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THE
POWERFUL
TRUE
STORY

THE NINE

How a Band of Daring Resistance
Women Escaped from Nazi Germany

GWEN STRAUSS

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Escaped from Nazi Germany*



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**MANILLA
PRESS**

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 une 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
belongs to us, to that other life, to those moments,
as a transmutation from one to the other,
in another life.

—NICOLE CLARENCE, ONE OF THE NINE

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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.

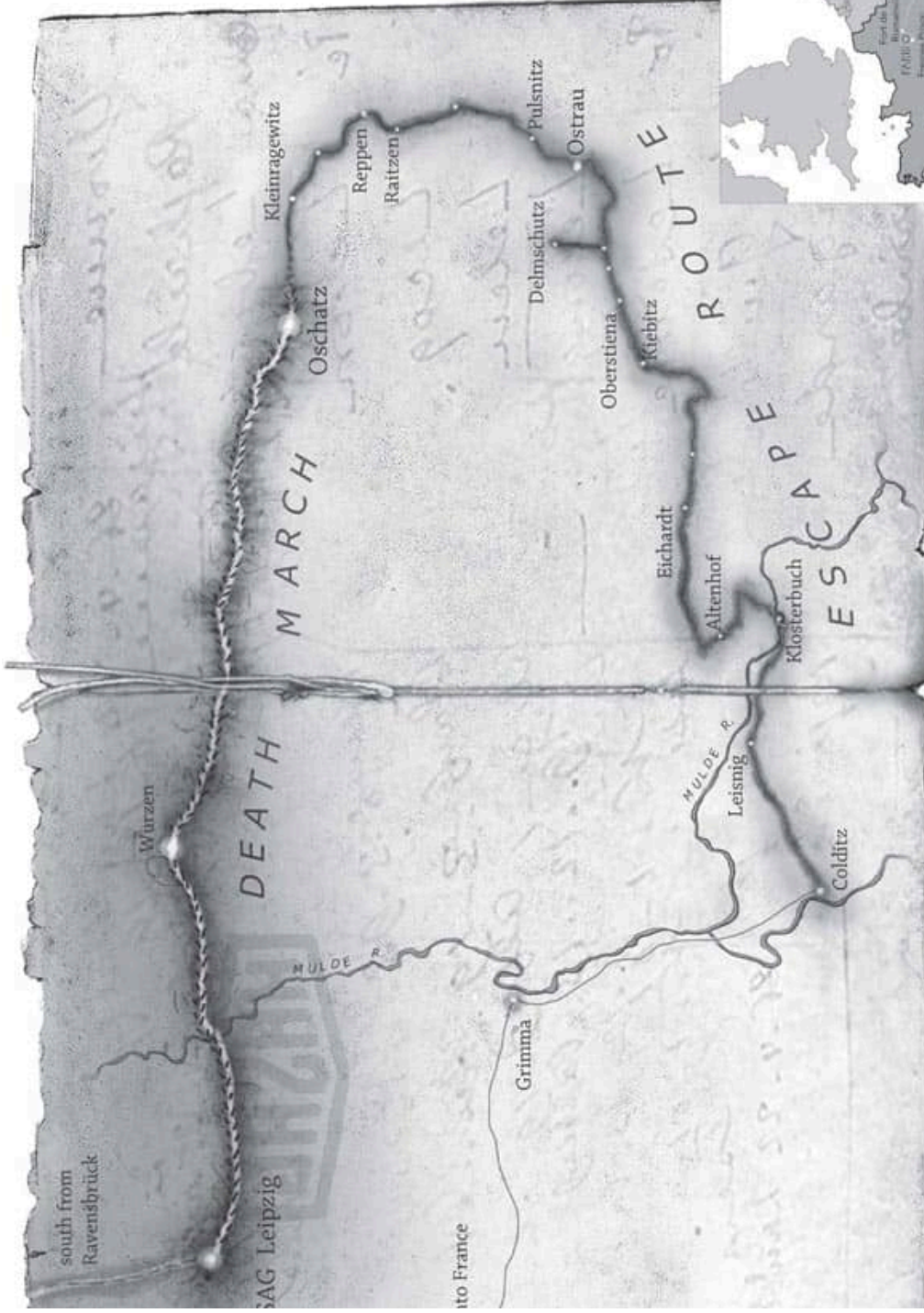
Renée Lebon Châtenay (Zinka), the bravest of the group. Twenty-nine when arrested after she went to a prison in search of her husband. Gave

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 Bouleux (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 colourful 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

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 Hélène had been shot in the head when she tried to pick up a half-rotted apple.

Hélène 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.

Hélène 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. Hélène 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 Hélène led Jacky, Nicole and Josée. A fifth woman who had fallen into their row balked, saying she was too tired.

‘Forget her, then!’ Hélène 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. Hélène 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

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 shoes are too big).

She and her team were waiting in the shadow of the woods that skirted the small field of her favourite 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. Hélène 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 Hélène 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, Hélène 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 Hélène 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 demeanour.

‘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 pedalled 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 herself that this was her job. She stiffened her back and stood up straight.

Fantassin placed the briefcase on the kitchen table and opened it. It was full of money, more money than she had ever seen in her life. He reached in and handed her some bills.

‘No,’ she said, feeling her face flush red, ‘I don’t do this for money. I do it for France, for my honour.’ She might have appeared indignant, but she was scared. She did not want him to think she was that sort of woman.

‘It’s not for you, it’s for your team. For the men who were there last night.’

‘They do it for France too.’ She spoke almost without thinking, something she rarely did.

‘For the families then, the ones who have already sacrificed,’ he said.

She nodded, because he was right. Her pride and discomfort had got in the way of her thinking. Many people were in hiding and did not have access to ration cards; they were hungry. This money would help them. She needed to pull herself together. She took a deep breath.

‘You must be tired.’ His voice softened. ‘How old are you?’

She told him she had just turned twenty-four a few weeks earlier.

He sat down in the chair by the sofa and lit a cigarette. There was a long silence.

‘You can take the bedroom,’ she said after a moment.

‘No, please, I will be fine here.’ He indicated the couch.

When H  l  ne protested that he was her superior officer, he said, ‘Yes, we are soldiers, but please, let me also be a gentleman.’

Fantassin’s real name was Valentin Abeille. He was the head of the entire M region.² The Germans had put a large bounty on his head. At this stage in the war, the Gestapo was relentless. It had been able to plant a few double agents in R  sistance cells. These groups consisted mostly of idealistic young people who received little or no training and were unable to keep a tight grip on security. Some of the younger men would boast about what they were doing to get *les boches*, told too many people, allowed themselves to be followed, or didn’t observe the proper safety rules. The average time a person lasted in the R  sistance 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 H  l  ne 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 R  sistance, H  l  ne 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.

H  l  ne 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 adrenalin 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 realise 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 4 February 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 of 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 centres, 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