

THE NINE

*The True Story of a Band of Women
Who Survived the Worst of Nazi Germany*



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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

First published in the United States by St. Martin's Press,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

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Printed in the United States of America. For information,
address St. Martin's Press, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

www.stmartins.com

Designed by Devan Norman

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (TK)

ISBN 978-1-250-23929-7 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-23930-3 (ebook)

First Edition: 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Eliza, Noah, and Sophie

*Ce que nous avons partagé
Dans la peur, le froid, la faim, l'espoir.
L'épreuve, tant physique que psychique
Ne se répète pas, même pour nous.
Elle se limite au monde de jamais plus.
Ce que nous avons enduré ensemble
Est à nous, à cette vie, de ces instants,
Comme un transmutation de l'une, à l'autre,
dans une autre vie.*

What we shared
In fear, cold, hunger, hope.
The ordeal, both physical and mental.
Can't be repeated, even for us.
It is limited to the world of never again.
What we have endured together
Is ours, that life, those moments,
Like a transmutation from one to the other,
in another life.

—NICOLE CLARENCE, ONE OF THE NINE

THE NINE

Hélène Podliasky, my great-aunt, known by the eight others as “Christine.” Twenty-four years old when arrested while working in the Résistance in northeastern France. A brilliant engineer, she spoke five languages. Considered the leader during the escape.

Suzanne Maudet (Zaza), Hélène’s friend from high school. Twenty-two when arrested while working with the Auberge de Jeunesse in Paris. Recently married to René Maudet, she considered herself the scribe of the group. Wrote an optimistic book about the escape immediately after the war; it was finally published in 2004.

Nicole Clarence held a position of importance in the Résistance. Twenty-two when arrested in Paris a day after her birthday. She was one of the “57,000,” the name given to the famous last transport of prisoners deported from Paris in August 1944, days before the city was liberated.

Madelon Verstijnen (Lon), one of two Dutch women in the group. Twenty-seven when arrested after she came to Paris to join her brother in the Dutch resistance network. She and Hélène spoke the best German in the group and were the advance scouts. Stubborn and brave, she wrote her account of the escape in 1991.

Guillemette Daendels (Guigui), Lon’s friend from Holland. Twenty-three when arrested with Lon the day after their arrival together in Paris. She was serene, the group’s diplomat. She became close friends with Mena.

Renée Lebon Châtenay (Zinka), the bravest of the group. Twenty-nine when arrested after she went to a prison in search of her husband. Gave birth in a French prison. Part of the Comète network, she helped downed and stranded Allied soldiers escape to Spain.

Joséphine Bordanava (Josée), Spanish and the youngest of the nine. Twenty when arrested in Marseille. She was raised in foster care in the south of France. Worked with the Marcel network, providing care parcels to hidden Jewish children and Résistance families. She was known for her beautiful singing voice.

Jacqueline Aubéry du Boulley (Jacky), a war widow; suffered from diphtheria during the escape. Twenty-nine when arrested in Paris. She worked in the Brutus network. She was tough, spoke her mind, and was prone to colorful curses. With Nicole, one of the “57,000” on the last transport out of Paris in August 1944.

Yvonne Le Guillou (Mena) worked with Dutch resistance networks in Paris. Twenty-two when arrested. She was flirtatious, charming, and whimsical, always falling in love. A working-class girl from Paris, but her family came from Brittany.



Map of the escape route and map of Europe

THE NINE

CHAPTER ONE

— HÉLÈNE —



Hélène Podliasky

A WOMAN BROKE FROM THE line and ran into the field of undulating bright yellow rape flowers. She ripped the blossoms from the stems with both hands, stuffing them into her mouth. Though exhausted and dazed, everyone noticed, and her action sent an electric panic through the rows of women. Stunned, Hélène waited for the sound of the gunshot that would surely follow. It could be machine-gun fire that would take out a whole section—any section, maybe theirs. The guards could do this: shoot indiscriminately into the rows to teach them a lesson. But nothing happened. All she heard was the continuous drumming of wooden clogs from thousands of marching feet.

When the woman ran back to the column, Hélène saw that her face was speckled with bits of yellow; she was smiling.

Then another woman ran into the field and gathered as many flowers as she could, using the rags of her tattered coat to hold them. When she got back into line, women jostled one another to reach her, grabbing at the flowers in a frenzy and eating them.

Why were they getting away with this?

Yesterday, a woman only a few rows ahead of H       had been shot in the head when she tried to pick up a half-rotted apple.

H       looked around. Their column was overextended. There were gaps between the rows and the sections. There were no guards in sight.

“Now!” she whispered urgently to Jacky, elbowing her.

“But we agreed to wait for dark,” Jacky whispered back, her voice raspy and terrified.

H       tapped Zinka’s shoulder. “Look!” she said. “No guards!”

“*Oui*, I see.” Zinka nodded and grabbed Zaza’s hand, saying, “It’s our best chance.”

They came to a curve in the road. A dirt road intersected their route, and parallel to that was a deep ditch. H       knew this was the moment. They had to go as two rows, all together, so they wouldn’t be noticed. Zinka, Zaza, Lon, Mena, and Guigui, who were in the row in front of her, slid out, and then H       led Jacky, Nicole, and Jos      . A fifth woman who had fallen into their row balked, saying she was too tired.

“Forget her, then!” H       hissed, and pulled her friends along. “Quick!”

They were nine women in all. Holding hands, they slipped sideways out of the column and jumped into the trench, one after the other. They lay flat on the ground in the deepest part of the ditch, where the earth was damp. H       felt her heart beating against her ribs. She was so thirsty she tried licking the mud. She couldn’t bring herself to look up to see if they were about to be discovered, to see if she would die shot in a ditch as she licked the earth. Instead she looked over to Lon, who was staring up at the road.

“What do you see?” H       whispered. “Are we visible?”

“Just feet.” Lon watched the endless rows of women trudging by, half of them barefoot, half of them in wooden clogs. All of the mud-died bare feet were red and bleeding.

Lon reassured her that they were hidden from view. In any case, the marchers had passed so many corpses along the way that this heap of women at the bottom of a ditch probably looked just like another pile of dead bodies.

With their arms draped around one another and their hearts pounding, they waited for the beat of the clogs dragging on the ground to fade. When the column was no longer in sight and they could no longer hear the rhythmic pounding of feet, Lon said, "It's clear."

"Now! We need to move." Hélène stood and led them along the ditch in the opposite direction. But they were soon out of breath and overcome with sheer euphoria. They climbed out of the ditch and collapsed in the field. They lay there looking up at the sky, clasping hands, and laughing hysterically.

They had done it! They had escaped!

But now they were in the middle of Saxony, facing frightened and hostile German villagers, angry fleeing officers of Germany's Schutzstaffel (SS), the Russian army, and Allied bombers overhead. The Americans were somewhere nearby, they hoped. They had to find the Americans or die trying.



My aunt, Tante Hélène, was a beautiful young woman. She had a high forehead and a wide smile. She had raven-black hair and dark eyes with thick, sensuous eyebrows. She appeared small and delicate, but you sensed an underlying strength. Even in old age, when I knew her, she had a regal demeanor; she was always elegantly dressed and impeccably manicured, and she radiated intelligence. In the photos of her in her twenties, she looked poised and clever. She was a natural leader.

In May 1943, she joined the Résistance, working for the Bureau des opérations aériennes (BOA) for the M region. The BOA had been created that April to act as a liaison between the Forces françaises de l'intérieur (FFI, the name used by Charles de Gaulle for the Résistance) and England. The BOA's role was to ensure the transport of agents and messages and to receive parachute drops of arms. The M region, which was the largest in the FFI, covered Normandy, Brittany, and Anjou. Right before the Normandy landing, managing this territory was crucial and dangerous. The Gestapo was successfully

capturing or killing an alarming number of leaders and network members. In the frenetic months surrounding D-day, Hélène's region was a hotbed of activity both for the Résistance and for the Gestapo's increasingly vicious and desperate attempts to break the underground networks.

Hélène was twenty-three years old when she joined. On a break from her physics and mathematics studies at the Sorbonne, she had taken a significant job as a chemist in a lamp company. But as her Résistance activities grew in importance, she left that job to work full-time in the struggle against the fascists. She lied to her parents about what she was doing. Her nom de guerre was "Christine," and in the Nazi records she is recorded with that name.¹ She would always be known by the group of women who escaped together as Christine.

Her commander, code-named "Kim," was Paul Schmidt. At the start of the war, Schmidt was the leader of an elite troop of French mountain infantry. In 1940, he fought in Norway; his battalion was evacuated to England, where he was treated for severe frostbite. After his recovery he joined the Forces françaises de l'intérieur and returned to France clandestinely. In March 1943, he was put in charge of the BOA and set up a series of "reception committees" in the northern region. Hélène was one of the fourteen agents he recruited. She was responsible for finding terrain suitable for parachute drops. For each drop she had to gather a team of Résistance workers to be ready at the landing sites. Eventually her work evolved to include establishing liaisons between the different Résistance networks in the M region. To communicate information to London about the reality on the ground she coded and decoded messages that were broadcast over the radio.

She waited with anticipation for the full moon, when the planes could find the drop site at night. Three days before, she'd listened to the radio. The secret codes were broadcast on the BBC, during a special fifteen-minute portion called "Les Français Parlent aux Français" (the French speak to the French). Hélène often wondered what ordinary listeners thought when they heard phrases like "les souliers de cuir d'Irène sont trop grands" (Irene's leather slippers are too big).

She and her team were waiting in the shadow of the woods that

skirted the small field of her favorite reception site in Semblançay, outside Tours. They heard the engine of the plane approaching. She turned her flashlight on and off in Morse code, beaming the agreed-upon letter as a signal. To her great relief, after a moment the little airplane blinked on its lights.

“Now,” she whispered to her team, and one by one, like dominoes, they lit their flashlights, outlining the perimeter of the reception area. The little plane circled a few times. H  l  ne’s heart raced as she thought of people in the village hearing the loud engine or seeing the white silk of the parachutes glowing in the moonlight as they descended to earth. As soon as the containers hit the ground her team ran into the field to gather them. They were filled with small arms, explosives, a new transmitter, and new code sheets. And for the morale of her group, the British had included chocolates and cigarettes.

As they filled their pockets with cigarettes and their backpacks with small arms, her team heard the plane returning to circle again, and they paused. Something else dropped into the night sky. H  l  ne saw the dark outline of a man floating down beneath a glowing white silk parachute. She quickly distributed the contents of the remaining packages to her team, ordering them to disperse in different directions. It was better if they left before the parachutist landed; the less anyone knew, the better. Only two men remained behind to get rid of the empty containers and to bury the parachutes. Not for the first time, she wished she could keep the lovely silk to make a dress. But there were orders.

The mysterious man unhooked himself from the harness and lit a cigarette. He stood off to the side and watched H  l  ne directing the two remaining men. She did not approach him either. Before they spoke, she wanted to gather her thoughts. Besides, this part of the operation had to go fast. They had to be dispersed from the site within fifteen minutes, so that if anyone had seen the parachutes or heard the plane, they would find no one around when they got here.

Finally H  l  ne approached the new arrival. He was tall and thin. When he pulled on his cigarette, the ember glowed, and she could see his sharp, angular face. He seemed amused. “I wasn’t told there would be living cargo,” she said, barely hiding her anger.

“Fantassin,” he replied, putting out his hand for her to shake.

Reluctantly she took it. "And you must be Christine? I was told about you."

"Why wasn't I told about you? I don't have anything prepared." When she was scared, H       tended to sound angry. *Fantassin* meant "foot soldier" in French, and the code name had been whispered about. He was someone important. She was glad it was dark so he couldn't see her blush.

"We didn't want to risk it being known that I'm back in France. The *boches* have breached our networks. We have to be very careful."

He handed H       a cigarette and lit it for her. This gave her some time to think.

"But I don't know where to take you," she said, dropping her tough demeanor.

"We trust you. I will stay in your apartment until I can make contact." He didn't ask her. He ordered her. And he seemed amused that it made her uncomfortable. If my mother knew . . . , she thought. Her mother had gone to a school where boys and girls were strictly separated, and the nuns who taught them would tell the girls to avert their gaze as they passed the boys' building, to avoid the temptation of sin.

Her apartment was a long bike ride away in another town far from the landing site. Fantassin had a black leather briefcase that had been tied to his wrist during the jump so that it wouldn't be lost. Now he handed it to her and said that they would ride her bicycle together. She could sit on the back. With one hand she clutched the briefcase and with the other she held on to this strange man as he pedaled them through the night. She tried not to grip him too tightly, but she felt the heat from his back. They did not speak except for when she told him to turn here or there. A few times she made him pull the bike over and hide behind a wall or bush while she checked to see if they were being followed. It was a routine she had worked out over time, but this night she was especially careful.

The long ride in the damp early morning helped calm her nerves. They arrived just before sunrise. She was exhausted. Her place was small, one main room with a kitchenette and a tiny bedroom. She had decided she would give him the bed and sleep in the living room. But once inside the small apartment she felt suddenly shy. She told

observe the proper safety rules. The average time a person lasted in the Résistance before being caught was three to six months.

In the end Fantassin was most likely betrayed by his secretary for the bounty. He was arrested by the Gestapo, and on the way to the infamous Gestapo torture site on the rue des Saussaies, in Paris, he jumped from the car. He was shot multiple times not far from the Arc de Triomphe and died soon after in the hospital. He had told Hélène during the brief few days they spent together that he could not allow himself to be taken alive. He showed her the cyanide tablets he carried. The less she knew, the better, he said.

While she worked in the Résistance, Hélène had more liberty than a young woman in France at that time would normally have. At the start of the war her parents and sisters had moved to Grenoble, where her father was now running a factory. Her parents thought she had stayed behind to pursue her studies. They would only find out the truth about her activities later, when someone from the network contacted them.

Hélène remembered those months as exhilarating. She was a young independent woman entrusted with an important role and in charge of older men. Lives depended on her. There were moments of high adrenaline like nothing she had ever experienced before. One such shock came when she arrived at the assigned drop site one early evening and was greeted by a group of French gendarmes. Sure they had been sent to arrest her, she felt ice-cold panic wash down her spine. She had already turned to cycle away when one called out the password. She froze, trying to make the calculations. If they knew the code, then they must know everything. She felt a wave of nausea mixed with a resigned feeling of relief. The game was up. There was no point in running away. But she mechanically answered their code with her own, and then the men walked up to her, asking for their orders.

It took her a moment to realize they weren't there to arrest her. This was her reception team. What she had assumed was the end of the line for her was only another strange twist. An entire barracks of uniformed gendarmes had joined the Résistance together. This incident bolstered Hélène and gave her a sense of invincibility.

On February 4, 1944, she was supposed to deliver a message to

General Marcel Allard, who commanded a part of the M region. When she arrived at the small hotel in Brittany where they were meeting, she saw him running out one door just as a group of five German soldiers entered by another. She was trapped in the middle. They arrested her simply because she was there and they were rounding up everyone in the hotel lobby. The message she was carrying was sewn into the lining of her purse, and miraculously the Gestapo did not find it. She was able to maintain that she did not know this Allard fellow they were after. They had nothing on her and her papers were in order, so she played the docile empty-headed girl—a role she had played before.

They held her in the prison in Vannes for a few days, but one guard reassured her that it was only a matter of paperwork. Not to worry—she would soon be allowed to go home to her mother and father. But then instead of releasing her, they transferred her to a prison in Rennes, where she was held for two weeks. Still there was no formal interrogation. They asked nothing besides why she had happened to be at that hotel at that particular moment.

Then one day two guards came into the cell where she was being held with twenty other women and called her name. The men handcuffed her and led her to a waiting black car. The men bristled with a violent anger, and refused to answer her questions or to speak to her. They transported her to the prison in Angers, in the Loire Valley, where she spent two months.

Fifty-eight years later, during our interview in her apartment, where Hélène had allowed me to record her story, she said, “Angers stays in my memory as the symbol of suffering itself.”

That was the place she was interrogated and tortured, sometimes to the point of being returned to her cell on a stretcher. The worst was *le supplice de la baignoire*, or waterboarding. They would take her into an ordinary bathroom where the tub had been filled with cold water. Her arms were handcuffed behind her. She was forced to kneel on the tile floor next to the tub. Then two men, one on each shoulder, would push her head into the water. They would hold her head submerged as she struggled for air. She felt their hands on her, one gripping her neck and the other pushing the back of her head. She tried to stay calm, but as her lungs begged for air, panic rose in her.

She felt a terrible pain in her chest, her neck and her head throbbed, and the longing for air grew. She struggled, but it was hopeless. Water flooded her mouth and choked her.

When they felt the fight leave her, they would pull her back out of the water by her hair and recommence the interrogation. She would retch over and over. It was in these moments of extreme pain that she felt most acutely the presence of her body, of her corporal existence. It was almost as if her body was her enemy, making her suffer.

They had discovered who she was, what network she worked for, and some of the people she worked with. They knew Fantassin had stayed with her. Each day they interrogated her, asking for the names of other agents, the code words, the message centers, drop-off points, dates, times. She tried not to reveal any useful information. For several nights, wet and cold with her hands bound behind her back and tied to a radiator, she tried to work out plausible stories, pure inventions that would fit with what they already knew but would not betray anyone.

She was hung by her arms. She was taken to the same tiled bathroom and almost drowned over and over again. Her fingernails were pulled out with pliers. Other terrible things were done to her. In our interview, H  l  ne stopped there, and I did not push for more details. There was a pause as she lit another cigarette, and I noticed her carefully polished manicure.

When she started to talk again, she told me about a Jesuit priest. "P  re Alcantara," she said, remembering his name. "He had permission to visit certain prisons. One day he handed me a small package. I saw the label with my name written on it. It was my mother's handwriting. That's when I cried."

When she saw the package, her knees buckled and she began to sob. It was the first time she had cried since being arrested. In order to keep her courage, in order to not break under torture, she had avoided thinking about anyone she loved, about her family. The package meant that they now knew what she had been doing behind their backs. She felt a stab of guilt for causing them pain, and a terrible longing to hear her mother's voice.

The German guard in charge of her cell was an Alsatian about the same age as H  l  ne. She spoke perfect German, so they talked

occasionally. He was disturbed by what he saw the Gestapo doing to her. He hated them, and his eyes filled with tears when she was returned bloodied and battered on a stretcher. He whispered encouragements through her cell window, which she only half heard in her semiconscious state. He told her that she should just tell them what they wanted to know and then she would be left alone. He told her that he wished she wasn't so brave. One time he brought her a kilo of butter. She was grateful, but it was a strange thing to have to hide in her cell. She had no idea what to do with the butter, where to put it. She had nothing to eat it with. Later he brought her sugar, a much more practical gift.

He took a short letter she had written to her family and mailed it to her godfather. H  l  ne knew that way it wouldn't be traced to her. The young Alsatian soldier must have kept the address because later, after the war, he looked for her by contacting her godfather. He wanted to know if she had survived and how she was. But by then, so many worse things had happened to her, and she was no longer the relatively innocent young girl whom he had guarded in the prison cell in Angers. She wrote back to him to say that yes, she had survived, but that was all. She asked him not to contact her again.

In the prison in Angers she wasn't permitted to have anything in her cell, and all alone, with no books, no paper, no magazines, she felt herself slipping over the edge. She begged the guard for a pencil. On the white walls of her cell, she worked on mathematical problems. When I asked what sort of problems, H  l  ne scribbled down an equation on a scrap of paper.

$$\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} dx e^{-ax^2} = \sqrt{\frac{\pi}{a}}$$

I showed my sister Annie, a mathematician, this equation, and asked what H  l  ne had been doing. Annie said, "She was computing the Gaussian integral," which involves e and pi. Annie explained that e and pi are called "transcendental numbers." Transcendental

numbers, like imaginary numbers, exist outside of ordinary math. In the history of math, the concept of imaginary numbers was the cause of great anxiety and drama through the ages as different mathematicians gradually discovered their necessity. In the early nineteenth century, a hotheaded young French mathematician named Évariste Galois was expelled from the École Normale for political activity. Though he was recognized as having promise, his mathematical ideas were too radical to be accepted by the establishment. He wrote feverish letters the night before he died in a duel, making some notes in the margins of his proofs that involved transcendental and imaginary numbers. Galois recognized there were some problems that cannot be solved with only the concrete numbers of our daily existence. His final words to his brother were, “Don’t cry, Alfred! I need all my strength to die at twenty.”

In her cell, at twenty-four, Hélène was gathering her strength to die. She worked on a number of classic mathematical problems, showing that you cannot trisect an angle or square a circle using just a straightedge and compass. There exist numbers that cannot be constructed.

Later, when Hélène landed in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, she would recognize her friend Zaza from the lycée they had attended together. They would cling to each other in the shower, fearing that the rumors were true and that the tiny holes in the ceiling would soon release a gas that would kill them. But instead they were drenched in freezing water. They were assigned numbers: Hélène became prisoner number 43209, Zaza number 43203. The prisoners endured endless roll calls, the *Appells*, when they were counted again and again. People became numbers and then nothing.

Not only are real numbers infinite, my sister says, but there must be an infinite amount of transcendental numbers as well. But we know of only a few. Annie thinks that this could be because of our human obsession with our tools: the straightedge and the compass have limited our imagination. Our thinking limits our understanding.

As I write this story, I wonder whether language also limits our thinking. The families I interviewed, the descendants of the nine women who escaped that day in Germany, would say the same thing: that their mothers or grandmothers or aunts felt unable to fully

describe what they had experienced. There was a limit to what they could say; their stories, if told at all, were only half told.

At the prison in Angers in June 1944, they could hear the sound of bombardment in the distance. The Allies were storming the beaches in Normandy. Hélène's young Alsatian guard told her, "Tomorrow you will be free, and I will be the prisoner."

She allowed herself to hope. But then she sat all day in her cell, with her arms hugging her calves and her chin on her knees, looking at the complex spread of equations, her attempt at transcendence. Outside in the prison courtyard, at regular intervals, jarring rounds of gunfire tore away at her focus as the German guards systematically executed all the male prisoners. Prepare for the worst, she told herself.

Late that night, perhaps exhausted by the killing, the same German guards loaded the few remaining women onto trains headed for Romainville, the transit camp outside Paris.

Some of the women had prepared tiny scraps of stolen paper, called *papillons* (butterflies), with short notes to their families and marked with their addresses. As they were driven through Paris, they tossed their bits of paper out of the cracks in the sides of the wagons. These last notes were sometimes picked up by brave people and sent on to the women's families. Often these were the last traces of their daughters, sisters, and mothers.

In the camp at Romainville, Hélène remembers watching a woman dying as she lay in the dirt. Supposedly she had syphilis and had infected some German soldiers, and so she was left to die all alone in front of them.

Hélène had no recollection of what she did during those days sitting on the ground surrounded by barbed wire—nothing but a vague memory of endless waiting. She had retreated into herself. She would allow no feeling to weaken her resolve to survive. A kind of numb blankness took over as she tried to adjust to her new reality. It was hot and dusty. They were held in large pens with no shade or shelter. People sat in silent misery, staring at nothing. There was the hum of flies and low moaning, but nothing that resembled language. There were the smells of rotting flesh, death, human excrement, filth, sweat, and fear.

After several days—Hélène did not know how many—she was

loaded onto a crowded train car meant to transport livestock. She began the journey east into Germany, toward Ravensbrück, ninety kilometers north of Berlin.

In my family, we knew that Tante Hélène had been highly decorated. She was an Officier de la Légion d'honneur, which is considered one of the most prestigious French honors, especially since the *officier* grade was rarely given to a woman in her generation. She received the Croix de Guerre, given for acts of special bravery during the war; and she had both the Médaille de la Résistance française and the Médaille de la France libre for her work in the Résistance. The family was proud of her, but we rarely talked about her past. As happened in many families after the war, people wanted to leave those dark days behind. It was thought best for everyone to just forget about the past. Not to talk about it. Not to dwell in darkness. There was survivor's guilt as well, along with the memory lapses caused by trauma, by the unspeakable ways some people had behaved. Hélène wanted to spare her family the grim details. And if you hadn't experienced it, you couldn't really imagine it. It took time; it took the generation who had not been through the war to start asking questions. In 2002, during a lunch with my grandmother, Hélène told me how she had escaped the Nazis with eight other women. Astounded, I asked her if I could record an interview with her to get the full story.

My aunt Eva and I traveled to Hélène's apartment in a very nice neighborhood near Neuilly on the edge of Paris. The small rooms were filled with photographs and books. Hélène was beautifully coiffed and dressed in a Chanel skirt and jacket. We were served tea. But after I thanked her for allowing us to record her, the first thing Hélène said to me was: "What's the point?"

"It's important," I offered, suddenly embarrassed by my youth, my easygoing American enthusiasm, and my relatively comfortable life.

"This story can only tell about the fate of a few human beings among many others who strive to live with dignity, despite the possible degradation, despite the efforts of the Nazis working to destroy them," she said. It was as if she had practiced this phrase, prepared it in advance.

I asked her why she had joined the Résistance. “Because of the horror of Nazism and all totalitarian regimes,” she replied.

I asked her if she had been scared, and she said no. She had been happy, even knowing the risks, because she was helping fight for her country.

She wondered out loud if it was meaningless to dig up all these old memories. I wondered to myself if I was being rude to probe and push her to remember things she may have wanted to forget. She said she preferred not to discuss the past, even though, as she admitted, she thought about the war all the time, every single day. You could say she was haunted by it and that her life afterward had been profoundly informed by what had happened to her then.

As the hours passed, she warmed up to the telling. I vaguely assumed that we would have many more conversations and that over time she would fill in the details. I left thinking that she had been happy to talk, and maybe felt only a bit of regret at having opened up to me. But whether because of her reticence or my hesitancy, we never did speak of the past again.

Later, when I began to write her story and delve into our family history, I felt I was breaking a taboo. The voices in my head told me it was not my business; I should be ashamed of myself for exploiting her story. Let the past rest in peace. But the past is restless. History, like individual memory, is not fixed. It is constantly revived.

Two years after my interview with Hélène, I stumbled upon Suzanne Maudet’s book *Neuf filles jeunes qui ne voulaient pas mourir* (Nine young girls who didn’t want to die). Zaza was Hélène’s friend. She recorded her memories immediately, in the months after their escape, but her manuscript was not published until 2004, ten years after her death.³ The details in Zaza’s book led me to find another account, written by Nicole Clarence for *Elle* magazine in 1964, on the twentieth anniversary of her deportation. From this article, I discovered a few radio interviews Nicole had given.⁴ And right before Hélène passed away in 2012, two Dutch filmmakers, Ange Wieberdink and Jetske Spanjer, made a documentary called *Ontsnapt* (Escaped), in which Hélène was reunited with Lon Verstijnen, another member of their group.⁵ The film was largely based on Lon’s book, *Mijn Oorlogskroniek* (My war chronicle). Some years later, Guigui’s son Marc Spijker sent

me Lon's own English translation of her book, which she had shared with his mother.

Collectively, H  l  ne, Zaza, Nicole, and Lon tell a story of friendship, incredible bravery, and survival. Their accounts differ in some details but converge at key points. There are large missing pieces; I will never know if they are willful omissions or lapses in memory. At the start, I knew eight of the nine women only by their nicknames: besides Christine (my great-aunt H  l  ne), they were Zaza, Lon, Guigui, Zinka, Jos  e, Mena, Nicole, and Jacky. They were all political prisoners. I would later learn that H  l  ne's father was Jewish and that Nicole came from a Jewish family, though neither woman talked about being Jewish nor, probably, identified as such. And if they did, they kept it hidden from the Germans. As bad as it was to be a prisoner in the concentration camps, it was much worse to be a Jewish prisoner.



Women in rows of five

As a young man, H  l  ne's father was a Russian professor of math in Lithuania before he went to Heidelberg to continue his studies. He then went to France to the Sorbonne. H  l  ne's mother was one of only two women enrolled in the Sorbonne at the time. Martine was a farm girl from the Lot region; her father was a great winemaker. A point of pride for the family was that the priest used their wine for the Sunday Mass. Martine had been raised in a devout Catholic family and educated by nuns. She could never be naked, not even to bathe. But

she must have been unusually brilliant, because after she passed her high school exams, the nuns suggested that she continue her studies—something virtually unheard of at the time, when it was thought too much education would ruin a proper girl's chances for marriage. Astonishingly, her parents agreed to allow her to go to Paris to study chemistry. Hélène's father, a talented musician who had given up a career in the symphony, was working in atomic physics. They met at the university, and six months after their quick marriage, Hélène was born.

The brilliant Martine was forced to give up her studies. Maybe this frustrated intelligence made for a complicated mother-daughter relationship. In any case, Hélène identified with her father. Two more daughters were born, seven and eight years later. There was a long-lasting resentment between Hélène and her much younger sisters. She was forced to babysit, and her father clearly adored her above the others. When the family learned that Hélène had been deported to Germany, her father was distraught. One night at dinner one of the younger daughters was asking him a question, and when he didn't respond, Martine said to him, "Won't you answer your daughter?"

He replied, "I have only one daughter and she's in Germany."⁶

Hélène was the intellectual among the sisters. She had an impressive list of diplomas in engineering and mathematics. She had a gift for languages and spoke several fluently, including Polish, German, English, and Russian. It was her facility with languages, her clear thinking in moments of danger, and her sense of cool diplomacy that made her a natural leader in Ravensbrück. Nicole later remembered her as the "pillar" of their group.



For five days Hélène traveled in an overcrowded cattle car, with little or no water, food, light, air, or a place to relieve herself. She was in a transport with 200 mostly French female political prisoners—*les résistantes*. They survived the inhuman transport by organizing themselves, taking turns standing and lying down. The sickest were moved closest to the small window, where there was fresh air. They kept up their morale by singing "La Marseillaise" and other songs.

Hélène had no idea where they were when the train made its final stop at the station of Fürstenberg, the town closest to the Ravensbrück

