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 each other 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 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?" Hélène 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 muddied 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 each other 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.

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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 soles 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. Hélène'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 Hélène 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 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

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 honor." 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 gotten 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 Hélène 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 Résistance 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 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, Hélène 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. "Père 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 Hélène. 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. Hélène 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, Hélène 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 Hélène 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 hot-headed 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 which 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 which 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 bombardments 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 of 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, Hélène, 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 Hélène), they were Zaza, Lon, Guigui, Zinka, Josée, Mena, Nicole, and Jacky. They were all political prisoners. I would later learn that Hélène'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, Hélène'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. Hélène'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. Astoundingly, 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 laying 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

concentration camp. The town and the camp were on opposite sides of a lake. The area, close to the Baltic, is subject to freezing winds and was known locally as "Little Siberia."

They arrived at night; the platform was violently lit with spotlights and guarded by SS and by female guards known as *Aufseherinnen*, their leashed German shepherds barking and lunging furiously. The prisoners had to jump from the wagon to the platform, and some of the older women fell badly, twisting an ankle or a knee. The guards pushed them. In the chaos, they stumbled over each other. The *Aufseherinnen* beat them with whips and shouted in German. If someone still had luggage, it was taken and thrown into the back of a truck.

Those who had died along the way had to be lifted into another truck, while the German guards shouted, "Schnell! Raus!"

Two columns were formed: those women who were still strong enough to march and those who could barely stand. The feeble were invited to ride in the truck with the baggage. Some daughters encouraged their tired and weary mothers to get on. They had no way of knowing that they were participating in the first selection for the crematorium and that they would never see their mothers again.

"Zu fünft!" the guards screamed, kicking them as they struggled to understand what was being demanded of them.

"They want us in rows of five," Hélène whispered urgently.

"Rows of five," she heard repeated in French, echoing through the crowd.

They marched from the train station to the camp, roughly four kilometers away. On June 14, 1944, when Hélène arrived, the camp was covered in mud and reeked of rotting flesh, human excrement, and dense, ashy smoke from the crematorium.

Hélène had "a face you never forget, and in all that crowd I recognized her at once," Zaza wrote, recalling their arrival and how she had spotted her friend from lycée in the throng of women.[7] In many ways Hélène's opposite, Zaza was the poet who noticed the color of the sky, while the rest were thinking only of their hunger. Where Hélène could be cool and calculating, Zaza was warm and open. Twenty-two years old when arrested, she was an optimist, with a sense of humor and an

immense love of life. Always patient, she was everyone's friend, but she was closest to Hélène, the one person Hélène allowed past her reserves. From the moment of their arrival in Ravensbrück, they stuck together. While Hélène was relentlessly plotting escape, Zaza was more passive. Trusting in nature, she waited to see what would happen.

Ravensbrück, open from 1939 to 1945, was the only German concentration camp built exclusively for women. Most female prisoners, like the nine, passed through Ravensbrück on their way to one of hundreds of slave labor camps or extermination camps. But many were murdered there. A majority of the records at Ravensbrück were burned by the Nazis in the final weeks of the war. But thanks to historians and to former prisoners such as Germaine Tillion, a trained ethnologist who was able to keep detailed notes in the final months, much evidence about the camp has been gathered.

Roughly 123,000 women and children passed through the camp, along with 20,000 men. Ravensbrück had forty satellite camps, a smaller men's camp, the Siemens factory camp, and what was called the Youth Camp of Ückermark but was in fact an extermination camp. Estimates of the death toll at Ravensbrück range from 30,000 to 90,000. The Fondation pour la mémoire de la déportation estimates that approximately 40,000 died there, but it is difficult to know for sure. Most of the women who arrived in the last chaotic months of the war were never registered. And there has been no accounting for the number of women who were "sent away" to be gassed in mobile trucks; one estimate reported that around 5,000 to 6,000 women were killed in provisional gas chambers.[8] Nor were the deaths in all the subcamps counted. And then there were the babies, murdered at birth or starved to death following their birth, who were not included in this official count. The women who died on the death marches were not counted either.

In the end, survivors feel that names are more important than numbers.[9] But the numbers give an idea of the enormity of the suffering. By June 1944, when seven out of the nine women in Hélène's group were in Ravensbrück, the camp, which was built to house 3,000 prisoners, held 30,849.[10] The morning roll calls lasted three or more hours, during which prisoners were forced to stand in place to be counted. The situation in the camp had reached hellish proportions, with the overcrowding and lack of basic resources.

As the women marched into the camp, they were led first to the *Effektenkammer*, or storage room, where they were told to strip completely. They were ordered to put their clothes in large brown paper bags. When they handed the bags to the guards, their number was noted and the bag thrown into a pile. Their smaller personal effects such as jewelry and money, if they had any, were handed over as well. With the Nazi flourish for recordkeeping, these items were carefully noted. After making a request for Hélène's Nazi records in 2018, I received from the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen many documents, including a few pages of these personal possession records. I read that Zaza handed over her wedding ring and five francs. Hélène handed over a bracelet, a watch, and seventy centimes.

Their heads were shaved. They had to stand spread-eagled while someone shaved their pubic hair in a brutal manner that left slashes and bleeding wounds that would easily get infected.

They were pushed to the showers. Once in the room with holes on the ceiling, Zaza grabbed hold of Hélène's hand. Looking up, she asked, "What do you think will come out of those: gas or water?"

After the violence of the drenching showers they were moved along to the next room, where clothes were redistributed. By this time the camp authorities had run out of striped prisoner outfits. So instead, new arrivals were given dead women's clothes. Each week trucks arrived from Auschwitz with clothes from the Jews who had been exterminated there.[11] The clothes were distributed haphazardly—a woman might have gotten an evening gown from a nightclub dancer or a schoolgirl's pajamas—so when the women emerged from this gauntlet, they looked grotesque. But in that moment meant to humiliate them and reduce them, the women were able to laugh at themselves and at each other. Lise London, one of the *résistantes* in the same transport, remembered the moment in her memoir and, quoting Rabelais, she wrote, "Le rire est bien le propre de l'homme" (Laughter is a human trait).[12] With laughter and song they would hold on to their humanity and fight back.

The French group was sent to a quarantine block where there were already about 400 prisoners. German officials, terrified of the spread of illness and germs, were strict about putting the newly arrived prisoners in quarantine for the first few weeks. Their block also

housed those whom the Germans called *asozial*, or asocial: prostitutes, homosexuals, Sinti and Roma (called *Zigeuner* or "Gypsies"), and common criminals.

One half of the massive hall was an open area with tables, and the other half contained wooden bunks, four levels high. Hélène and Zaza were able to find a place together on a top bunk. From there, Hélène hoped, they could keep a vigilant watch over everything.

While they were in quarantine, Hélène remembered, they spent their days taking apart piles of German uniforms. They had to remove the buttons, take apart the seams, and sort the fabric. The uniforms all had bloodstains, and most featured bullet holes. These were the uniforms of German soldiers who had died on the Eastern Front. The women would sometimes find in a pocket a letter that had not yet been posted. Reading the soldiers' letters, Hélène detected the low morale of the troops in the East.

A week later, on June 23, another transport arrived that included two friends from Holland: Lon, age twenty-eight, and Guigui, age twenty-five. Together they had left their studies in Leiden in 1944 to join the Résistance in Paris.

Athletic and graceful, Guigui had straight brown hair cut in a pageboy just below her chin, with bangs across her forehead. Serene gray eyes graced her long oval face. She had the demure, peaceful look of a Madonna. In the chaotic block, she was nonchalant and reassuringly calm.

Lon was the opposite. Words flew out of her mouth in combinations of the six languages she spoke. Lon was brave and thought fast on her feet, jumping where the more cautious might hesitate. Vibrant and extroverted, with a stout, compact body and a large laugh, she made friends across different nationalities. Lon could be bossy and domineering, but her courage would save the nine on more than one occasion.

One day, standing at one of the interminable roll calls, Hélène whispered to Lon, "What are you thinking?"

And Lon replied, "I'm thinking that six months ago my fiancé wanted me to make love and I refused. I regret it."[13]

Lon recalled being visited in quarantine by another Dutch prisoner: "The only cheery note came from Sabine, a Dutch girl who had

lived near my parents' home in The Hague. Regularly, and unshaken, she came along tapping on our window to have a chat. Of course, just as regularly she was chased away, but she remained unperturbed, and came back time and again. These hurried little chats, however, were precious to both of us, and with some sadness we remembered our neighborhood."[14]

Sabine filled Lon in about who was in the camp. There was a group of French political prisoners who were already out of quarantine, and Zaza heard that her friend Zinka from Fresnes was there.

In the group of nine, Zaza and Zinka were the only ones who had husbands. Zaza had been married only a month before her arrest, and Zinka only nine months before her husband had been arrested. Both men had been deported to unknown destinations. This was a source of great anxiety for the young brides.

At twenty-nine, Zinka was the oldest of the nine, but her natural jubilance made her appear much younger. She had a beautiful mass of tight blond ringlets, large blue eyes, a charming gap between her front teeth, and a delicate upturned nose, which made her appear slightly defiant. She was impervious to fear. She stuck her chin out and laughed off the threats from some of the most violent factions in the camp. When others would repeat dire rumors, she shrugged and admonished them, "Stop your pessimistic *bobards*." She was tiny. Her feet were so small, the wooden clogs she was given to wear were like large boats; they gave her blisters and bleeding sores. But she inspired others with her iron willpower. Little Zinka was the one who always tried to take the heaviest load, the worst job, so much so that her friends invented elaborate strategies to thwart her.

Hélène heard from Lon's Dutch friend that her friend Geneviève de Gaulle was in the camp. Geneviève was the niece of Charles de Gaulle. By 1943 many people had heard this little-known *général de brigade*'s voice on the radio telling them to resist, but they weren't sure who he was. Geneviève had written two articles about her uncle, under the pseudonym "Gallia," for the clandestine Résistance newspaper *Défense*. Her writing had helped reassure people in the Résistance about this apparently self-appointed leader in London.[15]

Hélène wanted to see Geneviève to find out if there was an organized Résistance group in the camp. But she needed to get out of quarantine to do it. The women were lucky to have a friendly *blockova*. *Blockovas*, the prisoners (mostly Polish) who headed each block, were there to police the prisoners. Some *blockovas* used their privilege to help and resist. Others used it to enrich themselves. Some were worse than the Germans. But their *blockova*, Hilda Synkova, a Czech communist, taught the French prisoners the ropes. One Sunday Hélène asked her if she could slip out in search of her friend Geneviève, and Hilda said yes.

The camp was immense, with long alleyways bordered by wooden blocks in a brutally geometric grid. Hélène miscounted, made a wrong turn, and was lost in the maze. Everything looked the same, all of it gray and muddy. On Sunday afternoons the prisoners stayed inside if they could. It was their one break of the week. Only the Jews, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and women who had been given an extra punishment were forced to work. In the heat and putrid odors, the camp felt empty of life. Suddenly disoriented, Hélène panicked and turned too quickly around a corner. There she ran straight into two SS guards. They smiled when they saw her. One was a large man, a bit fatter than most people during that time when food was so hard to find. His sidekick was skinny and scrappy, with cruel eyes. The large one spoke and the small one giggled.

Hélène was rattled. She wouldn't be this unprepared again, but at that moment she was unable to come up with a reason for being where she was, or any way to defend herself. The men grabbed her, each taking an arm.

"We will have to help you find your way, won't we?" the fat one said. The small one laughed as they dragged her into a small guardroom.

They pushed her up against a wall. She felt the rough wood planks against her back. She tried to go into that place in her head where she had found a kind of refuge in Angers during the torture sessions. But she could smell their acrid sweat as they joked about what they might do to "help her."

She wanted to close her eyes, but she had learned that doing so showed weakness, and weakness emboldened the bullies. She forced herself to stare right into the big one's eyes. He took out a pair of

pliers and waved them in front of her face. "Let's make her pretty," he said. He bent down close so he could whisper into her ear, "You will be prettier this way."[16]

He barked, "Open it!" With his thick sausage fingers, he pried open her mouth.

She tasted the oily metal of the pliers against her tongue as he rooted in her mouth and then chose one of her molars. She felt the pincers of the tool grip. "Hold her still!" he ordered the other man. She felt the sweaty arms of the smaller soldier as he grabbed her and pushed her down as her tooth was ripped out of her mouth, the sharp pain of the tearing of roots like sparks, followed by the warm gush as her mouth filled with blood. She felt cold sweat and nausea overcome her. But she swallowed.

"*Ja*, it's good! Much better." The guard held the tooth with its bloodied roots up to her face. Hélène could tell he wasn't satisfied; his kind never were. But, mercifully, they were interrupted by the sound of bells announcing the next round of their hourly regimented schedule. She saw the soldiers register that they had things to do, the routine that must be followed. Reluctantly they shoved her out the door. She stumbled, spitting blood on the ground, and miraculously found her way back to the relative safety of her friends in the quarantine block.