SURVIVAL

MEMOIR OF A FORCED LABOURER IN THE THIRD REICH

GEORGE BEESTON

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Disclaimer: Every effort has been made to verify names and dates in the manuscript, as well as photographic sources, but this has not always been possible.

Production: Scott Wilson

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Foreword

The compilation of George Beeston's memoir and the transformation of it to an appropriate format for publication, initially proposed as a book and recently for issue on the internet, has been a long and complex operation. Those most closely involved in the project explain below how it came about, with background about George's family and the objectives in its publication.

As a committee member of the Brussels Branch of the Royal British Legion (RBL), I met members of George's family at an event for military organisations held by the UK Embassy in Belgium in 2012. They told me that George wished to have his written record of his experiences in the Second World War made available to the public.

His situation at the outbreak of the war was unusual to say the least. Born in Australia, George was the son of a British father, Norman Willingham Beeston, originally from Southport in what was then Lancashire, and a

Belgian mother, Marie Sophie Monsieur, from Overmere in East Flanders. His parents met towards the end of the First World War when Norman was serving with the British Army in Belgium.

The couple emigrated and were living in Hamilton, New South Wales, when Marie had George on 27 October 1920. They did not stay long, moving back to Belgium and settling in Charleroi, where Norman found a job as a steelworker. George was soon joined by two younger brothers, Joe, born in January 1922, and Newton, born in October 1923.

The boys grew up multilingual, speaking English, French and Dutch. This proved to be a great advantage to George, especially during his war-time experiences, as his knowledge of Dutch greatly assisted him in learning German.

His aptitude for languages also proved very useful to the Allied forces at the end of the war. George later joined the British Army, serving for many years in the Royal Engineers from 1947. He was stationed in Britain, Germany, Malta and Christmas Island in the Indian

Ocean, before ending his military career at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) in Mons. He then worked as a civil engineer for Beecham Belgium until retiring.

George wrote his wartime memoir in 2000 and completed an electronic version, patiently tapping away with two fingers on his computer, in 2006. It was some years later that I heard about his story and told him that the Brussels branch of the RBL might be interested in publishing his memoir.

He sent me the manuscript in mid-January 2012, accompanied by a handwritten letter in which he wrote: “Sorry for the few mistakes in the text since I am a beginner with the PC and an autodidact in English. At home we spoke English but my schooling was in French. Wishing you a good reading.”

Less than five months after sending me the typescript, George contracted pneumonia and passed away on 4 June 2012, aged 92.

On first reading his account I was convinced that such a record of courage, in the face of extreme deprivation and violence, should not be forgotten. Thanks to text recognition software, I was able to transform his manuscript into a digital version.

A fellow branch member, the late Simon Robbins, gave the text an initial edit. However, our publication plans were put on indefinite hold in 2016 due to various questions that arose when contact was lost with the Beeston family.

Happily, in late 2025 our Brussels branch Chair Dennis Abbott was able to track down George's son, John. He authorised this publication and helped fill in a few gaps in his father's story. Dennis has thoroughly edited the text anew after discovering additional sections of the memoir and I'm delighted that, with the help of our branch webmaster, Scott Wilson, we have been able to produce the text in an e-publishing format.

I find it greatly rewarding that at last George's story will be told, as he intended. I am very grateful to the

aforementioned branch members, as well as Jean-Pierre Pede and Michael Whitburn for their encouragement.

This book is dedicated to the memory of George Beeston's family and friends.

Colin Puplett

What you are about to read is a truly remarkable account of survival against the odds. It is also a rare historical testimony, documenting the brutal experience of forced labourers, whose plight is often overlooked in accounts from the Second World War.

George Beeston was 19, living in Charleroi when the German Army swept through Belgium in May 1940. Within days he was on his way to France, determined to fight. Hopes he could make it across the Channel were dashed and George enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. Deserted by their officers, his unit was forced to surrender and George was fortunate to avoid being shot as a suspected partisan. After a long forced march through eastern France, he was held in a POW camp and

interrogated at length due to his Australian background. He escaped with false papers and made it back to Belgium in September 1940.

His father was arrested as an enemy alien and sent to an internment camp in Silesia in March 1941. George took what jobs he could to keep the family going, including a spell in Abbeville with his brother Joe after they were tricked into signing a sham contract and had their identity cards confiscated. After escaping home George thought he was finally safe but, in December 1942, he was sent to work as a forced labourer at a Siemens-Schuckertwerke plant in Nuremberg, leaving behind his mother, brothers and young fiancée Yvonne.

George suffered harsh treatment, witnessed horrific sights and was extremely lucky to survive. In the dangerous final weeks of the war, he twice went on the run. Liberated by the Americans, he acted as an interpreter during the round-up of German officers and SS. He returned to Belgium in June 1945.

When Colin Puplett first showed me George's account of his wartime experiences, I was also determined we

should publish it. I discovered additional sections of his memoir after tracing a German historian, Gerhard Jochem, who had met George and recorded part of his story on his website, rijo-research.de.

George's wife Yvonne pre-deceased him but Gerhard had an email address for their grandson Anthony, who had sadly died of cancer in November 2022, aged only 53. However, through the address, I reached his widow Cathy who put me in touch George's only son, John, who had returned to Charleroi after a globe-trotting career as a sales director.

John, 79 at the time of writing, patiently replied to my many questions, especially regarding George's family and life after the war. His father, whom he said always regarded himself as "Australo-British", often told him how fortunate he was to survive when so many did not.

As you will discover in the pages that follow, although George certainly had a helping hand from 'lady luck', he was a determined character, who could always be relied on to stand up and be counted in dangerous situations. With a mix of charm and daring, sometimes bordering

on the reckless, as well as his born gift for languages, he proved adept at talking himself and his friends out of trouble time and again.

If he ever learnt the proverb that discretion is the better part of valour, George seemingly found little use for it. His sheer resourcefulness undoubtedly saved his life on more than one occasion.

“It’s true that my father could always do lots of things. He was a soldier, an engineer, a carpenter, bricklayer, electrician, draughtsman and teacher. Above all, he was intelligent and very, very kind,” his son John proudly told me.

I am very grateful to my wife Laura Houlgatte for proof-reading the edited text.

And as George put it, wishing you a good reading. We will remember him.

Dennis Abbott, Co-editor

In editing these memoirs, I have striven to maintain the author’s informal, colloquial style. Although I made

changes, the great majority were to ensure that ambiguities were removed and avoid the reader having to re-read a sentence or paragraph. I deeply regret that the author passed away before I could meet him and consult him on the few areas where residual doubts troubled me. I trust that readers will find the account as absorbing and riveting as I did, even though ‘enjoyable’ would hardly be an appropriate description, given the nature of the subject.

Simon Robbins, Co-editor

Chapter 1
Invasion of Belgium and France

Don’t panic

On 8 May 1940 a friend who was serving in the Belgian Army told me that the Nazis were massing troops on the Belgian and Dutch borders, and that there was a real possibility that war was inevitable.

At first the news did not trouble me, but only until the night of 9 May. I was on night shift in the laboratory of a chemical plant where I was employed in Charleroi. It must have been about 5 o'clock in the morning when I heard the rumbling sound of aircraft flying low overhead. I rushed outside, remembering my friend’s warning. Many of my colleagues were already in the factory yard and looking up into the clear morning sky. I stood with them gazing at the planes flying low over the town in a westward direction. They were so low that the crosses on the fuselages of the planes could be plainly seen. Soon they were seen disappearing over the factory

buildings. For a very short time all went quiet again then suddenly the sound coming from Gosselies left us without a doubt that they were bombing the airfield and its workshop buildings.

The bombs were still exploding when the bombers returned from their mission of death and destruction, flying east towards Germany to replenish fuel tanks and bomb-bays ready for another deadly mission.

At exactly that moment the advance formation of the Wehrmacht had started crossing the Belgian and Dutch borders. The treacherous aggression was launched without any ultimatum. Almost immediately, the economic and industrial life of the two countries came to a halt on 10 May.

On the first day of the aggression my father had gone to the British consulate in Charleroi, where the Consul told him not to worry as the German army would be halted at the border. The invasion did not falter, however. Liège had fallen and the Wehrmacht was advancing west.

On the second day my father returned to the Consulate and was told not to be defeatist or panic. On the third day, during another visit to seek information and advice from the King's representative, it transpired that the office had been vacated and that the Consul had panicked and left for England, which he reached safely. The Commonwealth families left behind were caught in the turmoil and the heads of family would spend the rest of the war behind barbed wire. The German Army entered Charleroi on the sixth day of the invasion.

On 13 May all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 to 35 were ordered to report to Charleroi railway station, where they were to board a train convoy which would take them to Ypres. With my two brothers, Newton and Joe, and some friends, we arrived at the station at about 7 o'clock in the evening. The convoy, made up of open goods wagons, did not leave the station until about midnight, the delay being caused by an air-raid. Much damage was done to the station, but fortunately our convoy was spared. Throughout the raid, our sole

protection was to crouch or lie flat on the wooden floors of the open wagons.

The weather was unusually warm for the time of the year, which was a godsend as evacuees were to spend many days in the open. The convoy entered Ypres station in the early hours of the morning. En route we saw British ‘Tommies’ digging in, their spirits clear as most of them gave us the thumbs-up.

One might wonder why we had to report to Ypres. I came to the conclusion that, for many military strategists, this war would be conducted in the same way as it had in the First World War. Thus, as had been the case in the previous conflict, Ypres should be a reasonably safe town, at least for a time.

We remained in Ypres for one day. In the afternoon we were told to make our way on foot to Poperinge, a stone’s throw from the Belgian-French border. The multitude of young evacuees took to the road in the direction of the small town, the sun beating down on us. The long march soon began to leave its mark on some of

the more sedentary, for thirst and even hunger were making it painful.

The long column arrived in Poperinge station to be told that the French had closed the border as a precaution against possible infiltration by enemy agents. We were, however, allowed to take our places in the passenger train waiting at one of the platforms. We took a well-deserved rest in the comfortable first-class seats. This blissful interlude was brought to a close by the rattling of tins. Red Cross volunteers had boarded the train and were offering bread, cheese and warm coffee. Hunger and thirst satisfied, weariness took over, and the unpredictable outcome of our future was blotted out by deep slumber. The bliss did not last long as sudden movements of the carriage brought me to my senses. Peering through the window, I was relieved to see that we were passing through the French customs area.

Convoy to France

Daylight broke. We were speeding through vast, agricultural land and there was no doubt that we were in the low country of France – but would it mean safety?

From the convoy, Tommies could be seen digging trenches down the embankments as part of a defensive line, but how futile it would be. The West had not yet realised, or maybe preferred not to admit, that while it was pleading for peace in Europe, the Nazi clique hungry for power and domination were producing arms and materials for war, and that their training was focused on occupation and the elimination of those they called *Die Untermenschen*, the Nazi term for races they deemed as sub-human.

After a short journey the convoy pulled up in Dunkirk railway station, the town and its area still untroubled, the enemy being miles to the north in Holland and Belgium, and still on the other side of the Maginot Line in the west. The convoy did not stop for long. There was just enough time for the Red Cross, which had installed long tables on the station platforms, to invite the evacuees to

collect a French baguette, a camembert cheese and mug of warm coffee.

After Dunkirk the train sped on, following the coastline to Calais, which we also left without delay, again following the coast to Boulogne, from where the train continued in the direction of Dieppe. It then took an eastward direction, rumbling through the rich, fertile Seine Maritime region. It was night when the convoy reached Rouen.

We left the station on foot and, in the semi-darkness of the blackout, I noticed that we were being escorted by French troopers shouldering rifles with fixed bayonets which dated from the First World War. It did not take long to reach a large red building surrounded by high brick walls. The long column of exhausted Belgian refugees entered the compound through a large double door, which was closed and bolted after the last man had passed through. We assembled on what looked like a barrack square, and indeed we were in Rouen's army barracks.

Benevolent civilians took over where the French police had left off, and in groups of several hundred we were led into empty barrack rooms. Straw palliasses had been laid in neat rows on the concrete floor, and we were told to find ourselves a spot. We were then led to a large room which must have been used as a dining room, but it was now bare except for a long row of tables lining one side. Civilian volunteers were waiting to serve us some thick broth which one might call soup, with a traditional French baguette. It was hardly the time of the day to serve soup, but to our craving stomachs it was the most delicious feast we had had for a long time.

The rest of the day was spent wandering round the large barracks and queuing for meals. That night we had our first good night's sleep, although it was only on a straw palliasse. The next morning, after a frugal breakfast, I decided to find a way out of the barracks and go sightseeing in Rouen with a few others. The first part of our exploration took us to the main entrance of the barracks, only to find to our dismay that it was guarded by a sentry, who told us that he was there to stop us

leaving. It was only a momentary drawback, as we carried on our search for a way out. We finally came across a small door, which was locked and secure. This did not deter us. With the help of a couple more Belgians who had joined us, we set about pulling the door down and, once it was off its hinges, we fanned out through the streets of Rouen.

The city showed some signs of what was happening in the North, and several shops had already closed. We did, however, find a restaurant serving meals and, lured by the menu card displayed near the entrance door, we decided to spend some of our survival money on a slap-up meal. When we left the restaurant our stomachs were full, but our wallets pitifully flat. Next, we entered a grocery store where we bought some tinned food which we could keep for a day.

I was astonished how the cost of food had risen. Many were taking advantage of the predicament others found themselves in to increase the price of the most-needed goods. We had just been the victims of the business, or should I say racket, which was to become known as the

Black Market. It started with the beginning of the real war on 10 May 1940; prior to then the French had called the war *la drôle de guerre*, or phoney war. The racket thrived throughout the war, making some extremely rich, others very poor. For the racketeers it was a period of bonanza, for others it meant privation, misery and death in horrible circumstances.

Discouraging signs

The day was still young when we decided to return to what was our temporary home. As we neared the small door, we saw a mob of young men blocking it. Their identity documents were being checked by a French soldier who was guarding the passage. When it came to my turn, the soldier spotted my place of birth in Australia and asked why my brothers and I did not try to make for England. He went even further and explained where to find a British unit which was also billeted in the barracks. I decided to give it a try. Maybe the unit would not be too busy with the progress of the war to give our request consideration. It took some time to find its location. It was an infantry regiment although I don't

remember the name. At the entrance a Tommy was on guard duty, smartly turned out in full battle order, quite different from the French soldiers we had seen.

I approached him with deference. We felt as if we were already in England and, in a tone which must have been almost a whisper, I asked if there was a possibility of being evacuated. The answer from the soldier came as a cold shower on our aspirations. In a fatherly intonation, despite being about my age, he advised us to go to the South of France until the end of the war. He was, it seemed, full of confidence as to the outcome. Looking back, I wonder how the lad fared throughout the coming difficult months and years. I had made a mistake when I put my question to a trooper, for even though he was trying to be helpful I should have asked to see an officer. But there you are, you make one mistake and it changes one's whole life.

We went back to our straw palliasses, feeling for the first time somewhat discouraged. We had not long returned to our room after the evening meal when a squad of French soldiers entered and went straight over to a group of

Dutch lads. They ordered them to pick up their belongings and follow them, disappearing though the door. The Dutch lads returned after a long absence, looking somewhat bewildered and I decided to find out why. I was able to speak to one of them, being fluent in Flemish which is very similar to Dutch. I had learned the language from my mother's parents and English from my father, a British soldier in the last war who had met my mother in Belgium, all rather complicated.

One of the lads told me that they had been mistaken for German infiltrators. The French volunteers who served the meals had mistaken their language for German and reported them. The interrogation, he said, was brutal and lasted quite a long time. It had taken the intervention of a Dutch official to clear them.

The next day we were awakened in the early hours of the morning and told to assemble on the barrack square. We gathered up our meagre belongings. One young man had not moved from his palliasse and I went over to where he was lying. I bent down to shake and wake him and then realised that he was dead. Several empty wine

bottles, strewn on the concrete floor next to him, left no doubt that he had succumbed to an overdose of alcoholic beverage and had passed away in his sleep. The body was left in the large room.

We were marched to the railway station where we boarded passenger carriages. As the train left the station I noticed that the morning sun was rising over the horizon behind the convoy, and I deduced that we were travelling west towards the French coast and its harbours. The train had not been moving long when it started slowing to walking pace. Looking through the window, I saw the shattered remains of what had been the carriages of a train, the railway having been cleared to allow oncoming rail traffic through.

As the train moved along slowly through the wreckage area, I saw French soldiers involved in the macabre undertaking of recovering from the debris the mangled remains of young Belgian and maybe Dutch evacuees bound for the uncertain safety of southern France. I found out later that the train had been hit by Stuka dive-bombers in a murderous air-raid by the Luftwaffe.

The morning evacuation of the Rouen army barracks was carried out in a hurry, so there had been no distribution of meals for the day. In the afternoon the rail convoy stopped in a small village where a number of evacuees, including my two brothers, decided to search for a grocery shop where they might purchase some food. I remained in the carriage to keep an eye on our belongings. I was patiently waiting for the return of my brothers, who had been away for what seemed to be a long time, when suddenly the train started to move and my brothers had still not returned. Peering through the window I saw a large number of young men in the distance struggling to catch up with the last carriage. Were my brothers among them? If so, I was about to lose them.

There was no time to wonder what decision to take. I rushed into the carriage corridor, grabbed the alarm and pulled it down with all my strength. The brusque halt of the train sent me staggering down the corridor. I went back to a window to see the whole group clambering back into the end carriage. It was the happiest outcome

of the venture, but worse was to come. The carriage brakes had slammed on, but the locomotive, the brakes of which were not linked to the alarm system, kept pulling its load. The result was that the nearest wagon to the locomotive, loaded with spare coal for the long journey, had its coupling frame completely ripped off the main structure. It had not taken long for me to act, and it did not take much longer to realise the plight I was in. I had to act swiftly. The most sensible thing to do was to go back to my seat and immediately warn my compartment companions to keep quiet, feigning not to know who had activated the alarm. I was wise to take the latter precaution. A French police official turned up in our compartment while other soldiers were searching the carriages.

The soldier in our compartment explained that they were looking for fifth-columnist saboteurs. I could not help glancing at the nasty long bayonets the French had fixed to their rifles. My companions kept quiet. The fifth columnists in the German Army were what the SAS would become in the British Army; they were dropped

behind the lines by parachute or else they infiltrated dressed in civilian clothes over their uniforms.

The train was halted for several hours, which allowed me time to see the damage done as a result of my action, but I did not regret it. Another wagon replaced the wrecked one and the French soldiers disappeared as quickly as they had appeared, with the train able to resume its journey.

Late in the evening we entered the seaport of Le Havre. The city was quiet and there was no sign of the approaching Nazi invader. There were no more British troops to be seen, all units having been moved north to the battle-torn regions. The convoy did not remain in Le Havre for long. It was still dark when the journey resumed. I tried to get some sleep to forget the gnawing in my stomach. Some of us slept in the luggage racks, others on the seats, others on the floor. For my part, I found a small place in the corridor.

The train rolled on relentlessly through the night, the small towns through which we sped all shrouded in the darkness of the wartime blackout. In the early hours of

the morning the train arrived at La Rochelle. The station platform was lined with folding tables covered with white sheets where Red Cross volunteers were handing out baguettes and chunks of camembert cheese, with hot coffee also being offered to the hungry refugees. The food was already on display on the tables as if they had been waiting for our arrival.

Before we were able to finish our frugal snack, a strident whistle from the locomotive reminded us that it was time to leave. The volunteers had been so friendly that for that short moment we had forgotten the seriousness of our plight and that our journey had not yet ended. For hours the train rolled on, with the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean on the right, the fields of French sandy moors on our left. In other circumstances the voyage would have been pleasant but, with the dramatic events unfolding over Western Europe, none of us felt in a mood to rejoice.

Biarritz was the next brief stop for us ‘holidaymakers’. The town was soon left behind us as the train travelled east following the French Pyrenees, on the other side of

which was Spain which, ruled by a another despot, could – despite being the 'ante-room' to freedom – also be the path to the concentration camp of Miranda.

Many were fleeing from occupation and enslavement, whole families and young men running the gauntlet to reach Britain as the country of freedom, but also to enable the young men to take part in the 'crusade' to bring down Nazism, the scourge of our century. To reach their goal they were subjected to numerous dangers. They could be arrested either by the collaborating police of the country they were crossing, or by the German *feld gendarmes* in which case they would be handed over to the dreaded Gestapo. Once in Spain there were two possibilities; they were either lucky enough to reach Portugal and from there secure a passage to Britain on a cargo ship, or they would strike ill luck and be arrested by the Guardia Civil and taken to the Miranda concentration camp.

A rumour went round that, in the latter case, the exiled government of the person arrested would contact the Spanish authorities and buy the release of the arrested,

paid for in sacks of flour. The cost varied with the standing of the individual. The highest price was for fighter pilots. When it came to funnelling men through hostile country the *passeurs d'hommes* (guides) were to give priority to pilots where servicemen were concerned. Many *passeurs d'hommes* paid with their lives for the 'crime' of being one.

Lourdes was the next stop. We were given enough time to have a wash, which we had not had since leaving Charleroi four days before. The washing facility was far from luxurious – a water tap on the station platform where we had to queue up to wait our turn. We were not given much time for our ablutions, for when the locomotive whistle sounded we had to move fast and scramble back into our respective carriages. Indeed, so fast that my youngest brother Newton forgot his jacket. However, we were, from where we stood, able to see the church, erected on the place where the Blessed Virgin appeared to the young Saint Bernadette.

Finally, after many hours in the carriage compartment which had become our home, or at least our sleeping

quarters, the train halted in Narbonne. At the station a Belgian officer with the rank of captain appeared to be taking over the unloading of the refugees. I had not seen him before, yet it transpired that he had been with us since we left Poperinge. It was my chance to clear up something which had been puzzling me since we started following the French coastline. What was the reason for our long journey, why had we not cut straight across France? Weary and stiff, I decided to put my question to the captain at the first opportunity, which came when we had settled into our new abode, the army barracks in Narbonne.

After putting down our belongings in a large room which was to be our sleeping quarters, we were guided to the dining room which was spotless, with the tables and chairs all aligned. We were told to queue at the end of the serving counters and move along to receive a mess tin almost full of a thick lentil soup, the traditional French baguette and a mug half full of the cheap red wine the French call *pinard*.

Greedy skippers

The Belgian captain was supervising to ensure the good behaviour of the refugees, which was necessary as some of the lads had never had to live with a large group of people. After the meal I went to the captain's office and put the question which was burning my lips. His answer came as a surprise. Before leaving Belgium, he had received instructions from the government to make for a seaport in France and arrange for a crossing to Britain with his group of refugees. The task proved to be difficult, even impossible, as the war had produced a new race of individuals driven by greed, and all they were interested in was getting rich. When he approached cargo ship captains they asked him for an enormous sum of money in dollars, since all other currencies were no longer of value. The captain's promise to have the cost of the trip paid on arrival by the Belgian Ambassador in Britain was never accepted.

After the welcome meal we were led back to the room with the beds, the latter most inviting with white sheets and warm blankets. It did not take long for most of us to

get our heads down and soon all that could be heard was snoring, although for some their sleep was cut short by bad dreams. It was early next morning when we rose from our blissful slumber. After a typical French breakfast of a baguette, a piece of camembert and a mug of *pinard*, we were ready for the next move. We did not have long to wait; two policemen who had entered the dining hall told us to assemble in the barracks gymnasium, where we were informed that our journey was not over. We were somewhat depressed to leave the place where we were able to have the rest we had so missed since leaving Charleroi. The train journey this time was much shorter and after a little over an hour we de-trained in Uzès, an old, once papal town when the Pope was French. Leaving the station, we were led to a decrepit old building which had been a spinning-mill in its early days.

The captain having left us, a refugee took over the organisation of the large number of Flemish and Walloon refugees. He was as fluent in French for the Walloons as he was in Flemish for the others. He took us

round to show us our different sleeping quarters, with roughly 20 men per room. ‘Sleeping quarters’ was a rather pompous name, given the hole in which we were to sleep. The concrete floor was covered with straw, which was to be our palliasse for the nights and for resting. For our dining room we were allocated a large shed or rather a large barn. The meals dished out were to last for the day. Serving meals for over 2,000 refugees could take up to two hours, and during all that time we had to stand in the scorching sun. The food was barely enough for our young appetites so there was no other alternative but to queue a second time, and God help those who were caught.

The ablution facilities there were primitive. They amounted to an old fountain of the type installed in the days of horse-drawn carriages, the top trough being used for the horses and a lower one for cats and dogs. So we went to the large town square for our ablution space, its advantage being that it actually had running cold water and was directly on our doorstep.

Invitation to join the French Foreign Legion

The day after our arrival a notice was displayed on the main door of the building. The French Government was appealing to refugees to enlist in the French Army. That same afternoon my two brothers and I went to the recruiting office to join up. The queue was already long, including many who shared our mood. When it came to my turn, my recruiting officer whispered to his colleague sitting at the next desk: “I’ve got his two brothers here.” I should have wondered at the reason for the whispering and checking of my identity document, but when one is young one tends to take little notice of what is being said in secret.

I was accepted in the Foreign Legion and had a medical the same afternoon. I was told to be at the railway station the next morning. My two brothers were not accepted because they were too young. During our very short stay in Uzès I made friends with the Fleming who had taken over the running of the camp. Our friendly relations derived from the fact that we both spoke English and we would spend much time conversing in my mother

tongue. He told me that his name was Julien Lievevrouw and he was an architect, with an office in Gent. As well as English, he was fluent in Dutch, French, Spanish and German. Julien was to play an important part in me surviving the war.

About 25 years after the war, quite by chance I came across Julien's name and telephone number, which I had not forgotten. I dialled the number and a young voice answered. It was Julien's son, who had the same name as his father. I was given my friend's telephone number and a woman answered. I explained the reason for my call and the lady's reply came as a shock. During the war Julien was the commander of a resistance group in the Gent region. A man from his group was arrested and, under torture, denounced his commander.

Julien was arrested and tortured by the Gestapo to find out more about him, all in vain. Finally, he was transferred to a concentration camp in Germany, under the *Nacht und Nebel* (night and fog) directive. One lost all identification when deported under that scheme. One was just a number in the camp records. Julien was

liberated by American troops and sent back to Belgium, but he never fully recovered from the torture he went through, for the Gestapo had beaten him so brutally that his brain was damaged. That is what the Gestapo were capable of doing to a young giant of a man.

To come back to my tribulations, my interest in joining the French Foreign Legion was not guided by the glamorous *Beau Geste* image in the desert epic film, nor was I in their uniform including the cap with the cloth hanging over the neck to keep off the sun. Since we were going to North Africa for training, my intention was to request repatriation to Britain.

At the station I heard an old lady remark “pauvre enfant” (poor child). I brushed away the warning, as we received some provisions for the short trip to Marseille. No sooner had we boarded and settled down than the train started on its journey. Morale was good, warlike songs were echoing throughout the carriages, with the chocolate, the *pinard* and the cheese all further lifting our morale. As there was plenty, our fighting spirits were high.

In our euphoria I did not notice at first that the train was not travelling South but North. It sped through Valence, Lyon, Dijon, and our fighting spirits were dashed when the train stopped in the marshalling yard of a place called Joinville. On a track, some two or three from our convoy, a Red Cross train had stopped. At its sight we suddenly understood the desperate situation we were in.

The passenger coaches were crammed with wounded French soldiers. Some were on stretchers in the corridors and floor in the compartments, others on the soft seats of the first-class coaches. There was blood everywhere. Some had been crammed in cattle wagons and were lying directly on the wooden floors with a thin layer of straw to make them more ‘comfortable’. We could see blood seeping through the gaps of the floor-boards, which were not closely fitted, onto the rail sleepers below.

The soldiers’ wounds had been hastily covered with strips from bed sheets, with the blood tinting the whiteness of the makeshift bandages. They presented a gruesome picture of young men badly hurt in flesh and

spirit. They were groaning from the pain that was gnawing at their injured bodies. The less disabled were cursing the ill-fated luck which had struck them down.

The difference in treatment that the officers and other ranks received was a relic of the First World War, one may even say of the Napoleonic wars. There was no help around to comfort the wounded soldiers and, for the short time we remained nearby, we did our best to ease the suffering of those who needed it most: a drink of water, a gulp of *pinard*, a cigarette, or even assistance into a more comfortable position.

Julien found out from a slightly wounded officer, who was himself also going round helping where he could, that the convoy had come from the French Ardennes on the west side of the Maginot Line. The Wehrmacht had pushed through between Sedan and Charleville-Mézières. Faced with a highly-trained German armoured division, the French casualties were considerable.

Most of the French equipment dated from the last war, some soldiers not even having a rifle. The French tanks did not stand a chance against the latest German Panzers.

I saw abandoned French 75-pounder field-artillery guns on wheels with wooden spokes and outer metal rims, the outer surface of the gun barrel beautifully engraved. They must have dated from Napoleon's war and looked similar to those I had seen in the Waterloo museum in Belgium. The whole fiasco was due to the policies of the West, which preferred a peaceful co-existence with Germany, thus neglecting their own defence.

It was early afternoon when our convoy left Joinville where we had seen so much physical suffering. The chanting and laughing were over. Faces were grim, we had been disturbed by what we had seen. What did the future hold? How long would the convoy of wounded remain in a town deserted by its population, who had fled before the advance of the arch-enemy? There were still many old people who had lived during the First World War and endured the cruelty of the Boche occupier.

The train had pulled up on the outskirts of Vitry-le-François, but why on the outskirts? We were soon to have the answer. French soldiers ordered us to get out of

the carriages, which took quite a long time. We were reluctant to leave the comfort of the coaches when the sound of approaching aircraft had the effect of speeding up the de-training. The French soldiers and soldiers-to-be dispersed over the nearby field looking for cover and protection from the strafing enemy fighter planes. Locomotives and coaches were blasted to pieces by the heavy machine-gun fire. I understood then why the convoy had stopped outside the town, for the precaution saved it from destruction.

The air-raid was only just over when the French soldiers started rounding up the bewildered young recruits. There were 500-odd of us and, once we were finally grouped, we were made to form what vaguely looked like ranks and set off on foot to our camp. It was late in the evening when we entered the yard of a large farm. On either side of the main buildings, two wooden huts had been erected, one for the French soldiers, the other for us still civilian soldiers. The huts must have been erected in a hurry, for they were not even disguised with camouflage. They stood out like two sore thumbs and made perfect

targets for striking aircraft. The accommodation inside was clean. The wooden partitions had not yet been painted and maybe never would be. The furniture consisted of several chairs, a table, a few wooden cupboards and several three-level bedsteads. There was a pleasant smell of newly cut and transformed timber.

The beds with their straw palliasses, white bed sheets, pillow and blankets were a temptation for our tired bodies but, before that, we were able to satisfy our hungry stomachs. The meal was tasty and satisfying, the wine served in our mugs was a great improvement on the usual *pinard*. The meal over, I made my way to the entrance where I had seen a notice board displaying, among other information, a list of addresses for our unit, which read: name, surname, 126th Colonial Infantry Regiment, somewhere in France.

Before getting our heads down we were told to report to the equipment store, located in a hut occupied by police. We were each allocated a French Army jacket, to be issued at a later date. We were also told that we were in a small village, Dampierre. It had about 20 inhabitants,

four farms and that it was not even on the French road maps.

In the early hours of the next morning a bellowing sergeant, walking up and down the hut corridor, roused us from our beds. Having learned by now that orders had to be obeyed promptly, in no time we were out of bed, had a frugal breakfast and were out in the farmyard forming ranks.

We were told that Julien had been put in charge of our hut, then each one of us was given a pick and a shovel. It was a ragged and shambolic group that left the camp; one could have scarcely called us soldiers. It was still only about 4am when we reached a small river, which I found out was called the Ocnin, a tributary of the Marne. We were divided into groups on arrival at the site. One group placed explosive charges under a small bridge spanning the river and wrapped the trunks of trees boarding the road with cordtex, ready to be detonated. Another sub-group erected roadblocks. Two soldiers and a corporal supervised both groups, with a young sergeant

in overall charge. He was a typical legionnaire, wearing the headgear they had made famous.

I found myself in the main group which was given what I thought was the most futile task: we had to turn the small river, which must have been only about 10 yards wide, into a tank trap. Both sides of the river had eroded to form sloped banks; the object of the exercise was to cut into the side furthest from the oncoming aggressor and transform it into a vertical bank. To carry out the work we stood waist-deep in the river. I could not help wondering if we had been sent there not only to do the donkey-work but rather to be cannon fodder. If rivers like the Meuse did not halt the Wehrmacht offensive, this trickle of a river would certainly not stop them.

In mid-afternoon we left the senseless task to return to the camp where we had a much-needed shower, after which we were ready for the tasty and substantial meal waiting for us. Only then were we allowed to have a lie-down to rest our aching bones. It must have been a little before supper time when we were ordered to parade outside. Now what, I wondered?

During the short time I spent in Dampierre I saw troops from different parts of the French colonies moving up towards the front lines. There were three truckloads of Annamese troops, from the north of Indochina. They went into combat carrying a long vicious-looking knife, wearing a long dark dress that covered them down to their feet and wearing soft shoes with thick, felt soles. Their uniform allowed them move silently; they would attack the enemy at night, catching them unawares. The Germans showed no pity for those who were unlucky enough to be captured. I did not see a single Annamese POW. The other troops I saw moving up to the front lines were Senegalese. They were sent into action when bayonet charges were needed, which was seldom the case in this war of movement.

We meet our Legion officers

We were told to gather our meagre belongings and fall in on the field boarding the road. The 200-odd veteran legionnaires fell in on our left. I was not training under the hot desert sun of North Africa as I had wished, but at least I had the satisfaction of serving with them. Now

real hardship was to be our lot. It had been a glorious adventure for young men wanting to play their part in the war, but things were about to change for the worse. Soon we would be facing the abominable realities of war that would be our daily lot for weeks to come.

We were ordered to move on to the road, with not long to wait before a Renault staff car pulled up. Three officers stepped out, one a French officer, the other two Belgian lieutenants, whom we had never seen since our arrival. The three moved up to the top of the embankment from where they had a commanding view of the men for whom they had not cared so far.

The French officer presented himself as Capitaine X. I do not recall his name but he was a commander of the 126th Colonial Infantry Regiment. Perhaps he should have made himself known on our arrival, but he did introduce the two Belgian officers. The name of one I have forgotten, but the other, Lieutenant Brachotte, has stuck in my memory. I do remember the French captain's appearance. He looked like an operetta officer who had just stepped off the stage, with his highly

polished boots, high gaiters and belt, riding breeches and perfectly tailored army jacket. For a reason we did not at first quite grasp, when he next addressed us his tone became threatening. He drew his side-arm from its holster, pointed it at us and warned that he would personally shoot deserters.

Having made himself and his intention known, he explained that the second line of defence in the North had been breached by German tanks, forcing the French forces to withdraw onto a pre-determined line of defence. Our regiment was also moving back to prepare defensive positions. The three officers and the driver took their seats in the staff car and drove off. That was the last we saw of any of them. The cook handed out bread, a lump of camembert and a *gourde*, a water bottle full of red wine. It was dark when we set off in turn. We marched all night. In the morning our column was strafed by Luftwaffe fighters and, as we were moving through a thick wooded area, every man fled into the woods. I took shelter sitting with my back against a large tree and fell asleep.

I was awakened by a friend, Pierre Montwil, with whom I paired and who told me I had slept throughout the entire attack. Before setting off the sergeant informed us that the captain and two Belgian officers had deserted us, as a result of which he was assuming command. His task was made more difficult as the deserting officers had taken all the maps and information about the progress of the battle in the east of France.

We reassembled on the road and set off in a southerly direction, which was all the sergeant could do, given that he did not know much about the area. He avoided the villages and towns, keeping us to wooded areas and open fields where it would be easier to take cover or disperse. The whole day we kept going, not even stopping to have a bite of our lump of bread, which we therefore had to do on the move. Only natural needs necessitated a halt.

The second night of our ‘withdrawal’ found the unit moving through a dense wooded area. The trees boarding the road were so tall and the foliage so massive that the latter formed a canopy over us, giving the impression that we were moving through a green tunnel.

The silence, the pitch-black darkness, the fluorescent glow-worms dotting the sides of the road ditches gave an eerie aspect to the surroundings, and we moved quietly as if we dared not disturb the sinister environment. Unexpectedly the silence was broken by the sound of what could have been the tracks of an approaching armoured vehicle, hammering the tarmac surface of the road. As one man, the whole column made a dash for the safety of the woods.

The dreaded tac-tac noise having disappeared into the green tunnel, we slowly crawled out of the undergrowth of brambles and thistles that had lacerated and pricked our faces and hands. We had barely assembled again on the road in a shambolic semblance of order, when the foreboding sound came again from the other end of the natural tunnel, and back under cover of the aggressive undergrowth we all went. But it turned out that one man had stumbled over a frightened young colt in search of its mother, and it was nothing more than the animal's hoofs hitting the hard road surface that made the frightening sound suggestive of approaching tanks,

which was amplified as it reverberated in the tunnel. One of the legionnaires threatened to kill the poor animal but the sergeant advised against in case the muzzle flash was seen from the air by a prowling spotter plane, so the colt was let loose. We were so afraid that we did not think to realise that it would be impossible to see practically anything from above due to the dense foliage.

We soon left the safety of the cover, trudging over the uneven surface of a ploughed field. It made quite a change from the even surface of the tarmac road. We had not far to go before we were back on a track that ran between wooded areas. On the left side a clearing, man-made or natural, was being used as a parking area for a large number of heavy trucks, probably an advance depot for the French Army had they been able to stem the lightning advance of the Nazi invaders. Given the way the situation was developing, the vehicles would soon fall into the hands of the aggressors. On the right-hand side of the track the picture was gloomier still. A high barbed-wire fence had been erected on the edge of the forest. It ran for quite a distance and, behind the

barbed wire, were the sun-tanned faces of young men, obviously Spaniards, who begged us for help which, alas, we could not give them.

We were ordered to move on but Julien, who spoke Spanish fluently, remained behind to find out more about their plight. He caught up with us again before we had gone much further. They told him they had fled Spain when Franco's army defeated the government army. They had crossed the Pyrenees, only for a vast number of them to be interned. When the war with Germany started, they were sent to eastern France to work on defence projects. The difference from our situation was that they were behind barbed wire fences. Despite our grim prospects there was at least still some hope for us and I could not help feeling sorry for them for, once they fell into the hands of the Nazis, they would quite probably be handed over to Franco, Hitler's fellow dictator friend. In Spain the outcome for them would be the same as it was for those who were caught before they could cross the Spanish-French border. The despot's

laws were cruel and pitiless. The firing squad was the ultimate outcome.

We continued over fields, through wooded areas, weaving our way in and out of natural obstacles. We then followed the Marne River, its towpath a relief after the soggy fields we had just crossed as we dragged one foot after the other. The river was flowing slowly and, as a keen swimmer, I felt like taking a dip. In the scorching weather it would be a relief and might even be the way to safety, for in the last war the Kaiser's army was stopped at the Marne. Pierre Montwil was at my side and I told him of my mad brainwave to swim to the other side of the river. His answer shattered my hopes in this direction. He could not swim and I was not prepared to abandon a friend.

I ought to introduce Pierre. He was a couple of years older than me and the youngest in the unit. He had been working in the coal mines since he was 14. His face bore the bluish marks that miners get when they have been injured. Pierre was not only a strong lad, he had also a strong personality and he was there to help when things

did not go too well for me. Towards the evening the column entered yet another wooded area. There seemed no end to the forests.

Approach of the German Army

We had started to hear the deep rumble of heavy artillery fire, but the dense foliage of the trees made it difficult, even impossible, to determine from which direction the sound was coming. We left the forest and Pierre and I were in the lead of the column when, unexpectedly, I saw four tanks coming from a field, crossing the road and disappearing into the woods on the other side. I gestured to the column to take cover in the roadside ditch. The sergeant joined me to find out the reason for my warning. I told him I had seen the tanks crossing the road and identified them as German from their grey camouflage, French camouflage being khaki.

We prudently moved to the other side of the road and onto a field, following a small, fast-flowing stream. It was morning, the air cool despite the daily heat, when suddenly the calm was disturbed by the sound of an

approaching aircraft. The 500 or 600 legionnaires and rookies plunged into the cold water, up to their necks. I hesitated, looking at the cold water and then at the approaching plane. Not knowing the depth of the river, I decided to stay put, taking a chance that maybe the aircraft would not fire or that, if it did, there was always a space between where the bullets hit the ground. The plane came closer and turned back in the direction it had come without firing a shot. I noted then that it was a spotter plane. It was much later in the war that I found out that reconnaissance aircraft did not carry machine-guns.

The men came out of the water cold and dripping wet. Fortunately, they had taken the precaution of lifting their rifles over their heads. Despite the discomfort we were all experiencing, we had to move on to avoid being caught up with by the fast-advancing German troops. The sergeant leading us took his bearings from the sun during the day and from the stars at night. As a legionnaire he had trained a lot in the Sahara desert. We had been retreating for two days and three nights, living

on half a loaf of bread, a lump of camembert and a *gourde* of *pinard*, playing a dangerous hide-and-seek game with the enemy who must have been informed of our presence by the crew of the spotter plane.

We were nearing the edge of another forest, when the rumble of heavy artillery guns started to be accompanied by the sharp rattle of machine-guns and rifle fire, which became closer as we moved forward. The sergeant's orders did not need to be repeated twice. Every man took cover in the thick forest, where we regrouped under the orders of a corporal.

When the sergeant joined us he had made up his mind to prepare a resistance action. Since the arrogant and cowardly commanding officer had 'valiantly' put the safest possible distance between his precious person and the enemy, the sergeant who had safely guided us so far shared his simple plan. We gathered round to hear his orders. The road – which was only really a track – was to be blocked by straw bales which would provide a double row of protection in the form of basic ramparts. The experienced soldiers would man the first line of defence.

A second line would also be set up, with the civilians-come-legionnaires in reserve. One of us would have to move forward to take the place of each fallen man.

With the bales placed, we were crouching behind the soldiers when I saw the elderly corporal approach the sergeant. I was quite near and could overhear them. The corporal was reminding him of what happened to *fellagha* (guerrillas) in Algeria if they were caught with weapons in their possession. The French had no hesitation in shooting them and the same would happen to us if we were caught defending the position, he said. We would be considered *franc-tireurs* (partisans) and shot on the spot. The argument between the two men went on for some time and finally the sergeant agreed with the veteran's reasoning and decided, for our sake rather than theirs, not to put up a fight for we were of many different nationalities, although all spoke French.

The bales of straw were removed. His next order left every one of us with a strange feeling of helplessness, of finally being beaten, after struggling across fields and through forests, zig-zagging our way to avoid being

captured. Finally, the sergeant's dreaded order came: we would surrender.

The soldiers were told to smash their rifles against a tree in order to break or bend the barrels, thus making the weapons unusable. Did more than one soldier feel that he had lost his truest friend? The rookies and civilians were advised to discard any French military equipment they were wearing or carrying. To comply with the Geneva Conventions, the next step was to surrender carrying a white flag.

But where to obtain a white flag? A civilian rookie came forward with a large white bed-sheet, which he had in his belongings. Next, a long straight branch was chopped off a tree, the leaves stripped off and the white sheet attached. We had our flag of surrender. The next question was who was going to volunteer to march in front of the column with the flag. No-one came forward. The silence was unbearable and, since the sergeant did not want to designate someone, I persuaded Pierre to carry the flag with me. Was it that no one was prepared to march in front with a flag of surrender, or was it the

apprehension of simply being in front? I never knew. The column moved onto the track and started to march in the direction from which the sounds of battle had come. Behind us flag-bearers, some of the unit were protecting themselves behind a hand-cart they had found abandoned in the ditch.

The track had changed into a wide tarmac road. We were rounding a bend when some 300 yards away I saw an armoured half-tracked vehicle. Its weapon was already pointing towards us, as if its occupants knew we were making our way down the road – information no doubt passed on from the spotter plane. I shouted back to the sergeant that no-one should make a move or leave the column, which could be mistaken for an escape attempt.

Some 50 yards in front of our group, a lone legionnaire marched towards the half-track and its German officer. I did not see what happened then, for he and the officer moved out of sight. I was soon to find out. Had I known what would happen to me, I would have taken a different course of action and perhaps hidden in the woods. But

for how long could I do that and what would have happened had I been caught alone?

Taken prisoner

As we were carrying the white flag, Pierre and I were the first to be searched for possible weapons and ordered to produce our identity documents. Pierre had no problem and was ordered to stand on the other side of the road. Then my turn came. The officer kept scrutinising my identity document, then looking me in the face, which went on for what seemed like an eternity. His next move was most unexpected. He flung my documents into the roadside ditch, grabbed me by the throat and, livid with rage, started shouting a word that I did not understand as it was distorted by his anger. The word that I subsequent learned to understand was *spion* (spy), which is what he was accusing me of being. He kept repeating the accusation. Finally, having somewhat regained his composure, he pushed me roughly towards the legionnaire who had gone ahead of us and was standing alone.

The officer's attention was now directed to the rest of the column. I noticed a heavy machine-gun was aimed at the legionnaire and me. While the attention of the officer was absorbed by inspecting the other soldiers' documents, I asked the lone soldier why he had been separated from the others. His answer sent a frisson of fear through me. "When the officer laid his hands on me I put my fist in his face and told him that no German could lay his hands on me," he said.

I immediately realised the seriousness of my situation. Gathering my courage with both hands, as the saying goes, I went back over to the officer muttering "no spion, no spion". Julien, who had not missed a word of what was going on, then approached him and a long conversation in German followed. The officer was pointing at the photograph on my document and my place of birth, Hamilton in Australia.

Julien must have been very persuasive indeed for, unexpectedly, the officer handed me my documents and pushed me back towards the other POWs. We handed in knives and forks, as well as having our belts and braces

removed which made it difficult to keep our trousers up. We were ordered to keep our hands behind our heads and then told to start marching. As we set off, I heard the sharp crack of machine-gun fire and glanced back to see the lone legionnaire falling back into the ditch. I made a silent prayer for the victim's peace and for my narrow escape.

The execution over, the half-track escorted us on towards the next town and we had not far to go before reaching Saint-Dizier and the bridge over the Marne river. We reached the bridge that we thought would be our passage to safety. It was intact: the French sappers must have failed in their attempt to blow it up, or else the Germans had succeeded in removing the explosive charges before they could be detonated.

The position had, however, clearly been valiantly defended. The scene of the fighting was a stirring sight to anyone with some military dignity. The sappers had built a 'fort of fortune' made up of sandbags, laid in a circle and with the rampart high enough to protect the men, facing the approach roads from the North. In the

middle of the compound, about 20 metres in diameter, there was a plinth made of sandbags with the French flag flapping proudly on top of it. A soldier, lying motionless, was still holding the flag staff upright. Manning the machine gun and frozen in death after being hit by an enemy bullet, he had not left his position. Others were hanging over the sandbag parapet, their rifles hanging loosely from their clenched, rigid hands. In the inner circle of the rampart, other combatants lay, still clasping their outdated rifles with fixed bayonets, slain in a hand-to-hand encounter with the enemy.

There were no German fatalities to be seen. It was bad for morale to see fallen *kameraden*, so they were quickly removed. It was the battle that we had heard the night before. We had struggled through gruelling terrain, survived air attacks and long avoided being captured, determined to reach the bridge over the Marne River which had stopped the invader in the First World War. But we had not reached the bridge as a fighting force, but as dispirited POWs.

I can imagine four reasons why my life was saved.

First, the intervention of my friend Julien who told the officer he had known me from before the war; second, I was only 19, among the youngest in the regiment; third, the German Army was victorious and therefore more tolerant; and fourth, I had fallen into the hands of the Wehrmacht. Had I fallen into the hands of the SS, Julien's intervention would have been fruitless both for me and for him for taking up my defence.

After crossing the bridge we were herded into a field where a large number of POWs were already gathered. A German officer entered the POW compound and there was a pessimistic apprehension that another identification session was about to take place for. But the real reason for the officer's presence was soon clarified. He requested a German-speaking POW to come forward. Julien stepped towards the officer, offering to translate his instructions which, duly translated, epitomised the brutality of Nazi behaviour towards POWs.

We were forbidden to pick up food in any form. Any such action would be considered an act of plunder and punished as such. We would be allowed to collect water

to drink, but only when our guard escort allowed us to do so. Every man who tried to escape would be shot on recapture. And for every man who did escape, three of his nearest companions would be executed. That last order made every man in the group a guard of his nearest companion.

The harsh warning preamble over, we were ordered to form ranks on the road. We, the rookies, took our place at the front of the long column. It was still early morning when we set off on our journey to nowhere. We crossed the Saint-Dizier bridge again, travelling in the opposite direction from which we came. After a while, still in the combat zone and on a road bounded on both sides by high embankments, heavy shells started whizzing overhead. The French artillery were firing at German troops who were practically nowhere in sight. The guards who were attempting to take cover urged us on. We did not go far after leaving the shelled road before finding ourselves in a field where another fierce battle had taken place. It was dotted with the bodies of fallen French soldiers.

I told Pierre, who was at my side, that I would salute the first fallen we saw lying on the roadside as a mark of respect for their bravery. In spite of everything that has been said about the weak resistance put up by the French Army, I have witnessed the bravery of French soldiers on more than one battlefield, where they were overpowered by the sheer number and quality of the enemy's equipment. However, not once did I see French armour engaged in battle. Of course, the quality and efficiency of their command might be questioned. My regiment had witnessed the behaviour of our commanding officer and his two Belgian adjutants when they deserted, leaving us to find our way to the French lines.

You must excuse the gruesome lines that follow. I was soon able fulfil my pledge to show my respects to the fallen. A barbed wire fence ran along the edge of the road and a ditch. Behind the barbed wire a French soldier was lying dead, still holding his machine-gun, still pointed at the approaching enemy. He had not deserted his post and I was saluting the hero when a

German soldier came running towards me and grabbed me by the throat. He was close to my face, shouting "franc-tireur". He had come out of a column of troops moving up to the front. The *feldwebel* (sergeant) in charge of the guards saved me. It was not the first time, and not the last, that we were accused of being *franc-tireurs*.

Our march into captivity

During the first stretch of 25 kilometres we were allowed a 30-minute rest. We collapsed in the roadside ditch and fell into a deep slumber, only to be awakened by shouts, kicks and vicious stabs of German bayonets.

On the road we were confronted with more horrors of war. I saw a soldier's body hanging from a barbed-wire concertina coil, his body ripped in two by a machine-gun with such a rapid rate of fire that the German soldiers had named it Hitler's scythe. In front of our group was a sorrowful sight – a cart pulled by a vigorous draught horse, led by a soldier on foot, with his arm in a sling, having joined a column of POWs. Pierre and I had taken

the lead: we were not there because we were the fittest, but rather to avoid being stabbed by a guard's bayonet whenever they found the pace too slow.

From our position we had a dismal view of the back of the tip-cart. It carried a ghastly human load of mutilation. The cart had folding benches, one on either side. On the left, a wounded policeman was sitting with his hands tightly clenching the bench, the knuckles of his hands white from the effort. His face, poor man, was partly ripped off and hanging over his chest, barely attached by his left cheek. The brave man was not complaining, maybe too proud to admit his suffering to the enemy, and he just sat there trying to reduce the jolting of the robust and uncomfortable conveyance.

Next to him sat another wounded man: an explosion had left him blind. His face was blackened and his uniform also bore traces of the blast. On the other side, two other wounded sat with their heads and faces wrapped in makeshift bandages made of bed-sheet strips. Blood was seeping through the white cloth. Lying on the floorboards was another wounded, with the lower parts

of both his legs broken with open fractures. Tourniquets had been applied but how long would he be able to survive? My description may seem callous, but they are the true harsh realities of war – and I was to see worse.

We were now on a particularly punishing stretch of our journey. The hot summer sun was beating down on us, the heat and chalky dust increasing our thirst. Our lips and mouths were parched, our tongues swollen. It was pure torture. The conditions had been made worse by the retreating French Army, which had deliberately polluted the local wells, the only form of water supply in the region. I have often suffered from hunger and thirst; the latter is by far the worse form of privation.

God must have taken pity on us, for the German guards halted us in front of a large farm. No occupants were to be seen and in the middle of the yard was an inviting water standpipe. The guard motioned that we were allowed to drink or fill our bottles. I had been lucky enough to find a glass bottle at our last stop and filled it. When I got back to my place behind the cart, I felt it my duty to pass my bottle to my unfortunate ‘brothers of

war'. I gave it first to the man with the wounded face – in the First World War they were called *gueules cassées* (broken faces) – before he handed it to the others. It came back only a quarter full. It must have been hellish for the men in the cart. I did not forget the lightly wounded man leading the horse.

Amid much shouting, rapping of rifle butts and bayonet prodding, we all returned to the road to form ranks of some form, including the few who had not been able to quench their thirst. After completing the next lap of our forced route march we were allowed a short rest which did not last longer than 15 minutes. We reached a small town called Commercy, where we were locked up in a school. Julien found out from the *feldwebel* that we had covered 50 kilometres and been on the road for 12 hours. Before getting our heads down, we had to queue for a meal, a thick broth that I refused, as did most of us, as it smelled of decaying meat. I found a concrete space to lie on and soon fell asleep. As the French proverb goes, *Qui dort dîne* (he who sleeps dines, in other words sleep makes you forget hunger).

It was still dark when the bawling *feldwebel* roused us. I hurriedly went to the school kitchen to fill my glass bottle with the water that had not been shut off by the retreating French Army and fell in with the rest on the road outside the school. The cart was nowhere to be seen. I hoped its occupants had been taken to a field hospital. The French POWs had also left; they must have been taken to a camp. Julien made an effort to find out our destination. He was told that the commanders would not see us. No reason was given. We both had a feeling of foreboding. What was going to happen to us? We were considered *franc-tireurs* by many Germans.

Dusk was still spreading its dark cloak over the surroundings when we set off for another gruelling route march. We had entered a small village, and near the entrance of a farm a large number of French soldiers were lying dead. What happened next was sickening and degrading. One of the prisoners went round searching their pockets for their belongings, their wrists for watches, even their fingers for rings. But other scavengers had already been at work. All this happened

under the eyes of our gloating guards, who must have thought that we had no sense of respect for the fallen.

During our first short but welcome halt, we rested with our backs to the wall of a large property. I slipped into the arms of Morpheus, until I was awakened by voices that sounded like English. Alas they came from a group of soldiers from the Hamburg area. I found out much later in the war that they have a dialect in that region in which certain words can sound similar to English.

Before I was able to resume my shut-eye, a German officer, accompanied by Julien, ordered us to remove our footwear. What happened then was most unusual: two medical orderlies began to inspect our feet, nursing the badly blistered ones. I had blisters the size of a penny on both feet which had given me hell when I started the march in the morning, although the pain eased off as the day and the march went on. The orderlies applied ointment to my feet and bandaged them. The *feldwebel* was fuming, for he had to wait until each one of us was taken care of. There was not much he could do about it, for as in most armies the medical officer always has the

last word. It must have been more than an hour later that we set off again. I was convinced that we would not get away with anything now and would still have to cover the same distance.

We had covered a few miles when we came across a grey stone monument with an inscription that read *C'est ici que l'envahisseur boche a été arrêté.* (This is where the Boche invader was stopped). Under which someone had chalked *Pas cette fois-ci* (not this time). At the next stop, lying in the road ditch to rest, I found a bottle of *eau de vie* (literally meaning water of life but in fact a strong alcohol). I took a swig and it almost blew off the top of my head. The guards, who were also resting, had not noticed. I quickly pushed the bottle deep in my pocket, since its contents looked like water and I hoped it would be accepted as such.

The next stop for the night was a small village near Verdun named Clermont-en-Argonne, an area that saw fierce fighting during the previous war. We were herded into, of all places, the village church. It was already full of French POWs. We did, however, find a place near the

altar large enough to accommodate us. The French soldiers could not help asking us what we were doing among them and our reply did not quite satisfy their curiosity. It is amazing how rapidly information is spread among a large group of men, and all the more so when they are prisoners.

The effects of war

A French soldier had been brought in by one of the German guards. The man was in a state of shell-shock. Two French soldiers approached me for my help. Perhaps the *eau de vie* might be a cure. The prostrate soldier was shaking badly and I gave him a swig of the potent drink which appeared to calm him and give him strength. He grabbed the bottle with both hands and did not stop drinking the fiery liquid until the bottle was empty. It had been three-quarters full when he started drinking. Thereupon he fell into what looked like a deep alcoholic coma, and we were reassured when we heard deep snoring. I was handed back the empty bottle, but I did not regret my gesture. At least it had been worth keeping. I returned to my place among the rest of the

group where I soon sank into a deep slumber. The next morning the French soldier was fit and back on his feet, or so I was told. He didn't even remember what had happened the night before.

I was awakened by the loud banging of the church door closing. In the semi-darkness, a German officer was walking down the aisle towards the organ. Without the slightest concern for our rest, he started playing German martial music that shattered the peace. The officer's unappreciated and unwanted performance went on long into the night.

Another officer, who must have been an artist, went round sketching the tired and drawn faces of the prisoners, including me with my beard which had grown to a reasonable length. In the morning it was a tired group that set out on another long, punishing trek, our poor physical state accentuated by the lack of food. Our last meal had been a small lump of bread left over from our first distribution more than four or five days earlier. I was losing my sense of time. Some of us still had water

to quench our thirst, others had had neither water nor food.

We had not gone very far when one of our group collapsed, too weak and tired to go on. A German guard pushed him out of the ranks into the roadside ditch, while we were ordered to go on. We had not gone far when we heard a rifle shot. A little later the guard caught up with us. There was no doubt about what had happened to our unfortunate companion. We had not even had the time to find out his name.

At the next ‘rest’ I found what looked like a groundsheet. Somehow, I was always finding something, and the groundsheet had a kind of camouflage finish. I carried my find under my clothing so that it could not be seen by the guards. The site where I found it was close to a large group of German soldiers who were also bivouacking in the field. During the last stop of our journey a German came among us while we were resting, handing out pieces of German bread. When he reached me, he noticed my treasured find. In perfect French he asked where I had obtained the groundsheet. I

replied that I had found it in a ditch where we had last been resting. He told me to get rid of it quickly or some ill-intentioned German soldier might accuse me of having murdered one of his compatriots.

The lucky find suddenly became a reason for fear and panic. How could I dispose of the compromising groundsheet? A guard might see me getting rid of it. Finally, my benefactor, aware off my plight, offered to relieve me of the far-too-risky item. Once more luck had not let me down.

I had been happy to use it for protection when it started to rain but I was now prepared to get wet like the others. That evening we stopped and slept in a large farm near the town of Bar-le-Duc. The guard locked us in a barn for the night. In the comfort of the straw, it was the best sleep I had had for a long time.

In the morning we formed up in the farmyard, as we did every morning and evening before we were given something to eat or allowed to get our heads down. It had been another day without food. The count was always a tense moment. Was anyone missing? If so, we

knew what fate had in store for three of us. We knew the Germans had neither feelings nor remorse when they cut down the young life of an enemy. When we left I was holding, in the gently closed palm of my hand, an egg which I had found in the straw where I slept. I whispered the news to Pierre.

I had to be very careful, for we were not allowed plunder, and that is what my egg would qualify as. Furthermore, we were not allowed to speak to one another. I had the egg tucked in my hand behind my neck, for I was the only civilian POW who still had to keep both hands behind his neck. We covered the first 25 kilometres before being allowed a rest in a ditch. All that time I had the egg cupped in my hands. I was sitting next to Pierre and whispered to him that I would chip a small hole in the egg's shell, suck out half of it and let him have the other half. Whilst I was having my share of the egg, Pierre was keeping a lookout so I would not be caught red-handed with plundered food. But I had no sooner taken the first sip than I let out a sound of disgust. To Pierre's querying look, I could only gesture that it

was rotten. He took the egg from me to try it for himself. His reaction was the same. I had put my life in jeopardy for something to eat, all to no avail.

The half-hour allowed for the first rest over, we set off once more, the burning sun and chalk dust parching our lips and drying our mouths. I had no water left in my glass bottle. The well in the last farm had also been polluted by the retreating French troops. My thirst was becoming unbearable; neither the shouting, rifle-butt rapping, nor even bayonet stabs in the buttocks could make us go faster.

But, it seemed, God had not deserted those who were suffering. The road at one point converged with a river and the guard was unable to hold us back. As one man, we rushed to the sloping edge of the river bank, collapsing on our stomachs and cupping our hands to scoop up the foul, tepid water to quench our thirst with a heaven-sent beverage. As I was lying there, I suddenly saw the corpses of dead French soldiers and the carcasses of cattle floating on the surface nearby.

The last leg of the day coming to an end, we halted in a small village near Chalons-sur-Marne. There was nowhere large enough in which the Germans could lock us up securely. Only the cemetery was ‘available’ so we spent the night with the dead for company. There was, however, one thing there that made us appreciate the eerie setting: a water tap with plenty of fresh, cool water. Before setting off the next morning I did not miss the opportunity to fill my precious glass bottle. The counting of men over, we set off again, having covered over 200 kilometres. Why were they marching us so far? The *feldwebel* could find no POW camp in which the commander would accept us. We had been branded *franc-tireurs* and nobody would have anything to do with our group.

The barbarity starts

Julien did his best to help but the *feldwebel* did not seem to care what happened to us. While we were on the road, it also kept him out of front-line danger. Shortly after leaving the farm our column was stopped by an officer who told the *feldwebel* to lead us into a large field, where

a great number of POWs were assembled. There must have been over 3,000 of them. We could not help wondering why we had been told to join them. No-one was allowed to sit. An area near the edge of the forest had been left free. We stood waiting for an explanation which was still not forthcoming.

Then a lorry pulled up with about 20 Senegalese POWs on board. It halted in the open space and its occupants were violently pulled off. As they landed on the ground, picks and shovels were pushed into their hands. With brutal gestures and handling, the unfortunate soldiers were made to dig holes. What were they for? Were some of us to be executed?

We were still guessing when two more lorries drove onto the field and halted nearby. They were loaded with corpses. With the same brutality, a couple of Senegalese were pushed onto the first lorry to start moving the bodies into the gaping holes. The spare soil was then pushed over to fill the excavations. Six lorry-loads were dealt with in the same way. I was shocked at the brutal way the coloured men were being treated. It was my first

experience of the racist attitude of the Nazi German and it was not to be the last.

I was trying to get over my revulsion of what was taking place when two French POWs, accompanied by a young Belgian soldier, approached me. It is amazing how quickly information can spread. Of the 3,000 or so men assembled in the field, I must have been the only one who still had water in his bottle, for that is why I was approached. The young Belgian, who had somehow ended up far from the Belgian sector, was dying of thirst. I handed my bottle to him, at the same time telling him not to drink it all. He greedily gulped down the torture-relieving liquid and I had to grab the bottle from his grasp to save some for myself. As a gesture of thanks, the soldier handed me a large box of cigars, worth a fortune in those days of restrictions. But I had not yet started smoking and I had no intention of depriving him of such valuable ‘treasure’ which could still be of use to him.

The bodies had all been buried and the Senegalese were now digging a further large hole. In my mind, disturbing

thoughts began to germinate anew. Had the soldiers received orders to execute a number of the POWs as an act of reprisal? I was not wrong. The excavation completed, the 20 or so Senegalese were made to stand on the edge of the trench that was to become their grave. They knew what was coming. They came proudly to attention and fell, mowed down by the fire of a heavy machine-gun. The macabre show of German power over, several French POWs were made to fill the mass grave.

Before we were allowed to leave the execution site, the officer in charge addressed us in German. With Julien to translate, he justified the massacre of the Senegalese troops by claiming that had behaved with barbarity after capturing a German tank and murdering all its occupants. For the Germans, the killing of one of their enemies was an act of war and as such quite normal, whereas the killing of one of their number was regarded as murder.

Our group was the first to leave the field, the Belgian soldier having been ordered to remain with the French POWs, most likely to be sent to Germany along with

them. Having been the witness of a mass execution, I began to worry about my own future. That night we slept in Epernay. I remember seeing a large sign on the gable-end of a building, which proudly boasted it was *La Capitale du Champagne*. Our group was locked in a large garage on the town square, a German guarding the only door. I had only just settled and found a place among the garage machinery to rest our aching bones when another soldier came in, wheeling a barrow loaded with German bread which he handed out to us. After satisfying our need for something under our belt with that meagre ration, we all sank into a deep, welcoming sleep.

The night must have been far gone when a noise made by a rowdy drunken German soldier snapped us out of our shut-eye. The soldier was going round the half-asleep men, offering a glass of wine to each in turn. At the same time he kept repeating “Dunkirk fertig, Paris gefalen” (Dunkirk finished, Paris fallen). It didn’t take great knowledge of German to understand what he was celebrating. I felt so miserable about the sad news.

My mother's Belgian family had often told of the atrocities committed in Belgium by the German occupier during the First World War. I was unable to hold back the tears that overwhelmed me as the bragging soldier handed me a glass of wine. In a gesture of revolt and despair, I knocked the glass out of his hands. In the semi-darkness I did not see the look of fury on his face but, having dropped the bottle of wine, he grabbed me by the throat and started thumping my head on the concrete floor. He was screaming insanities that I did not understand and indeed did not care to.

My distress was so great that I did not feel the rough handling I was subjected to. I was in the state of mind one develops when one has given up. Julien, however, realised he had to do something to get me out of trouble or the soldier would not stop until it was too late. I was still conscious enough to hear him speaking to the raving mad German. What exactly was said I could not grasp, but it appeared to calm him. I felt his grip round my throat loosening until he finally let me go. The German picked up the bottle, then left the garage. There was no

more handing out of wine, but no-one cared. They were all glad to see the back of the German and see me out of trouble. Humour had not left the group as someone shouted “he should have come with a bottle of champagne”. Julien informed me later that he told the soldier that I had reacted the way I did because I had lost my whole family in an air-raid.

The next morning, having recovered from my bout of low spirits, I filled my bottle with water from the tap in the garage and off we went on another long march, again with no destination as no POW camp would accept our group. At the first halt we found, close to the ditch where we were resting, a pile of green mouldy German loaves. We were all groping for morsels of the smelly bread. The guards were looking on without any intention of intervening, but no doubt enjoying the scene. We had no shame for we were hungry. We had two more short halts which, as well as giving us much-needed but all-too-short rests, were also the scene of the sort of brutal treatment that one would not inflict on an animal. Late in the evening we were herded into an open field where we

spent the night. Fortunately, the weather remained good, but the groundsheet I had had to get rid of so hastily would have been most welcome on the moist ground. In the morning, we had to go through the regular nerve-racking *Appel* head-count: would someone be missing or not?

Since we left Saint-Dizier several of our comrades in misfortune had met the same fate as the first victim of the barbaric Nazi-Prussian *kultur* of oppression. When one of us faltered, the guards did not allow us to lend a helping hand. Because the pace was slowing, our comrade was pushed into the roadside ditch and we did not go far before hearing the deadly rifle shot which meant that our friend had been murdered.

During the next punishing trek, that proved to be the last, the struggle went on as usual, full of pain, sweat, hunger and thirst. One event that could be described as laughable did impart some agitation to the foot-dragging of the column and there was nothing the vicious guards could do. It was like trying to stop a wild stampede of animals. We had just come into a town square when our

eyes, ever on the look-out for food or drink, locked onto a pile of bottles which had been dumped on the pavement in front of a grocery shop. The content of the bottles was the colour of lemonade. A hundred pairs of avid hands were trying to grab a bottle of what would deliciously quench our thirst. I must have been one of the first to open his precious find. Alas, the smell of the liquid inside immediately indicated its nature: it was bleach.

Our discomfiture was great. The guards at least had a good laugh. It surprised us that they could laugh, maybe they were human after all? We had continuously been warned of the punishment handed out to anyone caught plundering, yet as we stampeded across the square, from the corner of my eye I saw a German officer smashing the window of a jewellery shop and helping himself to the ‘treasures’ inside. Maybe that was not considered plunder, just a reward for a brave Nazi warrior.

It was a dejected group that left the square. We were moving in a single line, marching in ditches on both sides of the road to let Wehrmacht transport make

headway towards the front. As we started filing across a crossroads a huge Mercedes staff car pulled up. Quite unconcerned, we kept moving but our lack of interest did not last. A young officer, a captain from what I could make out, was standing in the front seat of the vehicle. He was the typical figure of what Hitler and his clique called the Aryan race. With his blond hair, sticking out from under the peak of his cap, penetrating blue eyes, light complexion and rimless glasses, he look like a young man full of self-importance. In the rear seats of the car, I caught a glimpse of two senior officers. I gathered that they were of high rank from the red colour on their lapels, the greatcoat finish for generals upwards. The staff car, a six-wheeled vehicle, was also a sign of their rank. They had come from an easterly direction, maybe the German High Command in Germany where the *Blitzkrieg* was planned, in contrast with the West where static trench war was still the tactic in the early days. The two officers did not seem in the least concerned at what was going on at the crossroads, possibly discussing the rapid forward march of their troops.

The young captain, maybe to show his zeal in front of the senior officers, had grabbed a bullwhip and started lashing at the prisoners near the crossroads, myself among them. Freeing my hands from behind my head I went down on all fours, scrambling unhurt over the rough tarmac surface. Some of us were not so lucky. The small ball tip of the whip left nasty blue swellings on their faces. There was one satisfaction, however, in that two of our German guards also had their faces marked. The sight of that young Teuton officer will forever remain in my memory.

Afterwards we reassembled on the road beyond the crossroads and started climbing a steep rise that led to an industrial complex near Sainte-Ménehould which had been transformed into a POW transit camp. The factory gatehouse had become a guardroom and the high walls surrounding the factory were now surmounted by barbed wire. At the rear of the guardroom, a watchtower had been erected which was manned by a soldier with a heavy machine-gun. Two powerful searchlights were mounted on the tower. The column was outside the

entrance to the camp when the *feldwebel* disappeared into the guardroom, returning after a short time to report that we'd been accepted in the camp. I could not help worrying about what the future had in store, not that I had long to ponder on it.

The interrogation

As the group was escorted into the camp towards a large building, I was held back and ordered to hand over my identity documents in the guardroom. With no further questions, I was escorted to a room next to where my comrades had been taken. The room must have once been an office but it had been transformed into a detention cell. The door had been replaced with a barred version and the window over it had also been fitted with bars. The concrete floor was covered with snow chains which had been assembled in the factory for large vehicles. There remained little space for me to rest.

The next morning Julien brought me a mess-tin of thick soup, which he had had to queue for. He was also able to give me some information about the camp. It was

holding roughly 50,000 French POWs. The only meal for the day started to be served as early as 3am and the process went on until late in the afternoon. Latecomers to the queue had to forgo it. The camp commander made a gesture of understanding the ill-treatment we had endured, allowing 'civilians' to be first in the queue. I had only just finished my soup when a guard turned up to escort me back to the guardroom. I had decided to take things as they came and not worry too much. I was led into a small room, with a table and two chairs in the middle. I had an intuition that the scene was set for my questioning. I hadn't long to wait before an officer entered. He took one of the seats and told me to take the other. In perfect English he introduced himself as Captain X (I have forgotten his name) from German intelligence.

The interrogation took the whole morning. The questions related mainly to my family and background, my place of birth and date of arrival in Europe. At different moments he would slip in questions about Britain, hoping to catch me out. I could genuinely not answer

them for I'd never set foot on British soil. In the end, the fact that I had never been to Blighty must have got me out of trouble. I explained that my mother and I had made the sea journey from Sydney to Antwerp and that my father had followed later, making the journey as a clandestine passenger on various cargo ships. After the nerve-racking interrogation a guard took me back to my cell. I found my mess-tin filled with thick broth of an undefined flavour which Julien had pushed through the bars.

That afternoon I saw a POW being marched to his execution, escorted by two soldiers in front and two behind. The burial party, two other French POWs, were following with picks and shovels. An officer led the firing squad. The condemned man, a tall Senegalese, proudly marching upright, towered over his executioners. His only crime was the colour of his skin and maybe his bearing. They disappeared from sight around the corner of the building. Next was the unmistakeable sound of bullets hitting the outside brick wall on the end of my cell. Late in the afternoon a

second execution squad marched past my cell, this time a French POW who, I was later told, had made a bid for freedom. Again, the dismal sound of bullets hitting the wall.

I started feeling intense disquiet, intensified by the daily scene taking place on the open-air execution pad facing my cell. The slaughter was summary and cruel; the victim was finished off each time by the officer in charge, who fired one shot into his head with his Luger. The firing squads and slaughter only increased my apprehension, all the more so as I did not know what the outcome of my interrogation would be.

The next morning I was again escorted to the interrogation room. The officer was already sitting at the table and beckoned me to take the other chair. His first move was to offer me a cigarette, which he took out of a Woodbine packet, asking me what brand I smoked in Britain. As luck would have it, I was a non-smoker. From the first day, there was something not very serious about his questions. Towards the end of the second day, the captain started lecturing me about the virtues of the

Nazis, the grandeur of the German Army and the enormous task that lay ahead of it. Did he really believe in what he was saying, or was it – as I was able to confirm in the latter years of the war – just the result of propaganda brainwashing? Was the interrogation just a cat-and-mouse game? Was he just trying to make me fall into a trap?

On the other hand, it was possible that he had made up his mind from the beginning. Had my young age played in my favour? I'll admit that the officer, who was also young, remained calm and polite throughout the long hours of the interrogation. The attitude and behaviour would have been quite different had the SS or the Gestapo conducted the questioning. On the third day I was told that I would soon be able to re-join my comrades in the large hall and my compromising identity document was returned. At midday I was escorted back to my cell, where the mess-tin of thick broth had, as before, been pushed through the bars. The good news was only partly good as I also learned that I was being sent to Germany with one of the convoys. The prospect

of being sent to the Nazi homeland and its horrors was far from one for rejoicing. Furthermore, for how long would it be?

Friends

My closest friends greeted my return to the group with relief. I found a place to sleep in the over-crowded hall on a pile of snow chains. There was not much choice: one end of the hall was crowded with POWs, the other end with suffering and dying cattle. My ‘happy day’ was marred by two further executions. The POWs were compelled to salute German officers and warrant officers. One had failed to do so and, worse, refused to relent. Another POW was caught red-handed, milking one of the cows stabled in the hall where we were being held. His action was intended partly out of kindness, for cows which have once been milked must thereafter be milked every other day. Otherwise, their milk curdles, causing painful abscesses and death. That was something I learned during my later years in Germany. The guard who caught the animal’s benefactor did not see it as an act of mercy, but rather an act of plunder punishable by

death. This, I later found out, was also the penalty for Germans.

Julien had successfully been able to obtain a *laissez-passer* to visit the German military authorities (*kommandatur*) where he was allowed to see the commandant, who was also the POW camp commander, with the aim of clearing us of the stigma of *franc-tireur*. Once we were accepted simply as civilian POWs, we were given more freedom within the camp. Julien decided to go further by attempting to have us set free.

I took the opportunity now of being able to move around to look thoroughly for a possible escape route and told Pierre of my plan. Alas, the Germans had as usual been thorough with their security. I was unable to find a way out and abandoned the idea. In spite of my failure, I was determined not to be sent to Germany with the other POWs. Our group had been designated to fetch drinking water from the Auve River for the 50,000 in the camp. There was no fresh water available in Sainte-Ménehould, nor was there any for the camp. The retreating French

Army had blown up the town's water tower and pumping station as a form of scorched-earth warfare.

To perform the huge task in hand, we had been provided with a two-wheel handcart and large wooden barrel, which at one time must have contained wine. It was immense, with a capacity of nearly 4,000 litres. We were told that we would have to make two journeys, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Twenty men were designated for the mission and counted before leaving the guardroom, with a guard escorting the team. I was included in the first journey. The trip down was easy, a piece of cake. On the river bank a field water purification unit was filling the camp water tanker, which was intended for the kitchen and German troops only. Once we had filled our barrel, we set off back towards the camp. We were moving through a ghost town. The local inhabitants had fled as the German Army approached, this part of France having also experienced the barbarism of the Kaiser's army in the last war.

Our German escort allowed us to have a rest. He must have been a reasonable man. With self-explanatory hand

signals, he pointed at a large house near where we had stopped. Further explanations were not required. We all rushed into it in search of something to put under our (missing) belts. Alas, the house was empty and whatever had once been edible had reached a state of advanced decay. Inside the house I told Pierre, who was also in the team, that I was going to remain in the cellar, await nightfall and make my escape. Pierre quite rightly reminded me of the consequences for the team. In the first place, when the guard realised that one man was missing, he would not leave the house until the escapee was found. Pierre reminded me that we would be counted on arrival at the guardroom, where the penalty of three executions for one escapee had so far not been lifted. I resigned myself to dropping my latest escape plan for the time being.

Julien had told me of his plan for the liberation of my companions. Even though I would not be included, I had no intention of letting him down. The task he set himself, to persuade the military authorities in Sainte-Ménehould to let the civilian POWs go free, was no simple

undertaking but Julien was no ordinary man. He had lived for many years in Heidelberg and successfully completed an architectural course there before the war. He therefore knew all the particular traits of the German race. It still took him some time to succeed in his endeavour. The trips to the *kommmandatur* were frequent and long-lasting, owing to the number of men involved. Each day he would take a list of names, have them cleared and a *laissez-passer* made out for each. Days went by. Untiringly, Julien kept covering the long distance to the town. Each time he tried to have a *laissez-passer* made out in my name, but each time he received the same answer: that I was being sent to Germany with one of the POW convoys. Time was running out for us to find a solution to my dilemma.

I finally proposed a solution which, if it failed, would put us both in a dangerous position. On the other hand, there was a chance that it might succeed. First Julien had to get his hands on a blank form, which he had to try to obtain during what would be his last visit to the *kommmandatur*. The blank form then had to be altered

so as to mislead any German who inspected the document. The whole scheme was in the hands of Julien, who was not only a daredevil but a dab hand at sketching. Once in possession of the form, with the drawing pencils he had been allowed to keep, it would be child's play to falsify the document. That last morning I saw him going off on the mission that would be our final chance. I stood at the entrance of our room waiting for him to return the whole morning. It was almost midday when I saw him coming back round the corner. When he saw me, he started waving the documents in his hands.

That evening Julien was very busy, imitating the German gothic handwriting and sketching a truer-than-life swastika. He went even further in his attempt to facilitate my escape. On the day set by the authorities for the group's release, Julien made us form ranks on the empty space near the guardroom. I was placed in the middle. Only Julien and Pierre knew of my plan, for in all large groups there are always shady characters who can't be

trusted, often all the more so when living in adverse conditions.

We marched past the guardroom holding the liberation document high above our heads. So far, all was well, our escape plan was running smoothly. As we left the camp gate, we were taken aback when we saw a group of German officers and NCOs formed in a line on the edge of the road with the camp commandant in front. We marched past, doing our best to keep in a straight line. The Colonel gave us a smart military salute and in perfect French added: “Bonne route, bonne chance.”

We did not remain together for long. After a few miles, Pierre and I were left with a *compagnon de route*, the shifty individual who earlier in our tribulations I had seen going through the pockets of dead soldiers who had fallen defending their country. It seemed we were lumbered with the b----- who did not seem inclined to leave our company.

Trouble comes my way

During that difficult period of the 1940 Battle of France I was continuously getting into trouble or, as one might say, putting my foot in it. Pierre was wearing solid boots, the same that he had been wearing in the coalmines. He had worked as a miner since he was 14, which had given him strength of character and large, strong shoulders. I, on the other hand, who had been employed in the quality control department of a chemical plant, had no need for heavy boots. All I'd needed were what one might call light town shoes. The soles of my shoes had by now worn so thin that I could feel even the smallest pebble on the surface of the roads, jabbing into the sore soles of my feet, still raw from barely healed blisters. My main concern was to get a hold of some decent footwear, although without having to enter a deserted house to get them which, if found out, would be considered an act of pillage punishable by death.

We kept moving, passing one ghost village after the other. We were progressing at a steady and brisk pace, in my case virtually hopping rather than marching to avoid

putting my foot down on some sharp object. The whole population of the vast area through which we were travelling had abandoned their houses, animals and fields. Here and there a stray cat or a dog could be seen. The lush, green fields were dotted with the carcasses of dead cattle which had succumbed either to thirst or lack of milking. There were no horses to be seen. They had been ‘requisitioned’ by the victor, which was not considered looting any more than the action of the German officer I saw smashing a jewellery shop window and helping himself to the booty.

We had entered another ghost village, the footpath running alongside a long row of hedges with, here and there, a small gate giving access to the front lawns of the houses. Through one of these latticed gates my ever-searching eye glimpsed a pair of what looked like riding boots. My decision was soon taken and, entering the small lawn, my hands reached for the coveted treasure. I had barely grasped the boots when I heard a bellowing in a language I did not understand, although I could guess the meaning. In a flash, I realised that they were not

riding boots but German jackboots that had been placed on the grave of a fallen soldier. Maybe his steel helmet was missing or too badly damaged when he was buried.

I had entered the property through a small gate, which was now blocked by the immense bulk of a German soldier. To this day I do not remember how I managed to escape. Did I jump over the five-foot high hedge or barge through it? I do remember, however, running down the street with the German shouting at me and giving chase. My shoes were light, his jackboots heavy. It did not take long to get way ahead of him and once I'd caught up with my two companions we maintained the pace. Amid the pandemonium I even forgot my sore feet.

My luck was about to change for the better. We were making progress along an open road when I noticed a large bundle of clothes at the bottom of an embankment. I beckoned the others to keep going whilst I went down to search through the bundle for footwear of any kind. I had to rummage through most of the garments before at last finding what I so badly needed – a pair of sturdy farmer's working boots. They were well-made but it

only took a glance to see they were a few sizes too big. I didn't hesitate to take them as they would without doubt offer protection for my sore feet. I climbed back up the steep bank, sat on the edge of the road ditch and started swapping my footwear. My old faithful town shoes went flying into the field below. I had no socks to worry about; they had disintegrated into threads some time ago. The newly acquired boots at first felt really comfortable. I set off in a hurry to catch up with my companions. What a relief to walk on the rough surface of the road without having to look where my foot was going to land. However, another inconvenience had to be put up with. My feet were so small inside the boots that I was taking one step forward and slipping a couple of inches back inside. Nevertheless, I was soon marching at the side of my companions.

We made good progress and entered the suburbs of Vouziers late in the afternoon. The town was deserted, as had been every locality we had crossed so far. More by luck than judgement we had arrived near the marshalling yard. A locomotive with steam and smoke belching out

and a long line of empty goods wagons was on one of the tracks. A crew of soldiers were standing near the wagons, enjoying a thick soup before setting off. Our ‘undesirable’ companion, whom we had just realised spoke German, approached the soldiers begging for something to eat. One of them offered him the mess-tin from which he was eating. The human scavenger immediately grabbed it and started eating the leftovers. One of the other soldiers offered me his mess-tin too, but I gestured that I was not hungry; in reality, the idea of eating from it filled me with revulsion.

We found out that the rail convoy would soon be leaving for Germany. The route north would take it through Belgium. We waited patiently and when the train started we climbed into an open wagon unnoticed. Once inside we settled ourselves for a long journey and fatigue soon took the better of us. We sank into a deep slumber, rocked to sleep by the movements of the wagon. We awoke when the train stopped with a jolt.

I poked my head out to find out where we had halted and was astonished to read on the station board that we were

in Walcourt in Belgium. I woke the other two to give them the good news. Pierre and I decided we had gone far enough and left the wagon without being seen. Our unwanted travelling companion decided to go on.

Taking advantage of the early morning, we were able to climb the station's security fence without being seen by a sentry. We started on the last lap of what had been a long journey strewn with danger and hardships. Now the bright morning sun and the feeling of being free in Belgium again made us forget our hunger, thirst and fatigue. We were marching briskly, almost humming a martial song. In a village we passed through we noticed that some of the inhabitants had returned to re-start their lives under very different conditions. The field-grey uniform of the occupier was omnipresent though and identity documents had to be shown. In our case, the release documents from the Sainte-Ménehould camp. It was getting late and the curfew started at 8pm. We decided to make a halt in the village we had just entered, Gerpinnes.

On the village square we saw a farmer feeding his cattle. Together, we approached him to ask for shelter for the night. His reaction was most unusual and a precursor of what the attitude of farmers was to be throughout the war years. He was willing to let us sleep in the barn, but only if I let him have the boots I was wearing. I had not expected my heavy boots to bring out the greed of the farmer but I agreed to his bargain. The 'kind' farmer was prepared to give me a pair of slippers to complete the journey and, on that basis, we were allowed to get our heads down in the comfort of a thick layer of straw.

The early crowing of the cock roused us the next morning. The farmer was already up and about and he wished us farewell in an offhand sort of manner, there being no intention on his part of giving us even a piece of bread.

The journey to Charleroi took the rest of the morning. When I arrived home my father was in the garden. The shock of seeing me with my long beard, hair hanging over my shoulders, frayed trousers and emaciated figure made him step back, almost collapsing. He admitted later

that at first he didn't recognise me. My mother was quicker to recover from her surprise and was soon busy preparing a slap-up meal with what the German occupiers had left as survival rations. That night Pierre slept in one of the spare beds. In the morning he said he'd had a good sleep – but I could not say the same. I found it so difficult to sleep that I had to make my bed on the floorboards, where I eventually drifted off into a deep slumber.

The next day Pierre left on the last lap of his long journey. He still had some 20 kilometres to go.

Chapter 2
The Occupation of Belgium

The effect on my family

The occupation had a dramatic effect on our family from the start. My father was refused access to the factory where he had worked prior to May 1940 by the Belgian personnel. The reason given him was why should an Englishman be allowed to work when Belgians were prisoners in Germany? My father returned home downhearted, yet one could understand the general feeling in Belgium, for the media, orchestrated by German propaganda, blamed the British corps for the Allied debacle.

Having returned from France at the end of September 1940 I had no better luck, for the management of the chemical plant where I'd been working until May had been taken over by the Germans and, because of my origins, they refused to allow me to take up my old post in the quality control laboratory.

From the first day of the occupation the German authorities managed all major industries, the railways, post office, telegraph and telephone. All heads of police and gendarmes, all town and commune authorities, were supplanted by individuals collaborating with the occupying army. My father was told to find a job in the mines, which he did at the infamous 'Bois du Cazier', where over 250 miners would later lose their lives in an underground inferno in 1956. He had been working there for over a month when he returned one day with his back and shoulders covered in deep blue scratches caused by coal dust in wounds. He told us that he had been trapped in a very narrow passage from which he had had to be rescued.

To see our father so badly hurt was too much for us. Being the eldest son I decided that, as he was unable to find a decent job since he was British, he would stay at home. I got a job on a building site involving the reconstruction of a lock on the Charleroi-Brussels canal. The project also involved rebuilding a large bridge, the retreating French Army having blown up both.

My two brothers returned from France in November 1940. The younger went back to school and the older started work with me. With two of us bringing in income, life became somewhat easier for the family. I also decided to help local families from Commonwealth backgrounds who had been so shamefully abandoned to their fate. The occupying authorities had informed these families that they had to remain within five kilometres of Charleroi, so it was difficult for them to visit the farms, some far from the town, to obtain food. A friend of my father came to the house with what we thought was good news; he had been contacted by a Belgian who told him he was a *passeur d'hommes* and could get us to Britain. That evening we talked it over. As only the men in our family were affected, we decided to remain in Belgium and not leave our mother behind.

We soon learned that the Belgian was a stooge paid by the Germans to trap Belgians trying to reach Britain. Five men – including my father's friend Jack Pullen and a priest – were caught after meeting the *passeur* at a pub in Charleroi prior to departure. The five were told to

hurry and board a truck waiting in the street. A helping hand from inside the truck made boarding easier, but it was the hand of a German soldier. Jack, an Australian, spent three years in a concentration camp.

To help my compatriots, unable to leave Charleroi to search for extra food, I would cycle to the French border at weekends, await nightfall, and make for the nearest farm. Although France had more stringent food rationing regulations than Belgium, in spite of the Pétain administration's pro-Nazi policies, I was able to exchange tobacco for flour or butter from farmers. The border crossing was not without danger. French police and German soldiers patrolled the frontier day and night. It took a lot of patience and luck to await a gap between the patrols. The 35-kilometre return journey to Charleroi was an exercise in running the gauntlet, with German mobile patrols and Belgian gendarmes separately setting traps to catch black marketeers.

From experience I found that it was preferable to be arrested by a German patrol. If they did not arrest you, they would confiscate only part of one's load. The

gendarmes, on the other hand, would confiscate every bit of the load for their own use, their actions being accepted, even if not encouraged, by the occupying authorities. The return journey and its dangers were made less hazardous thanks to the assistance of brave villagers, who would warn me of the presence of German or gendarme checkpoints. As a result, I often had to alter my route back to Charleroi, meaning more kilometres to cover. I was engaged in this type of 'traffic' for my family's wellbeing and that of my compatriots until my life suddenly changed for the worse.

My father's deportation

Thanks to a pro-British friend, my father found a job on a building site in Charleroi in March 1941. His morale abruptly changed for the better as a result. It was his first day at work and he had left home early in the morning. I had still not left when a German Army car pulled up outside our front gate. Two burly *feldgendarmen* (military police) emerged, one ordering my father out of the same vehicle. He had been arrested on the building

site as if he was the worst of criminals. He was led into the house and told to pack some clothes and a blanket.

While we were packing in the back room, the *feldgendarm* who escorted him inside had gone into the front room. I pushed my father towards the back door with the intention of helping him escape into the woods at the rear. Our house must have been under surveillance and the existence of the back door known, for when I opened it I found myself face-to-face with the second *feldgendarm*, who could not help gloating over our disappointment.

We went back into the room and the other officer said in a compassionate tone and bad French “guerre bientôt finie” (war soon over). As they walked away, I grabbed a chair with the intention of smashing it down on the head of the German walking behind my father. I was so distraught that I was unable to think clearly, but my mother, who was behind me, grabbed the chair. Had I accomplished my extremely foolish act, I’m sure none of the Beeston family would have come out of the house alive.

My father was incarcerated in the prison in Charleroi, along with patriots waiting to be questioned by the Gestapo or executed, as well as criminals serving their term. My mother, who would not let things rest, paid several visits to the *kommandatur* until we were finally allowed to see our father. On our first prison visit we were verbally abused by the guard on duty. When we entered, he was sat at a desk on one side of the large visitors' room, which was divided in two by thick bars. My mother took a seat and my brothers and I, as young men usually do, leant against the wall, hands in pockets.

The guard suddenly broke into a fit of uncontrolled frenzy, his face flushed. For a moment I hoped he was about to collapse but he snapped at us, in fairly good French, sneering: "Get your hands out of your pockets, you lazy lot." If there was one thing the Germans would not accept from young foreigners, it was seeing them with their hands in their pockets while they were hard at work, putting things straight in Europe – or rather destroying it.

The waiting to see our father in the prison was always a long and stressful experience. We never knew if he would still be inside. Then one day the inevitable happened; we arrived at the prison to be told that he had been transferred to Germany. In a way it was a relief. It was no secret that, when the underground movement carried out an act of sabotage, the Germans would first select prison inmates to be executed.

My father had spent three months behind bars before being deported to Germany and it took another two months before we received a letter from him. He was allowed to write from an internee camp at Kreuzburg in Silesia, on the German border with Poland. In the month following my father's departure to Germany, every Commonwealth citizen living in the Charleroi region was arrested and deported; their only luck was that they did not spend a day in Charleroi's prison.

Life in occupied Belgium was becoming more and more hazardous, the soft-glove approach of the Germans changing into a true Nazi attitude, with executions of hostages following acts of sabotage or the killing of

Germans by the resistance movement. The Rexists, led by Léon Degrelle, collaborated with the Germans and formed a unit copying the occupier, with two distinct branches. One seconded the Gestapo in their repressive actions and were even more ruthless than the Germans in dealing with their own people. The other branch wore the same uniform as the infamous SS, with the exception that they had a "Belgium" insignia embroidered on the shoulder. This unit arrogantly patrolled the streets of Belgian towns and roamed the countryside to arrest unfortunate supposed black marketeers, who were only trying to find food to supplement their legal daily ration. The punishment was the same: imprisonment or the risk of being part of a reprisal execution.

Joining the Resistance

I had approached a school friend, Aimé Barbier, whom I knew was in a resistance group. He refused to let me join, which once more was luck on my part. A short time afterwards, he was arrested with his section. After the war I found out that they had been beheaded. My brother Joe joined up, talking his friend Yvon into getting

involved with him with a plan to intercept German trains carrying plundered machinery from France. The rail convoys from France had to travel through Charleroi en route to Germany. At a certain point, a difficult climb up a steep gradient, the convoy would move almost at walking pace. This allowed the two ‘saboteurs’ to leap aboard a wagon and busy themselves with hurriedly pushing some of the plundered machinery down the embankment. The venture took a dramatic turn when, for some unknown reason, the convoy stopped halfway up the climb.

The outcome was immediate: as Yvon jumped off the wagon, a bullet struck him in the back of the head. My brother waited a short moment, jumping only when he saw the man who had fired, a black uniformed Rexist, starting to walk away. Joe crawled under the wagon and then to a more remote hiding spot under other wagons – just in time, for the guard who had shot Yvon was back with what looked like his commander. From where he was lying Joe could see it all, even hearing the guard say “he is dead”. Had Joe jumped first he would have been

the one lying on the track cinders. He waited a while and started running when the two men left. When he arrived home he was as white as a ghost, still in shock after seeing his friend with a large gash on the back of his head. It was the end of the venture, all the more so as Yvon's mother blamed Joe for the death of her son, even threatening to go to the German authorities and denounce him, although nothing came of it.

I was involved in a lesser way in harassing the Germans. Together with a school friend, we decided to sabotage their army lorries parked at night on the main square in Charleroi. The action was quite simple, but dangerous; it amounted to dropping a lump of sugar in a vehicle's fuel tank. The result was that the carburettor would immediately gum up, bringing the lorry to a standstill. The following day we returned to find a German guard patrolling the square, so that was the end of that.

In August 1941 I read in the local newspaper that a building firm in Charleroi was looking for tradesmen to work in Abbeville on the reconstruction of the town. It gave an address where one could sign the engagement

contract. With two friends and my brother Joe, we proceeded to the address given in the newspaper to find that it was one of the chic cafés in town. There was no mistake, it was the right place. We entered the café to find that the large room was already occupied by a lot of people, maybe customers or job seekers like the four of us. We were given a 'chit' (a note) with a number on it and, after finding a free table, I ordered drinks. When I tried to pay, I was told that the drinks were on the house.

At one end of the room I noticed a large table with four chairs. In due course, four individuals walked in from a side door. I found out later that they were what we called, in those tumultuous days, des *marchands d'hommes*, who were practically slave merchants. Once they were seated, one of them started calling out numbers which referred to the chits we were given at the entrance. When our turn came we were surprised to receive a rail warrant to Abbeville and a week's pay in RMs (Reichmarks). We were also given the date of our departure.

On the date given on the warrant we boarded a train which was to take us direct to our destination. Over 1,000 men were on board. We entered Abbeville's small railway station less than five hours later. From where the train halted, I could see the damage done by the Luftwaffe's air-raids. There were rows of German soldiers with fixed bayonets lining both platforms which sent a stab of apprehension through every one of us. We were not given much time to ponder the situation; a bellowing *feldwebel* had us vacating the carriages in no time.

We were ordered to form ranks and left the station flanked by soldiers on either side. We didn't have far to go before reaching a camp with barbed wire fencing and a guard at the entrance gate. We were made to assemble in a large open area with three large barrack blocks on two sides. The *feldwebel* confiscated everyone's identity documents.

Together with Joe and my two friends, we managed to stay together, finding beds in the first barrack on our left. We had barely finished putting our belongings in the

lockers when the *feldwebel* (him again) came charging through the corridor, ordering us back out onto the grassed patch which was to be our future parading area. All present, he led us to the next block which was a canteen with kitchen and administration sections. We finally received something to put under our belt, the usual thick German broth with a lump of brown bread, which always tasted sour. It was getting late so we were allowed to return to our rooms. Some got their heads down, me among them, others playing poker until late in the night.

The next morning, after a frugal breakfast consisting of a lump of brown bread with a spoonful of marmalade and mug of ersatz coffee, we were driven and brutally pushed onto the grass assembly patch. Several army lorries were parked on one side and a Mercedes staff car arrived, with a man (or should I say an ape, but no, it really was a man) sitting on the left-side wing. The vehicle came to an abrupt halt, the man bounced off his precarious seat and, like a mad dog, set about us, pushing, kicking, even hitting those too slow in moving

with his fist. In less time than it takes to write, we were all on the trucks, leaving the ugly, red-haired ape-man standing alone. The truck I was in took us to the airfield.

During the early days of the war it had been an RAF airfield with an HQ in the town. The Nazi chiefs knew that the British would be the toughest egg to crack, so the Germans concentrated most of their *blitzkrieg* onslaught on the British air and ground forces.

At the airfield Joe and I were told to report to an office inside a Nissen hut, where a Luftwaffe officer told us to replace the broken windowpanes, glass and putty being at hand. The job did not take us long and since I did not know how long we had to wait, we decided to have a look inside the larger Romney hut alongside. It was spotless and the floor had been painted in a grey gloss finish. Inside, a group of Luftwaffe soldiers were carefully folding parachutes. In each, they inserted a label with their name on it. I asked one of the soldiers why the label was needed. He replied that, if the parachute did not open when the pilot jumped to save his life, every possible effort was made to retrieve the faulty

item and the label with the name of the soldier who folded the parachute. The culprit would be accused of sabotaging the war effort, a serious crime punishable either by death or – what could be worse – a life sentence in a concentration camp. The soldier also told us that a small stone inside the parachute could easily rip it to shreds during the jump.

The army lorry finally turned up to take us back to the camp for something to eat. We'd been without a bite since the early hours of the morning. The evening meal did not differ from the day before and remained the same throughout our short spell in the camp. That evening, as twilight slowly spread its grey cloak over the airfield, we were startled by a noise we had not heard since the days of the Nazi invasion in Belgium: sirens sounding their strident alarm. But where could we go? There were no shelters, not even an open trench to crawl into. There was nothing for it but to stay put and hope for the best.

The next morning we found out that an RAF fighter had strafed the airfield, causing some damage to the Luftwaffe planes. We assembled in the field where, as

before, we were handled brutally by the same ugly being. This time we found ourselves joined by a large number of men at the airfield. From a truckload of digging implements, some of us were given a shovel, others a pick. We were ordered to excavate a long, shallow trench for an electric cable. We had not made much progress when the guard in charge started bellowing. Everyone understood he was warning us of another Spitfire strafe and, as one man, we all leapt into the trench. The more he shouted at us to get out, the deeper we tried to get in, for we took his barking as further warning of the danger. We finally gathered that there was no Spitfire and, feeling somewhat embarrassed, we all crawled out.

When the trench was deep enough, the heavy electric cable lying its full length had to be picked up and carried on our shoulders. Every man – bar one – rested the cable on his right shoulder. When we had moved it into the exact position he wanted, the German ordered us to drop it back into the trench. The unlucky comrade with the cable on his left shoulder was thrown to the ground and

the cable broke his neck. We managed to free him, but it was too late; he had succumbed to his injury. The soldier did not care much about the sad fate of the unfortunate man: we were ordered to lay his body on the grass, away from the trench, to be picked up by a lorry.

That evening a feeling of sadness pervaded our barrack block. The next morning it was back to the field, but this time we did not see our tormentor, indeed I did not see him again. I was taken to an anti-aircraft gun post, the gun mounted on top of a shelter with a metre of soil above it. There was an accommodation space large enough for five men. A Luftwaffe *feldwebel* put me wise to the job I was to carry out – the whole interior of the bunker had to be painted, all materials and equipment having previously been delivered. I started immediately and soon discovered that I fallen in with a reasonable group of soldiers. They not only helped move some beds that were too heavy for me to shift, but even more astonishingly told me to sit at their table for the midday meal and share it with them.

I was sure that the *feldwebel* had a lot of influence on the behaviour of the young soldiers, and this conviction was confirmed when I once saw him bent double in a fit of coughing which I knew from experience – having lived in a mining area – to be a miner's cough. On one occasion, after another of his coughing fits, he said "Ich bin kaput und Deutschland auch kaput" (I am finished and Germany is also finished). He then told me that he had been working in the coalmines of Westphalia in the Ruhr. During his fits of depression the young German soldiers did not try to contradict him; on the contrary they even approved. It was 1941 and already the morale of the German troops was taking a tumble. Maybe the war in the East had something to do with it.

I remained on that job for several days, once witnessing an air-raid. The phone rang and the whole section rushed up the steps leading to the bunker, the *Feldwebel* shouting "Spitfire" for the benefit of us all. They must have practiced a lot at manning the anti-aircraft gun for it was not long before I heard him shouting "bereit" (ready). I remained below from where I could hear the

gun being handled. There was no shooting and when they all came down after the alarm was over the *Feldwebel* told me that the Spitfire was flying too low and too fast. He had learned enough French to make it clear to me.

After finishing that last job, I was taken to another place where I had to dig a trench between two buildings to receive an electric cable. I was on my own again, which was not the result of an order from the main office but rather the decision of the truck driver who took the working team round to the different jobs. I had not long been digging away at my small trench when a Focke-Wulf fighter plane taxiing to the airstrip came to halt a few yards from where I was toiling at the hard road surface. The pilot climbed down from the cockpit and, leaving the plane's engine ticking over, walked away towards one of the nearby buildings. Once he had disappeared inside, a mad idea took root inside my brain. I dropped my pick and started walking over to the plane. I moved slowly, glancing here and there in case a German approached. With stealthy progress I was at last

at the plane's wing and heaved myself onto it. I glanced inside the cockpit and my foolish idea of hi-jacking a German fighter and flying to Britain was quickly shattered. There were so many switches and dials that my eagerness vanished at once. The only item of the plane's equipment that I could identify was the joystick with its press button switch to fire the machine-guns.

I was not given much time to ponder over my failure for the pilot's yelling jerked me out of my disappointment. I climbed down hurriedly from the plane's wing and walked back to my trench. The pilot returned to the plane without a word, for he had been wrong to leave it unattended. Later I was still digging away at my trench when I observed the aircraft being pushed to its hangar. One of its three propeller blades was badly bent and bloodstains were visible on the fuselage. From what I could make out, the pilot had been in a dogfight with a Spitfire and had come out of it wounded but still able to crash-land with only slight damage to the plane.

On the second weekend in the camp we were paid for one week's work only, the remaining week being held as

a guarantee that we would fulfil our contract. On the Sunday, my brother and I decided to set off for a long trip to the French free zone – and, with a little luck, onto Britain. We travelled light to avoid being too conspicuous. It was early morning when we crawled under the barbed wire fence, after making sure the guard patrolling the boundary was well out of sight and hearing. We set off at a brisk pace, eager to put the greatest possible distance between the camp and us. We had only covered a few miles when the River Somme barred our road to freedom. I found myself in exactly the same predicament as I had at the Marne with my companion Pierre during the Battle of France. My brother could not swim and the river was too wide for me to try to help him across. We went upstream and found a bridge, however a German guard was patrolling it. We found another bridge downstream but it was also guarded. Time was passing and we knew we had to get back to the camp before lights out when the entrance was closed, with guards at the gate and along the boundary fence. It would be too risky to try entering the way we

left. So that was the end of our attempted bid for freedom.

Escape

Two more weeks went by with the same working routines and the excitement of the almost daily Spitfire strafing. I had no intention of having my young life brought to an end by friendly machine-gun fire, so after receiving our week's pay on the Saturday I let my brother and two friends know that I had decided to make a break for it that same evening and that, if they were willing to join in the adventure, they would be welcome. The three were unanimously in favour, for they were not too keen to participate in the coming 'festivity' that the Spitfires usually created. But it would mean leaving the camp without our identity documents, which were held by the Germans to stop us deserting.

That night, at about 3am, I woke the others and we stealthily left the room, crawling under the hut and laying in wait for the guard to pass in front of our hiding-place. We hoped to determine how long it would take

him to complete a round. The next time he passed, we waited a little and made for the fence, which luckily was of only a single row.

Once we were on the other side and out of range I took the decision to go to the right, guessing – rather than being certain – that we would then be going North, which was the direction we wanted to take. We had been walking for about two hours when we came to a railway line. I was certain that Abbeville was to the right, but what lay to the left? I had to hope for the best and have faith in my lucky star, which had so far never let me down. I decided that we should go left and follow the railway sleepers so as to be sure of reaching a station. The going was not very comfortable but at least we would not have to make detours to avoid obstacles.

So far I was right with my guessing, for at about 8am we sighted a small railway station; it was already open and we were able to get tickets to Charleroi, which was unusual for so small a station. We had two hours to wait for the train which would take us to Amiens. We changed there without trouble, and at the next stop,

Douai, without a problem. The following station, Lille, would be a more difficult as it was a key junction and communications centre for rail traffic from the west and south of France. Our train pulled into Lille's central station in the early afternoon. I had a look round for a possible German police presence before disembarking. All appeared quiet, there were no grey uniforms to be seen.

We proceeded to a train bound for Germany, which I knew would pass through Charleroi. Having found a free compartment, we settled down for the last lap of our hazardous journey. I felt restless, the journey so far had been too easy and something was bound to happen. Throughout my dangerous tribulations I have always been aware of a sixth sense directing and guiding me in my decisions. This time I felt I had to go to the carriage window to scrutinize the multitude of people hurrying along the station platform. Four men were boarding the last carriage and gave a forewarning of disaster for our escape plan. Two were easily recognisable as French police – always ready to cooperate with the Germans –

the other two no less recognisable in their long leather coats and soft hats with brims pulled over their eyes: Gestapo, without a doubt. With no identity documents and having deserted our workplace, which was part of the Atlantic Wall defences, there could be also no doubt as to the outcome if we were arrested: a non-return ticket to a concentration camp.

I had to think and act fast before the men reached our compartment. I could sense the pleasure they would have in arresting four deserters, but I was not yet beaten. On the run, one's wits are constantly alert, you are on the lookout and prepared to act at the slightest sign of a danger. When we boarded the train I had noticed that the carriage next to ours had a sign in German attached to it, "Nür fur Wehrmacht und Angehorigen" (only for German forces and family). I was almost certain that the Gestapo would not dare set foot inside that carriage, still less a French policeman.

I quickly appraised *le pour et le contre* and urged the others to follow me into the corridor, through the passage linking the two carriages, and into the

Wehrmacht corridor. This was where luck would play its part. Either the Germans would accept our presence and we would be safe, or we would be rebuked by the soldiers and arrested by the Gestapo. I did not push arrogance to the point of taking seats in the compartment; instead, we sat on our bundles of belongings in the corridor. To every German that pushed through the corridor past our bundles I mumbled “arbeit Deutschland” (working in Germany) at their querying looks, to which the reply was “gut, gut” (good) and we felt safe at last.

The next difficulty we faced was our arrival at Charleroi, where we could not leave the carriage on the platform side as the compartment windows all faced that way and there was a risk of our being seen. The only way out was to leave the carriage on the other side and hope we were not run over by a train on the other track. In the event, we all disembarked safely.

The next day I went to the town hall to have new identity documents made out. The clerk behind the small office window addressed me and my brother with an attitude of

disdain. I had anticipated that my request for the documents would be met with some reluctance. He replied that he would report us to the German authorities. This pen-pusher's answer provoked something like an electric shock. My hand shot out and, before he was able to retreat, I grabbed him by the collar and tie. With a vicious jerk, I pulled him towards me, his body halfway through the small hatch and his face turning blue. I barked rather than spoke to him with words full of menace. I told him that if he denounced us, I or someone else would denounce him to the resistance movement for cooperating with the occupier. With that I let him go. He returned to his desk and started making out our new identity documents.

I admit that the man's reactions were explicable in a way. Had I been caught with new documents when the originals were in the works camp office in Abbeville, the Gestapo would have arrested not only us but also the clerk for being an accomplice. I could, however, see that he was more interested in peacefully pushing his pen and browsing through his antiquated, dust-covered official

documents than in helping a compatriot in danger. There were many Belgians who paid with their lives for helping others to escape arrest by the Gestapo; why should he, from behind the safety of his window, try to help someone in trouble? It was so easy for him.

Things finally turned out for the best. The camp administration office in Abbeville either did not bother to report our absence, or else were afraid of possible reprisals for reporting us. Furthermore, the crooked methods they employed to recruit a workforce would not go unpunished after the war.

Round-ups and denouncements

During round-ups, the most common approach used by the Germans was to block the two ends of a street with army personnel. They would send the women home, then herd the men onto lorries and send them to France to work on the Atlantic Wall. An alternative method was to raid a cinema and similarly take the men away for transportation to the same destination. The unfortunate victims of the round-ups were never allowed to inform

their families of their whereabouts. Some became victims of a strafing Spitfire and never returned to their loved ones.

The occupation of Belgium, as in all the occupied countries in Europe, was a perpetual life of fear, of being denounced, or of being arrested and executed after an act of sabotage by the resistance movement or the ‘murder’ of a German soldier or one of their collaborators. Subsequently, the occupiers introduced forced labour for men and some women. The Rexist collaborators were often more abjectly cruel and degrading than their masters, as if they were trying to impress them.

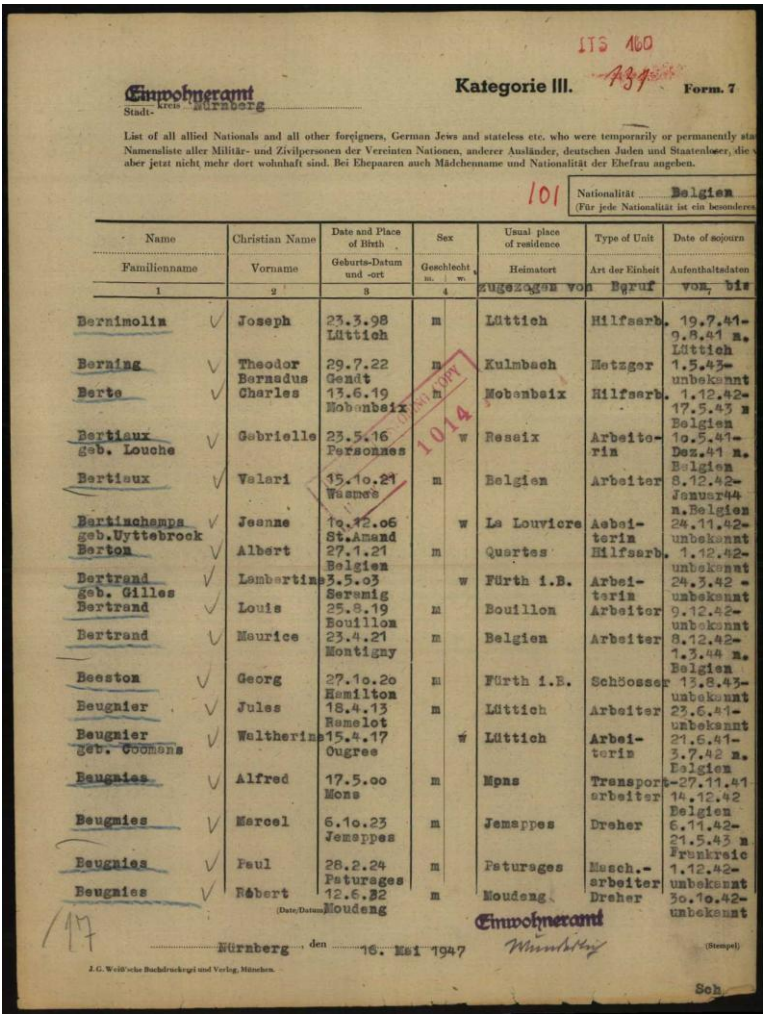
After returning to Belgium, Joe and I had the satisfaction of being able to get back the jobs we had left when we were so shamefully induced to sign the sham contract. Life was becoming very difficult as food rations were cut to a bare minimum. The Nazis were draining the occupied countries of their most vital resources and transporting them to Germany to keep the inhabitants supplied with the maximum possible flow of essentials.

Three generations: George (centre) with son John and grandson Anthony

George Beeston in 1943

Siemens-Schuckertwerke Transformatorenwerk plant under reconstruction in August 1944 (Stadtarchiv Nürnberg, StadtAN A 64 Nr. 1025)

Siemens-Schuckertwerke workshop, 1944. Italian military internees can be seen on the right side of the picture



ITS 160

Einwohneramt
Stadt- Kreis Nürnberg

Kategorie III. Form. 7

List of all allied Nationals and all other foreigners, German Jews and stateless etc. who were temporarily or permanently sta
Namensliste aller Militär- und Zivilpersonen der Vereinten Nationen, anderer Ausländer, deutschen Juden und Staatenloser, die
aber jetzt nicht mehr dort wohnhaft sind. Bei Ehepaaren auch Mädchenname und Nationalität der Ehefrau angeben.

101

Nationalität Belgien
(Für jede Nationalität ist ein besonderes

Name Familienname	Christian Name Vorname	Date and Place of Birth Geburts-Datum und -ort	Sex Geschlecht m. / w.	Usual place of residence Heimatort	Type of Unit Art der Einheit	Date of sojourn Aufenthaltsdaten
1	2	3	4	zugezogen von Beruf		von, bis
Bernimolin	Joseph	23.3.98 Lüttich	m	Lüttich	Hilfsarb.	19.7.41- 9.8.41 n. Lüttich
Berning	Theodor Bernadus	29.7.22 Gendt	m	Kulmbach	Metzger	1.5.43- unbekannt
Berte	Charles	13.6.19 Mobenbeix	m	Mobenbeix	Hilfsarb.	1.12.42- 17.5.43 n Belgien
Bertiaux geb. Louche	Gabrielle	23.5.16 Personnes	w	Reseix	Arbeiterin	10.5.41- Dez.41 n. Belgien
Bertieux	Valari	15.10.21 Wasmes	m	Belgien	Arbeiter	8.12.42- Januar44 n.Belgien
Bertinchamps geb.Uyttebrock	Jeanne	19.12.06 St.Amand	w	La Louviere	Aebeiterin	24.11.42- unbekannt
Berton	Albert	27.1.21 Belgien	m	Quartes	Hilfsarb.	1.12.42- unbekannt
Bertrand geb. Gilles	Lambertine	3.5.03 Seremig	w	Fürth i.B.	Arbeiterin	24.3.42 - unbekannt
Bertrand	Louis	25.8.19 Bouillon	m	Bouillon	Arbeiter	9.12.42- unbekannt
Bertrand	Maurice	23.4.21 Montigny	m	Belgien	Arbeiter	8.12.42- 1.3.44 n. Belgien
Beeston	Georg	27.10.20 Hamilton	m	Fürth i.B.	Schlosser	13.8.43- unbekannt
Beugnier	Jules	18.4.13 Ramelot	m	Lüttich	Arbeiter	23.6.41- unbekannt
Beugnier geb. Coomans	Waltherine	15.4.17 Ougree	w	Lüttich	Arbeiterin	21.6.41- 3.7.42 n. Belgien
Beugnies	Alfred	17.5.oo Mons	m	Mons	Transportarbeiter	27.11.41- 14.12.42
Beugnies	Marcel	6.10.23 Jemappes	m	Jemappes	Dreher	Belgien 6.11.42- 21.5.43 n Frankreic
Beugnies	Paul	28.2.24 Paturages	m	Paturages	Masch.-arbeiter	1.12.42- unbekannt
Beugnies	Robert	12.6.32 (Date/Datum) Moudeng	m	Moudeng	Dreher	30.10.42- unbekannt

Einwohneramt

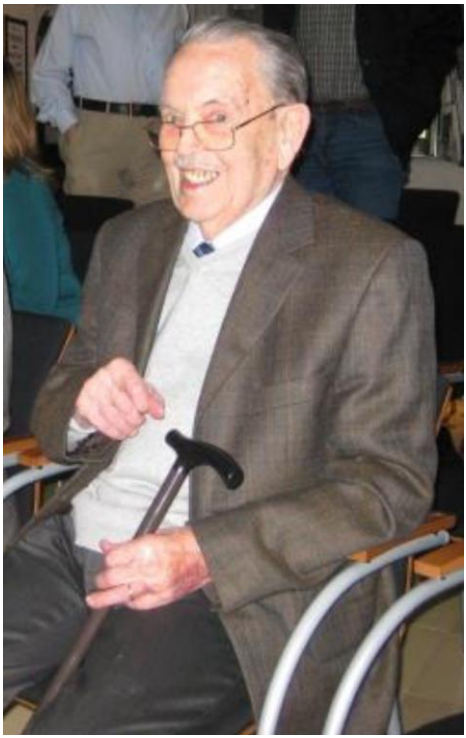
Nürnberg, den 16. Mai 1947 (Stempel)

J.G. Weiß'sche Buchdruckerei und Verlag, München.

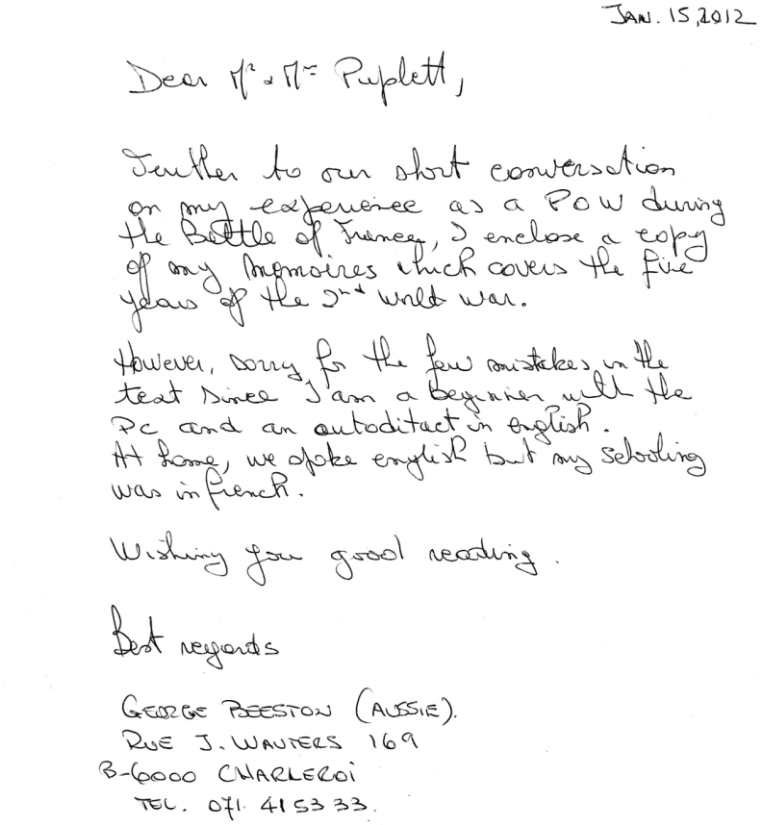
Sch

George's name appears in records held by the Arolsen Archives, a list of victims of Nazi persecution, from when he was at the camp in Fürth

George in 2007



George on a 'reconciliation' visit to Nuremberg, September 2001



JAN. 15, 2012

Dear Mr. Mr. Puplett,

Further to our short conversation on my experience as a POW during the Battle of France, I enclose a copy of my memoires which covers the five years of the 2nd world war.

However, sorry for the few mistakes in the text since I am a beginner with the Pc and an autoditact in english.
At home, we spoke english but my schooling was in french.

Wishing you good reading.

Best regards

GEORGE BEESTON (AUSSIE).
RUE J. WAUTERS 169
B-6000 CHARLEROI
TEL. 071 41 53 33.

Letter that George sent to Colin Puplett (RBL Brussels) in January 2012

Bomb damage in Nuremberg's Old Town, January 1945
(Stadtarchiv Nürnberg)

Bomb damage in Nuremberg's Old Town, January 1945
(Stadtarchiv Nürnberg)

Polish POWs in the Langwasser camp

Bridge in Charleroi destroyed by retreating French troops, May 1940

Sepp Dietrich and Léon Degrelle (shaking hands) with Belgian Waffen-SS volunteers in Charleroi

Passage in Nuremberg named after Jewish survivor Magda Watts

Chapter 3
Deportation

Out of the frying pan and into the fire

In November 1942 the Nazi authorities started deporting young men to Germany for employment as forced labourers, mainly in the factories working for the war effort. In order to avoid being deported I decided to leave the building industry, for it was primarily in that branch of the Belgian economy that the Germans were apprehending young men. I was lucky enough to get shifts in the steelworks in a quality control laboratory.

Little did I know that I was jumping from the frying pan into the fire. It must have been my third month in the firm. I had started my first morning shift when I saw a Wehrmacht officer walking through the plant with his assistant, who was taking notes and names. After they left, the plant manager informed me and a colleague that we were the unlucky ones selected for deportation to Germany as forced labourers. This news was devastating

because my father was already interned in Germany, and as the eldest of three sons, I was consequently the head of the family.

The next day I received a letter instructing me to be at the *Arbeitsamt* (labour office), with a warning that should I fail to turn up at the building, where I was also to have a medical, one of my relatives would bear the consequences. I was not only worried for my two brothers, but also for my father. So the next day I arrived for my medical, which was a farce. The medical officer was a captain in the Wehrmacht and, as luck would have it, I was found fit for deportation. A couple of days later – on 7 December 1942 – I was at Charleroi station, as were many others. The pro-German government had made sure there would be no hiccups, with a cordon of Belgian police and gendarmes holding back the families to ensure that no deportees escaped.

The display of emotion from the families present was mixed with anger aimed at the police and gendarmes. I asked my mother and my fiancée Yvonne, whom I'd known only two months, not to accompany me for I had

predicted this type of reaction. The sight of the stricken families must have been contagious for I saw a German soldier holding a handkerchief to his face to hide his tears. As we passed through the barrier, another soldier was ticking off names on his list. After a long delay the train eventually pulled out of the station. The mood of everyone on-board was cheerful considering the circumstances. In the past I had known this form of faked gaiety; it somehow never did last.

How right I was. It was getting late and dark when the train stopped in a small station on the Belgian-German border, and we were about to experience the brutality of the Germans, in this case by a member of the evil SS. A message in French came over the tannoy system ordering us to leave the carriages and proceed to the canteen, where we received a large bowl of thick soup and a chunk of brown bread. We were all hungry after the long hours since leaving our homes, and it was more a case of guzzling than eating in a civilised manner. Someone started shouting at us in a language none of us

understood. At that moment I made a promise to myself to learn to speak German as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, it was not just words we were subjected to. Maybe we were not moving fast enough, for suddenly a hissing sound could be heard over our heads. I glanced back to see an SS officer lashing at our group with a bullwhip. Amid screams, we started moving faster to avoid the biting tip of the whip. It was not the first time I had to scuffle to dodge the sharp blows. I could not help wondering whether whipping was part a German officer's training.

It was well into the night when we entered Aachen station. It was in complete blackout darkness. We could nevertheless distinguish the green uniforms and 'tschako' hats of the German police. They boarded the carriages and, shouting, pushing and kicking, they soon had every one of us on the platform. We were led into the street, escorted by the police, and started climbing a steep road until we reached a large building which must have been a theatre in peacetime. The rows of seats had been removed from the auditorium, leaving a bare floor

to sleep on. I found a free space near the stage and was about to drift into a welcome sleep when, through my half-closed eyelids, I saw a young man approach holding a cigarette paper in one hand and a box of matches in his other.

He was possibly a labour volunteer going to Germany to get good money. I pretended to be asleep until he tried to stick the cigarette paper on my nose. I was in no mood to be the victim of his ‘joke’. Without fully opening my eyes, I whispered: “you stick that paper on my nose and I'll kick you in the guts.” He sheepishly returned to his sleeping place and what looked like his friend, both having expected to have a good laugh on me.

Early the next morning we were awakened by the police and were soon ready as we had slept fully dressed. Before leaving we were offered a cup of ersatz coffee, after which the police, shouting, pushing and kicking again, started moving us towards the exit. The route down to the station took less time than it did when we had to climb the steep street, and we were soon back on

the same train that had brought us to Aachen on a journey to an unknown destination.

The next stop was Cologne. Would we be disembarking in the capital of the Rhineland, which was not very far from our homes? Our hopes were short-lived as it was only a quick stop and we were again on the move, this time in a southerly direction. The track ran along the Rhine valley, which in peacetime I would have found beautiful, but events being as they were it took on an aspect of grim happenings in store for us. At Frankfurt the train headed east; it was about mid-afternoon when we arrived in Nuremberg.

We did not have long to ponder on what was going to happen. A horde of policemen descended on us with whirling truncheons and the usual insults. On the platform we were made to form ranks and led down a long flight of steps into a narrow room with beds lining both sides. Did they expect us to spend the night in what looked very much like an air-raid shelter? The police had followed us down; in a similarly rough manner, they made us line up with our backs to the beds.

Once we had settled and been made to keep quiet, a group of German civilians walked in. What happened next brought back memories of films I had seen about the slave markets in centuries past in North America. The civilians went round testing our muscles, looking into our eyes and inspecting our teeth. Those judged suitable for the 'buyer' were taken away by him; sometimes he took more than one 'slave'. This abject handling of human beings took several hours (we would later discover far worse incidents). There were finally a couple of hundred of us left, judged as unsuited for slave labour. I wondered what would happen to us.

The answer to the question came in the person of a tall lout, wearing German Army uniform and with the rank of *feldwebel*. He was hobbling rather than walking. His face was distorted with anger at our lack of response to his bellowing, but also by scars deforming his right cheek. Part of his right ear was also missing and his appearance made us move briskly, all the more so as he was waving his Luger pistol. We clattered up the concrete steps, suitcases and other hard objects making a

deafening sound. Our tormentor, not the least bothered by his gammy leg, was close behind us, urging our progress by beating anyone who was slow and falling behind with a leather rod.

Outside the station he made us form ranks: forming ranks must have been part of the German upbringing for we were constantly being made to do so. We left on foot, too tired and hungry to appreciate the sights of the old city. We were met by a group of *Hitler-Jugend* (Hitler Youth) lads who started throwing stones at us and shouting. Their aggressive behaviour abruptly stopped when our escort fired a shot from his Luger into the air. The assailants fled like a flock of scared birds. I was convinced that the aggression had been arranged beforehand by Nazi racists.

We were not subjected to further violence and reached a restaurant building that was to be our camp, with our sleeping quarters behind. A civilian who introduced himself as the *lagerführer dolmetscher* (camp commander's interpreter) greeted us inside. I have forgotten his name. It sounded Polish and indeed he was

a Pole who had lived in Belgium but had come to Germany, attracted by the wages and better rations. Our escort from the station then started haranguing us in a typical ‘à la Hitler’ speech, starting with a Roman salute and “Heil Hitler”, which none of us returned apart from the Pole who, as we were soon to find out, was the *lagerführer*’s man for the dirty jobs.

The *lagerführer* was named Köhling and he had been severely wounded in the Siege of Leningrad, now Saint Petersburg. He still had shrapnel lodged in his right leg and it had also hit his face, tearing off half his right ear. From then on, we named him “pig's ear” which was not a very pleasant nickname for a wounded man, but neither he nor his interpreter were very pleasant people. He warned us that “his camp” would be run like an army camp, that strict discipline would be enforced and respected, and that any breach of the rules would be severely punished. The part-propaganda, part-‘information’ speech finally ended. It was getting late and we were hungry, and only then were we allowed into the building.

We were told that the village where the camp was located was called Maiach. The large hall, which was the annex of the restaurant, was furnished with three-storey wooden beds on one side, with tables and chairs on the other. The Pole took over from the *lagerführer,* making us first put our belongings in lockers in the space between the beds and tables, and to then lay the one blanket we received on a bed selected by him. He was making sure his authority was felt. After bed selection we were taken to a hatch opening onto the restaurant kitchen, where we at last received our first meal of the day, a soup which looked more like dishwater, two small potatoes and a chunk of brown bread. It was late when we eventually got our heads down. It was well known that the restaurant owners fiddled the food rations we were allocated, to be supplied on the black market to selected customers.

Life in a forced labour camp

At 5am the Pole woke us and we were given half-an-hour to assemble outside, ready to be marched to work. The *lagerführer* turned up. He had shed his uniform and

was now wearing a traditional Bavarian outfit. He walked past, eyeing every one of us as if we were on parade. We were marched off, the *lagerführer* escorting us first through a wooded area, then over a bridge spanning a canal and past the city cemetery. Finally, we were halted in front of large factory.

Over the gate a large sign indicated the name of the factory that I would never forget: *Siemens Trafowerk*. A number of us, roughly 100, were told to leave the group and report to the office inside the large administration block that could be seen from the gatehouse. With gestures, the watchman at the gate indicated which office we had to go to. The rest of our group went on to the other Siemens factory in Nuremberg.

It took us some time to find the office we had to report to, finally arriving at a door with an inscription in German and one in French reading “Etranger”, which meant us. I was the first to enter the devil’s abode, a long counter barring full access to the office, maybe for the safety of the little fat man sitting at his desk, ostentatiously wearing a swastika pinned to the lapel of

his jacket. We were soon to learn that the wearers of that badge were to be avoided. He was a stinker in the most evil sense of the word; his fat reddish face, crowned by a short-cropped haircut, and his sharp searching eyes made one feel uncomfortable. The words he spat rather than spoke in bad French were a forewarning of what could happen during the next visit to his office.

Indeed, during subsequent visits there was always a policeman in attendance to take a visitor to what the Nazis named the *arbeit erziehung lager* (work education camp). In reality, it was a *straflager* (discipline camp) with much the same barbaric handling of inmates as in a concentration camp. We were told later that it was a sort of ante-room for the concentration camp, as that was where one landed up after three months in the *straflager*. The discipline camps were run by the Gestapo which explains the barbaric practices inmates were subjected to. Dr Georg Grieshammer was the name of the purveyor of cheap labour to the discipline camps.

After the warning interview, we were told to remain in the corridor to be met by our ‘master’. When he duly

turned up I saw that he was also displaying the badge of the Nazi Party. I was led to my place of work and introduced to the German with whom I would be working as a labourer. The function I was given went somewhat against the grain, but I was not being deported to Germany to prove myself to them, but rather to do as little as possible. The man I was going to work with was of a type one can't define. He did not have the infamous badge pinned to his jacket lapel, which did not necessarily indicate that he was not a follower. They were not compelled to wear the swastika on their working clothes, as these maybe were not befitting of the 'Master Race'.

I must here digress a little to explain how Hitler and his clique of hyper-racists had subdivided the human race. All humans descended from the Germanic race were Aryans, thus belonging to the 'Master Race', those in the occupied zone west of Germany being classed as of a lower race, including the Italians who had fancied themselves as the equivalent and allies of the Germans. At the bottom of the racial echelon came the sub-

humans, namely the coloured races, Russians, Poles and, lowest of all, Jews and Gypsies.

The so-called elite were those to whom one gave a wide berth, those who were so brainwashed that they greeted their family in the morning with the risen hand salute and “Heil Hitler”. They always had the party badge pinned to their jacket. A joke went round that they even had it pinned to their pyjamas.

It was legally accepted that a German could beat up a foreigner, even kill him; the German could claim that he was feeling aggressed. After a very short time I was able to speak and read German, thanks to being trilingual. Flemish and Dutch were in many ways akin to German. I was able to read a large propaganda poster displayed in the city. It was signed by Julius Streicher, the *Gauleiter* and publisher of the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*, who was later hanged after the Nuremberg trials. The message addressed to the population read: “Die Deutsche müssen die Ausländer nieder schlagen” (the Germans must beat down the foreigners).

I shared a large tool-box with the German with whom I worked. Inside, I came across a length of a rubber hose, about three feet long and stuffed with pieces of lead, which could be used as a truncheon. I picked it up and, showing it to him, asked if it was also one of his tools. His gestures were self-explanatory. “It’s for you,” he said, gesticulating as if he were beating me.

An early incident illustrated the lack of consideration for foreigners. I was holding a length of copper strip which the German was grinding to shape with a portable electric tool. Somehow the strip of copper slipped out of my grip and, cursing, he hit my hand with the coarse grinding stone still spinning, ripping flesh from my fingers. He did, however, send me to the infirmary to be treated by an attendant who, by the way he treated the wound, would have been more at home in a butcher’s shop. I returned to my workplace to be greeted with indifference by the German.

We were soon to witness the callousness of the *lagerführer* and his Polish sidekick. One of our lads, who had left home at 18 to fend for himself, was spotted

by the Pole who did all the snooping in the camp for his master. He noticed that the young man was not having a cold shower at least once a week, there being no hot water. He reported this to the *lagerführer* who, despite the January winter weather, told the Pole to put the young man under a shower and to clean him with a hard scrubber normally used for the floor.

In the presence of the *lagerführer,* we were made to view the punishing ordeal. The Pole was helped by a French labour volunteer. The young man's skin rapidly turned purple. He was screaming with pain, but the *lagerführer* and his two acolytes, taking not the slightest notice of the lad's suffering, but on the contrary rather enjoying it, only ceased their efforts when he collapsed. He was taken to his bed and the next day was so ill that he could not work. A lorry came to pick him up. He was never seen again.

The lessons we learned from that experience were, first, not to trust the Pole and his friend, second, to shower even in freezing temperatures, and, third, to stay healthy.

Our lot was far from enviable: six days of work a week, 12 hours a day. On Sundays, we cleaned the camp and the immediate surroundings. At midday, we had a meal served at the factory in the canteen, and on Sundays in the camp hall. The meal consisted of soup, or rather soup that tasted like water, and one or two potatoes, depending on whether they were large or small, with the peel left on so as not to waste anything. In many cases, it was better to receive two small potatoes rather than one large one, as the latter might be inedible, while with the small ones, at least one might be edible. In the evening at the camp, the meal was no more substantial; we also received a piece of bread with jam for the next morning.

One of the *lagerführer*'s favourite pastimes, when drunk as was often the case, was to rouse us in the middle of night, assemble us outside in the freezing winter cold or rain to go through *Appel* (roll-call). This could last up to an hour, for it was invariably followed with propaganda and discipline speeches, appallingly translated by the Pole.

This type of disruption had been going on for several weeks when the shop-floor foreman, a good old man who had lost his only son, a fighter pilot on the Eastern Front, eventually asked why I was always looking tired and listless. When I explained the reason, he shook his head and apologised. That night we had no *Appel* and, indeed, never had another.

New arrivals

In early February 1943, about 50 Frenchmen from Auvergne arrived at the camp. We soon made friends as we spoke the same language. We warned them of whom to be wary. A very short time after their arrival another tragedy struck. One of the new arrivals suddenly woke everyone in the middle of the night, standing upright on his bed with his arms outstretched as if he was a plane on a bombing mission. His friends said that it must have been caused by a bout of malaria, which sometimes had such effects. The unusual behaviour might also have been an after-effect of the naval battle at Mers-el-Kébir on the North African coast between the British and French fleet, then under Admiral Darlan's command.

Our friend was on a battleship sunk by the British. Taken prisoner, he had the choice of either joining the British in their fight against the Nazis or returning home. In the event he chose the latter, only to be deported to Germany a few months later. Like our other friend, he was loaded onto a lorry the following day and never seen again.

A Flemish lad who had both legs broken in a factory accident was taken to the local hospital, which was rare. What happened during an air-raid once again reflected the lack of respect the Germans had for foreigners. The German patients were taken down to the hospital's air-raid shelter, while the Flemish lad was left in his bed. A bomb hit the hospital and blew all the windows out, leaving our friend in the cold. He went down with pneumonia and was never seen again.

It must have been some weeks after that incident that we experienced the first Allied bombing night-time air raid on 8-9 March. We could tell from our experience in Belgium that it was the RAF. They were more used to precision target bombing than the carpet bombing that was generally the rule with the American Air Force

(AAF). Still, there was always the danger of being in the zone being bombed and it so happened that we were in that zone. Suddenly, without the whistling one hears when the bombs are falling at a distance, the doors were blown in. Shards of glass were sent flying through the air but I was the sole casualty when a piece ripped through the sleeve of my jacket, cutting my arm. It was only a slight wound and indeed the only one I sustained throughout my wartime adventures.

There was no air-raid shelter, not even a trench for us to take cover in. Although there was a shelter for the Germans, they would not let us in, so we just lay flat on our stomachs, hoping for the best.

The raid had not been long over, when in the dark – all the lights were out – we realised that we had a visitor, a Russian POW. He must have had a very narrow escape, for he was sitting on a chair, still shaking like a leaf from shock. Someone gave him a cigarette. We also offered him a lump of bread from our meagre ration, which he devoured. He slowly regained his calm. We understood that he had to make his way back to the camp without

being seen by the guards. He explained in broken German that if he was seen returning, he would be severely punished.

Luck would have it that Köhling was not around. It was strictly forbidden to speak to Russian POWs. To give them food was even more of a crime to the eyes of the Nazis and we knew that Köhling hated the Russians for he blamed them for his handicap.

The Russians were trustworthy with us. We had the proof of that when one of us gave a small piece of bread to a young POW. A guard caught the man eating the bread which must have been different to the bread the Russians received. The unfortunate POW was taken away for questioning. The following day he was made to stand in the corner of the hall when we were having our midday ‘meal’. His face was swollen and blue from a beating and he was made to stand to attention. This went on for several days but he refused to betray who had taken pity on him. During those long days of punishment he received neither water nor food. He finally collapsed

and was taken away. I was told later that he had been executed.

A German worker was also caught giving bread to a Russian POW. His gesture was witnessed by one of his colleagues, a big brute who I never saw working but who used to walk around the factory looking for trouble. Of course he wore the dreaded swastika. The brute used an iron bar to batter the POW, who was left with several broken fingers as he attempted to protect his face and head. The German worker was never seen again.

In another incident I witnessed, a load of half-rotten potatoes had been tipped on the snow-covered ground near the food store at the factory. Suddenly, a Russian POW appeared, running towards the heap of potatoes. He somehow managed to grab a handful without stopping. As he headed for cover we heard the sharp crack of a rifle shot. The POW fell face down in the snow, which immediately turned crimson from the wound at the back of his head. It was cold-blooded murder. The guard who shot him was a *feldwebel* who had been wounded on the Russian Front and walked with

a stiff leg. He showed no signs of remorse and simply walked past the body. It was left there for days, the man's frozen hand still clutching the coveted treasure. The Germans attached a board to his back on which one could read in large letters: "Hier liegt ein Raeuber" (here lies a robber).

The huge air-raid in March severely disrupted life in Nuremberg. Everyone had thought that they were too far from Britain to be hit and the following day we were left to fend for ourselves, free to visit the area around the camp. What we saw nearby was disturbing: an anti-aircraft position of six heavy guns. The distance between our camp and the guns, which the RAF had tried to silence, was less than 200 yards. The Russian POW camp was even closer. We were being used as what nowadays would be called human shields.

Returning to work, I saw, to my pleasant surprise, that the old part of the factory was completely burned down. The raid had been scary, mainly because we had been locked up, and the sight was gratifying. We had no news of how the war was progressing and the air-raids were

the only tangible evidence of the fight for our liberation. None of us ever complained about the casualties we sustained, for the fact that the RAF was bringing devastation to those who had claimed that they would force Britain to surrender was a relief to everyone toiling under duress in the Nazi war industries.

Hitler had boasted that he would sink the biggest aircraft carrier in the world, meaning Britain. Now he was getting a taste of his own medicine, after ordering the destruction of so many towns. As the proverb goes, *Qui sème le vent récolte la tempête* (He who sows the wind reaps the whirlwind). The German who had been my first work supervisor never turned up again; he was possibly one of the first victims of the air-raid.

At the factory, we were engaged in clearing away the twisted steelwork of the roof structure, the burned-out machinery and the calcined, oil-impregnated wooden floor blocks that had caused most of the damage when incendiary bombs exploded. The site clearance took about six months during which time I worked in a team

of four, with a German in charge and two Frenchmen, both forced labourers like me.

The day following the air-raid, when we returned to the devastated camp in Maiach, we were told to gather our belongings. We were moving to another camp. We had to take a tram to Fürth, a suburb of Nuremberg. The new camp was also the annex hall of a restaurant. Although the quality of the food had not improved, the quantity did. The two girls who served could always be talked into giving us an extra ladle of soup. But it was a monotonously unchanging diet: a thick broth, a chunk of brown bread, a small lump of margarine, a spoonful of marmalade and a mug of ersatz coffee. There was however one improvement. The brutal *lagerführer* and his Polish alter-ego did not follow us.

In Fürth, we were allowed to ride on the tram but not to sit in the main compartment. Our status as *Zwangsarbeiter-Ausländer* (foreign forced labourer) didn't entitle us to travel in comfort, which made us feel like we were considered inferior. We would catch the tram each day to Nuremberg at 6am, returning after 7pm.

We continued to work 12 hours a day, six days a week. Things became worse when the air-raids became a daily occurrence. We didn't mind the raids, but it meant that on Sundays we had to clear the debris obstructing the streets, with a Nazi supervising our work.

Our situation was unenviable. During the raids we were regularly left without shelter; even when we did find somewhere to take cover we were often ousted by the Nazi in charge. Despite our predicament we could not help feeling full of praise and respect for the crews of the bombers, as the anti-aircraft guns relentlessly blazed away at them. If an unfortunate bomber was caught in a searchlight beam, one might see the plane dive towards the searchlight position, letting loose with bombs and machine gun fire. The men manning the anti-aircraft guns were also brave for they could not take cover and only hope the planes would miss them. I could not help marvelling at this chivalry of modern times.

During one raid, an RAF plane was brought down by anti-aircraft fire. One of the crew managed to parachute out and landed safely among the bombed rubble. When I

saw him, he was leaning against what was left of a wall, putting a cigarette to his lips and lighting it. An angry group of Germans led by a Nazi approached him, but he never lost his phlegmatic composure. Being alone, there was nothing I could do. The dramatic situation was resolved when two policemen fired shots into the air, the angry crowd fleeing like stricken chickens. The police led the airman to a waiting vehicle, first relieving him of his cigarettes, flying boots and jacket.

These brave young men, whether RAF or American crews, were in great danger while airborne and even more so if they were forced to parachute over enemy territory. They deserve far greater recognition.

The small town of Fürth was not bombed as heavily as Nuremberg. One of the German workers in my section, whom I trusted, told me that there was plenty of Jewish property and small factories which had belonged to Jews, and that may have been an explanation.

There were, however, two occasions when our false sense of security was shaken. When the sirens sounded we had to run some 500 yards to a trench with a flimsy

overhead cover. During one of the raids the bombs were coming down before we had had time to reach the shelter. All we could do was lie flat, protecting our heads with our arms. The following day we saw the trench shelter had taken a direct hit. It was an apocalyptic sight; the bomb had left a crater from which bodies were still being removed. The victims were Russian POWs who were working in the vicinity when the bombing started, only to meet the end of their ordeal where we should have been.

Another air attack took place late one evening soon after. We were, as before, lying on the ground and trying to protect ourselves as incendiary phosphorus bombs landed nearby. In a very short time, the hall opposite the restaurant was on fire. We tried to put out the blaze with water hoses, to little avail, but luckily managed to save our belongings and the restaurant.

Kindness and understanding

Around this time, when the rubble from the old part of the factory had been cleared, I found myself back at a work bench assembling coils of copper which make up

the main element of a transformer. The German in charge of the workshop was a kind old man, well into his sixties and aware of the hardships we had to endure. His name was Herr Ruf, who had lost his only son, a fighter pilot, in Russia. There were three workers, Herr Meyer, Herr Zeilman and Heinz (he always preferred that I call him by his first name).

None was a party member, in fact they were strongly opposed to Nazism. I had so much trust in them that I used to sing *God Save the King* and *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, so of course they knew my origins. I was known as "the Englander" and they even treated us as their equals.

When I once asked Heinz why he had not been called up by the Wehrmacht, his answer came as a bit of a surprise. He had 14 children and was thus exempt from military service, which he said he did not mind. He and his wife had lost their jobs as acrobats in a circus which had been disbanded as unhelpful to the war effort.

Heinz had told me that parents had to be careful when talking in front of their children. At school, pro-Nazi

teachers would question the children about their families. Many parents had been arrested due to their children's denunciations. The boys would be taken away to establishments where they were trained for the SS, with the girls brought up in an army institution.

He also told me that Jews of all ages were taken to an area of marshy land near Nuremberg and made to jump over quicksand. The elderly met their end as they disappeared into it, while the younger ones who were able to clear the patch were allowed to live before ending their lives in concentration camps.

There was no end to the atrocities he described to me, such as the barbaric behaviour of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, assault division), whose *modus operandi* was to assemble in large numbers in a pro-Nazi restaurant, get drunk and, then with plenty of drink-driven courage, go on the rampage, molesting, even killing, Jews and communists.

I lost track of Heinz after the site clearance was finished. He must have fallen foul of a party leader in the factory for he never did hide his anti-Nazi feelings. His family's

effort for the ‘greatness of Germany’ had not been enough to keep him out of trouble. I was unable to obtain proof that something had happened to him though, for everyone kept quiet for fear of the Gestapo.

Sometime before then, I had told Heinz and the others of my father’s arrest in 1940 and of his being an internee in Kreuzburg in Silesia. They surprisingly suggested that my father should ask the commanding officer of his internee camp for permission for me to visit him. I did not have much hope of success, but I sent a letter to my father asking him to make the application. The reply came some two months later, the normal time lapse between correspondence. His demand had met with the approval of the commanding officer.

It was now my turn to secure time off for the journey from the factory managers, which would not be easy. I decided to go right to the top of the hierarchy. On the ground floor of the main office building I found a lift to the top floor, but it had a notice fixed it, stating “Nur fur Deutsche angehorigen” (for German citizens only).

After climbing stairs up four floors, I first reported to the secretary, who told me the factory manager was too busy to see me. After this happened three times the German workers jokingly suggested I enter the manager's office, give him a big Nazi salute, and then maybe he would listen to my request. I was not inclined – no matter how adverse the circumstances – to make such a ridiculous salute, which to me did not represent an act of politeness, but rather a token of submission.

So I went up those never-ending flights of stairs again, only this time I didn't let the secretary stop me and went straight into the manager's office, greeting him in the way in which I had been taught. He must have been taken aback: when I explained in my best German the reason for my visit he did not hesitate to agree to my absence from the factory for a weekend and had the secretary make out the *laissez-passer*. However, the most hazardous potential obstacle to my journey to Kreuzburg was obtaining approval from the Gestapo office in Nuremberg.

My *laissez-passer* carried little authority in practice. It did not take long to make up my mind. The document authorising a visit to my father would soon be out of date, so I decided to do without the Gestapo's blessing and chose to travel by night to be less conspicuous.

My only clothing was in a rather shabby condition after the long months of deportation and my friends decided to get together and help me with different items of attire. From Franz Flament I had riding boots, from René Devos riding breeches, from Remy Herman a jacket, and from Antonin Gorce a shirt and tie. I looked quite respectable for the voyage in my riding attire!

Reunited with my father

On a Friday evening in mid-September 1943 I boarded the train at the small station in Fürth. It was the blackout so there was less risk of being apprehended by police on the prowl. In Nuremberg I had to change and catch a train for Dresden. An air-raid alarm brought the train to a stop as it was moving out of the station, which must have dampened the zeal of the 'Gestapists'.

Throughout the journey I was on the lookout for identity checks, spending most of my time moving from my compartment to the toilets or standing in the corridor. It was pitch dark when the train entered the huge station in Dresden. The place was crowded with German soldiers and civilians carrying large bundles of clothing. I was able to overhear that they were evacuees from German-occupied parts of Russia where they had taken over vast areas of land, named by the Nazis as *Lebensraum* (space for living). They were returning to their homeland after abandoning everything.

I now had to catch a train for Breslau; it took some time to find the platform, which was crowded with German soldiers. In the compartment, I found myself sandwiched between uniformed men who, from what I heard, were all on their way to the Russian Front. They had come either from sunny Italy or from a cushy life in France. They did not appear to be the least concerned about my presence in their midst. My outfit must have made me look like a local. The presence of the soldiers also made me feel less at risk of being bothered by the Gestapo.

The next change was in Oels (now Oleśnica). All these train changes had been made easier thanks to the train timetable, which one of the German workers had prepared for me. Oels was only a small station but similarly crowded both with civilians fleeing the Red Army and German soldiers on their way to slaughter in the name of their Führer. From Oels to Kreuzburg it was only a short journey. I had been travelling for almost 12 hours and, feeling tired, I found a quiet spot to lay down, enjoying the warm September sunshine. The place where I had chosen to rest was at a road junction, which had a signpost that sent me into a daydream.

The information that attracted my attention was the distance to the Polish border: it was only 40 kilometres away. I thought of joining one of the renowned Polish resistance movements but soon dismissed the mad scheme out of my mind, whereupon I fell fast asleep. I was awakened by the voices of children and my stomach's need of nourishment. The small lump of bread I had tucked in my pocket was enough to keep that part of my anatomy quiet for a while and, having disposed of

the frugal meal, I made tracks for my destination. I walked past a furniture factory, whose owner I would meet some 15 years later when I was an instructor in a British Army trade training school. After the war, Silesia became part of Poland and, as a result of the ambitions of a clique of cheats, many lost their homes, wealth, health and, in some cases, even their lives. The owner of the furniture factory lost his business and was working as a labourer in Germany when our paths crossed.

Next to the furniture shop I saw the distinctive small white and blue pole fixed to the facade of a barber's shop. I decided I needed a shave to be clean and smart for the following day, when I would be meeting my father. I sat in a vacant chair and requested a shave. I almost fled when I saw the cut-throat razor, its blade flashing in the artificial light, in the hands of the barber who looked as if he might have Parkinson's disease. However, not prepared to lose face in front of the old man, I stayed put. I was surprised and relieved when, as soon as the blade touched my cheek, his hand became as

steady as a rock. I walked out clean-shaven, still marvelling at his willpower to control his hand.

By midday, hunger was again gnawing at my stomach so I had to find a restaurant where I could obtain a meal without food coupons, which in any case I did not possess. I headed for the station where I was bound to find a restaurant. The station restaurant menu card displayed at the window offered a meal without coupons consisting of potatoes and mussels, which suited me. I took a seat in the far corner where a table was unoccupied, and from where I could see anyone entering the dining room. I could not afford to drop my guard; the Gestapo was everywhere.

When I left, I was feeling much better. It's amazing what a meal can do for one's morale. The barber had explained the internee camp was not far from the station. As evening approached, I had to find some kind of accommodation to spend the night, but where? I opted for the only option, to go to the camp and request a bed for the night. The camp was a grim, high red-brick construction with barred windows. The surrounding

compound wall was also built in red brick, its top covered with coils of barbed wire. It had been a prison before the Nazis took power; one of their first moves had been to empty the prisons and invite the inmates to join the Party. Those who didn't were the first occupants of concentration camps.

I banged on the entrance door with my fist and almost immediately a sentry's face appeared at the small spy hatch. His tone was stern: "Was ist es?" (What is it?). I replied, in German, that I wanted to come in. The double-door swung open and the sentry directed me to the guardroom. Opening the guardroom door, I stepped into a haze of cigarette smoke. At first, I could barely see the person who addressed me. I was finally able to focus and saw a *feldwebel* sat at a desk. He got up, pulling a dagger from its sheath and, coming quite close, pushing its point against my midriff. He was rather young to be a *feldwebel* and I could not help wondering if it wasn't his Aryan features which had given him accelerated promotion. With his blond hair and blue eyes, he must have seemed an ideal specimen to the Nazis.

He also had the arrogance of his masters. I shall relate in English the conversation which followed: “What do you want?” “I would like to have a bed for the night.” “Aren’t you afraid of German soldiers? No? Well you should be!” I felt his dagger pressing somewhat harder against me. I could feel fluttering in my stomach but I was determined not to give him the satisfaction of having intimidated me. Neither was I prepared to make any move that he could interpret as aggressive. A *gefreiter* (lance-corporal) was stood behind him and there were four soldiers playing cards at a table.

The *feldwebel* finally appeared to have displayed enough authority, no doubt for the benefit of his men, and asked me who had given me permission to be in the vicinity of the camp. I produced the document the camp commander had provided and, after reading it, he whispered a few words to the *gefreiter*, who told me to follow him. I was led to a prison cell and left in the dark with the door locked. Groping around, I eventually found the bed-slab with its straw palliasse and, collapsing on it, was soon fast asleep.

Early the next morning I was awakened by the *gefreiter*, who told me to follow him to the commander's office. I was admitted almost immediately. A Colonel was sitting at the desk and introduced himself. His English was faltering and he kept searching for the right words, so I told him that I spoke German, for which he was most grateful, even congratulating me on my efforts. Little did he know that I had learned the language more as a necessity than through any liking for it.

The fact I spoke his language must have put him in a trusting mood, for he started telling me about his family, a wife and two daughters he hadn't seen for three years, that he was Austrian not German, adding that his country had been forced into the European turmoil. He then asked where I had spent the night. When I told him I had been in a cell, he was furious and grabbed the phone, shouting orders at whomever was at the other end. He did not say another word until my 'friend', the *feldwebel*, walked in. Gone was his arrogance, gone was his superior attitude.

He stood to attention awaiting the reprimand. The Colonel asked who he thought he was to allow a stranger to spend the night in a high-security installation and did he realise the gravity of his action? There was room for men like him on the Russian Front, he added. I could not help taking pleasure in the anxiety of my tormentor. The Colonel ordered the *feldwebel* to go to the station hotel and book a room and meals for me; furthermore, the bill was to be sent to the camp office. A further clicking of the heels, a hand raised with a loud "Heil Hitler" and the dejected *feldwebel* left the Colonel's office. It was the last I saw of him.

The Colonel instructed me to report to the *dolmetscher* (interpreter) in the same corridor and, as I entered his office, a soldier told me to take a seat, saying that my father would not be long. When my father entered, it was such a shock after three long years of separation that we stood wordless, neither of us knowing what to say. The first moment of shock over, we started speaking in French, only to be interrupted by the soldier who, as the

interpreter, wanted us to speak loudly in English so he could hear our conversation.

We spent an hour together and were told that we could meet again in the afternoon. My father went back to his internee room; I went to the hotel dining room where I was served a slap-up meal, such as I had not enjoyed for a long time.

In the afternoon I went back to the interpreter's office to see my father, who arrived soon after carrying a small parcel. He first went to the interpreter's desk to offer him a few cigarettes. The parcel which he handed me contained some 'goodies' which he had received from the International Red Cross. We spent a further hour together. We had so much to say that the time seemed to fly by.

I went back to the hotel and requested the key to my room where I was able to have a lie-down on a soft featherbed with white linen sheets. I have no idea how long I slept but it was dark when I awoke. After a quick, blessed shower I went down to the restaurant, which was already packed. The table I had occupied at the midday

meal was still free, which suited me fine, for I could not afford to lessen my vigilance. The menu was as copious as before; there seemed to be no wartime restrictions in this part of Germany; the fact that it was a rural region may have accounted for it.

As in the afternoon, no mention was made of either food coupons or payment. It was still early evening when I finished my supper and I decided to take a stroll. I found myself in a small park at the rear of the internee camp. Having found a bench which faced it, I sat looking at the barred windows, my mind drifting subconsciously into imagining my father busying himself with his daily chores. Feeling somewhat depressed, I returned to the hotel and went straight to bed.

The following morning, after putting away a large breakfast, I took leave of the hotel owner, thanking him. My father had told me that he and some of internees would be going to the sports field in Kreuzburg for a game of football. I waited all morning but there was no match, with only school-age youngsters in evidence. I spent the rest of the day resting, my eyes and my

thoughts drifting towards the Polish border and the resistance.

It was dark when I arrived at the station. After producing the rail warrant for the stationmaster, I searched the platform for somewhere I could remain inconspicuous until the train arrived. I hadn't long to wait and on the return trip I shared a carriage crowded with German refugees coming from the East. The fact that there were so many passengers crammed in suited me, as being surrounded by people and bundles of belongings made it easier for me to huddle in a corner, so I could remain unnoticed whenever some official passed in the corridor. Even if I'd had permission to travel, I didn't want to draw attention to myself.

I didn't have to change in Breslau and in Dresden, it was the same scene as before with crowds of refugees mingled with soldiers en route for the front. I disembarked at Nuremberg in the early hours and went straight to work.

Black hole of the Kolosseum

Back in the camp that evening I shared the coffee, chocolates, biscuits and soap my father had given me with my best friends. I did, however, keep the tea for myself, which was a mistake. A few days later I noticed my supply was diminishing. When I asked Franz Flament if he had seen anyone searching my locker, he admitted that he and Remy Herman had been smoking the tea leaves. I advised him he should wait until I'd had my cup of tea before drying the precious leaves and rolling them in newspaper to make a cigarette.

Whilst in the Fürth labour camp another friend, Georges Scauflaire, was taken seriously ill with highly contagious scarlet fever. He was sent on foot to a labour camp in Nuremberg known as the Kolossesum. This dismal abode of more than 600 men stood comparison with the Black Hole of Calcutta. It was dark, lacking in either natural or artificial light, and overcrowded. The air inside hung with the smell of human sweat and blocked sewage drains. When I visited Georges in what was pompously called a dispensary, I found him in a small

room on the first floor. In reality, it was a kind of balcony, running halfway round the large hall which in its heyday had been a theatre.

As well as Georges, the room was occupied by five other men in bed with contagious illnesses. No medical care was available except from a benevolent orderly, who was also one of the cleaning staff. Some days later Georges was transferred to the local hospital. When I visited him I was even more appalled at what I saw. The sick bay was a large square room, the four sides of which were glazed from the top to within about a foot of the floor. Meals for the patients were pushed through a small opening in the lower part of the door. Their three-storey beds had straw palliasses but there were neither sheets nor blankets to keep them warm. They had a table and a few chairs in the room where they could ‘enjoy’ their meagre meals.

The men had pyjamas differing from those worn in other parts of the hospital so that they could be identified if they escaped from their glass cage. The whole milieu reminded me of an aquarium in which humans were kept

for the safety of those outside rather than those inside. When I spoke to Georges through the glazed partition, he complained about the lack of hygiene and medical attention, the sparse diet and proximity with the other patients suffering from various contagious illnesses. One lad was in the final phase of tuberculosis. I brought a small piece of bread to give to Georges but he was unable to reach it. He spent a month in the hospital, and when he returned to the camp he had recovered completely.

It was during our all-too-short stay in the Fürth labour camp that the Siemens management decided that foreigners were now required to provide a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week air defence (*Luftschutz*) guard duty at the factory. For a long time now, there had been bombings day and night. For a while, I secretly kept a diary in which I recorded the bombings; I had reached 36 entries when I decided to discard the diary for fear of reprisals.

One Sunday morning I was on my way to the factory, having taken the tram from Fürth. About two or three

stops later a soldier in SS uniform with a German Shepherd boarded and the dog immediately lunged at me, digging its teeth into my back. The commotion that followed brought the attendant on the scene and the SS man explained that his dog didn't like *Ausländer*. The incident ended with the inevitable, foregone conclusion, the tram being halted so that the foreigner – allegedly wrongly on the tram – could disembark so that the dog and its SS master could travel peacefully. I had to walk the rest of the journey, making me late but, since Dr Grieshammer was not present, I got away with it, albeit with a nasty bite on my back. Luckily, it healed rapidly.

Another incident I remember well took place in early June 1944 when I was walking back to the camp with friends after another long day of rubble clearance in the factory. The street was lined with police and a few civilians were waving small swastika flags as a large Mercedes approached. A policeman pointed his Luger at us, making us stop and kneel. I glanced up as the car went past to see a little man standing with one hand lifted in the Hitler salute. His peaked hat, almost too

large, was resting on his ears. A German at the factory told me it was Joseph Goebbels, who had come to Nuremberg to see the air-raid damage in the city synonymous with the rise to power of the Nazis.

Return of Köhling

Soon after, we left for the Südfriedhoflager (Southern Cemetery Camp), where our former tormentor Köhling and his Polish assistant were once again in charge. The camp was made up of barrack block constructions, put up to house ever more forced labourers and later slave labourers, a high fence topped with barbed wire surrounding the enclosure. The site consisted of three wooden accommodation blocks and an administration block which included a canteen and office for the *lagerführer*, as well as a stage where Köhling could make his propaganda speeches.

In the middle of the camp, a concrete bunker had been built for the *lagerführer*, his assistant, the Polish interpreter and his French sidekick. A trench shelter, covered with a corrugated sheet and about two feet of soil, was provided for the foreigners. The trench had

been dug in a straight line when it should have been zig-zagged (to contain the blast from any shells that hit it). There was also a coal bunker and kennel where two of the *lagerführer*'s Alsatian dogs were kept and let out at night to keep us inside our blocks. At the warning of an air-raid, it was a mad race to get to the trench, with the dogs on our heels.

Life in the camp resumed as it had in the first camp in Maiach, although we had no more night roll-calls. Köhling liked instead to indulge in assembling everyone in the hall where he would stand on the stage mimicking the words and gestures of his insane master Adolf. He would harangue us for over an hour sometimes, either after we had returned from a long day's work or on a Sunday when we had our own domestic chores.

I had a further reason for loathing the speeches, for the *lagerführer* must have realised how little French the Polish interpreter knew, in addition to how poor his German was. For some time, the Pole had fallen out of favour and Köhling had decided that I would translate his propaganda rubbish and constant attacks on the

British, whom he somehow blamed for the collapse of the German war effort.

I could sense when he was going to have one of his haranguing fits, usually when he was staggering about under the influence of drink. I would then try to make myself scarce. The most dangerous encounters I had with him were after the air-raids, for which of course he always blamed *die Englander*. Sometimes I wondered if he knew that the Americans were also at war with Germany.

After an air-raid I would be called to his office to be subjected to his insults, although he never actually lifted a hand against me. However, I once thought that my last minute was about to come. There had been an Allied parachute landing. I happened to be passing his office window on my way back from work when he spotted me. I could see that he was upset about something and noticed that he was holding his Luger. He pointed the gun at me and bellowed: “That’s what I do with your British paratroopers.” He then turned to a target fixed to the wall of his office and emptied the magazine of his

weapon, each shot hitting the bullseye. I shrugged my shoulders and walked away. It was the most sensible thing to do when he was in that mood.

The next bust-up I had with him was over a young deportee from Mons called René Cardinal. He and his two friends, who were from the same city, had stayed apart from the main Belgian group. One cold winter Sunday morning one of René's friends, whom I'll call Ginger because of his red hair, came to me in a panic. The Polish interpreter had caught René stealing some of the *lagerführer*'s coal and begged me to try and get him out of trouble. Stealing was punishable by death, so I was more than apprehensive about the outcome of any attempt to intervene. My only hope was to explain he had done it due to the cold weather, coupled with the hunger gnawing at our empty stomachs. Maybe that might strike a human chord.

When I entered Köhling's office René was on the floor, being kicked and hit by the Pole and the French volunteer. The *lagerführer* had a truncheon in his hand. The punishment beating stopped when I appeared and

Köhling, his face distorted with anger, stepped menacingly towards me. He quickly regained his composure and snapped: “Was ist los?” (what is the matter?). I then went into a lengthy negotiation to get René out. It worked and he was lucky to get away with a bleeding nose, a black eye and several broken ribs.

I remained in the office, set on bringing up some of the grudges vexing the camp. Köhling’s two assistant persecutors left, expecting the worst. But I had a feeling this was my only chance to try to put things right. The *lagerführer* returned to his desk. Even seated he looked almost as tall and asked why I was still in the office. I duly went through a list of complaints, all connected with the lack of heating.

We had coal stoves in our rooms yet no coal to heat them and large cauldrons for our ablutions, but again no coal to heat the water to allow us to have a thorough wash at least once a week or clean our laundry. His coal-bunker was full while we had to freeze in our beds. My interlocutor remained wordless for a while. He must have been wondering if he was being addressed by a

communist, for that was inevitably what one was accused of if one stood up for one's rights. His reply came as a relief. "That's how it is and that's how it shall remain," he said. I was about to leave the office when he called me back. In his hand he held a large loaf of bread which he gave me.

I walked down the long block corridor and back to my room feeling frustrated for having failed to succeed in my demands for an improvement in our conditions. I felt that the *lagerführer* had deliberately treated me as an inferior before giving me the loaf. He had treated me like one of his dogs: first you beat it, then you stroke it. Back in my room I handed the loaf to Franz and told him to share it with those present at the time.

Hunger, cold and fatigue were a daily torment. Despite my pride, I stooped to picking up pieces of potato that a German dropped on the floor at the workshop, immediately eating them. The forced labourer had no rights, no international convention to protect him. For refusing to obey an order, one of the deportees who lived in the same barracks was imprisoned in a *disziplinlager*.

We only learned what had happened to him when he returned to the camp after several months' absence. He was frighteningly thin. Solidarity then kicked in; everyone contributed a little to provide him with extra food and to treat the ailments that covered his body as a result of the mistreatment he had suffered. Thankfully, he was able to recover.

The tide of war turns

By September 1944 the air-raids were becoming more frequent following the Allied liberation of large parts of France, Belgium and the Netherlands. It was during that month that we had our first air-raid casualties. Joseph Braida and Joseph Molinelo, both from Toulon, had left France together. They had been friends since school and were like brothers. They had both been assigned to work in the modern Siemens factory and when the raid started one was in an air-raid shelter inside the factory, the other in another shelter. Molinelo decided to join his friend to be together and, as destiny would have it, a bomb fell on the shelter, killing both.

Life for all of us had become even more depressing since no more mail was reaching us from our liberated home countries. It was another of those Sunday mornings. I was sitting at the table in our room, keeping an eye on the office block, on the lookout for a messenger ordering me to report to the *lagerführer* for yet another one of his dull speeches.

I was distracted by a knock at the door and turned round to see an SS soldier standing in the doorway. I immediately noticed the insignia on his shoulder: he was one of the Belgian SS from the hated brigade set up by Degrelle. I also recognised him as one of four Belgians who had worked in the same building as me in December 1942. One day the four disappeared and we heard that they had enlisted in the Belgian SS. The lad before me now had none of the bravado the four had displayed when they first arrived in Nuremberg.

After telling me that the *lagerführer* had given him permission to meet me, he started relating his ordeal. The training by the German SS had been harsh and he had sensed their animosity towards the foreign recruits.

On completion of three months' training, which ended in March 1943, they were sent to the Eastern Front where the tide of battle had turned. The Wehrmacht was on the run and his SS unit took over a sector in Tcherkasy (Cherkasy in Ukraine) where the Red Army was concentrating its offensive. The battle lasted several days and he was wounded, a bullet entering the socket of his left eye and emerging on the edge of his left temple. "A millimetre to the right," he said, "and I would not be sitting here telling you about my misfortunes." In the event, the wound saved his life for he was the sole survivor of his unit. Those who were not killed and captured were executed by the Red Army, who seldom took German SS prisoners, as a reprisal for what they had done to the Russian population. Any foreigners serving in the SS regiments were also executed. I felt no pity either for him or his friends for, in my opinion, they were traitors to their country. It was a deserved punishment for the atrocities they had committed against their own people in Belgium.

When he had finished relating all his problems, he finally explained the reason for his being in our camp. He had been given the job of recruiting forced labourers into the Belgian SS. They could hardly have chosen someone less appropriate for this role. With one eye socket empty and a large scar near his temple, it was enough to make even the bravest think how the future of such an 'adventure' would end. I told him that his approaches would not be appreciated, for we were all without news of our relatives since the West had been liberated. It did not take much to convince him that he was wasting his time. Although I was only speaking for myself, I knew how everyone felt. No one would be mad enough to embrace Degrelle's Nazi ideology when the boat was taking in water from all sides and sinking.

He left, no doubt wondering how he would explain the fiasco of his mission to his master. I'll admit, I was also somewhat apprehensive as to the outcome. I watched through the window as he left. Would he be making a report to the *lagerführer* about my reaction? But, no, he walked past the office, a pitiful silhouette in his badly-

fitting uniform. He no doubt bore the SS blood group tattoo near his left armpit, marking him out as the property of his master Adolf H, just as cattle are branded with the mark of their owners. I saw many SS at the end of the war trying to obliterate the tattoo by burning it off with a cigarette, leaving an ugly scar or festering wound. Gone was the ‘master race’ swagger. My visitor eventually disappeared down the cinder track. I realised then that I should be more careful when dealing with people defending a lost cause.

After the war, I discovered that two friends who still live in the Charleroi region, Léon Louis and René Jugnon, had been compulsorily drafted into the Belgian SS. They told me that after a very short training period they had found themselves on the Eastern Front on the Oder River. Their brigade was overrun by a Red Army unit superior in men and equipment. Every man marked with the fatal SS tattoo was immediately executed. Léon and René owe their lives to the fact that they had been sent to the front so hastily that they had been overlooked during the tattooing. They dumped their uniforms and, together

with three escaped American POW GIs, managed to requisition a horse and cart. They made their way through Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and finally Yugoslavia, where they were liberated by the American Army in Trieste.

They told me that, during their long journey, they had witnessed the primitive behaviour of Red Army occupation soldiers – not the fighting soldiers on the front – who should have been restoring law and order but were instead violently raping and murdering girls as young as seven and old ladies in their seventies. The Germans called it *vergeltung* (retribution) for what they had done in Russia.

No to Nazi salute

In October 1944, a number of Italian workers, whether forced or volunteers I did not know, turned up in the camp. I was unable to avoid being pulled in to translate the *lagerführer*'s welcome speech. It was not difficult. In the past, I'd worked with two Italians who had fled their home country when Mussolini started eliminating anti-fascists. The two men did not speak a word of French, so

I had had to learn some Italian. They were billeted in Block 4 which was still empty. There must have been about 20 of them, sent to Germany after the capitulation of Italy.

A few days later a group of Czechs arrived. There was no need for a translator as their country had been occupied since 1938 and German was a compulsory part of their curriculum. They joined the Italians in Block 4, where there were still vacant rooms.

As the countries occupied by the Nazis became fewer, plundered food stocks became scarcer and scarcer. As a result, the rations for us foreigners, already barely sufficient for two 'meals' a day, were further reduced to avoid adversely affecting the morale of the German population.

The Nazi authorities repeatedly showed little consideration for foreigners. I recall a Sunday morning when the *lagerführer* informed us that we were to visit a camp at Langwasser in the south-east outskirts of the city. We were told a lack of cleanliness on the part of the

foreign workers had caused the camp to be exposed to a serious disease.

When we arrived we could see all the windows and doors at the camp on one of the blocks were boarded up, with large yellow crosses painted on them. We could see faces through the gaps of the window boarding; they were screaming in a language I could not understand but it was obvious they were begging for help. A Frenchman from one of the other barracks said they were Poles and the disease that had spread through their block had been identified as a type of plague. Rather than trying to cure the disease, the camp authorities had decided to isolate the sick, dying and dead. Those alive were left without care or food. While the Germans blamed lack of cleanliness for the outbreak, from what I saw of the surroundings it was more a problem of rats which must have thrived on the filth lying about. I was told later that German troops burned down the whole block with flamethrowers, including all its occupants, dead or alive.

Life in the Südfriedhof camp during air-raids had become more and more hazardous due to it being

situated a short distance from the railway marshalling yard. It was not the first time that our camp was located close to potential bombing targets. None of us blamed the RAF for fulfilling their missions, but rather the local Nazi authorities for allowing Siemens to put us in such a dangerous place. We spent many hours in the shelter trench with our feet in a foot of water. My friend Franz was so scared he used to sleep in the shelter, as a result of which he became crippled with rheumatism.

The bombing was not the only danger to which we were subjected. Our trigger-happy camp commander took pleasure in firing his Luger over our heads, saying that it would stop us making signals to the bombers.

Early one morning I was awakened by shouts and, glancing through the window, I saw about 200 Germans, every one of whom had the swastika badge pinned to the lapel of his jacket. They were gathered near the office of the *lagerführer*, who was giving instructions. The group split in three, with each sub-group entering one of the accommodation blocks. They then divided into smaller groups and entered each room at the same time. The drill

appeared to have been rehearsed beforehand; no one had a chance to avoid the search.

We were pushed brutally into the corridor, where we braced ourselves for further vicious handling. One of the French labourers quickly handed me a map on which the situation on the Eastern Front was indicated. It was based on official Wehrmacht reports which I had read in the Nuremberg newspaper, as well as information from a German who listened to the BBC news, the same German who told me at 10am on 6 June 1944 that the Allies had landed in Normandy. We hid the map in a dustbin close to where I was standing. The Germans were not as well-drilled as we thought. Had they made us move, they would have seen the bin and found the map, which would have meant being handed over to the Gestapo for questioning under torture.

The noise the search party was making as all our belongings were scattered on the floors suddenly ceased in the room opposite. A German emerged holding a bread-knife with a six-inch blade. Asked who it belonged to, a little man stepped forward. Of all the men

in that room he was the one I would least have suspected of having such ‘weapon’. Two of the Germans grabbed him roughly and, almost dragging him off his feet, took him to the camp office. When he returned after a long while, it was obvious from the marks on his face that he had endured a brutal interrogation. I told him that it could have been worse had he been taken to the Gestapo office in Nuremberg. The elderly assistant *lagerführe*r later told me that the Nazi security services were on edge after the July 1944 attempt on Adolf H’s life after a coup attempt. All foreign forced labourers were also being investigated.

The German Army’s losses on the Russian Front, combined with the large number of its soldiers captured on the Western Front, were beginning to take their toll. The Nazis were preparing a massive forced conscription of foreigners on the pretext that the Bolshevik invader would not stop at the German border, but over-run the whole of Europe. Thus it was the duty of everyone to join the German forces in the battle for ‘liberty’.

Placards to that end were being displayed on walls in the towns.

Soon after the visit by the Belgian SS soldier, I was returning to the camp one day when I saw the *lagerführer* waiting at the entrance gate. There was not the slightest chance of avoiding him. I was led into the large dining hall where Italians, Czechs, French and Belgians were already assembled. A German officer was nervously pacing on the stage where the *lagerführer* normally stood. He was a colonel and, coming to attention, he clicked his heels and raised his right arm, shouting "Heil Hitler". I remained motionless. My French and Belgian friends, copying my reaction, did not move either, but the Italians and Czechs returned the salute. The officer raised his arm to salute again, but the French and Belgians did not respond. The colonel asked me why I did not return the salute, to which I replied that it was not our form of salute. He made no further remark about this but went straight into his speech, which I felt was directed at me personally. "Die Englander kommen nie in Deutschland" (the English will never come in

Germany), he said. I did not have time to translate, for the howling sound of sirens signalled approaching enemy aircraft.

Since it was already dark, it could only be the RAF. The colonel was the first to leave the barrack block and I saw his car disappear in a cloud of dust. We spent over two hours in the humid air-raid shelter with our feet in water. When the all-clear sounded we all went back to the dining hall, where the *lagerführer* was waiting for me. I could not help worrying about the outcome of my refusal to return the salute to the colonel. I asked what would happen and the *lagerführer* replied that 'propaganda officers' were not very brave as a rule, adding that the colonel would be no exception and would not return.

He was right. The officer did not return, which was perhaps lucky for he must have felt insulted when I refused to return his daft salute. I noticed that the *lagerführer* had not returned the salute either. What he said next came as a surprise: "Du bis einen feinen kerel" (you are a fine fellow). They were the only kind words I ever heard coming from him.

The following day I read in the *Nuremberger Zeitung*, the local newspaper, that Ratisbon (Regensburg) on the Danube had been heavily bombed, including the Messerschmitt aircraft factory. Such news was always a morale booster to us. I remarked to my friends in the shelter that not a single anti-aircraft explosion was heard during those two hours of RAF planes flying over Nuremberg. I had the impression that the crews manning the anti-aircraft positions were too scared to bring the wrath of the RAF upon the city. I was also well aware that the RAF had got me out of a difficult situation.

The Jewish girls

The following week the Belgian and French labourers were told to vacate Block 2 to make room for more Italians who were arriving. We were transferred to a labour camp in a *Gasse* (alley) near Plärrer Square in Nuremberg's old quarter. The Nazis had taken over the site from the Jewish owner of a toy factory. It meant we were far from Köhling and his harassment.

The *lagerführer* in the new camp introduced himself as Herr Frish. He was a little man, only about 5 foot 3

inches (1.6 metres) tall, with a swastika proudly pinned to the lapel of his jacket. He walked with a bad limp, a memento from the battles in France during the First World War. He had a vile temper, but his bark was worse than in bite.

The first night in the camp there was another RAF air-raid. The following day I found out that the railway marshalling yard was the target. Alas, there were many casualties among the Russian POWs whose camp was close by. The Südfriedhof camp, also nearby, was hit as well. A direct hit on the concrete bunker had killed Köhling's elderly assistant *lagerführer* and the Polish interpreter who had come to Germany for a better life. Köhling himself was absent at the time of the air-raid; I was told that he was in hospital.

The Italian and Czech workers all survived in the trench shelter but had to move to another camp. After the site was cleared a barrack block was erected to house 500 Hungarian Jewish girls and women, brought in from Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Aged between

14 and 40, they were guarded day and night by male and female SS.

No-one was allowed to speak to them. To give them a piece of bread was a criminal offence punishable under the anti-Jewish laws. Every morning as we made our way to the factory we would pass the unfortunate girls on the other side of the road, on their way to another Siemens factory in Nuremberg, the Siemens-Schuckert Works.

Many were still only children, clad in rags, some with a blanket slung over their shoulders. The SS guards, real brutes carrying rifles with bayonets fixed at the ready, were ready to shoot if any of the girls made a move that could be interpreted as an attempt to escape. We were not allowed to show compassion for the ragged group. The SS guards would point their rifles at us to make us understand that we had to look to our front. For Siemens, the girls were slave labour that they could use wherever it was dangerous for their own people.

There is a saying that only mountains don't meet, but people do. That is indeed true. In September 2001, I was

invited to a reconciliation event in Nuremberg and introduced to a Hungarian Jewish lady named Magda Watts. She was among the girls I saw being herded to the Siemens-Schuckert Works to carry out forced labour. After the war she married and had two children, settling at Eilat in Israel. [Ed: Magda, who became a renowned doll-maker, died in Eilat on 31 March 2019, aged 90. A path named Magda-Watts-Weg, close to the site of the former Südfriedhof camp, was inaugurated by Nuremberg Mayor Marcus König on 17 July 2025].

Chapter 4
Countdown to freedom

In trouble again

On the first evening after arriving at our new camp, several of us went in search of an air-raid shelter after returning from the factory. We found one not too far away, built into an arched bridge spanning a moat which was part of the old city defences. The shelter was divided into two, one part for Germans, the other for foreigners. A warden kept an eye on the foreigners, just in case one of us made signals to the RAF pilots. Presumably he thought we wanted to bring bombs down on our own heads? I was soon in trouble with the warden. It wasn't claustrophobia but I did not like being in a confined environment during air-raids. I also felt a profound antipathy towards the man after hearing him boasting about his experience in the Afrika Korps whilst serving in Libya, how he had killed a Tommy and taken his steel helmet – which he was now proudly wearing.

One day I was standing near the shelter entrance when he suddenly grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and delivered a vigorous kick to the fleshy part of my anatomy, sending me flying over the four steps that led into it. There were air-raid alarms almost every night. After one of the raids the German with the helmet failed to appear and was not seen again. I hope an RAF bomb avenged the Tommy he so callously boasted of having killed.

During one of the raids, the doors and windows in our camp were blown out, letting the cold winter winds howl through the accommodation room. Siemens had no alternative but to move us again.

It was while I was in this camp that I received a most disturbing request. A forced labourer named Simon Blampain had been arrested for some obscure reason and incarcerated in the city's small prison, not far from our labour camp. It was where foreign workers were kept before being sent to the discipline camp, whereas the main, now universally known, Nuremberg prison was

where Germans who contravened Nazi doctrines were held awaiting trial or death.

A certain Jean Hensmans, also from Charleroi, handed me a note which he said Simon had given him. When I asked how he had been able to see Simon, his explanation was difficult to believe. He said they had met in the exercise yard, where the inmates were closely guarded by police. The note read as follows: “We have a plan to escape, but you must come to the prison for we need external help and I will give all details of the plan. You must present yourself as my father, for only close relatives are allowed to visit us.”

I sensed it was a trap. How could I pose as his father when he was a few months older than me? The German police would not fall for such a blatant subterfuge. I would willingly try to help them escape, but the odds were against any attempt succeeding. I called Franz Flament, Antonin Gorce, Marcel Muzard and Remy Herman together, and after explaining the reasons for my indecision, three agreed the request for help must be a dirty trick. Only Remy said I should help Simon and his

friends escape. But when I asked if he would help me, he replied that it was none of his concern. That's how one loses a friend.

Twenty years later I bumped into Jean Hensmans in Charleroi and asked him for an explanation about the note and his visit to Simon in the prison exercise yard. He said he could not remember the incident.

Much later, when I was invited as a VIP to Nuremberg in 2001, I met an historian named Gerhard Jochem. He promised to try and find out what happened to Simon Blampain. His finding came as something of a surprise: there had been nobody of that name incarcerated in the prison. He was also of the opinion that it had been a trick to get me into trouble.

Final camp

We soon found ourselves on the move again, after being transferred to our fifth and final camp, located on Johannisstrasse, not far from the main hospital in Nuremberg and a dynamite factory. Without doubt, we were once again being used as human shields. As was

the case each time we were sent to a different camp, our first move was to look for an air-raid shelter since, as usual, Siemens provided zero protection against air attacks. We found a perfect shelter in the old city fortifications – provided no Nazi Party members denied us entrance. That once happened when I was returning with friends to the camp after a long day's work. When the sirens sounded we were near the fortification walls and made for the shelter entrance at the bottom of the moat. We came face to face with a member of the SA, pointing his Luger in our direction and accusing us of plundering houses.

He told us stay outside the shelter where he could see us. Throughout the raid we remained in the open until we noticed that the 'brave' SA man had moved back inside and could no longer see us. It was our only chance to avoid being taken to the police so, despite the bombing which had already started, we climbed out of the moat and found protection in the cellars of a nearby house. We took a great risk being on the streets during the bombing, but we knew that the risks would have been even greater

had we been taken to the police. The word of a Nazi Party member would always carry more weight than that of a foreigner.

The site where we found safety was about 500 yards from the camp and, with sufficient warning, it was possible to run the distance between pre-alarm and full alarm. The safest form of protection were the underground passages which had been used in the Middle Ages to move from one part of the fortifications to another when the city was under siege. A huge tower, also part of the city defences, was also used as a shelter. As foreigners though we had access just to its upper floor which had only a tiled roof as protection. The Germans believed that if a bomb hit the top of the tower, the combination of its thick walls and floor, together with human bodies, more specifically us, would snuff out the intensity of the blast.

The other area where we were allowed to seek protection was deep below ground level, under the tower. My friend Franz spent many nights there. Such was his terror of the bombing raids that he would spend every night in

the humidity of the low-level shelter. This only made his rheumatic condition worse, to the point he became almost paralysed.

He once talked me into following him into that God-forsaken place. Water was running down the walls and the floor was covered with pools. There was a smell of decaying matter in the atmosphere. Franz slept on stone benches which lined the walls; Several families with children were also sheltering in the large room. I doubted they were German families, but rather foreign families who had come to Germany for a better life. I left Franz there and returned into the cold wintry night.

The raids on Nuremberg intensified in December 1944. The AAF carpet-bombed the city by day, while the RAF continued to target specific installations and factories by night. It was during one of these night raids while on *luftschutz* duty in the factory that I was ordered, together with two Germans, to man a look-out bunker. When the raid started the two Germans fell to their knees in the small space inside the bunker, leaving little space for me to stand except on one of them.

Acting more from curiosity than bravery, I could not help looking through the lookout slits provided in the brickwork to survey the area surrounding the bunker. The Christmas tree flares dropped by the pathfinder planes illuminated the darkness so it was like broad daylight and I could clearly see the bombers diving to execute their targeted attacks. I kept my two German companions informed as each plane dived and released its load of bombs. They prayed even louder each time. The raid must have lasted over an hour and in fact we remained in the bunker for almost three hours since incendiary bombs had fallen on the gas bottle storage area, setting off each of the bottles in turn over a long period. After a while I no longer saw the RAF bombers diving towards their targets and made a run for it, leaving the Germans to their praying. When I reached my Belgian friends, who had gathered in a safe place, they told me that they had given me up for dead.

In fact one of our group was killed when a landmine exploded at the entrance of a bunker where he and a German had taken their posts. The concrete top of the

bunker, which must have been about half a metre thick, was lifted off the brickwork and thrown in the air by the force of the blast. The two men inside were left stripped of their clothes and the German's spectacles were embedded into his face. They were so mutilated that it was difficult to recognise them.

Several incendiary bombs also hit the transformer workshop. A Nazi supervisor assembled all the foreign labourers and ordered us to put out the fires with buckets of water. It was dark and from where he was stood, on a sizeable object, he could not see that we were also throwing buckets of transformer oil on the flames. The 'struggle' to fight the fires went on until the morning. All the German civilians had left the burning factory to see if their families had survived the raid. There was not much damage to their homes as factories and other vital installations had borne the brunt of the RAF night raid. With the arrival of daylight, the Nazi in charge was able to see what he had been standing on for most of the night: a 1,000-pound time bomb that had failed to explode. He almost fell off it and stopped shouting,

leaving us to fight the blaze alone. It did not take us long to abandon our efforts and go down into the basements to find a spot where we could have a quiet rest until the German workers returned.

Constant allied air-raids

The raids were now taking place almost every day. During the daytime the AAF were carrying out their carpet-bombing raids; after dusk the RAF took over, with their swift and practically undetectable Mosquito light bombers. It had become nearly impossible to make for the shelters in the time between the alarm and the bombs falling. The Flying Fortress and Lancaster bombers were detected by radar as they flew over the outer circle of Nuremberg, 20 kilometres from the centre, whereas the Mosquito light bombers were only detected when they were directly over the city.

I implored Franz to stop spending the nights in the humid basement of the fortification tower. He listened to my advice, which meant that he was in the camp during one of the Mosquito raids. At the sound of the alarm we

all rushed towards the shelters in the fortifications. I had gone only a few metres when Antonin Gorce and Marcel Muzar overtook me, warning that Franz had collapsed and was shouting for me to help him.

I ran back towards the camp to find him lying on the pavement, cursing his handicap. I heaved him onto my shoulders. The bombs were already exploding close by; the dynamite factory some 500 yards from our camp must have been under attack. It was too late to reach the tower so I decided to seek shelter in a nearby house. I pushed open the main door, visible thanks to the flares dropped by the pathfinders, and spotted a flight of stone steps leading to the basement. With Franz still on my shoulders I started moving down the steps when I heard voices. I stopped and we crouched down, fearing to advertise our presence. We knew too well how readily the Nazi wardens would accuse a foreigner of being a plunderer. As soon as we heard what we thought was the last explosion we made our way back up the stairs and into the open. Franz had somewhat recovered and was able to walk with me supporting his arm. It was dark

now, the flares having petered out, and the air in the street was thick with dust from houses brought down by the bombs. We returned to the camp, which was still standing.

The next day a French lad came to me asking if I wanted to see some dead “Chleus”, the name the French had given to the Germans. He took me to the roof of a building close to ours which had been hit. There were over 40 bodies, recovered by Russian POWs, laid in rows in the yard behind our building. The horror of the scene overcame me. Even though I had seen action in the Battle of France in 1940, this was what Hitler and Goebbels had promised to do to Britain and what many other many countries had experienced.

The bodies which had been identified had a label pinned to their clothing; the others would remain unidentified. Among the victims I noticed four German soldiers, maybe on leave from the Russian Front, all badly maimed like the others. There was, however, one victim, I could never forget, a martyr sacrificed to the ambition and greed of the Nazi clique. She was a young mother

and the collapsing building had crushed the lower part of her body. In her left arm she held a baby, still pressed against her breast, with her right arm covering the child in a last vain effort to protect it from the falling debris. She was German, but what affected me most was the fact that she was a young mother with her baby, murdered like so many others in different parts of Europe. I left the rooftop distressed, with a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach.

It was in the Johannisstrasse camp that I learned what had happened to Köhling. A French forced labourer told me he had had his leg amputated due to his wound from Leningrad. The Frenchman had since been lumbered with moving him about in a four-wheel handcart. Because of Köhling's temper, his wife and daughter had left him. Their 17-year-old son had been killed at Caen in Normandy and his loss had also contributed to their separation.

The Frenchman told me that Köhling wanted my forgiveness for his past behaviour. However, I was wary and refused to see him. First, because I could not and

would not forget the ill treatment I had had to endure and, second, because he always carried his Luger with him. His son had fallen under British fire. I knew Köhling would not hesitate to avenge his son's death. Still, part of me could not help feeling sorry for the man, for he was also a victim of his leaders' ambitions and greed for power.

Back at the factory, production had come completely to a standstill but we were soon put back to work, clearing bomb debris. On Christmas Eve we sang patriotic songs and national anthems in the camp without being bothered by the police, which would not have happened five or six months earlier. Spirits were high as we could at last see the end of our days of forced labour.

On 2 January 1945 I was busy clearing the site around midday, preparing for reconstruction, when I heard the sound of aircraft heading towards the city. I could see two twin-boom Lightning reconnaissance planes, unhindered by the anti-aircraft defences. Large clouds in the vast blue sky offered ideal protection for them.

It was obvious we would soon be in for another raid. At 5pm the pathfinders dropped the first Christmas tree flares and aluminum radar-foiling strips. For some reason, many of us had not made for the safety of the city fortifications, possibly because we were weary of running to and fro during the day and night. We took shelter instead in the basement of a house opposite the camp. The days of being refused protection had long gone; many had left the city.

The raid lasted two hours and halfway through it we felt the house tremble down to its foundations. My first impression was that it had been a close shave, but when we emerged we realised the house had taken a direct hit. The top was blown off and only the fact it was a solidly-built corner building had prevented it from collapsing completely. From my vantage point I could see the medieval city centre in flames, some reaching over 100 metres high. I could feel the air around me being sucked towards the huge fire, adding oxygen to the furnace. The raid left over 15,000 dead or wounded, and it could have been many more had it not been for the fortifications and

underground tunnels. Little remained of the old, mostly wooden buildings, which provided excellent material to feed the fires.

The next morning we were confronted with rows of German corpses, recovered from the ruins by Russian POWs and laid on the street waiting to be taken to the cemetery, where more prisoners were digging mass graves. People who were still alive but burned beyond recognition were being loaded onto flat trucks to be left to die at the cemetery.

One of the POWs told me that the raid had left a horrible carnage at their camp. It had one air-raid shelter, a trench covered with metal sheeting and a thin layer of soil. An incendiary bomb had fallen on the centre of the trench, badly burning some of the POWs. The survivors ran towards one end of the shelter and the other, only for two bombs to hit both. It was a once in a million chance.

The Russian POWs were forced to remove any unexploded bombs and mines, often embedded deep in the ground. Once they were clear of surrounding debris, a POW skilled in bomb disposal carried out the most

critical part of the exercise, defusing the detonator. An extra ration of food was their reward for risking their lives.

I had become friendly with the POWs as my German was now more fluent and they could speak it a little, allowing us to have clandestine conversations. One was really a good friend. He was about 20 and came from Kiev, then part of the Soviet Union. Sadly, after the 2 January air raid I never saw him again. Of all the POWs, and there were many, the Russians were without a shadow of doubt the ones who received the worst treatment. For them it was hell on earth, yet they took it stoically. Some might call it submission, but I know this was not the case. When they were liberated, their fate was often even worse as we all now know. [Ed: Joseph Stalin regarded capture as desertion or treason and many former POWs ended up in Gulag camps].

Survival for us foreign forced labourers was more and more difficult. We were receiving only one meal a day, delivered to the camp in the evening. The German population was also feeling the brunt of the food

restrictions, so no more slices of bread were passed to us unseen by anti-Nazi Germans.

However, the attitude of a segment of the local population remained consistently hostile. Some explained the reason for this was that we had taken the place of young Germans who were being sent to the front. I understood this resentment, although I was in no way responsible for our deportation. But I refused to accept being considered inferior.

The rebel lagerführer

Sometime in February 1945 I was told to report to the Johannisstrasse camp *lagerführer*. I wasn't worried as the only thing he usually wanted was to check the number of labourers in the camp so that he could order the meals for the following day. My report still included an extra four men who had left to try and reach the Allied Army which had crossed the Rhine. They asked me to keep their names on the list so they could put a safe distance between themselves and Nuremberg. That also meant four extra rations to share.

When I entered the office, the *lagerführer* was sat at his desk, drinking a glass of Cointreau, with a half-full bottle in front of him. He was slightly drunk and, picking up the bottle, he started praising the quality of French liquors. For one brief moment I thought he was going to pour me a drink, but instead he poured a small amount of the Cointreau onto the glass top of his desk and set it alight with a match, releasing the aroma. Having proved his point, he started telling me about his life.

In the early 1930s he had been arrested and sent to the concentration camp in Dachau. After five years of incarceration, he was offered his freedom if he joined the Nazi Party and enlisted in the SA (the Brownshirts). The emotional blackmail was too much to resist for he had been separated from his wife and two daughters. He did not tell me why he was arrested, but I guessed he had been a member of the Communist Party.

He suddenly put his glass down and told me to follow him outside the camp. When I told him this was not allowed at night he replied that I had nothing to fear when I was with him. It must have been about 10pm and

we caught the tram at the end of the street. I remained on the platform while he took a seat inside. We got off at Plärrer Square, from where he took me through the ruins of the old city until we reached a café-restaurant. He knocked at the door, no doubt using a code, and we were let in. Inside, despite the dim candlelight, hurricane lamps and dense blue cigarette smoke, the SA *lagerführer* led me towards a corner table and brought me a bottle of beer. It had a beer label, but not much taste.

He stood at the bar with a group of men and I could see him doing most of the talking. They were openly discussing the removal of Adolf H and his clique before the Red Army could occupy more of Germany and the RAF and AAF had destroyed more towns. They wanted to be liberated by the Allied troops. A man with shoulders like a weightlifter's brought me another beer and, sitting down in front of me, clapped me on the shoulder, nearly knocking me over. Wishing me good health, he added in German: "You are one of us now, you'll be our liaison man with the Amis", meaning the

Americans. It must have been nearly midnight when we all left the restaurant. The *lagerführer* took me back to the camp on the last tram.

The next day I pondered my situation. I had been taken into the confidence of a German resistance movement. Even if the end of their dream was in sight, the Gestapo was still extremely active. At the camp, we were no longer required to work in the factory. Although our meals were still delivered once a day, the police had visited the camp and told us that we would be carrying out defence work in the west of the city and would receive our meal there in future.

I was not prepared to help with the defence of the city and told my closest friends this. They fully agreed, suggesting that I should get everyone else on my side. My mind was soon made up and, speaking from a balcony, I addressed the wider group. If we all agreed, no one would leave the camp the next day. One crucial question was raised, namely how would we receive meals? I replied that I would see to that.

After my short speech two new arrivals asked for a word. The one who did most of the talking was a Parisian and follower of the Pétain regime. He felt we should help the Nazis to defend the city. I argued with him and things quickly became heated. The Parisian suddenly pulled out a knife, pushing the blade against my midriff. His friend, a German-speaking native of Lorraine, moved closer, ready to intervene, but both finally backed off and left the camp. I never saw them again.

I had a more serious things to think about, however, such as ensuring we would still be fed. Together with my friends Antonin and Marcel, as well as another newcomer, a man from Toulouse, we set out to intercept the horse-drawn vehicle transporting rations to groups working on the defence of the city. The Frenchman had somehow managed to lay his hands on a four-wheel handcart and we hid in rubble by what had once been a main road.

From a distance we could hear an Italian voice, urging his mount on as it pulled the wagon carrying the rations.

When he had almost reached the spot where we were hiding, I grabbed the bridle of the horse and forced it to halt. The Toulousian told the Italian POW driver that he was collecting rations for a group which had moved to another area. There were four of us and he was on his own, so he did not try to refuse our request. He let us unload a large container of thick soup and after that we let him go. The men in the camp were relieved to put something under their belt.

Our expeditions met with success for four days but on the fifth, to our dismay, we saw from our hide that the Italian prisoner was accompanied by a German soldier with his rifle at the ready. It was pointless trying to convince him that we were from a different working group. Back at the camp I assembled the men and told them each would have to fend for himself. They took the bad news without a grumble for they realised that we had done our utmost to maintain their rations while we were 'on strike'.

That same evening the *lagerführer* called me to his office and told me I was to accompany him to another

meeting with his friends. After a short walk we arrived at a restaurant; after the same knock at the entrance door, we were let in. The place was already full of Brownshirts, several civilians and two or three policemen. I was allowed to mix with the others while the *lagerführer* took over the running of the meeting.

One of the group pointed out that they needed weapons. The *lagerführer* had a few words with the restaurant owner who came to the front of the bar and lifted a trapdoor used to take beer barrels and cases down to the cellar. The man went down, returning shortly with his arms loaded with weapons, repeating the operation until the long bar top was covered with arms and ammunition. His armoury included weapons of different types: rifles, revolvers, light and heavy machine guns, grenades and ammunition for each. There was even a *Panzerfaust* (an anti-tank weapon).

After a long discussion during which the *lagerführer* kept giving orders, the group agreed to meet again in the near future. The arms were taken back down into the cellar and we left the restaurant together. It was the last

time I saw the *lagerführer*. A mole must have infiltrated the group. I had strong suspicions that it was one the policemen I had seen when the large cache of weapons was being displayed on the restaurant bar.

A new *lagerführer* arrived at the camp around the beginning of March 1945. He was from the Sudetenland, the part of Czechoslovakia annexed by Hitler before the war. I don't recall his name but remember asking if he knew what had happened to his predecessor. He said he preferred not to answer my question, a reply that came as no surprise.

The following day, however, he asked if I would accompany him to the American lines. I agreed and we decided to leave early the next morning. But first I had to get hold of a bicycle; it didn't not take long as I had seen one in the back yard of a house next to our camp. I climbed over the wall, passing the bicycle over to Franz. I told him about the plan to make it to the American lines.

The *lagerführer* was at the camp early in the morning and we set off in the direction of Würzburg. We had

covered no more than about 60 kilometres when we stopped at a farmhouse. I was introduced to the woman running the farm as well as the wife and children of the *lagerführer*, who, like many others, had fled Nuremberg and its daily air-raids for the countryside. It was early morning when we arrived and we were invited to sit down to a copious breakfast, after which I offered to do some work for the woman-farmer as a gesture of appreciation.

She asked me to plough one of her fields and, even though I had never done this type of work before I asked her to make ready a team of oxen and show me the field. Conscious of my ignorance, she ploughed the first furrow and then left me to it. Once she had left, I gained self-assurance and started ploughing, making sure that the furrows were straight. It was a good team of oxen, making the ploughing much easier.

I was distracted from my work by an AAF squadron flying over the fields. They were so low that I could almost see the crew in the cockpit and could not resist waving. I finished ploughing the field by midday and

had a last look at the freshly turned soil, feeling rather proud of the result and not in the least guilty for helping the enemy's war effort.

Back at the farm, a slap-up dinner was awaiting me. The *lagerführer* told me he would stay with his family at the farm. He said the Americans were about 100 kilometres west of Würzburg and I left the farm with a large loaf of bread for the journey.

I had not gone very far when I arrived at a Y-junction where I came across three men, whom I recognised as forced labourers like me. They were Belgians who had also been trying to reach the American lines. However, what they said completely dampened my enthusiasm. They had made it to Würzburg and walked straight into a group of SS and, in attempting to escape, one of their friends was captured and killed. They said the whole area was crawling with SS on the lookout for deserters.

I decided to cycle back to Nuremberg and wait there for the end of hostilities. The road took me past a wood, from where a soldier suddenly appeared. As I had seen him, he had more than likely seen me. So I kept

pedalling, affecting an air of unconcern. The soles of my boots were still covered with soil from the field I had ploughed. I must have looked like a farmhand returning after a day's work. I started whistling a tune and kept my eyes straight ahead. As I passed him, I glimpsed the dreaded SS insignia on his helmet and battle dress. But luck had not deserted me for he was in his late teens, probably a conscript. An experienced SS would have stopped me. Out of the corner of my eye, hidden and camouflaged in the woods, I could see tanks, trucks and armoured half-tracks. As I pedalled on, I regretted not being able to pass on the information to the advancing Americans.

It was late afternoon when I reached the camp. Most of them were glad to see me again. There was one stranger among them, a young SS soldier with his arm in a sling. He kept saying "Deutschland kaput" (Germany finished), adding that he felt safer among us. I had no option but to tell him that it was too dangerous for us to let him stay in our camp. He left, sad and disconsolate.

Lady luck

Throughout the war I found myself in difficult, not to say dangerous, situations but never did lady luck let me down. This was now again the case. I remained with Franz at the entrance of the camp as the young SS soldier left. Had we gone back inside I would not have noticed the lurking danger. When one lives constantly surrounded by danger, one develops an extra sense, just like a hunted animal.

I saw two men approaching, walking down the alley leading to the camp. They were wearing long leather coats, the rims of their soft hats pulled over their eyes. Gestapo without a doubt.

I was sure I had been denounced due to my association with the disloyal SA *lagerführer*. Maybe he had given my name and those of others when he was being tortured, or when his wife and children were being tortured in front of him? It was well-known that the Gestapo did not hesitate to inflict pain on the relatives of their victims if they failed to obtain the information they wanted.

Before moving back hurriedly into the protection of our room, I told Franz that if they asked for me to tell them "Beeston weg" (Beeston has gone). I was ready to make a run for it for I knew that, once in the grip of the Gestapo, there would be no way of getting out alive. But lady luck was looking after me. The men had advanced barely two paces into our room when the sirens sounded the air-raid alarm. Having arrived at a stately pace, they left running like two scared rabbits. The alarm lasted the best part of four hours and they never returned.

That evening I called together my best friends to inform them that it was no longer safe for me to remain in Nuremberg and that I had to leave before being caught. The decision was painful; we had been together for two and a half years, we had lived through difficult times, and our friendship, forged in hardship, was not an empty phrase. I later learned that the police escorted the others on a march eastwards when the Americans approached Nuremberg.

Before my departure, several deportees gave me what little food they still had, mostly just a few pieces of

bread. Out came the old map, which we had hidden. West was out of the question; I had already been forced to turn back. I decided to head south for Austria and then Switzerland. One of the French comrades who had worked with me in the factory, Marcel Fageries, handed me 100 Reich Marks to keep me going. Marcel liked gambling with his friends from Marseille and would play poker through the night. Had I left without his gift I would have had just 2 RM in my pocket.

On the run again

It was about 3am when I said farewell to all my friends with whom I had spent so many difficult hours. Under cover of the moonless night I cycled pass the SS barracks in Fürth, and later that morning reached the village of Altdorf bei Nürnberg. On my left a small railway station bordered the road, on my right a restaurant. A man dashed out of the restaurant, frantically gesturing to me to come in. His attitude seemed friendly enough, so I decided to accept the invitation. The owner explained that a group of Waffen-SS were at the far end of the village arresting soldiers

who had left the front and were thus considered deserters. I had only just entered the restaurant when I saw a lone Wehrmacht soldier sluggishly walking pass the restaurant towards the trap set by the SS.

My saviour took me to a side window from where we could see the soldier walking to his doom. As he reached the place where the SS were hidden, two came out, grabbed the unfortunate soldier and pulled him into the thicket. A very short time afterwards I heard the rattle of a sub-machine-gun.

The restaurant owner gave me a large meal and advised me to avoid the roads and take a late train to Ratisbon (Regensburg) instead, as there was less chance of being noticed and caught. I gave him the money to buy me a rail ticket. It was dark when the train entered the small station. The coaches were crammed with civilians fleeing from the constant heavy bombing by the RAF and AAF.

I decided to stay away from the crowds in the coaches. I firmly installed my bike on the buffers of one coach and then sat on the buffers of the opposite coach. Each time

the train entered a station I had to jump down and slip under the carriage, climbing back onto my perch as soon as the train started moving again.

At some point I must have fallen asleep from exhaustion. I dreamt I was falling into a hole. I woke up just as I was about to slide between the buffers. At the next stop, I decided to risk travelling with the other passengers, finding a small space in the coach corridor. I noticed an unpleasant smell coming from a suitcase a lady was clutching tightly. I asked the man sitting next to me to enquire what she had in it; she replied that it was her dead baby and she was taking back to her village for burial.

The train stopped with a brutal jerk. I got up to find out the cause and saw the engine had stopped on the edge of a large bomb crater. The rails were twisted, and the sleepers had been reduced to small sticks, as if a giant hand had chopped them to make firewood. After a short time, the train conductor came round to inform us that another train would arrive on the other side of the crater

to take us to Ratisbon. The rest of the journey was uneventful.

In Ratisbon, I recovered my bike from the buffers and found my way out of the station, in the process meeting the German who had been sitting next to me in the corridor. He must have thought from the few words we exchanged that I was deserter. My accent had led him to believe that I came from Westphalia and he could therefore not understand why I was travelling to the South. He was a native of Ratisbon and indicated the direction I should take to reach the Danube. We parted without introductions; in situations like ours, in those troubled times, it was best not to know your companion's name. I remember, however, that he must have been around 40, perhaps a soldier who felt he had done his duty, eager to return to his family and rebuild his life in this chaotic world.

The city I was leaving, like the train station, was teeming with countless evacuees. It reminded me of the evacuation of Belgium in May 1940. In the throng, it was easy for me to go unnoticed by the police or, worse,

the Gestapo. I finally found my way to the banks of the blue Danube, although it was not blue as I had expected. I reached the city outskirts as dawn was breaking and found a spot by the river where I could rest for the day, as I had decided that it would be safer to travel at night. I pulled out the small chunk of bread my friends in the Nuremberg camp had given me *pour la route*.

I remained on the banks of the Danube until dusk started spreading its protective cloak over the river and the surrounding area. I felt rested but my stomach was craving a good meal. I soon found myself pedalling along country roads, taking care not to enter villages which sometimes meant groping my way through dense wooded areas. It all added to the time it would normally take. I had moved back to the banks of the Danube and dawn once more forced me to halt. Ahead of me I could see a large town. I lay all day watching convoys of SS troops crossing a bridge over the river and heading east. It seemed practically impossible to bypass the town to the west. I couldn't swim across the river with my

bicycle – which I had no intention of leaving behind – so I knew I had to cross the bridge.

I approached it as night fell and, barely halfway across, a powerful hand-torch beam halted me. I was told to move slowly forward and found myself facing two policemen who started questioning me. I replied in my best German at first, but when they asked if I was a deserter I broke into French. Had they asked for my identity documents I would have been in real trouble, for I had lost them in Nuremberg during an air-raid. All I had was the Siemens pass, which would have given away my last place of work.

When they asked where I had come from, I replied without hesitation: I said I had left Ratibor because I did not want to be captured by the approaching Red Army. Why did I think of Ratibor? In Nuremberg, a Frenchman of Spanish origin, Molino Jose, who had fled the civil war, mentioned he was being transferred there. Situated in the extreme east of Germany, the town was well known for its factory producing synthetic aviation fuel; it was also frequently bombed by the RAF.

My short interrogation seemed to have satisfied the policemen when the one who appeared to be in charge suddenly asked me to show him my hands. Apart from the ploughing, I had not done much work for a while. However, having been on the bike for days, my palms were callused from gripping the handlebars. It must have been sufficient for them to believe me. They said I could go but I'd have to find a job on a farm in the area – and that they would check if I had done so.

Relieved and free at last, I cycled on into the night. I had not gone far and was passing a wooded area when a natural need forced me to stop and enter the thicket. As I was about to return to the road, I glimpsed what looked like the fur of a rabbit at my feet in the pale light of the moon. In a lightning movement I bent down and grabbed it. Instead of a rabbit, I found myself holding the skull of what had been a human being, now almost devoid of flesh. The rest of the body was covered in leaves but I could see the remains of a striped uniform.

I had seen young Jewish girls in Nuremberg wearing the same shameful uniform. I let go of my gruesome find,

snapped up my bike and did not stop pedalling until I reached a farm near Kirchroth. I was hungry, tired and shaken by what I had seen further back in the woods. I found the farmer in the cow-shed and asked if he could employ me. He was unable to give an answer there and then but said that his wife would give me something to eat. In the evening I was again given a meal and told I could sleep in the barn. I found the hay a perfect bed; even a mouse did not stop me from having a good night's rest.

Farm friends

I was awakened in the very early hours of the morning by the farmer, who told me I could stay on as a farm-hand, adding that my first job was to kill a pig so I could put some flesh on my bones. It was the first time in my life that I had to perform a butcher's job but, as one says, "à la guerre comme à la guerre" (just get on with it). The slaughter took place the same afternoon; the farmer told me that the animal was vicious and for my sake it would be advisable not to mishandle it.

When the event was over, including the cutting of the different parts of the pig as instructed, I was covered from head to foot in blood. The following day the farmer's wife asked me to kill a chicken for the midday meal. I refused to and told her I was sorry, but I could not kill another animal. I must admit that, after the plentiful meals I had had during the two previous days, hunger was no longer gnawing at my stomach. I was never again asked to kill an animal.

The following day I was taken to one of the farmer's fields to demonstrate my aptitude at ploughing. Confident from the results I had obtained during my first escape from Nuremberg, I set about the task under the watchful eye of the farmer and had not done much when he left me to it, appearing satisfied. I was rather proud of my efforts when I had finished. That night I slept in a small room next to the barn and was told that I would have my meals at the same table as the farmer and his wife.

The farmer's wife told me they were no lovers of the Nazis. She had three sons, the oldest having shamed the

family by joining the SS. He had gone missing in Russia and was presumed dead, as the Red Army did not take SS prisoners. The second was a medic in the Wehrmacht. He had taken part in the Battle of Stalingrad and was decorated with the Iron Cross. He received a book on the history of Germany with the award. The farmer had torn out a photograph of Hitler on the first page. The youngest son had served in the Afrika Korps and was in a prisoner-of-war camp in Canada. The son from the medical corps returned home on leave while I was on the farm and when he told me he had to join his unit on the Western Front I advised him not to do so, as the war was nearing its end. He followed my advice and, after filling his rucksack with provisions, set off for the wooded hills, returning when the American troops arrived.

In a short period of time, I carried out all the tasks farming involves apart from two, milking the cows and cutting the corn. One task I did enjoy, which gave me a false sense of freedom, was going up into the hills with a team of oxen and a cart to collect tree branches to keep

the fire going and for smoking the pork hanging in the flue. On the whole the farmer was quite satisfied with my efforts, which was expressed by his and his wife's attitude to me. They even arranged a mansard room for me in the loft.

It must have been only a few days before the arrival of the American advance party that the farmer surprised me with some astonishing news, namely that three British soldiers had arrived in the village and taken up quarters in a farm belonging to the mayor, who was a fanatical Nazi. The farmer could not understand the reason for the vast movement of SS troops in the region. There were no more Wehrmacht troops to be seen as they had put down their arms, leaving it to the SS to defend a pocket of Bavarian resistance. In the farmer's opinion, they were there to protect a castle on the Danube which was the lair of some Nazi 'big nob'.

It was late in the evening when the farmer told me about the British soldiers. Early the next morning, as dawn slowly broke over the countryside, I jumped on my bicycle and made for the mayor's farm. It was the first

time I had seen the place: it was impressive, with high walls surrounding the yard and a large porch with an imposing door. The whole domain reflected the wealth of the owner, or in this case, his loyalty to the Nazi party. I cycled straight into the farm-yard, almost knocking down three soldiers playing football with a sort of ball they had made. Seeing my leather jacket, they thought that I was an American.

We started introductions. The quieter one was a Londoner, the tallest a Liverpudlian, and the smartest of the three, looking as if he had only just come off parade, was a Scot. They told me they had escaped from a column of prisoners of war, that the Germans were evacuating Ratibor in the East, and that after their escape they had already marched some 300 miles.

I told them I had escaped from Nuremberg and the Scot told me that he had known a lad who had come to Ratibor from Nuremberg, a Spaniard named Molino who used to bring him food when he was locked up in the camp bunker for getting into trouble. And this is where the world is so small, for it was obviously the same

Molino Jose who had been transferred there from our camp in Nuremberg.

I had to go back to my employer's farm but returned to see the British soldiers the following morning. When I arrived, I found only the mayor there. He informed me that the soldiers had left in the early hours when they heard troop movements on the main road some two miles away. I had also heard the noise of heavy traffic moving fast, which, I found out, was the SS retreating.

In the afternoon, there was more noise of military traffic coming from the main road. The farmer handed me his binoculars and I climbed onto the roof of the barn from where I was able to see an American army convoy moving towards Straubing. I could not help thinking of the three British soldiers, hoping they had made it to the American lines and not walked straight into the SS troops. I tried to find out later what had happened to them, but to no avail. It was another week before an American armoured half-track pulled up in front of the farm. The officer in charge jumped off the vehicle and told me the war was over.

I was asked to accompany his unit, acting as an interpreter, as they rounded up German officers and SS. We arrested one officer and four SS at the mayor's farm. I continued doing odd jobs for my employer for a month or so and it was on one of my expeditions that I bumped into an old acquaintance, the policeman who had stopped me on the bridge over the Danube and wanted to see my hands.

I stopped him and, holding up my hands, asked if he was still interested in seeing them. He muttered something I did not catch and started to go on his way. He was wearing his uniform and riding a motorcycle. I told the officer I was accompanying that the policeman had boasted that he would kill the first American he met. The officer told my 'friend' to get off his motorcycle, which we loaded on the Jeep, and left the policeman to walk the rest of the way to his destination.

One afternoon the farmer took me to the Danube, about an hour's walk from the farm, to show me how close we had all been to being annihilated. I saw two large river barges and a sunk tugboat, which did not at first strike

me as a cause for concern. The tugboat had been sunk by AAF ‘Jabos’ (fighter bombers). The river barges were moored to the river bank and it was their cargo that concerned the farmer most. I only saw artillery shells but the farmer, who had seen action in France during the First World War, recognised markings on them which were the same as those used in yperite mustard gas artillery shells. Many American soldiers and German civilians would have died, he said, had the SS laid their hands on that cargo.

I had the opportunity to intervene with the American military authorities when the farmer warned me that Russian deportees were engaging in looting, theft and even rape. This led to threats from a Russian deportee who had been dismissed by the farmer before I arrived. The American forces removed all the Russians from the area, including the one who threatened me.

Journey home

I remained on the farm until the beginning of June 1945, helping with farm activities and accompanying the

American ‘hunting’ team when I was required as a translator, until one day the officer I often accompanied told me that the East-West alliance was deteriorating and that both sides were massing troops on the dividing line separating the Allies from the Russians. He said it would be preferable for me to return home. The next day I said *au revoir* to the farmer and his wife who wanted to pay me for the work I’d done. Given what the currency was worth, I refused to take the money. They gave me a loaf of homemade bread and a ham from the pig I had slaughtered; it was all much appreciated.

I set off for Straubing on foot and, from there, by truck to Ratisbon. I thought it was going to be my last-ever journey as the Afro-American driver drove at breakneck speed. I was relieved when the truck pulled up in Ratisbon army barracks. The barracks were occupied by a French unit, who had raised a French flag over the entrance. A soldier took me to what appeared to be the HQ office. An officer was sat at the desk with a Luger in front of him, that weapon I knew so well. A second person in the room, wearing the striped uniform of a

concentration camp inmate, did all the talking. He ordered me to remove my shirt and raise my arms, at the same time picking up the Luger from the desk and looking at my left armpit for the infamous SS tattoo. Satisfied, he said I could put my shirt back on and the Luger went back on the desk. The soldier who had brought me to the office and had followed the inspection with a very unconcerned air, told me to follow him to a barrack room.

There were already four men in it, all Frenchmen who had been subjected to the same treatment. One of my new room-mates took me to a kind of balcony overlooking a yard, where an American Army truck was being loaded with church bells which had been plundered from occupied countries. A lad in civilian clothes was struggling to push the heavy bells up a ramp onto the truck, as a French soldier poked him in the back with his bayonet. The room-mate explained that the young man was a French SS who had tried to fool the officer in the interrogation office, only to be found out by the tell-tale SS tattoo.

The next morning about 20 of us were loaded onto an army truck and taken at breakneck speed to a military camp in Bamberg, where we spent the night. The following day, after a delousing session with DDT we were then marched to the railway station, given a C-ration pack and put on cattle trucks, which had been made comfortable to some degree with straw covering the floorboards. In all there must have been over 1,000 of us on the train.

The journey back to Belgium took us through Nuremberg, where the train halted at the station. I was able to see the ruins of the medieval city where I had spent so many months of hard labour.

After an entire day of travel in the cattle trucks, we disembarked at Liège in Belgium. A few of us were lucky enough to spend no more than two days in the army barracks, where we were treated more like undesirable refugees than forced labourers returning home. I arrived in Charleroi on 12 June 1945, exactly two-and-a-half years after being deported. At the station my fiancée Yvonne and my family were awaiting me.

After the war I met my friend Franz, who told me that the day after my departure from the Nuremberg camp, the police turned up and marched everyone to an area where they toiled for six days, digging defence trenches. On the seventh day they were rounded up and told to board lorries which took them east until an American armoured unit caught up with them and they were liberated near the city of Pilsen (Plzeň) in what was then Czechoslovakia. Franz told me that the Nazi authorities appeared to have gone berserk: deportees in the East were being moved westwards and those in the West were being moved eastwards.

I had my own views on the matter. The Nazis had been shanghaiing young foreigners into their army. In time, they would have had a great number of foreigners filling the gaps left by fallen German soldiers. The Nazis, who still pinned high hopes on their new secret weapons, were like rats (sorry for the comparison, rats!) for it was when they were cornered that they became most dangerous and vicious.

Is it too much to hope that at least their philosophy and practices will never again rear their heads in our all-too-troubled world?

Epilogue

I have often wondered, and still often wonder, how civilised peoples, whose cultures could serve as an example and a reference for many other peoples, could have allowed themselves to be drawn into the turmoil of the Second World War, led astray by a group of ambitious men, hungry for power and wealth.

After more than 50 years, with age taking its toll, I still revisit the aftermath of these man-made cataclysms. I cannot forget the sight of bodies of men, women, children and the elderly, innocent victims, lined up on the sidewalks. People left burned and unrecognisable from the effects of incendiary bombs, bodies torn apart by explosive bombs; bodies whose clothes and flesh had been ripped away by anti-personnel mines.

I remember, in front of piles of rubble, the posts that were fixed in the ground with signs bearing the names of

those buried there. I saw a Wehrmacht soldier, on leave from the front, a small suitcase in hand, his head bowed in pain, reading the names on a sign – his loved ones, undoubtedly, his home, certainly – then walking away with his head down.

I clearly remember – this vision still haunts my thoughts – the mutilated bodies in the yard behind our camp. I remember the sensation in my stomach, twisting with emotion and rising to my mouth. I trembled from the psychological shock for a long time. I can't forget the young woman whose body was crushed, clutching her baby to her chest in a final embrace.

What I have described is only a tiny part of the horror of those years, just the tip of the iceberg. I will not live long enough for these memories to fade from my mind. I now have three generations behind me and I do not hesitate to describe the horrors to them.

In 1946, I went to England and visited several cities, including those that had suffered from the air raids at the beginning of the war. In London, I saw clean sidewalks and streets, no more mutilated corpses, but entire

districts, the size of Nuremberg's old town, completely razed. The rubble that had once been imposing blocks of buildings was neatly and symmetrically arranged.

When leaders and their generals, unable to establish their superiority on the front, and unable to win victorious battles, direct their power towards the destruction of cities and their inhabitants, I do not consider them men but monsters.

Charleroi
24 February 2000

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The Royal British Legion: A Duty of Remembrance

Publishing George Beeston's account of his wartime experiences has long been the wish of the Brussels branch of the Royal British Legion (RBL). The Royal Charter, set out in 1925, requires the RBL "to perpetuate the memory of sacrifices made during service with the Armed Forces in war and peace". We believe George's ordeal as a forced labourer merits a duty of remembrance.

The RBL is here through thick and thin, ensuring that the unique contribution of the Armed Forces community is never forgotten. The Brussels Branch meets regularly in the city and surrounding area. We have been here since 1922 and we support serving personnel, veterans and their families in times of need, wherever and whenever that need arises.

Membership is open to all ages and nationalities. You do not need a military background. We currently have British, Belgian, French and German members.

The branch organises social events, commemorations and battlefield tours. Members receive a regular branch newsletter *Legion*, the official RBL magazine, six times a year.

Membership of Brussels Branch currently costs only €30 per year. That's €2.50 a month – less than the price of a cup of coffee. For an application form, click on the 'How to Join' page on our website: https://branches.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/brussels-branch/

ROYAL BRITISH LEGION