom? Do they cry because they don't see me anymore?

However, I am lucky that I go to *Catechism* classes. Madame Auger always receives me with a smile. Also Virgin Maria smiles at me when I look at her.

Soon my first communion ceremony will take place. On that day I will look like all the other girls who go

through this ceremony, even these who have rich parents. I will wear a long white dress, like a bride's dress, with long veil that is tied to a tiara on my head. I will have a wide belt tied in a big knot in the back, a lace charity purse, and white shoes. Mémère will prepare a big meal in my honor; she will invite all of the people that participated in the vigil night, as well as my friend Ginette, who is also going to be in the ceremony.

But all this is still so far away, and since the war has been over I feel even more miserable.

Autumn, 1945. It was just another day.

I sit in class, as usual, close to the exit door. The place for the bad students...and then suddenly the door is opened in a brutal way. Mademoiselle Brisset, the school's principal appears. I hear, "Paulette Szenker is called to the hallway."

... But...Paulette Szenker?...this is me...

I panic. What do they want from me? What have I done? Have I stolen? Am I filthy? Does Mémère want to get rid of me?

I turn around.

I...I...I...I cannot believe what my eyes are seeing.

Here...in the hallway...DAD.

I jump.

I am in Dad's arms. His body is trembling. Dad is sobbing. Dad kisses me. Dad hugs me tight.

Soon I will wake up. Surely this is a dream. Soon I will wake up.

It was not a dream.

Dad is really here. After three years and six months.

Slowly, Dad releases his intense hug. He looks at me. I still cannot believe it. My classroom's door is wide open. All the girls are looking; they are just as surprised as I am.

Mademoiselle Malaigre, my teacher, in complete shock, is looking at the scene. She, who didn't want to look at me...

Suddenly, Mademoiselle Brisett says, with her soft and warm voice, with the r's that roll in her throat, "For today, my little Paulette, you are done with school. You can go back to your foster with your dad."

We leave school. Dad is holding my hand. I still cannot believe what is happening, my hand in my dad's hand. I have dreamed of this so much. We go downhill to town towards the suburb, the same trail I took in a crazed run, a few years earlier, when I thought I would find a surprise from Mémère for my birthday. Now I can walk slowly, without ever stopping, to walk to the edge of the world, my hand is in Dad's hand.

We look at each other, we smile at each other. Not talking.

On the way, people are looking at us, they smile at me. The rumor has spread fast:

Just now a little girl from social services has found her dad. Women stand at the thresholds of their houses. The same women who used to chase me when I touched their bicycles, next to their houses' gates. They make little gestures of affection. I am flooded with pride

and self-esteem. Everybody will know that I am not an abandoned child.

This is a fairy tale, for real.

We enter Mémère's house. Dad needs to bend his head. Just like me for the first time, he looks around, surprised. This is such a small house! Dad shakes Pépère's hand.

Mémère shows us into the dining room, the same room I was forbidden to enter when guests came over. Until this very morning I was forbidden to do so. Now, I am a guest!

I sit on Dad's lap. I hug his neck, and look at Mémère. She purrs. Her face is very red. She comes, goes, rushes. She serves wine, cider, brandy.

Up until now, no one has spoken. Smiles, kisses, looks, but not a word.

Now Marie and Raymond come in, Guy's parents, Mémé and her daughter Jacqueline, who gave me Cinderella as a gift. Here are also Marguerite, Mémère's friend, my friends Ginette and Jeanine, and finally Guy.

The dining room is packed with people who came to welcome Dad. I believe that at this moment, I know the meaning of the word Happiness: love, pride, self-esteem, security, calm, trust. Sitting on Dad's lap, I sway with Happiness. Then Mémère turns to Dad, "You know, Monsieur Szenker, Paulette is a nice girl. She's obedient, disciplined and pretty. We love her very much."

Really???

I shake with resentment...and pleasure.

I know Mémère is lying. But today, maybe things have changed. It looks like she finally sees me, since I got scabies.

Mémère goes on, "Paulette is not so good in school, she has learning difficulties." Dad's eyes round with astonishment, "But in Catechism class, she's the best. She is a good Christian, and she is getting ready for her first communion ceremony."

Silence.

And then for the first time I hear Dad's voice. With a horrible accent, and in broken French, he says, "I thank you for taking good care of Paulette. I had to abandon my children because they were in danger. Paulette cannot go through with the communion ceremony nor can she return to the church. **We are Jews!!!**"

Right now the sky is falling on my head. I want to hide inside Dad. Hide under his jacket, his coat. I want to find a big hole and hide in it.

I am **ashamed, ashamed, ashamed.**

I panic.

This is not true. I am not a Jew. I was never a Jew. I don't want to be a Jew. What will Mémère say? And all the people who hear this?

I hug Dad's neck tightly, I whisper in his ear, "Take me with you away from here, right now!"

What happened afterwards? I don't know. I wish I knew. Despite my efforts to dig deep into my memory,

there's only a black hole. I do not remember a thing.

My memory comes back to me once I leave Saint-Amand.

*I have to take a break.*

*I haven't felt the chill that floods the room. I haven't noticed the big snowflakes that completely cover my beautiful pine tree. The snow falls condensed as it creates a pretty lace curtain in front of my window. I am amazed.*

*Quick, the coat, the boots, my hat, and I am outside.*

*Sublime! Jerusalem beneath the snow. Sublime!*

*The sidewalks have disappeared. The cars' motions have stopped. The entrance to Jerusalem is blocked. Vehicles don't enter. They don't leave either. Jerusalem is disconnected from the rest of the country. I walk without leaving foot prints, the snow covers them. The branches of the trees bend and rest on the tops of parked cars.*

*Wonderful pure whiteness covers the city. I find it hard to walk. I sink into half a meter of shallow flakes. I don't feel the cold. It is January 27<sup>th</sup> 2000. A week ago, the draught had cracked the ground.*

*I go back to Saint-Amand. I go back to my memories.*

Mémère puts all of my belongings on the kitchen table. She checks numerous times that nothing is missing. The dress I will wear for the ride, underpants,

socks and rubber boots are on the chair. I am in an unbelievable state of excitement. Mémère washes my hair, and puts on an anti-lice lotion. Afterwards she combs my hair with a thick comb, and when my hair is dry she puts around my head a white ribbon that she has just ironed.

Mémère looks at me, she backs up a little bit to see that it is all perfect. On her lips, a tiny smile of content. It even looks like she thinks I am beautiful. I melt like chocolate in the sun. I don't know where Dad is at this time, I only see Mémère's look, an almost soft look that I experience as caressing. It is as if I have changed Mémère. That's it; my belongings' bundle is closed. My clogs are left in front of the door. I want to take them with me, I love them. I want to leave my gown, but Mémère puts it on my shoulders. I wish not to wear this thing ever again but Dad says it is good quality, and you cannot find this kind of fabric anymore. This good fabric, it is from social services, and I don't belong to social services any longer.

The moment of departure has come. Pèpère and Mémère go out with me to the front yard, where Marie, Raymond and Guy are waiting to say good bye to me. I do not dare to kiss Mémère in fear of her rejecting me because of the scabies, but spontaneously, she gives me a big kiss on the cheek. I even think I saw some tears in her eyes. I want to tell her, "I love you, Mémère."

Pèpère says, "Come here girl, I will give you a kiss."

I feel I am going to cry.

Dad and I are leaving the yard. I still do one last wave with my hand.

We reach the Four Roads junction when I suddenly notice that I have left behind my Cinderella. I leave Dad's hand and I run back like crazy. I get breathless to Mémère, who doesn't understand what's going on with me.

"I forgot my Cinderella."

"I know," Mémère says, "She doesn't belong to you anymore, I put her aside for another girl."

I'm speechless. This is my Cinderella; no one has the right to take her away from me.

This is a horrible injustice. Tears burn my eyes but I do not dare to argue with Mémère. This is so malicious.

I run back to Dad.

I can't speak. I can't explain anything. When Dad finally gets it, he promises to buy me a very beautiful doll in Paris. But no doll will be like my Cinderella. Only she knows all my secrets, nothing will replace her.

But I heard the word "Paris." I am going back to Paris. I still cannot believe it. We go up towards the town. My hand is in one of Dad's hands, and in the other he holds the bundle of my belongings. I smile to all the people I see on the way. God! I have dreamed of this moment for so long. And here, it has come.

The bus is already parked next to the post office café. Three and a half years earlier, I got off at the same stop with my bundle. Alone, with no family, abandoned. In a few moments, I will get on the bus and ride in the

opposite direction.

I sit next to Dad. I tell myself that we will never leave. Finally, the driver sits in his seat. He starts the engine, and I feel the trembling under my feet, my heart goes wild.

I press my nose against the window, just like Guy from the first time I had seen him. We are leaving slowly. The road to Cosne is in front of me. We are passing the house of René and Hélène and that of the photographer, the police station, the pottery factory where Mémère works. I look at the gardens, the people. The bus accelerates, and suddenly Saint-Amand disappears from my sight. I turn back trying to see the last picture of my village, one more time. But what is happening to me? What? I am not going to start crying, since I am happy to leave and soon I will meet again with my family! Nevertheless, I feel deep inexplicable grief. I hold in my tears. So I will not see Guy and Mémère's house anymore? I will not come to the garden to congratulate the rabbits, the chickens, and the rooster anymore? I will not pick wild berries from the trail anymore? I will not sit under the big oak tree anymore? There will be no more vigil nights? And my Cinderella? And my friends, Jeanine and Ginette? So I will not see Pépère and Mémère anymore?

There is a big chaos in my thoughts!

Now the bus goes fast. Again I am afraid of the turns but not surprised to see cows in the pasture. Forehead glued to the window, the fields are passing in front

of my eyes, the trees, the meadow, and other villages. When I read the sign "Cosne," I finally realize I'm going back home.

Dad doesn't say anything. I do not dare to ask him questions. I prefer the surprise. Mom is probably waiting for me with my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, especially Eliane, who will make a surprised face when she sees me. Maybe also my grandparents from Warsaw came in order to meet me?

We get to "Cosne" train station. The platform is black with people. I panic. Horrifying images that I have almost forgotten come back to me. I am afraid to lose Dad. When the train comes towards the platform, it is a total craze. Yelling, pushing, and cursing to get closer to the doors. I feel lifted and drifted. I cry and hold on to Dad's coat, but he does not let go of his holding on me, and we both get on the train. God, I was so scared! Trampled, suffocated, I lift my head high to breathe air.

A quick thought goes through my head. All of these people who touch me will get scabies. They will pass the disease to their families, who will pass it to other people. And because of me, the whole world will be contaminated. I am cursed.

We are traveling for a long time already. I have to pee. I don't know where the toilet is, and I ask Dad to escort me. Men, women, children and luggage are blocking the aisles. I have waited for so long that I cannot hold it in anymore, and soon I will pee in my underpants. I want to pass but there is no space, and some people

even get upset with me.

Dad asks to pass me over people's heads. They grab me and pass me from hand to hand. I get to the toilet but I couldn't hold it in until I got there. I need to do the same gymnastics on the way back, and they will notice that I am wet. I will die from shame.

And if I don't find Dad when I'm back?

This ride back is a nightmare. I will never go on a train again.

Finally we get to Paris.

God! All of these people run to all directions, the cars that almost touch me, the honking, the noise; it is all very scary for me.

Now we need to take the metro. Changing trains, and again people pushing, stairs to climb up, stairs to go down. I will never get home like this. I totally lost my sense of direction.

In the village, I could walk alone for many kilometers, I knew where I was. Here, in Paris, after two or three steps I am lost.

Finally, I read "St. Ambroise" station. We are here. Outside I recognize the café, the grocery store, the butcher shop. We cross Folie Méricourt Street, and here I am at Pasteur Street. I raise my head when I pass in front of aunt Rivké's building, the window on the sixth floor. I want to call like back then, E-L-I-A-N-E. Maybe my aunt and my cousin are waiting for me at my house. Running, I get to number 12. It is hard to breathe. My heart is pounding, so strong. At the stairs I smell again

the smell of the house. I get there before Dad and I stand impatiently, in front of the door. Without any rush, Dad puts the key in the hole.

Finally, I enter my home.

It feels like a fist punch. Nothing has changed. The wallpaper, the red velvet tablecloth on the table. The sugar basin on the buffet.

And the piano.

I go close to the piano almost on the tips of my toes. I lift the cover; take off the green cloth that covers the keyboards. I don't dare to touch. With the tips of my fingers I caress the keyboards. Big silence in the apartment. In a moment, the door will open and Mom will appear. Still the same silence. I cannot hold myself any longer and I ask, just like the last time when I left the house,

"Where is Mom?"

*At this point of my story, I don't want to go on but my fountain pen does not stop. It runs on the paper as if it wanted to go on without me.*

Where is Mom? Died. Murdered.

Where is Eliane? Died. Murdered.

Where is Aunt Rivké? Died. Murdered.

Where is Aunt Sarah? Uncle Bernard? Died. Murdered.

My grandparents? Died. Murdered. Where are Dad's brothers and their kids who stayed in Poland? Died. Murdered.

Where are Mom's brothers and sisters who stayed in Poland? Died. Murdered.

Dad has only one brother left.

Mom has only one sister left.

All the rest: murdered, murdered, murdered.

It is not true.

It cannot be.

I look at Dad and cannot understand. I manage to say, as if I am talking to myself:

"So there's no one left to love me? I will never see Mom again ever, ever?"

Something terrible rises in me. A very painful thing. Something that burns from the inside. Something that destroys my body and overpowers it. It has a name: Hatred.

Mémère knew what she was talking about. It's the Jews fault. The Jews will have to burn in hell, they say in the Catechism classes. They killed Jesus.

So it's my family's fault. It's my fault. I hate the Jews. And myself more than anybody else. But I, I will be a good Christian. A good French citizen. Chaos in my head.

I thought I have heard the worst. But the worst is coming.

A few survivors heard that Dad was not deported. They come to our house to find out about the fate of those that maybe managed to hide. These survivors came back from the camps. They tell about how it was “there,” about “another planet.”

I don't believe them. They are crazy. One of them sees me and says, “Hey, you are here? You are very lucky. My kids were burned in the crematorium.”

What is a “crematorium”?

They explain to me. They explain everything to me. So I will understand it well. Because I, as opposed to others, am lucky to be alive.

I learn new words. I learn a new language: raid; deportation; Drancy; Auschwitz; Majdanek; Treblinka (my family perished in these three camps); gas chambers; crematorium; extermination.

The war is over. Social services is behind me and...

**The Holocaust is penetrating me.** I am not twelve years old yet.

Eliane's father comes back from captivity. He too does not want to believe what they are telling him about his wife and daughter. He waits for them to come back. When he looks at me I feel guilty to be alive.

“Say thank you. You are alive. You have nothing to complain about.”

I can't hear it anymore. I want to fall asleep and never wake up.

Often times, at night, I dream about my little cousins. I see them rotating on a skewer in the oven, like rotisserie chicken. They were my age. I want to go back to Mémère. To feel like being a little child again.

To burn in hell. Maybe that's what the word crematorium means.

Dad is speaking Yiddish with his friends. I don't understand my Mom's tongue anymore. It upsets me, it's ugly, it's Jewish, it embarrasses me, and it frightens me.

Claude and Nicole are finally back. I waited for them for so long, with all my heart. They were present in all of my thoughts, in all of my dreams. Now they are here, next to me.

They don't recognize me. They don't know each other. They don't know who Dad is.

Nicole was at a foster family, not far from me. We didn't see each other. Our foster parents were angry to death at each other. Claude was in a hospital next to Bordeaux. During all these years, he didn't go to school. He has a look as if he was threatened. I want to kiss my little brother and sister but I scare them.

My grief weighs more than me. I don't know how to carry it. Time has stopped. But not life.

Indeed, we need to get going. First we need to go to the hospital to be disinfected.

I remember.

It happens at St. Louis Hospital. I stand in line, naked. Behind me and in front of me there are women of all ages and children. We are all naked. Other than my body, I have never seen the body of an adult. I am in shock. I pretend not to see anything. A curtain separates us from the men, who wait like us, also naked. The curtain is not long enough to conceal everything. When my turn comes, I step over a tub. A nurse, who sits on a stool, dips a thick paint brush into a bucket full of liquid. She smears my body, as I turn myself around. When it is over after a few minutes, the nurse yells: "Next one!"

I go to another room. They apply DDT powder with an intense smell on my hair, and wrap it with the towel that I have brought from home. I need to stay with it for a few hours.

Free of lice and scabies, I go outside. Passersby turn towards me because of the smell and the towel on my head. I'm blushing with shame but I will not have lice and scabies anymore.

I also remember my first shower. I was looking forward to it. I wanted so much to be clean.

With a bag, towel, wash cloth, and my clean clothes, I walk to the public showers.

The dark room is over. The spider's web and the mice are over. I will take my time to soap and wash myself. I will smell good... suddenly, when water is gushing over my head, an uncontrollable panic attacks me. I am sure

that I'll drown with all of this water that is getting into my eyes, my nose, or my ears. I choke. Desperately I look for the knob to stop the water. I can't even scream; my mouth is filling up with water. I am about to die in the shower stall.

I will need a very long time to make peace with the benevolent water, and accept its flow along my body.

Meanwhile, I struggle alone, hurting. I have no one to talk to.

For the first time I meet my big brother again, Isaac-Jacques, I can hardly recognize him. Now he is already a young man. He is eighteen years old. He is very handsome, and also smart. I am proud of him. I listen fully when he sings and plays the piano, but he is very distant from me. It looks like he doesn't want me to be back. During the war, he was alone with Dad. I think he wants to keep Dad only to himself. They are still speaking Yiddish among themselves, and I don't understand. I feel like a stranger. It is true that meeting again with a complicated sister, a bit stupid and filthy, doesn't make it any easier to reconnect. We will need some time to get closer to one another again. In the end, only his ferocious humor will be able to break through the barrier between us, but the Holocaust will remain a taboo.

My older brother doesn't tell me anything. He also doesn't want to listen to me.

As for me, I want to tell Dad how miserable I was at social services, but I'm ashamed. Ashamed not to be

able to comprehend that there are people that had it worse than I did.

"You don't have a mother? So what? Think of those who also lost their father."

"Say thank you."

But... what am I saying thank you for?

Thank you for those nights that I imagined Claude and Nicole burning in a fire? Thank you for those nights that I imagined Dad beaten up by the Germans until he collapses on the ground? And as for Mom, impossible, for now, to speak about her. Maybe later, if I can...

*All of this is unbearable.*

*It seems that also my fountain pen, that now tells the story for me, thinks it is unbearable as well. I feel it slow down, winding like a vehicle that is out of gas.*

*I let it rest.*

*Spring blossoms pull me to walk in the streets of Jerusalem, to see the wonders of nature that resurrected. The trees, yesterday they were bent down, broken, wounded from the wind, the lightning, the snow, and today they are straightening up and teasing winter. One night is enough, and here the buds are opening up. Birds are fighting over space on a branch, probably to build a nest. The weather is so nice. It is even too warm to put on a sweater, so it is tied around my waist, and I keep walking, still surprised by the sharp transition from wool hats to sandals.*

*A few breathing exercises, to fill my lungs with fresh air, and I am ready to confront the white page that is waiting for the continuation of my story.*

I can't say thank you. I can't be grateful for being alive. To be alive seems to me something natural. I don't understand those grown ups who say I am lucky and too big to cry. Why do they have the right to cry over their loved ones that will never come back again? I also loved Mom, Eliane, and all of the others.

I wanted to come back to my home. But it is not my home anymore. Maybe also Dad is not my dad anymore. I am not happy but I have no one to talk to. Anyway, kids are never right. Nevertheless, amid the turmoil of the rebellion and desperation, there are moments of wonderful warmth, excitement, and pure happiness. Moments that I want to keep forever.

Like when Isaac-Jacques sits next to the piano and sways to the rhythm of a lullaby; or when he jumps on the stool as he begins a jazz piece, and sings as he plays the piano. I clap my hands and stomp my feet to the rhythm. I feel like dancing. Sometimes, when we are alone at night, he wakes me up and tells me:

“Paulette, listen to this tango.”

“Let me sleep, leave me alone.”

“No, no! Listen to what I have written right now.”

He pulls me out of bed. And we laugh so hard. For a brief moment, I find again my big brother Isaac, not

the one that is called Jacques. In these moments, it is almost possible to believe that everything is just as it was before.

Dad has remarried. It is natural, he is young, and he is handsome. At my age, I can understand the sacrifice that comes with marrying a father of four children.

They have repainted the house. The furniture was replaced.

One day, I came back from school and the piano was no longer there.

The empty spot that was left looks like an open pit.

I want to yell:

“No, not this! Not the piano!”

I didn't say a thing but inside of me I felt something was torn.

The piano is what connected me to my beautiful childhood. Inside of me I believed that soon they will pay for piano lessons for me, and that I will also run my fingers on the keyboards to accompany Dad playing. I imagined myself playing jazz, like Isaac. I know that I am talented in music. It is the secret connection, the only one and the direct one, that I have rediscovered with my big brother. Privileged moments that I believe were untouched.

I have nothing left. Nothing that reminds me of Dad and Mom. I shouldn't have come back to Paris. I want to go back to Saint-Amand. Right, Mémère was very hard on me. She hit me frequently, but there, there is the beautiful river and the frogs.

The periwinkles and the violets, the vigil nights and the statues church. There is Mémère who used to attach a round bread loaf to her chest, and before she cut it, she makes sure to mark a cross with a knife. It makes a slight dry sound on the crust, and Mémère's black apron becomes white from the flour. I want to hear again the robin and the owl, the crickets and the wind beating the hung laundry. What to do now? I need to get used to my new situation, but before I fall asleep, I will keep asking little Jesus to give me happiness. I tell him everything I cannot tell anyone else. I promise him to be a good Christian.

Anything but a Jew.

My teacher from the time before I left was very surprised to see me back at school, at Rue de la Folie Méricourt, in September 1945. She recognizes me immediately. Mademoiselle Duval explains to me that when I left school in 1942, she had thirty five students. Back to school, after the police raid on July 16, 1942, she was left with only eight non-Jewish girls. She thought that I disappeared as well. It is very difficult to hear that, and more difficult to understand.

I enter eighth grade. There are forty students, between the ages twelve and fourteen. I am the youngest. The report about me from my school at Saint-Amand followed me.

Naturally I sit in the back of the classroom, my

usual place. To my surprise, right from the first class it seems to me that I understand the teacher's explanations. I even dare to raise my hand, and succeed in the spelling test without errors, without copying from my neighbor's notebook. I get compliments. Are they really talking about me?

Later, the teacher sits me in front of her desk. I am very uncomfortable. Basically, this is a place for the best student. It is probably a mistake. Maybe the lessons were too easy. Surely I will go back to the last row tomorrow.

Not at all!!!

The days that go by erase my fears. I am totally surprised that I understand, think, and participate. In the end of the first month, I am first in class.

Unbelievable!

It's probably not a mystery. Maybe I unconsciously absorbed and remembered what was taught in Saint-Amand, but because it was obvious that I was stupid, I had to behave like one.

After such a long break, I am reading as much as I can be, but Isaac-Jacques's library has disappeared with the piano. So I gobble my textbooks: history, geography, grammar, poetry— but neither math nor geometry. A book is a real friend. It always agrees with you. You neglect it, you come back to it, and you kick it. You

never forget its smell, when it's new and especially when it's old. I miss one in particular. I miss it very much: my Catechism book. At night, before I fall asleep, I try hard not to forget the stories and the images of the saints. I try hard, like I tried hard at Saint-Amand not to erase from my memory Claude and Nicole's faces. I never forget to pray, and now I can thank Jesus for my good grades.

I am so happy when it's time to go to school. I feel protected there, but at recess, I still squat next to the wall and look at the girls. I can't share the laughter with them. When it's my teacher's turn to supervise the back yard, she asks me to get up and go play with my friends, but for now I don't have any.

Many years later, I will receive a letter from the teacher that will remind me this fact. She had noticed the shadow in my eyes that concealed a painful secret.

I graduate the year with an excellent reward. It is an amazing book, *White Hook*. I read the note that is pasted in the book:

This excellence award is given to Paulette Szenker.

It is like a dream. It is a miracle that could not have happened to me. Especially not to me. I am inflated with pride...and I feel total contempt toward the worst student in class. Too bad for her. Everyone has their turn!!!

I don't know how to love, except for Claude and Nicole.

My success in school has no impact at home, not even when I win a prize for the best essay, among all the schools in Paris. I am in first place, and my school gets the prize.

However, everybody is excited about and admiring Claude. He, who never went to school and had been the last in his class during the past three months, leaps tremendously to get to second place in the class. In the next few months, he's first. He will not move from this spot throughout all of his school years. He gets all the awards. I am blushing with joy for him.

Nicole fascinates me. They say that she's not a good student. Some even add that she's dumb, but I know it is not true. I know that my sister is very smart. Nicole is an artist. One day when she was sick and lying in bed, she created a doll from a cherry pit that was still attached to its stem. On the pit she painted two eyes and a nose, on top she pasted wool ends for hair, and cut a paper skirt that she tied to the cherry's stem. Nicole was only six. It is amazing how much the cherry-doll reflected imagination and patience. Later on, Nicole will develop talents as a dancer and musician. A neighbor, that used to be a ballet dancer in the opera, will give Nicole her old ballet shoes as a gift. From that moment, we will see Nicole only on the tips of her toes or doing a split. She will imitate the movements and the dancing steps from the shows she'll see on TV. Alas, none of these talents will receive any attention or recognition at home.

I too, will not realize my dream of becoming a

history or French professor, nor will I play the piano. I have to leave school at fourteen to go to work. I have no words to describe my despair. I am aware of the fact that I hardly know anything to be able get by in life. I don't know what to do to find a job, who to contact. I am in an extreme panic, but at the same time I tell myself that I'll be lucky, since I am fourteen and I will not become a farm girl. I will not have to kill little rabbits.

Dad's friend knows a furrier who is looking for an apprentice. I get the job, and here I become a fur technician. I don't like this job, but I am doing it the best I can because I am afraid of being laid off. Sometimes I miss school. Sometimes I go and visit my teacher Madame Dagnas, whom I love with all my heart. She doesn't understand why I am not allowed to continue my studies, but she encourages me to be a good worker.

On the way to work, I happened to meet my friends who I used to go to class with, they are on their way to high school. They talk about Latin verses, math, essays and dissertations. The jealousy and grief gnaw at me and raise a big lump in my throat. I, too, want to walk like them carefree, books under the arm, a vest on the shoulders. Because I am the one who was the best student. My fingers don't have ink stains, but my nails have become black from the fur color.

I feel like I've been robbed.

I grow up. Suddenly I realize that life is a wonderful

gift. It makes me feel dizzy. Through the boys' glances, I think I detect my ability to make them like me. It is very surprising since the mirror reflects back an image that I don't like. Thick and frizzy hair that I collect into a big ponytail, with undisciplined ends that escape and look like a cork screw around my face, that looks too round for me.

I dream of looking like Juliette Gréco, with long straight hair, a long thin figure, a cat-like walk. I am the opposite of this model but my hips are becoming more delicate, my body curves, and I have stopped biting my nails.

I have become a young woman. I am fifteen and a half years old.

I decide to go back to Saint-Amand, by myself. I ask Dad to pay for my month vacation at Mémère's, who is surprised, but agrees to have me. Mémère is not rich, it could help her.

On the train platform, I couldn't have imagined that I will again experience so intensely my ride from 1942. I want to push away the memories and the images, but my memory is mocking me. I reject it. But it is present. I purchase a magazine to distract my mind. Nothing helps. The escorts, the young children who cry, the Germans' dogs, my little brother and sister, the separation, the unknown. It all comes back. I want to leave, but I stay. I don't know what to do. The train ignites with

tremendous noise of metal wheels. It is too late to withdraw. I close my eyes. I tell myself that the war was over a long time ago. The beautiful landscape that passes in front of me is able to drive away my ugly wounds.

What will Mémère think of me? Will she think that I have changed? I am willing to do anything to make her happy: wash the dishes, go to the store, mop the floor, pump water, and bring in the wood logs, to be a very good girl.

I get off at Cosne station. The bus to Saint-Amand is parked. I sit with my suitcase. I look at the passengers that come up with baskets filled with groceries. There are even chickens and ducks, livestock. It smells like a farm. They stare at me. They can see I am not from the area, although my heart beats irregularly because I feel at home.

After twenty kilometers, I read the sign "Saint-Amand..." I feel that I'm about to cry. The bus stops at the stop of the café next to the post office. Like the first time. Almost yesterday.

I take down my suitcase. Mémère is not there. I prefer that. To be by myself, to remember.

It was 1942, the month of June. Like now, I got off the bus, but back then I wore the social services' uniform: my long gown that reached my ankles; around my neck a necklace with my license number: 2100; and instead of my suitcase, my bundle of belongings.

I could have never imagined that I would come back to Saint-Amand.

I head to the potter's suburb. I meet again the familiar sounds that the clogs make as they drag on the gravel. The air is cold; I raise my head to fill my lungs with air. I am floating.

I go downhill on Grand Rue and walk very slowly. I am anxious to meet Mémère again. I still feel defenseless.

With the suitcase in my hand, people are curious. I recognize almost all the people who cross my path, and I smile at them. I can see that they ask themselves who is this young lady?

Finally, I enter the front yard. Mémère is waiting for me. She gives me a big kiss on each cheek, looks at me from top to bottom, and says:

"You have grown well."

She keeps on looking at me and adds:

"You are pretty."

I am so surprised that tears quickly blur my sight, but I remember that Mémère despises crying. I tighten my lips, I hold it in, I think of my ninth birthday.

Mémère moves aside to let me pass. I meet the doll house again. It looks even smaller, but other than that, nothing has changed. It is unbelievable how everything remained just as it was. On the table there's the white cheese dripping into a bowl, and the pickles' jar, and also the smell of the soup. Always the same soup. Over the table, like back then, a bulb hung on the electrical

wire, still without a lampshade, and on the windows the same lace curtains. I am so excited that for a while I cannot locate time. Before and after are all mixed up.

Mémère asks me to follow her going up the stairs so she can show me my room. I get... the room with the parquet floor. I gasp. Is she referring to me? Is it for me? I recover and go down the stairs hopping, cross the yard and run to the garden. I see Pépère: "Hey, girl! You're really back?"

I give him a big kiss. He has a good smell of tobacco, soil, sun and cut wood. I close my eyes and smell the strong scent of the parsley, the carrots, and the strawberries. I look at the pear tree, the plum tree, the hen house, the rabbits' house. A pleasant sensation fills me up. I stick my fingers through the wire holes of the rabbits' house to say hello to the little rabbits. Surprisingly, it seems that I haven't grown up. The toilet with the wide open hole in the ground still scares me.

I return to the house. Is it possible that I was so miserable here, roughed up, humiliated, and nevertheless to have no grudge towards Mémère? I'm even happy to be here. Guy came to greet me. He grew up a lot. I look at him and smile to myself. Surely he will never be my husband; he is too much of a "brother."

The next day, early in the morning, I go to town. At the Four Roads, I hear the Vrille River flowing under the bridge. I walk towards the public laundry place. People recognize me.

"Have you really come back to see Jeanne?"

I am delighted by their accent. I walk leisurely, to see everything again. Young men turn their heads to see me as I walk. I feel like I'm floating. I linger at the merchant store windows. I know them. I went to school with their kids. I envied them for having parents and for being rich.

I reach the church. Passing through the gate, an intense smell of incense takes me back to Catechism classes, Mass, evening prayer. Jesus is still in his Mother's arms; Jesus is still on the cross, the statues of the saints, and the paintings of the holy family. My steps echo in the silence. I bend on my knees to recite with devotion one "Our Father" and "I bow to you Maria." I cross myself and leave.

My last visit I dedicate to school. I forgot that it's summer break now. School is closed, I'm disappointed. I hang on the gate; I can see the yard, the oak tree, and the inner yard.

I wanted to see my previous class, the hallway where Dad hugged me with his arms. Since then, Dad has not hugged me anymore. No one else either. That's the way it is.

I go around the school, it is very hot, and at least I will not have to collect flying bugs. I continue my journey through my memories. I detour through the town a few times, breathing in the air of an unbelievable freedom, going wherever I want, coming back whenever I want. When I come back Mémère receives me with a smile. I melt. I melt.

In the next few days, I am surprised by the number of boys who pass with their bikes in front of Mémère's house.

"You see," Mémère says, "The boys are coming for you, they think you're pretty."

And in her eyes I notice a naughty collaboration. Mémère, if only you had known how much I love you!

Mémère is right. When I go to town, boys surround me. I recognize them but cannot remember their names. We talk, laugh. I don't have their accent anymore. I don't know if they know who I am. It doesn't matter. They look at me, I feel pretty. I am in love with all of them, I don't know who to pick.

Time passes by quickly. Too quickly. I tend to neglect my friends Jeanine and Ginette, but after believing that I'm ugly and suddenly realizing that the boys like the way I look, I am shocked. There's no way I am missing any of my dates.

But to my beautiful river, the Rio, I decide to go alone. Nobody is there, because it is not laundry day. The water is amazingly clear. I sit on the grass and think.

Through the birds' tweets and the water's trickle, I become, for the first time, aware that I was unbelievably lucky to escape the gas chambers, the crematorium, death. I understand that life, my life, is more than a gift. It's an offering. I am fifteen and a half years old. I am in love, I am happy, I am eternal, and I start singing. Coming back to the village, I have the urge to kiss anyone who crosses my path.

Days go by indeed too fast. I wish I could stop time. I gobble with hunger each and every moment. From the moment I open my eyes, at dawn, I take my time a bit longer in bed to better absorb where I am.

This is “the bedroom for the important guests.” On the dresser, there’s a pitcher and a bowl made from flowery porcelain. I am allowed to wash myself in the parquet room. When the smell of coffee reaches my room, I know Mémère is preparing my breakfast. Not soup, no! But coffee and slices of bread. Do I deserve so much attention? Do I deserve for anyone to take interest in me?

My vacation is almost over. I will take with me the perfume of the flowers, the fruits’ trees, and especially Mémère’s smiles. I will be dreaming of the shy courtship of the boys - we exchanged addresses. I know that what I have experienced now, with so much wonder and happiness, will not happen again. An experience like this can be lived only once.

Before I leave, I decide to visit Mademoiselle Brisset, the principal of my previous school. When the moment of surprise passes, she hugs me with her arms. She remembers. I listen to her. I love her voice, her accent and the way she rolls the r’s in her throat. Mademoiselle Brisset is well educated; her eyes are bright with wisdom. She is a distinguished lady. Before I leave, she gives me her picture and says, “My child, never forget

that you are Jewish, and be proud of it!”

I depart from her, confused.

And here, it is over. I need to go back. Saying good bye to Mémère, she says unexpectedly, “When you were at Saint-Amand, you resembled a real Christian, but now that you live in Paris, you resemble a Jew...”

I am stunned.

On the bus that takes me to the train station, I feel such a deep sadness, that I consider going back. On the train, I experience again, the happiness, every moment of these incredible reunions.

As for my adolescence, this is the first time my memory is so colorful.

I realize I haven’t sought to know what had become with my little friends from social services.

Was I afraid?

Going back to Paris will not be easy. Before I deal with the gray colors, the job I don’t like and the house where I feel like a stranger, I allow myself a break to take a walk in the center of Jerusalem. It is May 23rd 2000.

My steps lead me to Jerusalem’s market, Mahane Yehuda. It is unbelievable how this small market can contain such a big crowd. You can hear all the languages:

Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian, French, Yiddish... I float smelling the Mediterranean spice scents, which I love so much. Since it is springtime, a magical spectacle of colors cover the shelves. I find a place to sit in a small café, between the cucumbers and the olives, to sip a Turkish coffee. With loud voices the merchants praise their fruits and vegetables. As for myself, I hear a song, a melody.

I go back to Paris, and the experiences from Saint-Amand fill my head. Lyon train station, the pushing, people complaining. I am full with melancholy. Coming back home, I fold my memories into the suitcase since I no longer have anyone to share them with. Who can understand my love of the place where I used to be so miserable? Even I cannot understand.

Moreover, nobody knows anything about me. It's better this way.

In the first few days after my return, I want to cry, every day; life is stronger than anything.

Even before I leave my adolescence behind me, and without any early notice, my character changes. From submission I turn rebellious. I can hardly contain the rage that is boiling inside of me. I believe that I can fix the world. I believe in communism and that it will bring with it equality. I participate in demonstrations, post announcements, the cops chase me. With my friends, we want to build a peace-seeking world; we are full of

hatred toward those who don't agree with our opinions. We are against the death sentence except for those who think that communism is not a good thing. We are of course anti-racism. My friends love Blacks, Arabs, Chinese, and so on. Except Youpins.<sup>15</sup> With them, it's not the same. This position freezes me. I hide my origin and am scared to death that they will find out the truth. But as for myself, I am a good Christian (I still pray before I go to sleep), a good French citizen, and a good communist. I get along very well with my conflicting ideas. I am impatient, teasing, aggressive, and rebellious. I am willing to fight for my opinions. I am sixteen years old.

At the same time, another passion is biting me: Bebop. They say it is a rebel dance. For me it is the ultimate compliment. I secretly visit St.-Germain-des-Prés. And after a few times at the "Rose Rouge" and "St. Germain Club," I come to prefer "La Huchette."

I have a trembling in my belly from the moment I hop the stairs, as if I am magnetized.

I remember the first time.

The basement, tiny, filled with smoke. In one corner, three musicians: a pianist, saxophonist and trumpeter play jazz music with their eyes closed, transported.

I make my way between low tables and stools that

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15 A disgraceful nickname for Jews (SA)

are attached to each other because there is just no space. On the miniscule dance floor, two couples are doing an acrobatic dance. The girls, with sneakers, wear a long black skirt, torn on the side. When one of the guys seems to be tired, another replaces him without breaking the rhythm. When a girl is retiring, another replaces her, without ever stopping the beat, so there are always two couples dancing, without a break. I look, fascinated. I want to do the same thing. I am sure that I can. The rhythm is streaming in my veins, but I am not dressed properly.

Next week I will be on this dance floor. It is a challenge.

A friend agrees to lend me a black skirt. I only need to unstitch the side, and it will do.

Claude, my brother collaborates, lending me his sneakers. He is size 9, and my size is 7, but who cares?! The problem is getting out of the house with the new outfit – I am supposed to go to the movies with a friend, wearing a classic outfit, something very old fashion!

Since we don't have toilets in the house – the Turkish toilets are located on the lower level – I come up with the idea of hiding the skirt and the sneakers in a bag that I will place on the toilet shelf. It is risky, because not only might a neighbor get to the toilet before me, but the bag can fall into the hole. Claude and I laugh so hard from my strategy, but everything goes well.

I leave the house dressed up “normally,” and change my clothes in the restroom. The twisting I have to do

to change into my clothes, without dropping anything into the hole, indicates a skill that I wasn't aware of.

Whew, I am in the street. I am shuffling a bit in my sneakers but I've made it. When I get to "La Huchette," I approach the dance floor, and receive an electric charge. I separate the dancing couple, replace the girl, and immediately get into the uncontrollable rhythm of Bebop. Nothing can stop me anymore, I am floating, I am in seventh heaven, and fatigue does not exist.

I come back to my senses in the street, at three o'clock in the morning. The last metro has passed a long time ago. I walk back home, from the metro station of Maubert-Mutualité to the one at St. Ambroise. I reach Pasteur Street at four o'clock in the morning. Passing in front of my little cousin Eliane's window, I raise my head. Maybe she's here? She forces herself on me. I push her away, she's coming back. Eliane was supposed to be almost my age. She will never dance Bebop. Eliane was thrown into the crematorium. She wasn't even six years old.

**I don't want to hear any more about the Holocaust.**

I live, live, live. I want to dance.

I am sorry, Eliane.

My underground outings go on for a few months, and nobody notices that I come home at late hours... until the day when a picture appears on the first page of one of the evening newspapers that are read at home.

I am seen with a slitted skirt, lifted into the air by my dancing partner.

When I dance, nothing exists anymore, so I didn't see the camera. The snitch!

In the family there is shock, followed by shame. I am a lost girl. Chasing guys, an extreme curse, almost a whore. From that moment I am not allowed to go out at night.

I am miserable, miserable, miserable. Only I understand the meaning of my burning passion to dance. I dance to push away my past. This is my revenge. I take revenge on the social services; I avenge those who I've loved and were murdered; I avenge my fate that my parents had so beautifully expected for me, that turned its head on their promises. When the music takes me higher, higher, nothing can hurt me anymore. When I am all vibrations from the first rhythm, I dance my youth, I dance life.

Cutting my swing so abruptly, they don't understand the level of pain and damage they cause to me. At night-time, I go back to being the little girl who prays for Jesus to help me. They say I am promiscuous. Come on...it makes me laugh!

I don't even see the face of the guy I am dancing with. There is no need to talk, there is no need to know each other, for me, the guy does not exist but for the dance.

I look around me for someone who could have protected me. No one. They are pointing at me. For a long while I realize that the child or adolescent, who is not

surrounded by love at home, will not get any help from the outside.

If I could only go back to Mémère! In Saint-Amand, I could still believe in my dreams. Usually, I am not the one to nestle my memories, the ones from the time when I was loved, admired, being passed around among the arms of all my family and their friends. Maybe it's supposed to protect me? Not to have more misery?

I know it's not my fault and nevertheless, I ask myself if I deserved to live these few happy years.

God! There's still a mess in my head.

No need to think that everything is dark in my life. Two new children came to make the family bigger. My sister, Monique and my brother, Michel. I love them very much. For me, they are not a stepbrother and a stepsister; they are a real brother and a real sister. And I am their big sister. But I don't have to defend them. I don't need to be scared for them. They have a dad and a mom that love them, too.

Now I am eighteen years old. My friends tell me that I am funny and that I have a great sense of humor. It's true. I am very quick, and no one beats me when it comes to mocking myself. Anyway, I have developed a sense of irony.

When I'm out of the house, I lock with a key everything that no one needs to know about me. I tell them that I receive plenty of warmth and love. I am that

close to telling them that I am spoiled. This would be a record!!!

Although I have stopped dancing in basements, it doesn't mean I have slowed down. On a regular basis I go to "Le Rêve," a dance club on Grands Boulevard! Classy!

I've replaced my sneakers with pointy high heels, which I take off when the band starts playing Bebop and I dance bare foot. I put them back on for the mambo. I still don't care much for my dancing partners' looks. If they attach to me too much, I push them away brutally. I am here for the dance, I am rebellious and wild.

Sometimes I do have a little flirt. But only a tiny bit.

A threat is floating over my head. They tell me that surely I am not planning to dance all my life and that I have to think about marriage. I am only eighteen years old. To get married at eighteen, it's like leaving school at fourteen. You hardly know anything about life. How to manage a budget, take care of the laundry, the kitchen, the husband, and not going out to dance anymore?

I am very worried and feel they want to find me a husband. Right, I do believe in the institution of marriage. To meet a handsome guy (surely he will look like Jean Marais or Gérard Philipe<sup>16</sup>), he will love me very much, only me, and we will have beautiful children.

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16 Two famous movie stars from that time. (YE)

To build the ideal family, I need to find a guy before they find one for me. I hear Dad's friends say, "I know someone good for your daughter." I tighten my lips. I will not let them decide for me, I will fight. Nobody will choose a husband for me.

But the biggest problem is me. I am at a crucial moment in my life where I cannot make a mistake. At an age when young women dream and are carefree, I have to choose quickly: Jewish or not Jewish?

Oh God in the sky, help me!

A Jewish guy? That is out of the question. If there is really no choice, if he's not too Jewish, even almost not Jewish. But such a thing does not exist. A non-Jewish guy? What if he will find out that I am Jewish and he doesn't like Jews, and he'll kick me out? I wouldn't even know how to defend myself.

What a mess in my head!

I have a decision. Not far from our house, there's a Jewish youth group, over the Bataclan on Voltaire Avenue. For the first time that I had come to this place – a shock! Almost all of them are orphans, of either one or both parents. They talk a lot about Israel. It doesn't interest me.

They say "died because of the deportation" with the same tone as you would say "a post office worker." They got used to the tragedy and the orphan status. Not me.

When I'm asked where I had been during the war, I answer: "with my Mom and Dad" and that everything is OK. I will not stay at this youth group where I feel like a stranger. In fact, I feel like a stranger everywhere.

But who am I?

I have a new friend. She just happens to be Jewish. I like her very much. She's smart, funny and relaxed. She introduces me to her parents, who are very permissive, and to her many brothers and sisters. A big family. I am well received. Sometimes, my friend and I go dancing and ice skating, which is much harder than dancing.

One evening, we have a date with guys my friend knows, to go ice skating together.

I am not excited by the idea. Because, I haven't acquired the skill of skating yet and I don't feel comfortable. I'd rather not draw the attention. I almost cancel the outing but at the last minute, I decide to go anyway. On the metro platform, I see my friend surrounded by a few young guys. I introduce myself, shake hands, when suddenly my gaze is drawn to a guy is sitting; his head is bent towards the ground, his hands interlocked on his knees.

"Meet my cousin," says Odette, my friend. The cousin raises his eyes slightly towards my direction without changing his posture. His eyes are very blue, his look is freezing. He mumbles something maybe saying hello, without reaching his hand out. Such antipathy, this cousin has. Great beginning!! I regret that I came.

The entrance to the skating rink is expensive, and my evening is lost. In the rink we spread out. But nevertheless the unsympathetic cousin interests me very much. Every now and then I see him passing like an arrow. It's like he doesn't see anyone. He skates very well. And as for me, in order to not expose my situation, I'd rather go and sit on the rink's rail and observe the skaters.

I envy the girls who spin gracefully as they hold their partner's hand. I feel lonely. I wish for this evening to be over soon so nobody will discover how sad I am. I try to smile, but these darn tears will soon turn me in. If they ask me, I will give an excuse that the mascara burns my eyes. I can't explain to myself my anguish. What do I care that this guy is not affable. In fact, he is really hostile towards me. So what?

Suddenly, half an hour before they close the place, the cousin, fast as lightning, rushes towards my direction, and without slowing down, he leaps and sits next to me. I swallow saliva.

"Everything OK?" he asks as he looks at me for the first time.

I am hypnotized by his look that is...how to say it... hostile. He stares at me. I lower my eyes. He asks me what I do in life. Suffocated, I mumble that I work in the fur industry. He too. My mouth is dry and my hands are sweaty. He asks, "How old are you?"

"Almost eighteen."

"I'm almost nineteen."

If he would have told me that he's thirty, I would

have believed him. He looks ageless.

He is cold, sad, and serious. He resembles a lone wolf. I say that I love dancing. It's not his cup of tea. He does Judo, and soon he'll receive his brown belt. I say that I hang out a bit with Jewish youth. He doesn't. He doesn't like it. His friends are not Jewish, and they are much older than him. He came tonight with his cousin by chance.

I think I heard that he doesn't like to hang out with Jews. But, he's a Jew. A thought goes through my head. It's him. It's him, my future husband! I will not have another opportunity. A Jew that doesn't like Jews, this is for me.

When we depart, I peek at him discretely. His hair is longer than what is accepted, his coat is longer than what is accepted. He looks like he couldn't care less for fashion or anything else. He looks strong. He will protect me. It's natural, he's a Judo student. I tell myself, "He'll marry me and he doesn't know it yet."

It's easy to say all this, but apparently, he's not interested in me, and surely I will not hear from him again.

A year goes by. One day, when I leave work, I notice him.

"Did you pass here by chance?"

"No, I came to see you. I want to go out with you."

"I already have a boyfriend."

"You're leaving him."

"What?"

“I want to marry you. I want you to be my wife. I haven’t forgotten you.”

I never dreamed of a love declaration of that sort.  
I said yes.

I will need another whole year to convince my family to accept my future husband. I fought with all the energy that love, faith and youth can give. Only Claude and Nicole were on my side.

And here came the miracle.

I am twenty years old. Before I leave the house where I was born, I look in the mirror for one last time. I feel beautiful in my wedding gown, covered with my veil. I smile to myself. All of a sudden, and in an instant, Eliane’s face appears. Eliane will never wear a wedding gown. She was beautiful, she was Jewish, she was only five and a few months old, and she was endangering France. They pushed her into the crematorium.

I beg you, Eliane, not today. It’s not my fault; let me join my future husband at the city hall. I am the happiest bride. Sorry, Eliane.

Dad is ready. He is handsome, my dad. Just for me he dressed up. I wish to hug him and to kiss him hard, but I can’t. I don’t dare. Our most natural gestures of affection and love had disappeared in the Holocaust.

But today, because I feel full of life, I would like to tell him: Dad, I love you.

I didn't say those words. Maybe one day. I have all the time in the world.

Among the wedding gifts, the one the touches me the most is from a woman that I have never seen. It is a poem. And it begins like this:

"My dear child, since I know your story for a long time, I know what price you had to pay to conquer this victory."

This poem, that goes on for a few pages, talks to me about hope, happiness, love and long life. Shaking with excitement, I put the poem back into its envelope, and with it I slipped in a small piece from my white veil.

*It was fifty years ago. The paper became yellow, so did the white veil, but the poem remained as it was.*

Here. Now I am a lady. I am liberated. Well, this is what I think. Since my personality is not formed well enough, I lean on my husband. I am submissive. It's easy, I am in love. But, every now and then the feelings of rebellion and rage that I want to unload blast through me. When there's hardship, I turn to prayers and to my saints. It's a secret, it belongs to me, and it's my right. My husband will never know about it. We never talk

about the Holocaust. I know that his father, his young cousins and their mother were murdered in Auschwitz. He knows I was hidden with social services and that my mom was murdered. Period. We have buried the past. All we want is to be good French citizens.

My first baby comes into the world a year after my marriage. A wonderful boy we named Thierry. His middle name is Maurice, in memory of my husband's father, whose name was Moses, but we called him Maurice because it sounded more French.

When I leave the maternity ward with my new baby in my arms, a deep heaviness wraps around me and I feel suffocated: will I know how to defend my child? Will I be able to save him? With all my might I push away horror images that come to my mind. I fight against myself. No. I don't want to think of other mothers, other babies, of another time. I am a new mother, I have no connection anymore to what was before, there is no danger anymore, there are no camps, there is no yellow patch. The war has been over for a decade now.

I am like everybody else. There is no danger lurking for my baby.

The months go by and I see my baby grow up. I am calm, even though I have to deal with many financial and emotional problems. We are in 1955, in the midst of the war in Algeria. My husband is completing his military service eight hundred kilometers from me. I see

him rarely but at least he's in France. I think the reason he wasn't sent to Algeria is: "Father died for France." But I'm not sure, since my husband didn't do anything in that direction.

One morning, as I take out my son's stroller from the storage locker (that all tenants have a key to open), I find all four wheels cut and a note on the stroller: "Bitch, your Youpin husband is not in Algeria like all of the other Frenchmen."

My heart doesn't stop pounding. I am completely shaken, my teeth rattle. I know who did it. I know I cannot deal with these people. How did they find out we're Jews?

Overwhelmed with fear, I entered my house with my baby. I am alone, I have no phone. For my child, I have to recover.

I bring the stroller's wheels in for repair, and go on smiling to these neighbors, that are rotten with hatred. I do it with the conviction that I will succeed in making them love me. I am so naïve; I am only twenty one years old.

Thierry is eighteen months old when I have the strong urge to take him to Saint-Amand. I am so lonely with my husband being away. I justify this passion with the clean air, the fresh vegetables from the garden that will benefit my little son. I do believe that the reasons are much deeper and complex.

Mémère agrees to have me if I pay for my stay, which seems totally normal. I haven't seen Mémère since I was fifteen years old.

At the Lyon train station, I am already unsure that this ride was a good idea.

The moment I second guess myself is always the moment that there is no going back.

I hug my baby tight to my chest, and feel that I have become so tiny. Had I been older, would I have known how to protect my little brother and sister?

Will I ever be able to live without fear and guilt?

At the train station and on the train there are the same smells. The passing views are the same views. I know where I'm going; nevertheless, I am filled with anxiety. Well, my character is very complex. I find it hard to live with myself.

Mémère is waiting for me at the bus station. I am flooded with joy to show her my baby. What a strange sensation to cross Saint-Amand with my baby. And at the same time, I see my childhood unroll here, from the bus station to Mémère's house.

I get the bedroom with the parquet floor for the second time, the one for distinguished guests, but today I'd rather have my old room. I still call it "my social service room."

Maybe I am not quite normal.

Guy got married. He has a daughter and his wife is pregnant again. The couple lives with Guy's parents. We meet each other in the yard, just like when it was war time. I don't know his young wife, Josette. She came from another village and I understand that she's not accepted by the family. They don't like her, she becomes my friend. Josette loans me a baby stroller, so I can stroll with Thierry and take him to places where my memories are most delightful. I cross the fields and take strides in the path that goes to the Rio. I dip Thierry's feet in the clear water of the beautiful river, he laughs hard when a frog splashes in the water. I marvel at the experience of reliving with my son the wonderful moments that were able to soften the harsh reality of my past.

I have a problem with church. I circle it but I don't go in. I use the excuse that the intense incense scent might disturb my little son.

School is also very close. I stay stuck next to the gate. If I go in, I will see the hallway where I met Dad. Mademoiselle Brisset, the principal, might be there. I have to show her my child.

Mademoiselle Brisset welcomes me with wide open arms. She is surprised to see me with my baby. She warmly kisses me. Her voice preserves the authoritative tone of an educator, but she treats me as equal, since I am a lady and a mother.

I will never measure up to Mademoiselle Brisset, she is a noble woman. I speak, she listens. When we part from each other, I feel wiser, and I promise to go back to

school from the point when it discontinued.

Every day I write to my husband. Love letters. However, as far as my story, my memories, my feelings, I will stay mute.

Again I leave Saint-Amand with a kind of sorrow and an unsettled feeling that is hard to define.

I realize that the places we love are not necessarily connected to happy memories. But these places are part of my life, throughout my life.

Twenty two months after Thierry was born, I am a mother again. She is a very beautiful girl that we named Fabienne Brigitte. Leaving the maternity ward, happy, my new baby in my arms, I could not have imagined that I will again have to expel images from a horror movie. I've thought it was all over. Not to be haunted by the horrible question: How to protect and save my children?

My husband, who was not released yet from his military service, got some time off. He is very proud to be a young father of two children. We love, and in his arms I find again trust and safety.

We enter the tribe of the responsible parents. As for me, I have to be the perfect mother, to know everything, to understand everything; the privilege of making a mistake does not exist. My children, too, have to be perfect to deserve the love of others. This passion for

perfection is not easy to implement. I don't pay attention that it's deteriorating my spontaneity, the love and the softness. I am very strict as to meal times, strolls, and going to bed. I am sure I am doing a good thing. I am a mother that loves her children, but I don't think I am the mother that loves like my mom did, all love, softness, gentleness, patience. I am projecting reflexes of rigidity that were inflicted upon me, and that bring up a terrible embarrassment in me. Only in the evening I let myself go as I observe my sleeping children. I kiss them softly and whisper in their ears, "Mommy loves you." They are wonderful with their innocence and their vulnerability. They are my life. They are life.

My passion for dance has not decreased at all, and often times I feel a strong urge to go out, to dance, to feel free, just for a few hours, but it is out of the question to be away from my responsibilities. I have found a solution. We buy a record player. I will clean the house as I dance. To scrub with steel wool, to shine the buffet, to wipe the windows, to climb on chairs to dust the tops of the cabinets, the chandelier- all this to the rhythm of the samba, the mambo, the swing, the boogie-woogie, the Bebop; to jump, to move, never exhausted, thanks to my passion for life, I devote myself without limits, without witnesses, in my home. My small apartment is sparkling clean. They say I am addicted to the dusting cloth. Let them say! It's better to look like a cleaning fanatic than a crazy woman who goes wild as she shines the furniture.

One morning, even before dawn, I wake up with an idea, with a certain vision: I will never be a technician in the fur industry again.

Since my children are still too young for me to go back to work, I have to make a use of this time to go back to school. My ignorance limits my personality. I have many complexes, I don't dare to formulate my ideas, and I am leaning on the ideas of others who are not necessarily smarter than me...

I will get a high school diploma. This is a challenge.

I will not go back to the furs. It is said that there is no stupid profession. It is true. But when you don't like your profession, it might make you stupid.

I sign up with an organization for science studies. My move is bold.

New notebooks, sharpened pencils, I approach my first class, shaking with delight and blushed with anxieties, and also a bit of shame. I am twenty four years old when I meet the classrooms again, the desks and the benches, the black board, the smell of the chalk and the paper. I have a certification that confirms my graduation of elementary school, and I have left school a decade ago. I begin with a handicap. Never mind. Since I know that I am right.

Classes are given in the evening, in a few of the quarters' public schools and also in the basement of the city hall of Eleventh Quarter. What can be told about the teachers, who after retiring, decide to dedicate their

time, volunteering to educate adults, and make them succeed? They teach us to love the subjects that used to scare us; they expose us to writers, to beautiful essays, and especially to help us develop intellectual curiosity. I will be grateful to them forever.

I learn with passion, the same passion that I have for dance, which is telling!

The studies until the finals are going to be long and I will need, for a while, to go back to work, but what kind of work?

I take secretarial and typing classes. Nicole, my sister, comes to babysit the kids often. Thanks to her I don't even miss one class.

Now, Thierry and Fabienne are kindergarten age. With a secretary and typing certification, I find a job as a secretary in a fashion house that sells women's clothes. I also need to pass a test. It's the worst test I have ever had, as if my whole fate depends on it. I don't have experience or any recommendation letters.

I act as if I don't care, sit with a theatrical confidence, and slide carelessly a page into the typing machine. I pray hard that no one will notice that my shirt drips sweat which slides down my back, my burning cheeks and my shaking hands.

I have the audacity to put on a smug expression, and I type. One moment, maybe two.

"OK," says the boss, "you may begin."

He didn't even look at the paper. Neither did I.

Such an entrance to a new profession, you don't forget. I was lucky.

We are at the yé-yé<sup>17</sup> and mini era. My boss is yé-yé, the secretaries are yé-yé, the models are yé-yé, and the costumers are yé-yé. I am exposed to the fashion world and to contemporary trends. Sylvie Vartan, the beautiful singer, escorted by her body guards, comes to us to choose her clothes. I envy her beauty, but my husband's look allows me to see myself most beautiful when I go dancing!!!<sup>18</sup>

I notice that up until now, I say all the time "my husband." But he has a name: Henri.

As a matter of fact, everybody can call him Henri, but "my husband," is just for me. I know it is a bit silly, or maybe not at all...

I am his biggest admirer. Henri left school at the age of fourteen. The classes were boring for him, but mainly he saw himself as the head of the family and wanted to replace for the sake of his brothers, his father that was murdered in Auschwitz. When I met him, he used to say that this was his mission and duty.

He, too, went back to school, correspondence though, and thanks to his good grades he realized that he's more talented than he thought.

At the same time, he is dedicated to practicing for

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17 Music style that was popular among youngsters in the mid sixties. (YE)

18 "Je suis la plus belle pour aller danser" – from a popular song from that time. (YE)

his black belt. He aspires to be a Judo instructor; he believes his father would have been proud of him for that. Henri does not believe his dad is dead, he hopes to see him appear, one day, at a street corner. I guess these things, since we don't talk about them. Henri is secretive, a bit closed, but projects calm and protecting strength. Next to my husband I feel safe.

I am happy. So why every time that I'm amazed or excited about something, am I immediately flooded with deep sadness?

I remember the first time we went on a vacation with our children, to Rimini, Italy, with the car we have just purchased. These were times of happiness and pride. As I let the sea waves sway me calmly, and think of the long way I have come since social services to this enjoyable place, at once, my happiness vanished.

Where are the girls that became farm girls and did not have another option other than to marry boys with a painful past like theirs, and that have never known anything other than violence, lack of love and self-respect?

I am lucky. They took me out of social services because I'm a Jew. The others stayed because they were really abandoned, and nobody came to pick them up.

And what if Dad was kidnapped? And Eliane? She will never see the turquoise blue of the sea.

As much as I want to scream **No, No, No, it is all over**, I know that the images from the past will pop like a coil at the same moment that I think I have the right

to relax and enjoy life. Since I am alive, I must punish myself...and thank Jesus.

That is why there's still a mess in my head.

Nowadays I earn good money, go to work with much joy, the models, the clothes, the collections, I had never believed that this would be my world.

"What do you do?"

"Model-secretary."

Really classy, totally not the working class.

But, deep down, go figure why, the diploma that I am most proud of is the one that declares that I have finished elementary school.<sup>19</sup> I achieved this diploma at the time in my life when I perceived myself as ugly, in every respect. Moreover, I have kept a fond place in my heart toward my friends from the workshops. With them I have recreated the world. I hadn't known back then that especially in these places there are so much percolating wisdom, resourcefulness, sense of humor, sense of self-irony, and so much camaraderie.

But I am not sorry that I have chosen a different path. Being a secretary is just one station. Now I am thinking of college. Maybe even medical school. I am all dreams and plans. The trust and encouragement of my husband allows me not to doubt myself.

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19 At that time, in France, elementary school went till 8th grade. (YE)

Sometimes I think it is a privilege to be born in France. Politically I am located at the left, I am a good citizen, I care, and I am committed. I think the French language is the most beautiful; the French nation is the most courageous, and the state of France the most noble. It happens, however, that I get deeply hurt when I hear curse words against the Jews, by people who hold the same political opinions as me, since I believe that the left-wing cannot be racist. I know how to respond violently to protect the blacks, the Arabs, the foreigners. But when the derogatory remarks are directed towards the Jews, I say nothing. I am paralyzed. I am ashamed of being a coward, but I do not know how to defend myself. I even think that my Jewish origin is not defendable. I do not tell anyone I am Jewish. During the war I had learned to live in hiding. I keep living like that, in hiding.

We have moved to a bigger apartment. Now we have our own bedroom, and even a bathroom. When the evening comes, the joy is when the keys are placed on the locked door's lock, my husband, my children and I are sitting on the sofa watching TV, and the dog is lying on our feet.

These moments are so precious to me that I promise God not to ask for more, ever.

But one day...

*I am very excited. My fountain pen does not respond to me anymore. It goes in all directions with angry scratching. I don't resist.*

*It is December 12th 2000. My country experiences big chaos riots and disorder. But no turmoil, no rebellion, will prevent the mountains of Jerusalem from shining under the rays of the sun setting. I go out to admire the fire ball that rapidly descends until it touches the edges of Jehuda Mountains, and disappears into the other side of the hill.*

*The Jerusalem stone is still soaked with pink color. All the beauty of the world is in front of me. I think I am floating. I will need a few more minutes to return to earth, but the December chill gets me back to my desk.*

*I go back to my story.*

It is springtime, the month of May, the year 1967.

We are thinking of our upcoming vacation, a sunny place, the sea, the warm sand. I have no worry other than losing some weight in order to fit into my new bathing suit that will bring up my tanned skin. We will go to Portugal, Spain or Italy. I am happy.

One morning there are reports in the radio that Egypt is threatening to block the Straits of Tiran,<sup>20</sup> and might cause a war between Israel and her neighbors.

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20 A strategic strait connecting the gulf of Akaba and the Red Sea. (YE)

I go out to work.

In the evening, all of the TV shows are dedicated to this subject.

I prepare dinner distractedly.

The next day, the radio channels are opening their morning report with the development of the explosive situation in that region of the world. On the way to work, in the newsstands, I discover the main headlines of the daily papers. The word "Israel" appears in huge letters. My blood freezes. I turn my head as if I haven't seen anything, and mainly in order to not be seen, as if I was in danger. In the passing days and weeks the whole media is drafted to cover the subject. The French go to the street and yell: "Israel Live!"

Big demonstrations of support and solidarity are taking place throughout France. I do not participate. I don't even know to which camp I belong. But I also didn't know that so many French love and support the Jews. Moreover, it seems they know more about what's going on in that region than me.

One day, however I have the idea to look at the map to understand better where this conflict is taking place.

I search for "Israel." Israel. Not a word that jumps to the eye. Finally I see.

I see a tiny dot. So tiny. A state that is surrounded by large threatening states. At war time, it will be ruined. If it happens, nothing will be left of it?

So... so like someone who slept too long, I wake up

at once. Everything I had detested pushed away, hid, jumps straight to my face.

Amidst the violence I have lost my identity, on that night when I was torn from my family, in 1942, the Holocaust.

Amidst the violence I find my identity again, in that spring of 1967, on the eve of a merciless war against the Jews.

I have found my identity again.

I want to scream: I am a Jew.

A real earthquake.

I want to pray so there will not be a war, but I don't know which god I must turn to. I cannot turn to Jesus anymore, he is not my god. I have made a mistake.

Jesus, I have gone with you a long way. I have loved you, but with all the respect that I owe you, I leave you.

I go back to my brothers and sisters. I was and still am what I was in my mother womb.

I am a Jew.

I already know now that I will leave France. My fate is underway. I trust. But at the same time I am scared.

What is going on with me?

It is an upheaval. And nevertheless, for the first time, there is no more mess in my head.

On this day of June 5th 1967, it is six o'clock in the morning when I turn on the radio.

I hear that the war between Israel and Egypt and Syria has broken out two hours ago.

From the depth of my heart I whisper: God in the sky, don't allow another tragedy,

make sure this little dot on the map will never disappear.

The hours and days that will pass will be a real nightmare. Jordan, without previous warning, sends its troops in against Israel. I think I am having a nervous breakdown.

But I am not alone anymore. In my husband's eyes I saw the distress and the tears. I think that right now he found his Jewish soul again, but we are too shy to speak about these things.

Finally, on June 11th, 1967, the heavy war artillery has stopped.

The State of Israel stands strong.

The God of my ancestors has listened to my prayer.

All of the radio stations and the TV as well as the papers went back to their usual rhythm. The tension expired, the passions relaxed. Not for me.

Whereas everything looks like it went back to order, in our everyday life, at work, at home, and as far as our future vacation, a fire burns inside me that will feed my fate in an irreversible way.

What should I do to rejoin/unite with the Land of Israel? For now I see that all options are destined to failure. Married, a mother, having no experience in forcing my opinions on others and mainly, lacking in adventurous spirit, I am in a horrible trap.

Maybe one day, a miracle?

Waiting for this day, on Sundays I go by myself, to Orly airport, in order to see the airplanes that take off towards Israel.

This is the first time I see an airplane close by. An airplane from the Israeli airline El-Al.

It's huge, enormous. I ask myself how this heavy machine can hold itself in the air. I look at the passengers' cabin, the windows. I reach the plane's tail...and up...all the way up, The Star of David in the colors of the State of Israel. Blue and white.

And then, in a speed faster than a flash, I see again the yellow star sewn to my clothes, the Jewish star of shame, and on the plane the Jewish star of pride.

On my clothes, the fear, the shame.

On the airplane, the hope, and the life.

One day, the airplane with the Star of David, blue and white, will take me there. To the land of my ancestors. I remain a long time in observation.

Every Sunday, I escape to the airport. Nobody knows

anything about my adventures.

I still hide.

I wish, like a little child, to still believe in fairytales, in a magic wand that will save me from this complicated situation.

A year has passed since these strange ideas of leaving everything and uniting with my people. One evening, when I came back from work, as usual I prepare dinner; I peak at the shows on TV: A report on Israel.

Dinner is sloppy; I don't look at the kids' homework. I clean up the house frantically, as I say to myself that this agitation is excessive, but I can't control myself. Usually, at the end of the day, finally in my slippers, I like to let myself sink into a pleasant fatigue, as my husband and our children sit in front of the TV and get updated on the news. These are preferred moments that lengthen even when the other programs are interesting.

But on this evening, the news doesn't end. I think they extended them. We'll also have to endure the weather forecast. I am a bundle of nerves when, finally, Israel's first views appear.

Here's the desert, the shepherds, the goats, the sheep, the donkeys, the Bedouins, the tents, the camels, the covered women, the barefoot children with big black eyes, excited by the camera.

Planted in this biblical landscape are verdant Kibbutzim and their crops that extend infinitely and create

a strange contrast with the dominant color of the sand.

Now we are in Mea Shearim, the orthodox Jewish quarter of Jerusalem. The men are dressed in a strange way: puffed golf pants, white socks up until the knees, on their heads big black hats made out of fur, and on each side of their face a long curl of hair swaying at the rhythm of their walk.

The report continues its journey towards the Mediterranean Sea and its long beaches of thin sand, the Jordan River, the olive trees, the fruit trees, the flowers, the cities and the wide avenues, the modern cars.

At the end, the camera lingers on a wonderful sunset, coloring the mountains of Jerusalem with red.

The report has finished.

We are far from the images of the tanks in the desert, the Six Day War.

My husband turns off the TV. I remain glued to the chair, staring at the empty screen.

A heavy quietude sinks between us. We both have tears in our eyes.

In these moments, I would like so much to reveal the secret that suffocates my life.

And then I hear Henri, my husband, say, as if speaking to himself, "In ten years, we might be there..."

"What did you say?"

"No, nothing."

“Yes, yes, I have heard well. You said maybe in ten years. And why not now?”

And without waiting for an answer, without breathing between one sentence and the other, like a magician who draws from his mouth an endless ribbon, the words come out of my mouth, sentences. I can't stop anymore. I mustn't stop. I feel the miracle at the edge of my lips. I must not let it slip away. It will never come back again. I need to speak, to speak, to speak.

Henri's distressed look at such a flood of words is evident through a tiny moment of weakness that unsettles his sturdiness. It gives me confidence to present, to explain, and to justify my idea. And my husband doesn't know me anymore.

I regain my confidence which I have buried inside, the same confidence my parents have given me in my early childhood. I feel strong, determined, and brave.

It is a real blow...

One after the other I knock down Henri's arguments. Almost all night, I keep saying my arguments that we are young, brave; we've always known how to deal with all sorts of obstacles; we are responsible; we will find our roots again; our children will grow up in freedom and pride, and so on.

I fell asleep, exhausted, without getting an answer. But he did not say no.

The days pass, the weeks pass, the months pass. These remind me of more waiting, more hopes, but I

don't give up. I consolidate more arguments. I repeat myself. God, what a combat!

*I shouldn't have forgotten the exact date of that morning...*

Henri woke up much earlier than he's used to.

I hear him getting ready at the bathroom, moving to the kitchen, going back to the bedroom; he goes again to the living room, goes back again to the bedroom and again to the kitchen. This kind of restlessness is not typical for him.

He comes back to the bedroom with a tray and hot coffee. I get up on my elbows. Henri sits at the edge of the bed, slides his hand under my chin and looks into my eyes. He says:

"You won. I am ready. We will go to Israel."

Have I heard right?

I will not ask him to repeat his words...

No, I did not win. He, only he, won. As for me, I function with my excitement, with my passion. For him, the reflecting, the reasoning, the seriousness.

I can imagine he fought with himself to agree to go ahead with this step.

From that moment everything will happen very fast. We announce the news to our family and friends. The reactions are violent. They say that we have lost our minds, that we should not be allowed to do such an act

of craziness...we understand that we will cause pain.

We wait until the summer vacation to tell our children, in order to not mess up their studies. We decide to spend our last vacation in France in Saint-Amand. I offer Henri to go to Limoges, to go back to the place where he was hidden with his father, mother, brother and sister. He refuses. He doesn't want to see again the house where the Gestapo caught his father, who did not come back from Auschwitz.

August 1969. We are at Saint-Amand again. We have rented an apartment in town.

I have not forgotten a thing. I can walk with my eyes closed in the streets, to go up the stairs, to get away from obstacles, to recognize a voice behind me.

I visit Mémère. She kisses me with somewhat of a chill. I forgive her. I will never be her granddaughter, but I will never stop loving her.

Mémère's house seems even smaller than the last time, but I find in it the same smells. The same place, the same table, the same tablecloth, the same stove, and the same low stool. Up the stairs, my bedroom. Are there still things to attest to my past in this place?

I don't want to know. I fear the shock folded in my memories. After my soul was hurt, I want now to enjoy my luck. My happiness is so big it hurts like a wound.

I want to see the garden. Instinctively, I bypass the sharp stone planted in the middle of the path that goes to the vegetables garden, an obstacle I knew how to

bypass with my wheelbarrow when I used to bring in wood logs. I pass under the shed of the water hole. It is filled to the rim with rain water. On one of the walls a sickle is hung on a nail, and on the ancient straw chair Mémère has put her basket full with onions, garlic and shallots. I close my eyes and breathe in the air. I want to preserve in my memory the details, the smells, to relive them every time I wish to go on a journey to the past. I continue my tour toward the flowers and vegetables. The dahlias and roses, Mémère's preferred bouquets, their perfume is intoxicating. The vegetable garden is full of carrots, cabbages, tomatoes, peas, string beans, and lettuce. I chew a parsley stem. It has a taste of real nature. I want to pick that big pear but I remember Mémère did not allow us to touch her pear tree. I will not do it. Before going back to the apartment, I turn one last time. Mémère's garden is impressive with its beauty.

I go on with my pilgrimage and direct my steps to the Rio River...but what happened?

Brambles have covered the stream of water. It is a grim look. I go away fast, my heart aches. The Rio has dried up.

The soft weeds, the rippling of the clear trembling water of the beautiful river, no longer exist but in my memory.

In this month of August of the year 1969, the weather is wonderful. People stroll, I meet acquaintances and

speaking with them on the curbside, listening to gossip. The same gossip as back then. This one got married with the son of that one because he's rich and he got her pregnant; that one has a child and her husband is not the father, but he doesn't know; or that one spends all her money on clothes that she has nothing left to feed her children; the pastor is not observant enough, etc., etc. It is all told in the local dialect, which delights me. I know, it is very stupid, but this is life!

Henri, who now has a black belt in Judo, offered to engage the children of Saint-Amand during the month of the vacation volunteering and give Judo classes. The children and their parents are very happy- the same parents who at 1942 were my age and did not want me around, which pained me very much. Today, I don't hide my pride. Thierry and Fabienne made local friends. I never thought I would experience something like that. I want to clap my hands. It is wonderful. I don't get tired from walking in the streets and the paths, to see again the same things, nevertheless, the feelings are different every time.

We met the priest at Guy and Josette's- the one that is not observant enough!

He's a young man, educated, open and lovable to the youngsters, whom he listens to and understands. Often times, upon their request, he drives his beaten down car and takes them to the disco. This phenomenon is rare and very modern, but in the village it creates a stir. The priest knows we're Jews. He admires our people, and

we experience with him fascinating evenings. He tells us how he disapproves those who still dare to call the Jewish people “the people who murdered the God.” He admits that among the circle of the religious authority he hears anti-Semitic speech. He promises that one day, he will take the youngsters who are under his religious wing and show them Israel. He will fulfill his promise.

At the conclusion of our very special vacation, I visit Mademoiselle Brisset. I sit in front of this woman with her wonderfully wise eyes. Her look dives into mine, her voice has not lost its authority, and she rolls the r’s in a marvelous way. She remained Madame Principal. I still hold the same respect for her. I tell her we decided to go to Israel, and remind her she had ordered me to never forget that I am Jewish. She remembers. All her wishes escort me, but at the moment of saying good bye, she wishes me to also never forget this beautiful French language, to pass it to my children and my grandchildren.

We depart. I look one more time at this noble lady that passionately loved her profession, her students, and her village.

Mademoiselle Brisset taught me self-respect, taught me to look in the mirror and to not be ashamed. You have given me your picture. It will not stay in the drawer forever.

I have put it on my desk. You reside with my loved ones.

I know, I repeat my words. I am a victim of softness.

That's it. The vacation is over. It will remain the most beautiful vacation of my life. I leave Saint-Amand-en-Puisaye. I do not turn my head back, and when the last house disappears, I know the girl from social services does not exist anymore.

I've believed it ....honestly...

Our departure date is not scheduled yet, but I cannot go back to routine life. Nevertheless, I have to go back to the office, to concentrate on my work, to the metro, the bus, the shopping, the meals, the usual errands, whereas I am not present anymore.

My head is in the luggage. In one day alone I experience euphoria, impatience, preoccupation, serenity, apprehension, certainty. But never doubt.

Finally the day of departure is here.

*Facing the memory of such potent moments, I have to take a break. I go out.*

*I go on the bus. It doesn't matter where I'll get off. The police stop the bus. Outside, there's a suspicious object. We are in the center of Jerusalem. All the streets around us are blocked. The special robot arrives with the person who will neutralize the bomb. We wait patiently. This is the routine of our lives. Today, June 21st 2001. The ceasefire that was signed by the Palestinians is a fire that doesn't cease. Tonight, when I'll listen to the news on the French channel, France 2, I will hear again that*

*the Israelis are the ones to blame.*

*What do I care?*

*My safety is in the hands of the policemen, who are constantly around to expose death-devices intended to tear apart bodies of innocent citizens. I don't know how long we stay put. I let my thoughts drift and I look at the ancient stone houses, the terraces packed with strange objects or with flowers, the passersby wait for a signal to keep walking.*

*How strange is this life: intense, rich, stressful, dangerous, but also euphoric, joyous, confident. We move again. I let the hops and shakes of the bus cradle me. I travel in Jerusalem. I am happy.*

*I am also happy to pick up my pen again and hear its squeaks and runs on the paper precede the words even before they formulate in my head. This phenomenon is a real mystery.*

The tenant who replaces us in our apartment hands me the key: "Here, do this for the last time," he says.

A small sound in the lock. "Clack."

At this moment I close the door on my past in France.

It is not the airplane that I have dreamt about so much that takes us.

We are at Marseille port. The ship is waiting at the dock. Its name is Moledet ("Homeland" in Hebrew). The passage to the ship's deck is lifted to the height of a building a few stories high. I am surrounded by my

husband and our children. I climb the steps, my head is bent. Our dog, Rex, a German shepherd, precedes us. With his owners he feels safe. I am dizzy and I have nausea.

These unpleasant sensations pass the moment the young sailors welcome us. They speak only Hebrew. I don't understand a thing, but, my God, they are so handsome with their white uniforms. I think I am in a movie.

We go down to the belly of the ship where our cabin is located. It is furnished with a large bed and bunk beds, a small cabinet, a sink. On the floor, a carpet. Beautiful. Next to the window, a small desk, and I notice an amazing bouquet of flowers and an envelope. I ask myself: what is it doing here? Surely it is a mistake. I peak at the envelope and read:

Monsieur and Madame Palacz

And their children

Passengers on board of "Moledet" to Haifa

From Christiane and Jean-Francois Kahn.

I can't believe it. I really cannot believe it!!!

How did my dear friends managed to get the flowers to the cabin???

In the envelope I find a poem that was written by hand: a blue line for Jean-Francois, a red line for Christiane. Each line begins with capital letter, that adds up vertically to create,

In blue ink: France

In red ink: Israel.

Twelve lines written in prose, rhymed with encouragements, hope, and love. A one-of-a-kind message. For a one-of-a-kind trip.

We organize our personal belongings in the small closet. A steward brings us a bucket of water for the flowers. We go back to the deck, when they announce that all passengers need to enter the dining room. Slowly the passengers are leaving the deck. I don't move. Leaning on the rail, I look ahead.

Today, January 5th 1970. The time is 19:00. It is dark. The wind is freezing. I am bundled up with my coat. I wait for the departure.

Finally, I hear the sound of the engines and the ship is moving.

We don't speak a word of Hebrew.

We don't have work, we don't have a house.

In our pockets, we have our last pay check.

But we are rich, rich, rich.

France: I leave you. For the last time I want to tell you that I have loved you more than I could, in a way that only immigrants' descendants can, but you did not love me in return.

You violated all your duties toward the name you carry: France.

**F comme Fraternité (Brotherhood)**

**R comme Respect (Respect)**

**A comme Abri (Shelter)**

**N comme Noblesse (Nobility)**

**C comme Courage (Courage)**

**E comme Egalité (Equality)**

You sent my aunts and uncles to their death; with your murderous craziness you didn't want to spare the young children. Within your walls you murdered my mother. You decided that my soft and gentle mother, who was grateful to you, endangers the French population.

But, I love you, France. Not because of who you are, but for your children who did not obey you. For your children, who by risking their own lives, hid, defended, helped and sheltered Jews. For your children who knew how to stay human, worthy of the name they represent: France.

Thanks to these people, and only thanks to them, you've remained beautiful.

I look at you one last time as the ship is slowly moving away from the dock. In just a little while the port lights will disappear.

I want to be able to tell you, "Sweet France, my dear childhood country." I envy you Monsieur Trenet.<sup>21</sup>

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21 Charles Trenet (1913-2001), a French song writer and composer, who wrote and composed the song "Douce France", sweet France, in 1943, where he describes his love to the country, and refers to it "The country of my dear childhood." (YE)

Now, complete darkness.  
So long France.

We will sail in a gusty, stormy sea for six days. The shaking and swinging are not the only elements that are stormy.

I have to deal with another storm, the one of emotions that won't leave me alone, even when I think the wind has settled down.

I know that I will have to get to know my country, my people, the traditions, the language, the climate. They say all beginnings are hard. I will accept the hardships. The ones that came before us, who dried the swamps and revived the wasteland, will not be ashamed of us. We will show them we can. We will know to give without asking anything in return.

I look at our children; they are joyous, carefree, and happy to take part in this adventure.

We, the parents, however, carry on our shoulders a huge responsibility. We are in the middle of the school year, and once we arrive our children will have to go back to school without knowing the Hebrew language, surrounded by unfamiliar faces.

I have butterflies in my belly.

Hope and anxiety are intertwined with each other, but there is no doubt. I don't talk much. I am too invested with all of these thoughts that try to find a rational place in my head.

My husband, with his surprising talent of reading from within my silence and the depth of my eyes, places his hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear:

“Don’t worry about a thing. Jews have suffered and survived Auschwitz, so Israel cannot be anything but heaven!!!

I am in shock.

The comparison is harsh, very harsh. But it is beautiful. It is said in capital letters.

We stop at Ajaccio, Napoli, and Athens. We visit the ruins of the Parthenon, but I cannot enjoy or take interest in the explanations of the tour guide. It’s a pity. During the whole trip I have a nightmare that the ship will sail without us.

The voyage doesn’t end. But the crew is welcoming, and offers movies and evenings of dancing. When we get closer to the Aegean Sea, no dancer can stand on their two feet on the dancing floor any more. The ship swings back and forth, the laughing girls fall into the arms of the handsome sailors, whose stances are stable.

It is impossible to distinguish the sea from the sky. I have an upset stomach. We are surely not far from our destination. The sea, after a burst of rage, lost all its energies. Appeased, the waves undulate in a nonchalant way.

There is only one more night left.

Sunday, the eleventh of January 1970, it is 4 AM.

The ship has cast an anchor in the Port of Haifa.

My husband, our kids and I are standing on the deck. It is very cold. It is still night-time. Large clouds prevent us from seeing the sunrise. Slowly the clouds dissipate and allow a bit of day light to penetrate through.

Soon enough, I see a thin shining curve, and in an unbelievable speed the sun appears fully...

My first look at Israel.

My first look at my homeland.

The shock is huge.

A burst of love.

At this moment, when I am almost touching happiness, my mother's face appears. Flooded with excitement, I see other faces passing in front of me:

Micha and Zilda, my two grandmothers

Abraham, my grandfather

Uncle Bernard

Aunt Frida

Aunt Rivké

Eliane, my little cousin

As well as my other family members whom I was supposed to meet in Warsaw, and are gone now.

No one is left to say your names. You were young, full of energy. You had plans for the future. You weren't given the opportunity to develop wrinkles. You, Mom, thought of hiding in the psychiatric hospital, in sweet

France. You did not know that there they are exterminating people, killing them slowly with starvation. And the trap closed up on your life.

You were Jews. You were not protected. You did not have a state.

Do you see me? Have I made your dream come true for you?

Are you proud of me?

We are about to go to Jerusalem. I will be your eyes.

We will need many more hours to pick up our belongings and our car. Meanwhile, the welcoming committee offers sandwiches, and grants us one hundred and fifty Israeli Liras. The members of the Jewish Agency give us our address and our Israeli I.D. cards.

We have chosen Hebrew names:

Henri becomes Eytan

Paulette, Ariela

Thierry, Yoram

Fabienne, Yael.

We keep our last name, Palacz.

We are standing at the dawn of our new life.

Beaten with excitement and tiredness, we go into our little car. We drive in silence, each one of us with our own thoughts.

It is dusk and suddenly, it is night.

The way is still long to The City.

Everything was said and written about Jerusalem.  
But how will it look to me?

We drive and drive. It seems like the car knows the way...

All of a sudden, in an exit from a turn, up up, It appears. Radiant with light. Like a river of diamonds. God, make it so that I don't wake up. Make it so that all of this will not be a dream.

I can't write anymore. If I will add one more word, it will be superfluous.

It is the month of December 2001, leaning on the window sill as usual; I observe again my beautiful pine tree. The sun rays find their way through its branches, shining like a garland. The weather is beautiful, but very cold.

Soon it is Christmas for Christians. For us, Chanukah, the celebration of lights.

Thirty one years have passed since we arrived in the land of Israel. A long time; however, it seems like yesterday. My love and passion to my country remained as they were.

The preliminary immigration challenges enriched me. Finally I understood my parents. Like me, they arrived to a country without knowing the language. I used to mock their broken French, I used to correct

them. And here, I too have to ask the help of my children to write a letter, to figure out a formal document. They too, laughed at my mistakes and my bad spelling.

Like my parents, I too took pride of my children and their fluent Hebrew.

Like my parents, who loved and respected France, I love and respect Israel.

But unlike them, I am positive that our Israeli citizenship will never be taken from us...

I enjoy remembering our first steps.

Looking for a roof to put over our heads and a job required so much energy that we forgot we'll have to deal with more challenges. However, there were enormous challenges- the climate, the mentality, the nutrition, choosing a good high school, finding a good doctor, making new friends whereas we left behind ten year-old friendships. What a challenge!

There were exhausting evenings with our Hebrew teacher, Ruthie, who was kind to invite us over. So much effort it took from us to understand each other, since Ruthie did not know French. We were talking with our hands, there were bursts of laughter, and we were fortunate to enrich ourselves with one more word or two.

*I want to tell about my first walk in Jerusalem.*

I am by myself. Walking wherever my feet take me. Sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. I am

walking in narrow streets, crossing yards surrounded by small houses. They hung on a flight of stairs along hallways that connect to other yards.

Laundry, lots of laundry on wires stretched from one wall to the other, from house to house, from yard to yard. Not too aesthetic but very clever. The intensity of life is felt.

I don't know yet that I am in a very orthodox Jewish quarter. Young children look at me with curiosity. Right, with my mini dress and boots I probably look foreign. I smile at them, and suddenly, like a flight of sparrows, they run away. The little boys with their yarmulkes, with their long hair locks from each side, looking like corkscrews, and swaying at the rhythm of their run. The little girls wear black wool socks, and get tangled in their long skirts trying to catch up with the boys.

Entertained, I follow them and find them gathered around their mother. She looks at me top to bottom, with scolding eyes. It looks like she wants to protect her children from my presence, when I suddenly hear, "Mameh."

The children call their mother "Mameh," like I used to call my mother. The children speak Yiddish with their mother, my mother's tongue. I thought this language does not exist anymore. In the mouths of the children I find again in my memory the soft melodic accent of this beautiful language.

I wanted to come to Israel, to go toward the future,

to erase the past. A miss. The past will never be erased.

Very shaken, I go away. I keep walking from quarter to quarter, meeting people of all colors. Dark, black eyes, golden hair, bright looks. It looks like people from India, Sweden, Poland, Peru.

Are they all Jews?

Jews like me?

What a nation!!!

I am totally uprooted. However, I feel at home. I feel good at home.

## The Kotel<sup>22</sup>

I've heard, of course, of the Kotel. But I don't know its history. I plan to visit this tourist place like the other places that attract tourists.

I walk in the narrow alleys of the ancient city of Jerusalem, intoxicated by the scents and the oriental colors. I stop at the merchants' stands, ask numerous times how to get to my destination, I walk in circles, I take my time, when getting out of a dark and narrow alley...I find myself in the square of the Kotel...

I stop breathing. Tears blur my eyes. I stay here, hooked, enchanted. How to explain it?

I see only a wall! It is not even enormous!

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22 The Kotel – is the name of the Western Wall in Hebrew (SA).

On the tips of my toes I get closer to the ancient stones, touch them with the tips of my fingers, with awe, and allow my hands to travel. Finally, I dare to put my lips and my forehead on the stone. Cold and burning. I close my eyes. I am by myself in the world. I hear whispers, contained cries, the humming of a melody.

When I finally raise my head, I notice tens of hands trying to place, between the cracks, a small and precious note.

It probably enfolds within it a wish, a prayer. Confused and continuous sounds of foreign languages rise around me, and I dare to believe that God sees and listens only to me. Does this belief make sense? What a mystery!

I withdraw from the wall like everybody else is doing. I assume that this manner of walking backwards serves the purpose of lengthening our observation.

I don't know that it has to do with respect, so as to not turn the back on the wall.

Branches are showing from the cracks and white doves find refuge between its holes.

Its name is "The Kotel."

I will return to put a note. I will write only one thing: "Thank you."

From this first meeting I remember every detail. Like my first-love meeting. Here, I will know more excitement...

I don't know anything about my religion, and I rouse

astonishment when I ask about the course and meaning of the Jewish holidays. It embarrasses me, however, so I don't make any effort to know more. I love my God, and tell myself that what we have in our heart is most important. Therefore, there is no need to follow the religious commandments. Really?! It is much simpler...

When I left France, my boss gave me the Bible, written in Hebrew and French. I have tried to turn it into the book that I have on my nightstand. I didn't understand a thing. On the one hand, I think the repetitions are awkward, and on the other hand some parts of the text are incomprehensible.

I have put the Bible aside, as a souvenir.

Time passes. It doesn't consume my enthusiasm. I breathe my country. There are places I love so much, it feels like every time I discover them it is as if for the first time, like the market of Machane Yehuda in Jerusalem.

It is a market that is full with people all week long, except for Saturday. Pushed between the narrow aisles, oh, what a magical meeting place! Meetings take place in the middle of the aisle, and create a cluster of people, shopping charts, babies strollers, but nothing disturbs the continuation of the conversation about political events, health issues, and the beauty of our fruits and vegetables, when around us, people whose path was blocked complain and get upset. And this would not prevent them from doing the same thing just a few meters ahead.

It is warm, heartfelt, and totally human. I love, love, love.

Jerusalem is always bustling. New neighborhoods are being built.

I want to get to know the establishing stages of my neighborhood.

When we come to visit the building we will live in, we are surprised to find out that it is the only building. Its construction was just finished. We are the first residents. We choose the top floor to be able to enjoy the superb view.

Around us, there's nothing. No road and no street lights, and to be able to come back to our home we need to climb over stones and rocks. We are surrounded with cranes, bulldozers, diggers, tractors, sledge hammers, etc. The noise is terrible. We live in the gravel, the mud, the plaster. It is all a huge construction site.

I observe with much curiosity the work, and little by little I see a floor, and another floor, and another one, and a roof and a chimney rise from the ground. I draw with my eyes the houses I used to draw in my childhood, in my drawing book.

I am present in a delivery. The one of my neighborhood.

From week to week, the view is changing, and after a few month, I no longer recognize the path that I used to walk back home.

Cement blocks dressed with the beautiful Jerusalem

stone. These are already apartment buildings with numbers in the front. Nevertheless, we still stumble on the ground of the narrow passing path.

One day, all the heavy construction machines have left, leaving behind them a clear clean space. The asphalt draws a beautiful black line, smooth, shiny, and created my street, and its name “Yam Suf” (the Red Sea). The street lights are bright at night.

My excitement reaches its peak when, one morning, I find a garden beneath my window...grass covers the dry soil from yesterday, and young trees were planted- now they are taller than the building, including my beautiful pine tree.

Trucks of moving companies have replaced the bulldozers, and families begin to make their place. Most of them are young couples, not many children.

We observe with curiosity and ask ourselves who will be our neighbors. The neighborhood grocery store is the only meeting place to get to know each other. We communicate in broken Hebrew, however this is the only language that unites us.

In my building, people speak French, English, Romanian, Arabic, Moroccan, Portuguese, Polish, Russian, and Italian. We are all new immigrants.

I hardly got used to the quietness and calm of the beginning and already children's strollers are joyfully filling up the sidewalks. Babies are born, and with them kindergartens, schools and a high school.

The neighborhood grocery store has kept its nostalgic charm, but now we meet at the commercial center of neighborhood, vibrant with cafés, small restaurants, clothes shops, a flower shop, pharmacy, post office, bank, and synagogue.

On Friday mornings, there is much excitement before Shabbat. People meet, stop, and invite each other over for coffee. An atmosphere of a village. We don't observe Shabbat in our house, but I love the smells of cooking that flow into the stairwell, some remind me my younger childhood: chicken soup, Gefilte Fish. I don't remember the occasions that Mom used to make those meals, but I remain drenched with the cooking smells of my parents' house.

It has been three years since we came to Israel. Yoram studies at the technical school of the air force. Yael gets ready for her finals. Eytan has worked at the electric company since we arrived. He studies at night to receive a controller diploma. He loves his job that allows him to travel the country to connect the new Jewish and Arab villages to the national electricity network.

I paint. I have discovered my passion: to represent the beauty, the magnificence of my city. I don't need talent nor to be a genius. It is enough for me to hold the color palette, to look out from the window, and to allow my brush and my hand to run, without stopping, on the canvas.

I am getting to know myself: I am an artist of colors.

I enjoy the observations that offer me two contrasting views. On one side, the mountain, its colors, the light, the silence, the calm; on the other side, the window is open to the street, the movement of the cars, the noise, and the passersby. I love contrasts.

In life, there are events that are so unexpected that one can ask if we hadn't been waiting for them after all...

It was a Friday just like any other.

As I was leaning on the balcony rail of my house and looking at the refection of the sunset on the neighbors' windows, I noticed a shadow of a woman; her head is covered with a white shawl. The woman places two candlesticks on the window sill, lights two candles, reaches her hands towards the flame, and covers her eyes. It looks like she's praying.

I turn my head so she won't notice me, but use my view and continue to look at her.

I know it is not customary to do so, but her movements make me curious. I stay put and contemplate.

The traffic of the buses has stopped. The street has lost its commotion. Men, with Talitot<sup>23</sup>, are walking to the synagogue. Their kids, wearing their Shabbat clothes, follow them. It is so very beautiful.

Peace descends upon Jerusalem.

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23 Talit (plural Talitot) – A Jewish prayer shawl worn in the synagogue. (SA)

But where have I already seen movements like the ones of this woman???

On the next Friday, I stand a long time on the balcony of my house, so I don't miss the lighting of the candles ceremony.

I am more confused. The lace shawl, the flame, the hands. Maybe I've seen it in a movie, or maybe I have read about it? And every Friday evening, I catch myself doing what I hated at Mémère's: to peak in on the neighbors through the shutters.

I imagine their house very tidy, a table covered with a white tablecloth, a vase with flowers on the furniture, but all I see are the dancing flames of the two candles.

I bought two candlesticks and two candles.  
And I have let time pass.

Finally, one evening, I decided to light the candles at the same time like the woman across the way. If I had thought of creating a romantic atmosphere, I missed it. It is true that the meal was not fitting. Just like every evening, I made a few salads, cheese, eggs and bread. In short, an evening like any other.

But, I have felt a slight difference, like a holiday feeling in my home.

Only now I am beginning to realize that I have a lot of deficiencies. Now I want to know more about Jewish tradition and customs.

I have heard about classes that are given in French by a certain Léon Askénazi that is known as “Manitou.”

I almost left during the first class. From the moment the students arrived, I feel that I don't belong here. I recognize the faces of very scholarly people; some are invested in heavy books and discuss texts. The crowd is varied. There are priests and nuns, and even some of our neighbors that define themselves as atheists.

I want to leave the place discretely, before they notice my presence, but the door is already closing, the hall that is full to the brim, and when Manitou enters, it quiets down.

I sit all the way at the back; I shrink in my chair and peak from the bottom.

Manitou speaks. His voice is not strong but it is so quiet in the room that I hear it well. My neighbor offers to share his Bible, so I can follow the verse that is read in Hebrew and translated to French. Manitou comments. He stays for a long time on one word that seems in fact simple and easy, and gives it a few commentaries that are far from what I thought I understood. I concentrate so hard that I did not pay attention to the time passing.

I came back again, this time with my own French-Hebrew Bible, and its pages are still glued together because it had not been used. I become a diligent student, and slowly, dare to change my seat and reach the center of the hall. The study and the reading of the original Bible make me very excited.

I begin to think, contemplate, and work my nervous

cells. I feel my intelligence awakening.

**And I realize the enormity of my ignorance...**

And after few months of study, I already sit in the first row. I did not become a scholar, but I don't want to take the risk of missing even one word.

My level compared to the others is not important anymore. Manitou relates similarly to the "big ones" and the "small ones." He is so close to each and every one of us that I forget that I am in front of a giant. This great Rabbi, a grand master, refers to himself:

"I am only an educator."

One time, I dared to participate in a Manitou's seminar about a complex subject. I did not understand much. It was way above my level. I tried to check with the others in the seminar if they understood anything, and based on their answers it seemed they weren't in any better shape than I was. Nevertheless I persisted and stayed on until the end.

At the end of the seminar Manitou said to us, "I know, it's not easy, but don't worry: even if you didn't understand everything, your soul got it well."

Wounded from the Holocaust, troubled by doubt, looking for answers, and having guilt around my faith, I nonetheless find peace in Manitou's classes. Often times he raises the topic of the Holocaust but does not offer any explanation.

"It is still too early to understand," he says.

Sometimes the suffering reflects from this devout Jew face, with us, he is looking for the meaning of a hidden word in the sacred text, that offers, even in the current conflict, the hope, the pride, the strength, to always keep one's head up. Although the study of the Bible is a serious matter, it doesn't prevent him from being a very funny man. I don't remember a class without a blast of laughter. His humor is sometimes ferocious and squeaky, and sometimes gentle and witty. Manitou uses the French language in a comic spirit that delighted his audience. In his teaching there's also charm, integrating the past and the present. I could find myself in biblical times and also in present day Israel.

In very small steps and much secrecy, I come closer to our tradition, but knowing is not enough for me. I also want to do. To preserve.

One Friday, I put a white table cloth on the table, I placed Challah bread on a silver tray, a bottle of a kosher wine, and a small plate. The candle sticks have found their regular place on the buffet, and next to them I put a nice bouquet of flowers.

I am about to celebrate my first Sabbath in my house.

The time has come, I light two candles. I take a step back to make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

But what is happening to me?

A thick curtain has just been lifted. I see everything again...

I see mother doing the preparations in the tiny kitchen. Mom that covers her hair. Mom's hands reach to the flames, her eyes are closed.

Why, for the longest time, has my memory betrayed me to the degree of hiding, refusing, rejecting everything that was happiness and celebration with my parents?

Who refused cultivating the memory?

I feel intense rage flooding me. Against myself. Against the whole world. I am so frustrated.

*I delay my story. I snap my bag shut and go out.*

*I can't find the right place for me in the café. I go from place to place. Here, too much sun, there, too much shade, people, noise, too much of too much! Finally I sit in the first place I find. I don't want to think of anything, but to enjoy slowly over an evening coffee. There are many youngsters in the place, for some of them it is there final year in high school, and to get over the stress they gobble an unbelievable amount of ice cream, pizza, cake. These boys and girls are beautiful. They are crazy, unconscious, and reckless. They are young. Soldiers, not much older than them, patrol my neighborhood. It is a crowded area and suicide bomber attacks threaten us again. Such a beautiful day, not a time to die.*

*I show affection to the people I know. Smile to them.*

*Who can guess the turbulence in my soul?*

*The rage has softened. A bit more time is needed to feel gratefulness for the path that was found again, and accept that this time, my memory can be compassionate.*

*I can go back to my writing.*

Now that I've discovered Shabbat, I begin to change my habits. For example, starting Thursday I do grocery shopping for two days, and organize my time to prepare the meals before the Shabbat enters. From the moment the candles are lit, all work has to be stopped.

I admit that the beginnings weren't so successful. I am not always consistent. But the help comes, surprisingly, from Eytan of all people. My husband was always indifferent, if not disdainful, towards religious practice, whatever it is. Now, Eytan embraces this evening of the week as a day that is not like any other day of the week. He is the one who chooses the wine for the blessing. We dress up nicely as if we are about to welcome an important guest...it is out of respect for you, Eytan says. Oh, really? OK, so be it...

And as for me, I am wondrously happy to repeat my mother's movements, for she has not lived enough years to be able to teach them to me.

On a beautiful morning of the year 1974, I look at my round belly. I am pregnant. I am forty years old. There is no limit to my surprise and my happiness. They say that in my age it is risky. But as for me, I am glowing.

I can enjoy the change in mentality, thanks to it I no longer have to hide my belly under an ugly tunic. Nowadays, a future mother shows with beautiful liberty her adorable curves, round from the life that grows inside her. So that I, under the pleasant spring sun, allow my short and light dress to expose and caress my motherhood. Delightful!!!

In the fall, when the trees are colored in red, brown and gold, I deliver into the world our daughter Keren – ray of light. Yoram and Yael have chosen her name.

My last child was born in Jerusalem.

I will leave the maternity ward, with my baby on my heart. I trust the future.

I observe with much delight the growth of Keren.

Now, I would give anything to get pregnant, to give birth again, and to raise again my Yoram and my Yael. I am a new mom, more calm, more accessible, more permissive, and the paradox is that despite my age I am more modern. But my love for my children stays the same love.

I have stopped painting. I have no time left. I am too busy learning to knit, to produce by myself vests, hats and socks for my baby.

My friends gave me leftover wool, in different colors, not necessarily matching. I am embarrassed. I read over and over the knitting instructions, not understanding the terms.

I mix, twist, tangle, get upset and...oh, astonishment! Nameless knitting styles and mixes of laces and colors produce something that leaves me speechless.

Errors of interpretation and inconsistent materials produce an artistic creation.

This is where my new passion and profession are born. In the beginning I knit small models, but with time, I allow myself to drift. The inspiration is consuming, it is born mainly at nighttime. Then, I get up, and in order to not let it escape, I quickly draw on a paper the shape/outline of a dress or a coat. My colors are influenced by the seasons and current events. In order to get them right, I do experiments like with a plate of paints, and use all the materials that are possible to knit with one needle of two, it can be wool, cotton, silk, straps, curly laces, smooth, shiny or matte.

I paint with knitting needles.

The balcony turns into my studio, where the materials I will use to create my projects are piled in straw baskets. I place, with much deserved respect, the finished "creations" in a box, and when it is full with sweaters, coats, hats, bed covers, wedding dresses, and even dolls, I organize an exhibit. However, it is difficult for me to let go of what I've created.

I see my dolls leave and ask myself which hands of a girl will cradle them.

I am happy, but not yet fulfilled.

I have more demands. Study. I have an uncontrollable craving for knowledge.

This is another nice wink of fate, which has sent Eytan to knock on the door of Professor André Neher, for a routine electricity checkup.

I have just purchased the book *The Biblical History of the Israeli People* by André and Renée Neher. It is a wonderful opportunity to go to them to get a dedication, and without letting them know ahead of time, but on the tips of the toes, Eytan and I came to the Nehers.

This meeting will change the course of my existence.

Professor André Neher, a philosopher, a writer, a lecturer, an educator, a Rabbi, who speaks with another as an equal. He has an unforgettable voice, a look and a smile that encourage asking questions. A noble man, who raises you to his level. His wife, Doctor Renée-Rina Neher, teaches Jewish history at the university.

I become her student. She becomes my dear friend.

I remember the first time, at the Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus. I am forty six years old...I am eighteen years old...I have desired this so much!

For four years I study Jewish history with much greediness. I walk between the lecture halls and the classrooms, from the library to the cafeteria, where I love having coffee with my teacher Rina, amid the hustle of the students.

Rina, with her wise advice and dear encouragements, pushes me ahead. I also accept the fact that it is impossible to know everything and that there is no shame in saying:

"I don't know." Now, if I blush, it is from excitement and not because of shame.

I feel comfortable within my new self.

However, every time I feel very happy, a shadow from the Holocaust creeps in.

I cannot experience happiness without hidden bleak feelings. Hasn't André Neher written a book by the name *The Challenging Happiness of being a Jew*?

We are in the end of November, 2002. In my country, the terrorist attacks are many and murderous. Huge headlines in the foreign papers are reporting these attacks and too often, depressing the thoughts of tourism. Nevertheless, during this November, tourists are coming, despite everything, to express love and encouragement for the State of Israel.

There are thousands of Christians. I see these visitors, whom we have not expected, flooding the streets of Jerusalem. They carry on their chests a sign. It is possible to read:

"No to terrorism, yes to tourism." These friends of Israel burden our soldiers, since they are responsible for their safety. To be a friend of the Jews also means to risk one's self.

This brings me again to these women and men, who by risking their lives without asking for anything in return, hid and saved a persecuted Jew. You deserve the medal of "Righteous among Nations" that the State of Israel awards you. But I am afraid that because they

keep silent, many saviors slip from this recognition.

The State of Israel does not recognize Jews that saved the lives of their Jewish brothers and sisters, as “Righteous.” The argument is that they did what they had to do. Nevertheless, I want to talk about the Jewish children that supported those who were younger than them.

*I want to share an event I experienced.*

In 1940, I am six years old. When the German divisions arrive, the French are running away in the roads. It is an exodus. The mayor of the Eleventh Quarter of Paris (my quarter) decides to evacuate from the city – this I learn only later – the children who study in the schools, including me.

If, despite my young age, my memories are so accurate, it is because (it seems to me) of the emotional shock.

I remember the name of the place that I had been at - Château de Coulon. There were many children. I was the youngest. I didn't stop crying and asking for my mom. I remember the huge freezing halls, the wind penetrating through the broken windows, and the long hallways.

It was so huge! So cold! So empty!

I remember mainly the malevolence of those who supervised us; they were supposed to take care of us. For example, the one that was in charge of the food was supposed to help me shower in the evening. A nightmare!

It always started with slapping because I peed in my underpants, and ended with an extremely violent scrubbing – “this will warm you up” the woman said with malice.

I used to leave the room sobbing, but an older girl waited for me behind the door. She used to hug me in her arms to comfort me, and cursed the woman with great nerve.

This “older” girl later had to endure, in front of the supervisors and the principal, the price of her nerve, as she held me tightly behind her back. This girl’s name was Régine.

And she was twelve years old. She did not know me but understood that I was lost without my parents, and wanted to protect me. It required determined rebelliousness and great courage to deal with injustice, stupidity, and malice. Régine also challenged the girls and the boys, especially the boys, as she slapped them.

All this time I was hanging on her dress, which she didn’t like all of the time. To get me off her, she had to shake me hard so I would let go of her dress. But every evening, after dinner in the frozen dining hall, when the other kids were creating dancing circles to get warm, violent Régine would take me on her lap, kiss me, and carry me asleep in her arms to the sleeping hall.

Two years later, I had gone to social services. I have not found again someone like Régine, but I continued thinking of her.

After many years – the year was 1994 – I learned by chance who she was, and I found her. She was Régine Zylberberg, now Régine Choukroun, or simply Régine.<sup>24</sup>

We met again at her house.

I get there two hours ahead of time, escorted by my husband. I wait in a café located on Régine's street, from which I can see her windows. I go back and forth to the toilet, not being able to control my excitement.

I would prefer for Régine to be just anybody. I would knock on her door, throw myself into her arms and hold her tightly. But I have a meeting with a star.

At the designated time I knock slightly on her door. I am greeted by a lovely girl; and three small white dogs, playful, jumping happily around me and licking my hands and face.

The tension melts immediately. What a reception!

Régine has not arrived yet. I am invited to sit on an amazing sofa. I sit on the edge of the sofa and sip with short sips the fruit juice I was given.

I look at the engaging living room.

How to bring back the grim memories from Château de Coulon in this amazing apartment?

I wait. I have a feeling of crossing the Red Sea!!!

Finally, behind my back, I hear: "Hello!"

I get up immediately and Régine is in front of me.

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24 After the war, Régine became a famous public figure (a known singer, and the owner of exclusive night clubs) in France, America and England. (YE)

I don't jump on her, I don't feel I am allowed to do so, but we kiss. Her husband, Roger, who stands beside her, reaches his hand warmly, and immediately, with much simplicity we speak about our lives in Château de Coulon. Régine has more memories than I, more accurate details, and I learn about many things I didn't know.

She says that she never gave into injustice. I look at her. I don't see the star anymore.

I find again the courageous, the proud fighter. She's kept the same rough softness that gave me then so much confidence. Régine says that life has spoiled her, but a shadow crosses her gaze briefly.

Roger listened with much excitement.

Eytan has learned about a part of my life he hadn't known. His presence beside me gave me much joy.

Departing from Régine, I kissed her with warmth.

Coming back to Jerusalem, I went to the Kotel. I have written wishes on small pieces of paper for Régine, which I have added to the thousands of prayers that are kept in the cracks of the stones that time has worn out. As I was leaving, touched from the bottom of my heart, I said, "Master of the universe, allow these little pieces of paper to speak."<sup>25</sup>

This is the only gift of gratitude from me to Régine

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25 The writer mentions here a well-known song of Régine that is called "Let the Little Pieces of Papers Speak" that Serge Gainsbourg, the famous singer had written for her. (YE)

Choukroun, but probably the most powerful. Gainsbourg would have loved this gesture.

January 15<sup>th</sup> 2003. We stand in line to receive gas masks. Will Saddam Husain attack Israel like in 1991?

The nylons, the tape to prepare the sealed room, are back on the stores' shelves. We can't take a risk: we need to be ready, all the while maintaining a routine life.

The shelves in the supermarkets are full, the kids keep going to school, men and women go to work as usual. Some trust our leaders, some trust our army, and some trust their God.

All this creates a sense of collaboration and security.

We have torrential rain today, finally. It doesn't matter if one is optimistic or pessimistic, a believer in God or an atheist, it is agreed that rain in the end of January is a true blessing. I will never hear in Israel the figure of speech, "it is boring like a rainy day."<sup>26</sup> In Israel, it is not boring on a rainy day: huge traffic jams, endless lines at the bus stops, underground drainage flood, turning the roads and the sidewalks into rivers...

We complain, but we are happy. Moreover, tomorrow or the next day the sun will come back and we'll forget the umbrella that could not withstand the stormy wind, the cars that splashed on us, and the apartments that are not warm enough. I wish the water level of the

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26 A common French expression. (YE)

Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) will rise with a few centimeters and mainly, that our soldiers won't suffer from the cold...

March 25<sup>th</sup> 2003. Spring has arrived...nevertheless; snow is falling down on Jerusalem. The wind is whistling, and my beautiful pine tree is going wild. It bows its head, loses its balance, and straightens up roughly to bend the other way, it almost breaks.

I don't feel like going out. Anyways, it is uncomfortable to be bundled with a coat, hold an umbrella in one hand, and a handbag in the other, and on the shoulder a gas mask that you need to carry everywhere you go.

It is a week now that war is rampant in Iraq. Although they say we are not involved with this war (they claimed the same in regards of the first Gulf War, and nevertheless...), the murderous craze of Saddam Husain hovers over Israel. Israel is threatened, Israel is humiliated, Israel is always with the bad guys, the others are the good guys. We have cable TV and receive broadcasts from three French channels. I see the protestors who are "in love with peace" spit their hatred towards the Jews, beating up Jews. This horrific beast hid underground and it shows up again.

France, sweet France, **respond!**

The war in Iraq is over. We have taken the tape and nylons off the windows, and opened widely the window

of the sealed room. The gas masks went back to the closet, and a big crowd is flooding the food stores; the reason is not to accumulate food for war time, but rather, for the celebration of Passover that is coming soon. Passover, Exodus out of Egypt, the end of slavery for the Jewish people, and the return to their land. I am extremely fortunate to be living the reunion of all these Jews who were displaced and replaced, who had never stopped shifting history and their own history.

Today, I am not writing in front of my beautiful pine tree. Shielded by an umbrella, I look at the sea, the immensity, the infinity. We are in the month of May, 2003, Independence Day. Israel is 55 years old; an old people in a young country over an ancient land. I am happy. I am infinitely happy. I close my eyes, and allow the images to pass, from the small church at Saint-Amand-en-Puisaye to the Kotel, from social services to Jerusalem, Jerusalem where our seven grandchildren have been born.

Our daughter Yael and her husband Arni were the first to make us grandparents by our grandchild Roi and our twin grandchildren Shirly and Gali. Our son Yoram and his wife Shula gave us Maya, Inbal, Eran and Hila.

Our daughter Keren awaits her prince charming.

Friday, June 20th 2003.

The consistent relaxing buzz of the El-Al airplane engines has allowed the passengers of the night flight to

sink into trusting sleep.

I get up to take a few steps in the aisle. I can't sleep. I look at the children who are deep asleep in their dad's or mom's arms. There is nothing more beautiful.

I go back to my seat and lay my head on Eytan's shoulder. Without waking up, he enfolds me in his arms. In an hour we will land at Orly airport in France. Through the window, a dark night. Maybe it's time to prepare my speech. A crucially important speech. But my head is empty. I mustn't fall asleep. I fight it, fight... when I hear Eytan saying:

"My darling, wake up and buckle your seat belt."

I probably fell asleep for a few moments, enough to have a strange dream. Aunt Rivké did not die in Auschwitz; she is in prison, sentenced for life. I am getting ready to go and visit her, all excited to see her after sixty years, and I promise myself to go on visiting her every month for the rest of my life.

I didn't have enough time to see aunt Rivké, Eytan woke me up to early.

Nevertheless, the dream is totally strange.

From afar, I already notice the little lights. It is very dark although it is six o'clock in the morning and it is the month of June. Finally I see the roads lit by the cars' lights. It is impressive to see from above these long stripes that the cars are gliding on quietly.

I imagine to myself the people who are going to work.  
I am going to a ceremony.

I am anxious and tense. I know that what is yet to come will hurt. I hope to withstand the mission. Aunt Rivké, stay beside me!

It is June 21st 2003, eleven thirty in the morning.

The school yard at 1 Pihet Street, Paris, in the eleventh quarter, is already packed with people. Today is not like any other day.

Today, the school is honoring the memory of forty six Jewish children, from first to seventh grade, who one day did not respond to the calling of their name.

These children were murdered in Auschwitz between the years 1942-1944.

It is very warm on this Saturday of June 21st 2003 in Paris. The school children of 1 Pihet Street are six to twelve years old. With serious faces, they sit quietly on the benches. They know what they need to do and why. They are white, black, Chinese, Arab, they are full of life in such a wonderful way. There are no places to sit left in the school yard, and people keep coming. They gather in front of the gate and in the street.

Policemen are guarding.

Behind the table, with the microphone, stand the Mayor of the Eleventh Quarter, the Vice Mayor of Paris, Parliament members (all covered with the French tri-colored scarves), the representatives of the deportees to the death camps, representatives of the resistance

movement, organizers from the organization of commemorating the Jewish children from the Eleventh Quarter who were deported to the death camps, the principal of the Pihet Street school.

And me...

I have come from my beautiful city, Jerusalem, to speak about Eliane Sztajnberg, my little cousin, who was arrested in school. It was also my school.

At the conclusion of the dignitaries' speeches – I will not forget the speech of the young principal, Madame Trébon, who speaks to her young students, her dear children, choking with a cry – I am asked to read the name of each child who was murdered. Next to me, a little seven-year-old boy, reads their age: four, five, and six...**unbearable**. Following the reading of each name, a young student adds a flower over a bouquet on the ground.

My voice breaks when I read the name of Eliane. "Six years old," says the young boy.

A young girl puts a flower. One flower. For Eliane.

Each child is a flower. Each one has a name that was given to them by their mom and dad, I was thinking to myself for a moment.

It is very warm. An emotional burden lies over the crowd. They signal me. I will speak, I will tell. I am standing alone in front of the microphone. I am no longer scared.

In the audience, I know my cousins, nephews, my sister Nicole, and my husband Eytan, and also Fanny

his sister, they are all there.

But I don't see anyone.

I am by myself with Eliane. I hear my voice, and cannot recognize it. It is carried over the walls of the school, spreads into the streets of my quarter. People stand in the windows, they hear.

Eliane lives again. Eliane glows. Eliane complains. Eliane fools around. Eliane is in kindergarten...up until the day when a French policeman came to take her from her classroom.

Eliane, trusting, gave him her hand. In the school records, it is written:

"Eliane *Sztajnberg*, arrested in school, left our institution permanently in January 1943."

Monsieur policeman, how many little "Elianes" did you take in your hand to send to Drancy camp, a transition on the way to Auschwitz?

How could you do it?

My speech is over. Hardly ten minutes have passed. The silence is heavy. Nobody moves from their seats. Some cry. The children don't deflect their eyes from me. Their faces are serious.

I don't want to leave them. Not like that. So I ask them to remember in their memory the image of a young smiling child who leaves school and holds a big red balloon in her hand.

That was the last gift she received from school for her last Christmas, in the year 1943.

Her name was Eliane Sztajnberg.

Nobody is left when I decide to leave the place. I give one last look at my school. I get lost in my thoughts. On the walls of my quarter, still pasted with the announcements regarding the ceremony, with the pictures of the children who perished – not all the pictures were found and for them only the names were read. Over the same walls, sixty years ago, I read the laws that forbid Jewish children from entering the playgrounds, and the ones that instructed us to carry the yellow patch from the age of six.

I gratefully thank the ones that are responsible for the organization of commemorating the Jewish children who were deported to the death camps – AMEJD.<sup>27</sup>

I know the obsession of these men and women to not let go, so that not even one child, not even one infant, will be forgotten. Not letting go, they dig in the schools' records, and reveal the first and last names of the ones whose arrival to the world was wanted to be erased. These names appear now in the schools in Paris where the children studied. In a few playgrounds you can read the names of babies that perished.

*Jerusalem. I sit again at my desk. Peace. Finally.*

*The month of August is particularly warm, but a light breeze arrives and lifts my last white page. My*

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27 Association pour la Mémoire des Enfants Juifs Déportés (Association for the Memory of Jewish Children Deported) (YE)

*beautiful pine tree winks at me. It sways slightly with elegance. Amid the tangle of its branches, tens of birds squeak making a lot of noise. Some of them are braver, come to my window sill, maybe telling me in bird language: "Come on, the word 'End,' how long will it take?"*

*The idea to write my story did not come from me. The beginnings were hard. Sometimes, they weren't even realistic. All of the excuses were good to get away from my desk and postpone what needed to be done. For example, to check that everything is in order around me, to prepare food, not to accumulate delays in laundry, in sewing, to make some phone calls...*

*Then, and only then, had I allowed myself to sit, with sharpened pencils, eraser and sharpener organized. It took a while until I noticed that without paying attention, the doors of my memory opened up, and that the writing attracts me.*

*Now that the word "End" gets closer, and my book became a friend, I feel sad to say good bye to it. True, I have used words that pained me, and at the beginning I couldn't have imagined that Eliane, my little cousin, would become the conclusion. The circle has closed but it does not end my grief.*

*"To end the grief"- these stories have to do with mental health. Is it possible that one day I will not mourn anymore over my loved ones who were murdered?*

*Never.*

*Tonight I haven't slept. Maybe because of the full moon. Dawn has not yet risen. And I am already standing at my window. It is pleasant outside. A few shy chirps escape from my beautiful pine tree. I notice the turns and slopes of the mountain. It looks like peace, but yesterday evil hit. Fifteen were killed, fifteen whose lives were shattered prematurely. The twenty year old young woman who was supposed to get married the next day, will not wear her white dress. The newborn whose mother still nursed him became an orphan.*

*Today is a different day. In an unexplainable way, in Israel, the person who believes in God as well as the atheist have the same beliefs: to make peace with Ishmael.*

*I, too, cultivate this dream for Israel, my country that I love with all my soul.*

*Today, September 11th 2003.*

*It is five-thirty in the morning.*

*Jerusalem.*

*I want to light the dawn by praising Psalms for the morning. And I read Psalm 57, Verse 9.*

*End*

# Epilogue

## *In memory of Eliane*

Eliane was my little cousin. She did not have the fortune of living beyond the age of kindergarten. She hadn't yet turned six when the French police entered the school to arrest her and send her to Drancy, a transition station on the way to Auschwitz. It was 1943.

Forgetful France almost succeeded to detach itself from the memory of these Jewish-French children, I could have said its sons and daughters, who studied in the Republic Schools, and one day, did not reply to the calling of their names.

They were exiled. Let us say: they were sent to their deaths.

Too often, there was not even one family member left to express or commemorate their names. I have asked myself, who will remember Eliane after me? One day, I learned about the existence of the organization of commemorating the Jewish children who were sent to death camps (AMEJD). Immediately I contact the president,

Hanna Kamieniecki. I speak with her about Eliane and send her the documents that I have.

From this moment on, begins a constant correspondence of letters, faxes, and phone calls. For months.

### **They cannot find Eliane...**

I am desperate.

One day I am visited by Saby Soulam, one of the active members of the organization. He assures me that all the volunteers, who are looking for each child that is lost, are persistent and stubborn, so that no child is forgotten. He speaks to me about the organization, about the challenges he faces with the principals of the schools that are not thrilled to speak about the past with their students. Others, however, will do anything to help.

I regain hope, and the phone calls with Hanna continue. Eventually, her voice becomes familiar, encouraging, and necessary to me.

“Don’t worry,” Hanna says to me, “the ceremony will not take place without Eliane.”

Hanna recruits her whole team to track Eliane in one of the schools of Eleventh Quarter. Obsessively, these men and women will dig, search, go forward and backward to find, eventually, in the elementary school at La Folie Méricourt Street, a dusty attendance notebook. They read there the name and date of birth of Eliane Sztajnberg Entering kindergarten, October 1940

Leaving kindergarten, December 1942.

Next to these was written the detested detail that corrupted the face of France:

**Was arrested in school.**

She was a tiny girl. Not even six years old.

Hanna Kamieniecki sent me a copy of the school's records with- unbelievable, unbelievable- a picture that was just found.

The daughter of the elementary school principal from 1942 found out about the search for Eliane. She remembered the picture, the one and only that her mother had saved. It is a picture of her students at that time. Maybe these were tracks to find them?

And this is what happened. Proof. A horrible proof.

Eliane is seen there without her apron. The teacher, Madame Jeanne Boutier used to ask the little children who wear the yellow patch on their clothes to take off their aprons before entering the classroom.

Eliane didn't yet reach the age of wearing the patch. Only now we learn that the Jewish children could be subjected to Vichy laws, even before they turned six.

The daughter of Madame Boutier, Eliane's teacher, gave the picture to the organization.

Now it is possible to set a date for the ceremony.

**Saturday, June 21, 2003.**

Excitedly, I enter the school on 1 Pihet Street, the Eleventh Quarter. A big crowd is already present. My

sister, Nicole, arrived before me (she didn't have a chance to know Eliane).

We fall in each other's arms. I meet my sister-in-law, my cousins, my nephews, and friends.

Hanna and her staff of volunteers are there as well. They will become my friends, and Hanna will become my big sister.

Hanna, a former resistance member, organizer, and educator, prepared these students age's six to twelve over the past few weeks. She entered every classroom to explain something which is not comprehensible and to answer naïve questions.

When I arrive, the children already know who I am, where I came from, and who Eliane is. A young boy, about eight years old, comes closer to me: "I know your name is Ariela. If it is too hard, I will be beside you and help you."

I kiss him with all my heart.

Now, the yard is too small to contain the whole crowd. There are no seats left and people stand at the gate of the school and on the sidewalk. The students of the school go to their places and wait quietly. Each one of them knows what they have to do. Their faces are serious. They ask me to stay next to them. My eyes look for Eytan, my husband. I don't see him but I know he's close to me. I know what he feels. For the first time he will hear me speaking to an audience. It will be short. They've asked me not to go over ten minutes.

I didn't prepare a paper. I will not be reading. I have

thought of Eliane for so many years. I will let the words burst out. They will come from the heart. They will be right.

But, God, I am so scared!

Hanna Kamieniecki opens the ceremony. Following her, the principal of the school addresses the parents and her students, her dear students; her voice chokes with restrained crying. Now, an adult reads a first name and last name. A child reads the age, and another places a flower.

We hear forty six names. Forty six little victims, who used to be students in this school.

Please let my nerves handle this.

It's my turn. In this month of June in the year 2003, the heat is suffocating.

In front of me students, parents, friends, and family. Behind me, with a three colored scarf, the mayor of the Eleventh Quarter, the Deputy Mayor of Paris, and members of the parliament.

At attention and in the front of their flag were the representatives of the people who were deported, the people who belonged to the resistance movement, superintendents from the academy and the national education, and teachers.

Where did the little boy who offered me his help go?

I come closer to the microphone. Not too close. I am

afraid that they will hear my strong and irregular heartbeats. I gulp a big inhalation of warm air.

And at this moment, I hear that my voice echoes far from me; it bursts through the walls of the school and spreads to the streets of the quarter where I was born, where Eliane was born.

Eliane, listen.

My name is Ariela Palacz and I have come from Israel to speak to you about my little cousin, Eliane. I am very nervous. But when I look at the children, when I see all of you, I know you will give me courage.

Eliane was born at 10 La Folie Méricourt Street. She stayed at this address until the end. We, my parents, my brothers and sister, lived in Pasteur Street, very close by. Eliane's mother, Rivké, was my mother's younger sister. They loved each other very much. When Eliane's father was a captive at war, Eliane was three years old. She used to come to our house so she didn't have to stay by herself. You could say Eliane grew up with us.

I must say that this girl, who constantly each and every day came to us, had upset us, we the kids, a little. Aunt Rivké, who adored her daughter, was watching closely so that none of us could offend or hurt her. Mom used to say: "You have to be nice to Eliane, you have to

be patient. She doesn't have a dad."

I was jealous of her. Furthermore, Eliane was very beautiful; her hair was golden and curly. When she would walk in the street, people turned around to look at her. I really envied her.

One night, two women arrived at our house. They took my little brother, my little sister and me. They put us in the social services, which is now called DDASS<sup>28</sup>. They separated us immediately, and informed me that I was abandoned.

I did not understand. I did not understand that it was meant to hide us, to save us... So I believed that Eliane took my house, took my place.

I hated her.

Perhaps I wasn't totally guilty because I was very young.

For three and a half years, I remained without my parents, my brothers and my sister. Three and a half years is a long time.

After three and a half years, Dad searched and found me. And I asked, "Where is Eliane?"

They told me, "Aunt Rivké and Eliane were deported."

I did not understand what did the word "deported" meant, I didn't know this word. So I asked, "But she'll come back?"

And I waited, and waited... finally I understood.

I understood that I will never see Eliane again. I

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28 Direction Départementale de l'Action Sanitaire et Sociale (Departmental Directorate of Health and Social Services) (YE)

felt responsible for her death. Maybe I didn't love her enough? Maybe it's my fault? And I swore to myself that I will never forget her.

I remember.

Christmas 1941. We are still all together. The eve of the break, the kindergarten children come out with a gift in their hands, Eliane got a jumping rope. Aunt Rivké might be thinking it is too simple of a gift for her daughter. She's very angry. She enters the Principal's office and says, "I am the wife of a war prisoner. I can afford to give my daughter a bigger present."

That's the reason she returns the jumping rope.

After Christmas vacation, I go with Aunt Rivké to pick up Eliane from kindergarten. The children come out slowly. And from far, I see Eliane. She has a big smile on her lips. She holds a big red balloon.

I see again this little girl, so happy...

As you heard, the policemen entered the school. They arrested Eliane.

Eliane left France from Drancy camp, in the month of February, 1943. I assume it was very cold in February. I think Aunt Rivké, who was so scared for the safety of her daughter, dressed her with a thick coat. She must have lifted her collar, and buttoned it well, so that during the course of the ride Eliane would not get a cold. This is what I imagine to myself.

The destination of the ride was still unknown. But knowing Aunt Rivké, I am sure she said to herself: It

doesn't matter where will I be, I will defend my daughter like a lioness.

Aunt Rivké and Eliane entered Auschwitz.

I ask myself: When did aunt Rivké realize that it was over? That that was the end. And what did she do?

I imagine to myself.

She took her daughter in her arms, she hugged her very tightly. Maybe she sang a lullaby to her in Yiddish, that beautiful language? Since the ride took a long time- three days- maybe Eliane fell asleep? Maybe she didn't understand that she's turning into an angel?

Her father, Uncle Bernard, came back from captivity after the war. When he arrived home he was crazy with happiness to see his daughter and his wife again. But the guard of the building said to him, "Monsieur Sztajnberg, don't go up to your apartment. Nobody is left."

I know we will leave soon. Each one of us will go back to our homes. I go back to my beautiful city, Jerusalem. But before we say good bye, I would like us to cherish a beautiful image in our memories, the image of a happy little girl.

She leaves her classroom holding a big red balloon in her hand.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Paris, June 21, 2003.



My grandfathers and their children in Poland. My mother is on the right. From all subjects in the picture, only one survivor will remain after the Holocaust. Most of them perished in Treblinka



My parents



Me in my father's arms



With the wheelbarrow



All the family together for the last time – at the Chelles: Assis. My father with Claude, in the first row Aunt Rebecca, my mother with Nicole in her arms, Charlotte, Janet and Annette Fajgenbaum in the second row, Uncle Sztajnberg with Elian in his arms, Uncle Avrum and Aunt Handel Fajgenbaum with Jean in her arms



Isaac, my big brother, after the war



1940

I was evacuated from Paris  
to Chateau de Coulon



I find my "protector" from Chateau de Coulon again, the singer Regine

1942

Claude, Nicole and I (obviously,  
the picture was taken at the  
beginning of the year)

At the DDASS organization  
before the separation of the  
three children





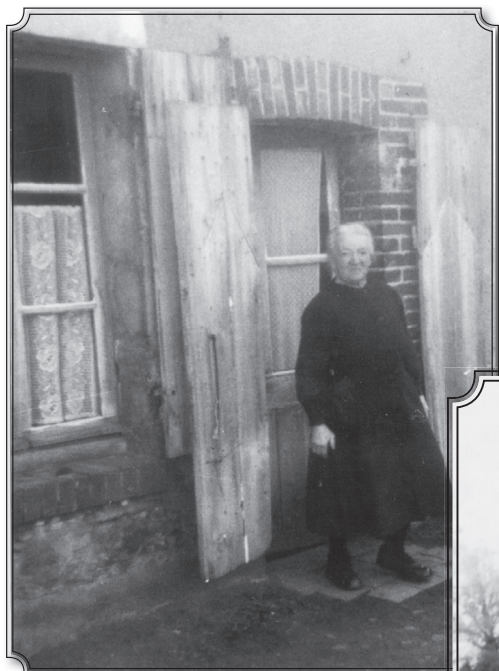
At St. Amand school - Photographed on a postcard from 1904 that was accidentally found in one of the markets. Nothing has changed



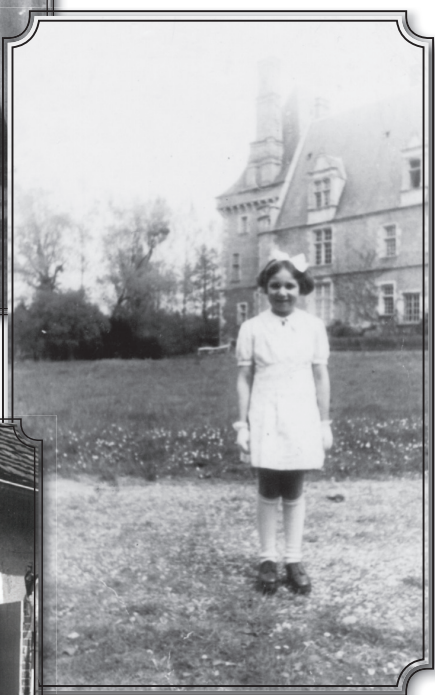
Miss Brisset, Principal of St. Amand school



Me - on the steps of the school, many years later



Mémère at the front of her house



Me on Mémère's niece's wedding day;  
Fall 1943 or Spring 1944



Me - at the front of the house



Ethan (Henry) and I (Paulette) on our wedding day, on 4 May 1954



Our three children:

Yoram and Yael photographed in Paris

Keren Born in Israel



I'm with my grandchildren





Me talking about my cousin Eliane at the ceremony while handing the sign at my school



Eliane, my cousin, was arrested in her classroom by a French policeman. Although theoretically she had immunity due to her father being a POW