

Souvenirs

Robert Beckers' Account of the Nazi Ghost Train, pp. 17-32
(Translation by Mary Street, March 2, 2015)

A sojourn surrounded by four walls

The intrigues over the months would not have been bearable if we had worried about our fate on the day when, despite our precautions, we were captured. To tell the truth, without having a complete view of the situation, we knew that few of our predecessors had avoided capture, and there was no doubt about the penalty. Spies were destined for capital punishment in most armies of the world. So here I am at the fork in the river, and what waits on the other bank is not comforting.

It must have been, I think, a good summation of thoughts that I had during that first night; after being worried about the fate of my little daughter **Christine**, of her mother **Didine**, and of her mother, who were implicated in my activity (which remained a secret for several months I was reassured some time later); I obviously could alert neither the members of the team who had escaped being caught, nor the occupants of about ten radio emission hideouts. I quickly realized that, in any case, rather than free myself from useless calculations, I would be better off foreseeing situations to avoid in the immediate short term.

I probably enjoyed a relative anonymity since my active role was not revealed by my friends during their interrogations. But how long could that last?

I only had several days to decide on a course of action. I concluded that I should routinely deny any accusations against me.

I had adequate training, since my youth I had a tendency to adopt a kind of defense when I was confronted with a difficult problem to solve! This time it was with a clear conscience that I decided that this would work out the same way.

I had systematically memorized, but never put in writing, the addresses and names of our contacts, maybe a good one hundred of them. With no written record, I was covered on my end. Alas, how was I to know if I could avoid divulging that when I would be under interrogation. I had only one solution: to forget. And I began to try to will forgetfulness into my memory . . . which is not really a current experience for me. An exceptional situation required me to apply myself to the task. I dedicated myself to it fully.

I had looked around the cell and met four occupants. It became evident right away that we were all innocent of the accusations which were, or were going to be, charged against us! It would remain that way among us, with one exception which I will speak of later, for my entire prison stay, during which my cellmates were often changed.

This new lodging was built for two prisoners, but held five, and that called for an unusual civil behavior. Plunged into a complete intimacy, the height of which occurred when

each of us took his turn on the kugel, otherwise known as a portable toilet, which was located in the corner of the cell.

All of us were innocent ... of the same crime, believing in a certain fraternity which helped to bear each other without too much difficulty.

The rhythm of the days quickly imposed itself upon me. [p. 20] Like everyone else, I hoped to get the bottom of the casserole, even if it meant some thin gruel of celery which was grown in the "gardens" of the prison. Like them, I jumped up at the sound of the key in the lock which presaged a worrisome exit when our name was followed by "tribunal!" I did not need to worry about a "promenade" which I heard proclaimed in front of other cells, for my situation as a secret prisoner kept me from this distraction.

On the other hand, I had the right and even the obligation, to attend Mass on Sunday where everyone was cooped up in an enclosure with a view of the "stage," and in the impossibility of communicating effectively with other spectators. I will talk later on about the very personal occasions which allowed me to appreciate the rites of religion.

The "local" distractions were reduced to playing cards, a pastime in which I rarely took part; additionally my master in this matter, a brave Flemish gendarme, took great pains to initiate me to the rules in the jails: they were totally incomprehensible for a civilian! Sometimes a sport took place by chasing flies. With no other solution available, I finally attained success in catching these pests in flight and crushing them in my hands. I am still proficient at this to this day! On the other hand, I am still totally allergic to cards.

They also announced the "shower" which should have given me satisfaction; it was very short, for it was glacially cold and I never liked washing myself this way. Alas, there was no bathtub for us to use.

The shower excursion however held a memorable surprise for me. At a moment when we crossed a line of women who were probably returning from the same showers, the two lines came to a stop; at this moment a girl leaned in my direction and said: "**Robert**, I am a friend of **Jeanine** (my sister), hang in there and we will prevail." Unfortunately the line moved then in different directions before I could learn more. Later I told this to my sister but she was not able to put a name to this girl. For me it was a precious moment. May she have had good luck, like me, to return safely from her ordeal.

This was my only personal contact (!) during my prison stay, besides the one that I had later with a "saintly man" whom I will describe later.

The great majority of my companions expressed the hope of leaving for Germany where one could feel out of the clutches of the drill masters. Their wish was often granted, but unfortunately few of them would have been pleased with it. Among those with whom I had shared the coordinates, none showed up after the end of hostilities; the camps must have been in charge of completing the training in their own way. However, I knew

of one exception which I will discuss later as briefly as possible, since it has to do with a story from a later period of time.

Armand's arrival in the cell made a big impression; he had traveled to **Breendonk** before landing among us. This camp, situated on the road from **Brussels** to **Antwerp**, was recognized as similar to the better known camps in Germany.

The well-being of our new pensioner was worrisome. He arrived exhausted, at the limit of his resistance, notably suffering from infections on his feet, brought on by wearing shoes that were too small. The forced labor in which he participated, consisting of long stretches of back and forth movement, pushing carts full of stones, dumping on one side and reloading on the other. This was just one part of the treatment he had to submit to later on.

No medication was available; it was useless to ask for some from the guards who laughed at the request while distributing a kick of the foot, as a bonus. [p.21] An ersatz soap used as a disinfectant was the only available remedy. Its use yielded good results, however, and after some days our new companion was feeling better. The care that I had given him had created a reciprocal feeling of sympathy between us. He spoke about the fate of his farm, which he cared about as much as he cared about his family.

As for many others, the departure toward Germany seemed to him to be a less worrisome solution than an eventual return to **Breendonk** [**Fort Breendonk** was a Nazi prison camp in Belgium used during the war to hold political dissidents, Resistance members, Jews, etc. Torture and executions took place there.]. One day his name was shouted along with the word "transport." For him, this meant the desired departure, but alas **Buchenwald** was the destination of this trip. Our goodbyes were brief; he had spoken to me of his village, **Houtain le Val**, near **Genappe**. I knew his name. Would we ever see each other again? This wish was granted, but more about that later.

News of the war filtered in when new prisoners arrived. Communication between the cells was made through heating pipes (out of service to be sure); one could amplify the sound by applying a metal receptacle to them. I would have been able to try to contact especially my friends by using Morse code, but I was never very distinguished in this specialty!

The landing of June 6 provoked a wave of joy everywhere. The development of operations was not, however, easy to follow.

It was even more difficult for me because the **G.F.P.**, the military secret police, soon came back to my good memory. I made the acquaintance of the drill sergeants on **rue Traversiere**, in the general neighborhood of the secret police. I quickly realized, upon hearing their questions, that they believed they already knew a great deal about me. This is to say that they were far from satisfied with my answers: I truly did not know what they wanted me to say, for they needed to realize that I had been summoned for no reason. Their patience quickly ran out, and their relative amiability was replaced with

serious threats about my fate which awaited me if I persisted in this disagreeable attitude. I must point out that the interrogation took place in German, a language which I do not speak, which meant a translator had to be used. It was as if my stay at the **Solvay Institute** required courses in this language, and that I had a sufficient knowledge of it in order to take a long time to think before expressing myself. These gentlemen quickly lost their patience. I expected the worst. That did not take long, and I made the acquaintance of “**die Kapelle.**” A chapel was under the roof of this location, previously occupied by a religious congregation.

Some equipment for these circumstances had replaced the usual furnishings of this place, and they were meant to accelerate the responses from those who were most reticent to speak. I will speak more about this in another paragraph (“the interrogations”). I have a fraternal memory for all those who had to submit to the use of those instruments, before and after myself. I had firmly decided not to satisfy my torturers’ curiosity; this was not the best way to go through these meetings, as they persisted assiduously.

I recognize that even though I am totally atheist I still called upon “my God” to help me. They responded by telling me that God was not interested in people like me. True or not, we resisted together, He and I, and no confession was obtained! I was a poor broken thing when I found myself seated in the cell reserved for visitors in the cellars of the building, and I returned to the prison the worse for wear. [p.22] My cell companions showed much compassion upon discovering the damage upon my return.

The departures to the **rue Traversiere** took place in the early morning, before the distribution of coffee and a slice of bread which was allotted to us; the return took place after the meager evening meal. When the visits to the **G.F.P.** took place day after day, that meant two complete days without food. That was the case and my downfall was total. It was impossible to catch up on sleep, for my physical state made any prone position impossible, and that went on for five weeks.

One of my companions, **Mathieu Nelen**, I will never forget his name, did what he could to care for me with massages which, despite his manifest inexperience, helped little by little to make the large pockets of blood disappear.

My drill sergeant probably decided that the moment had come to further his investigations, and the trips began again between the prison and his lair. Sometimes I had the right to use a private front wheel drive transport.

If escape from the prison appeared to me to be impossible, did a possibility perhaps exist?

(I was wrong about the prison for I was lucky to meet **Lucien**, called **Miche Jansen**, a member of the **Service**, who escaped over the wall with three cellmates . . . a piece of the story!)

One day, finding myself on the back seat of the car, and two soldiers seated in front talking about one thing and another, I noticed that the handcuffs on me were not entirely closed allowing me the freedom . . . to use my arms. The ride used the **Charleroi Road** and, at the moment where we approached the intersection with **Avenue Louise**, the car stopped alongside a tram. It was now or never! and I did not take the chance, judging in an instant that I had no chance at all to get out alive, since the two soldiers were well armed. Stupid or not stupid? Someone else might have taken advantage of the opportunity, who knows; I do not ask myself the question but, and it is easy, I feel after the fact that the chain of events which followed prove I made the right choice.

Taking advantage of my state, the interrogations which followed happened following the same procedure "seated/ standing" the seated position on my damaged feet, made firm by a low box, it took a real effort to rise up from it. Everything prolonged enough to lead me to a moment when I refused to do the exercise. This rebellion did not help my physical state or our relationship.

My determination remained intact, deny, deny, deny. My inquisitor had a card up his sleeve: a door to the office was opened, and my accomplices appeared. **Glove** realized that he had met me somewhere, without being able to be precise about it. Faithful to his "tactic" **R.D.** confirmed that he knew me and that I had played a role, as leader of the group, in the activities which they accused him of. . . To the best of my recollection, **Ge** had not been summoned for this confrontation, or if he was he did not say anything.

The future looked grim. My determination remained intact and I denied, denied again. The tactic paid off, for I was no longer interrogated for the following days. [p.23]

I could have hoped that the great wave of arrests were avoided. As for **Didine** and my mother-in-law, I still did not know what their fate had been.

I took, as sort of an opportunity for distraction given my convictions, the possibility of a meeting with a chaplain who had to come by to distribute communion, though I had no experience in this domain. The day came, and I found myself face to face with a German officer as he passed my cell; he even had a reassuring cross on his uniform. Wanting to honestly play the game, I wasted no time in telling him that I was a nonbeliever. He received the news without being shocked and said to me: "I know, I also know why you are here and the attitude you have; be strong!" It would be useless to try to describe my surprise. And that was just the beginning of my emotional reaction. Then he said to me: "I am going to open my missal, watch closely but don't make any reactions." The missal contained a letter from my family. I could reassure myself, no one else had been arrested. People on the outside were working on our behalf. When it came time for him to take his leave, he slid an object into my hand advising me not to show it to my cellmates. It was neither a rope ladder nor a pistol but a piece of chocolate which was eaten on the sly!

The population in our cell changed from four to five detainees. I was intrigued when several days passed with only three as a quota. This was an abnormal thing, and I don't

know what intuition got into my head that we needed to beware of the next arrival in the cell. Even though we had made discrete confidences on the subject of our arrests, I counseled the others to seriously keep it to themselves. I was waiting for the arrival of a “sheep,” a type of dangerous animal on two feet with an exaggeratedly curious nature. My premonition was correct when a big, rotund individual was introduced; that which strongly jars most citizens of this country, all reduced to the bare minimum.

He revealed to us that his arrest was due to a strong activity in the resistance. In a talkative manner, he invited us to share our secrets, but my companions kept their own counsel. But he was clearly more interested in hearing my stories than theirs.

Sharing our circumstances, and our pittances, seemed to weigh on him after several days, especially since what he was learning was not worth this ordeal! Several times he tried to put an end to it by asking the guards for an interview with his drill sergeant, which finally took place several days later. When he returned from his “instruction” he announced to us that on the way back to the cell he was told that his escape had been organized, and it would take place the next time he would be transported for interrogation.

Then he invited us to compose some words destined for our families, which he would deliver once he had escaped. Unlike my companions I did not respond to his proposition, I can’t recall what excuse I made. And forthwith he quickly got out and the numbers in our cell immediately returned to full up.

In the end, he had not entirely lied. In fact he showed up one day at my house, as a member of the German police. He told them that he had the chance to meet me, that he felt a great deal of sympathy for me and that, upon payment of a great sum, which he spelled out, he could help me out. My family decided to play this card, with no other possibility in sight, and they gave the required amount to the individual.

An event had happened in the meantime. A new chance for “communion” had presented itself. So once again I saw the chaplain and I shared with him my suspicions with regard to the suspected “sheep.” I asked him to please alert my family about a visitor they would probably be seeing. He reassured me that he would do his best; I am certain that he would have acted upon this request if he hadn’t been sent to Germany or Russia soon afterward. [p.24]

I had the joy of meeting again **Monseigneur Gramman** while visiting **Brussels**; ironically it was in the room on **rue Traversiere** which was returned to his congregation! I had had, previously, knowledge of courageous assistance which he had given to prisoners at **Breendonk** before their execution, by transmitting afterward their last message to their families. The memory of such a man must not be forgotten. As he was seriously ill, he did not survive much longer after this visit.

A major event marked my memories of the last weeks of my incarceration. I was taken from my cell in the morning, and as I was waiting to follow the usual routine toward the

exit and the **G.F.P.**, they escorted me through a maze of hallways in the prison. I was taken to a room in which three or four officers were seated. These officers were each wearing a cross, but they were swastikas! Immediately one of them asked me to renounce myself and that my case was terminated and that, considering my acts against the German army, I was sentenced to death . . . he had the delicacy of telling me that this would be by hanging. I did not contest their decision, but before this execution should take place I wished to see my wife and daughter. I don't remember if they agreed to my request, but it did not happen right away.

I did not think it was advisable to tell my cellmates the reason for my absence. This was something to keep to myself. I remained with this unpleasant perspective until **2 September 1944** in the early morning. On that day we were taken from our cells to join the crowd of other prisoners who had been taken like us to the exit. Some covered trucks were parked, we were thrown inside, and a new adventure awaited us.

The joys of the G.F.P.

I found myself the worse for wear in **Saint Gilles**: with chronic albumin in my urine and a debilitating regime added to the fatigue of the interrogations, I was not in ideal shape! At first I was interrogated in the prison itself by men in the service of the **Funkabwehr**, who felt, mistakenly, that I was a marconiste. That came with blows and threats, but in reality I had nothing to tell them. I had ignored everything about the proper technique of radio transmittal, and had I known about it I was well aware that I would never have divulged anything, on any topic.

Then I was moved to the **G.F.P** room on **rue Traveriere** in **Brussels**. Our business was then taken up in the hands of the chief of **G.F.P.** named **Koehler**, who went to great measures to try to make me speak, using the few clues which he had assembled from my associates' declarations. For various reasons, those people were not able to adopt the same attitude of complete silence.

After trying polite persuasion, then brutal, **Koehler** concluded, after several meetings, with the threat of reprisals. My entire family would be arrested, taken as hostages. Then one day he told me that he had gone through with the threat. It was obviously impossible for me to verify this.

Several weeks went by during which I was interrogated four or five times, always brutally, threatened with death by firing squad without a trial, which was certain to happen if the **Allies** set foot in **Belgium**. [p.25] They told me that they would use all "necessary means" to make me talk.

One day **Koehler** felt he needed to call into his office some notables from the **G.F.P.** because I had dared to say to him that Belgians know well "the humanity" of procedures used by the German police to make prisoners talk. On this occasion I received a treatment justifying these "compliments" that I had just made to them!

One Monday toward the end of June, I was taken to **rue Traversiere**. I expected the worst, having been warned by **Koehler** that he was going to go to the extreme. I found myself in a cell in the cellar, less than one square meter, without light or air, a 5 centimeter board nailed to the wall, like a bench, with my hands tied behind my back. I returned to **St Gilles** that evening without food or water, having a high fever, and not having any interrogation at all.

They came to get me again on Monday morning, I had been awake for 48 hours.

I was immediately taken to **Koehler's** office. He began by warning me about what would happen to me if I persevered in my intention to remain silent. After my denials, he began the meeting. Surrounded by several men from the **G.F.P.**, he interrogated me nonstop for three hours. He forced me to sit down and get up (aug-nieder) on a box that was 25/30 centimeters high. My hands were tied behind my back with handcuffs with the hinges inversed and constricting blood circulation. My hands were purple and the marks from the handcuffs stayed imprinted on my wrists for three months. When I refused to stand up, they twisted my wrists with the handcuffs and beat my fingers with a ruler.

Then I was taken to "the chapel" which was in the same building, to the torture chamber. One more time I was asked to tell the **G.F.P.** what I knew.

Upon my refusal they tied my wrists to my ankles, which were tied together by leather ropes made for this purpose, which were tied as tightly as possible. One of the assistants used a leather strip of about 1 meter 50 and a diameter of 1 to 3 centimeters. He beat my buttocks with all his strength. An unbearable pain made me fall, half unconscious. Screaming in pain despite my firm resolution to taunt them by not reacting. They forced me to get up again and repeated the procedure a number of times, without ceasing to interrogate me.

The attendants to this spectacle numbered about 8 or 9, and they took great pleasure in abusing me in any way they could.

After a short respite, they replaced the handcuffs, bound my elbows to my body, and tied my feet together; they made me lie with my belly down on a table and my feet on the floor. The executioner began again to whip me, while someone else beat my legs with a piece of wood, and a third person held my feet to the floor. During this time **Koehler** held my head between his hands and hit my face with all his strength against the table. Two others took turns asking me questions during the short moments when I was not screaming in pain (I was deaf for three days from my own screaming).

It was 1:30 and they had not succeeded in drawing out one word from me.

They took me back to the cellar where I found the narrow cell, staying there without eating or drinking. They warned me that they would come back at 2:00 to continue the

same treatment. I was under military guard, the “old jacket” kind, who was apparently not there for his own pleasure.

My state must have seemed particularly painful. He took out a sandwich from his pocket, and with a smile of encouragement he offered it to me. Despite the difficulty I had in finding the opening to my mouth, I was able to swallow it while keeping an eye out for the German army!

They kept their word and at 6 o'clock exactly, they continued to interrogate me using the stand up and sit down system, which was simply atrocious in light of their preceding treatment. When, exhausted, I could no longer stand up, they slapped me and beat a ruler against my fingers.

I still had my hands handcuffed behind my back. On the brink of fainting from pain, when I refused to get up they got up on the box and took me by the shoulders to make me stand up and then let me fall down under my own weight. They did not stop for one instant asking me everything while threatening me that they would begin this kind of treatment every day if I did not talk.

After returning to the cellar and my cell at 7 o'clock, I was thrown into a **G.F.P.** truck which took me back to St Gilles. They had promised me that I would tell the truth before day's end, and as usual they ended up with nothing!

I received no care at the prison and I was not capable of laying down on my back for 5 weeks. My pain persisted for years. During this time **Koehler** brought **Didine** to the **G.F.P.**, and had her make statements leading her to believe that I was agreeable to that! He accepted several times some photos of my baby, who was 6 months old at the time, which he said he had given to me. He even had the nerve to tell her that he had given me these photos and that I had been very happy to see them! It's useless to say that I did not received the packages that **Didine** left for me at the **G.F.P.** which he suggested she bring . . .

I also remember that when I had expressed as a final wish before being executed to receive a photo, he told me he would consider it . . . and at that moment he has several photos in my file!

This account is part of a document that I had created on 22 May 1946, two years after our arrest, when my memory of the facts was still accurate. It was destined to play a part in the trial of **Koehler** and his acolytes, whose superior was **Bisbort** (it took place but I do not remember the sentence he was given).

Memories, continued. A trip to Brussels / Malines and a return, not very enjoyable

On 2 September 1944, the courtyard of the **Saint-Gilles** prison was noisy with yelling everywhere. The prisoners were brutally thrown out of their cells, finding themselves huddled under a menacing group of guards.

Everyone was calling out one to another to show each other they were sharing the same fate. No one answered my calls, and very quickly I was separated from my cellmates.

There were some covered trucks parked nearby for us, but where would they be taking us?

We continued to ponder this question with no better answer than a supposition without foundation. We were quickly brought to our next mode of transportation when we found ourselves at the **Gare du Midi**, surrounded by S.S. agents. Before us were two rows of cattle cars, with writing on the side indicating 40 men, 8 horses. We were thrown inside close together with some 80 to 100 men standing shoulder to shoulder, the deduction was impossible; it was not our problem for the moment, nor later on for that matter. We were taken out of our cells without having our usual breakfast, so we began our journey without food or water. The doors were closed again as it became obvious that no more people could be squeezed into the space, as arms, legs and heads were about to crush into each other.

[p. 27]

Thus began a waiting period, which seemed to have no end. On the railway platform we could hear prisoners yelling amid German shouts, indicating to us what our immediate future would become. In view of what happened to us later on, contrary to what we could imagine at the time, we were ignorant of the treatment to our comrades on the preceding convoys at the end of the line.

From time to time a jarring motion happened when a locomotive attached, shaking the convoy which however did not begin to move.

The openings only let in a little light, and the air quickly became unbreathable, and the body heat made the temperature mount. Let's not even mention the inevitable bad odor.

I did not have a watch, nor my neighbors nearby, so it was not easy to determine how much time transpired.

Stories started to spread, remarks about stepped on feet and other inconveniences due to the closeness of the passengers, all these began to blend in with my first reflections about the possibility of escape, which seemed slim under the present circumstances.

It was in the middle of the afternoon, which we were able to determine later on, when the convoy began to move. We traveled at a snail's pace. There were many stops and starts along the way. Night fell and it was impossible for us to determine in which

direction we were going. It was probably not to the West, as we had heard rumors of the allies advancing, so east to Germany seemed more likely.

The occupants who were close to the door noticed that it was not properly locked. There was a chance to escape; I had not noticed that at the time we embarked a secret meeting was held between a prisoner near the opening and an "authority." At the first movement in the crowd toward the exit, this prisoner, who we would come to know as **Ernest Demuyter** the Belgian deputy and famous pilot, confirmed himself to have been promoted to "responsible leader" of the cattle car. He had "given his word" that none of us would attempt to escape, under penalty of becoming hermetically sealed in the car! This "favor" was the reason therefore for the little bit of fresh air that we had been using. The prisoners who had been enjoying this beneficial position near the door were in unison with the "leader", and were not inclined to join the ranks of the remaining multitude!

The best solution was to make use of the opening in the door to throw the pilot into the liberty that he refused to give to others. The circumstances, and the weakness of many who were exhausted by the confinement, contributed to avoiding the fate which he deserved.

Since I had entered among the first passengers, I was thrown toward the back of the car and it was practically impossible for me to move to any other position.

I noticed that my nearby neighbors, who were smashed against the wall of the car, were trying to make a hole with a spoon or a fork, which were precious items stolen from the prison. Their work progressed well until soon . . . freedom appeared in the form of morning light coming from outside; our feelings of satisfaction stopped when the barrel of a gun, probably a machine gun, could be seen, as well as shouts from the guards on the other side.

These shouts left no doubt about the fate which awaited us if the hole grew any bigger. [p.28] It was clear that our attempts at escape would have to be reconsidered.

We were more and more thirsty and if, at this moment, the "chosen ones at the door were blessed with a little bit of water they noticed right away that it was not drinkable because it was meant for the locomotive and was chemically treated.

The night was spent in different movements of the convoy, feeling movement from time to time, without knowing why it was so. I could distinguish, when the train stopped, voices of friends coming from the exterior encouraging us to be strong; that reinforced our morale.

After some hours, the incomprehensible peregrinations of our convoy finally came to an end. With the authorization of the "leader" the door was opened and those closest to the opening saw a large paved area surrounded by several machine guns. Naturally this was not a welcoming party. Once again I thought we were goners. This confrontation

lasted a while until the door was prudently closed by our doorman; after a few minutes it was opened a crack, and I was able to get closer and, to my surprise, the machine guns and their owners had disappeared.

They were suddenly replaced by 3 civil servants whose looks seemed to indicate that they were not a threat to us. And in fact the news spread quickly: we could leave our “prison,” we were free. We were more than 1,500 who escaped the worst; I could find in the middle of this crowd, three of the comrades who were arrested with me including **Glove**. We were not pretty to look at, having lost so much weight, but honestly that was the least of our thoughts. Our desire to leave this place, as well as our fear of the enemy returning, were so great that we hurried to get out of there without waiting another moment.

The **Petite Ile Station**, for this was the name of our location, was quickly out of our sight as we hurried toward the closest tram . . . while avoiding German soldiers who apparently had greater concerns than to be interested in us. It was in fact a panic for the allied forces were at the edge of the town, thus saving us from our deadly fate.

The tram was able to take me home without any problem. But this was without counting on the professional conscience of the ticket collector who asked us to pay for the ticket. It was well understood that we had not a penny to give him. His tone of voice began to raise, as the justification for this problem did not satisfy him. It was then that the ire of some good citizens of **Brussels** who were typical of this neighborhood decided to argue with this honest public servant! He rapidly understood that he had to go along with their arguments, and he allowed us to stay on the tram to our destination.

Having overcome this last obstacle, I was able to rejoin my loved ones.

This story could have ended well; like in a child’s story “the evil ones are conquered, and the good ones are returned safe and sound to their families.” Alas I have learned that it seems I did not know about the arrest of the hosts that I had not identified, who were sent to camps and never returned. It is useless to explain that based on very tenuous information, I will attempt some research about that.

[p.29]

Numerous members of our team disappeared since that time, and if I locate their descendants they may find here the proof of my great acknowledgement for their precious contribution to the success of our activities. Without them nothing would have been possible.

How the Belgian train employees took our fate in their hands

On the night of the **first of September** the Germans brought two train lines forming a length of 32 cattle cars. Stationed on train tracks 14 and 15, there was an extraordinary number of S.S. guards keeping watch.

The second in command at the station, **Michel Petit**, was present at the station that morning, when he was contacted by an anonymous civilian who told him simply: "The Germans evacuated the **Saint-Gilles prison**." The decision was made immediately: "Prevent the departure by any means."

At the locomotive depot, the foreman named **Gevaert**, was warned that at all costs he must make the exit of the locomotive as slow as possible.

He still needed to know which one was destined for the convoy. The information was obtained that it would be the "**Fahrnummer**" **1.682508**. Also, at the time that the Germans ordered a locomotive for this number in the convoy, a type 33 machine was chosen by the German foreman. At the risk of being shot on the spot, conductor **Roelans** tore the pipes from the grease pump.

The German chose another locomotive, a 1202; this one was located in a place that was full of German personnel. It was impossible to sabotage it.

They had to wait for the machinist who would arrive for the noon shift; it was arranged that upon his arrival he would become ill and return to his home with a medical release. During this time, they got busy in the offices. It was a question of rearranging the lines, and the dynamite was brought out from its hiding place. But they feared reprisals and decided to use a ruse rather than force.

The Germans were getting impatient. The machinist named **Vanderveken** was chosen to replace the sick machinist, and it was only 1:30. After having delayed while setting up some preliminary operations, keeping busy with refueling and cleaning up the train's firebox, **Vanderveken** slid down from the tender and began to call for help, faking a sprained ankle which would necessitate replacing him.

During this time the prisoners had been were piled 80 to 100 upon each other. Some German vans arrived which were filled with strange objects, in a disorder indicating panic.

Taking a risk, the second in command **Duverger** and **Schoenaers** began to open the air orifices of the cattle cars, while saying, "don't worry, the train will not get across the border."

The Germans became more and more nervous because they needed a machinist. At 2:00 o'clock foreman **Deshorme** arrived to relieve the courageous **Roelans** to operate the locomotives, and he was told about the situation. Also he put in his pocket the list of personnel who were present and made the rounds in the station's workshops.

It would be 3:30 when machinist **Verheggen** and his driver **Leon Pochet** stopped arguing and were ordered forcefully to get on the train, surrounded by 3 S.S. holding them by their elbows. They had only one thought: use everything at hand in order to never arrive at the border. **Verheggen's** written log describes the following: [p. 30]

As soon as the locomotive began moving, we directed it toward a cul-de-sac, which was our first means of wasting time.

Then when we arrived at the **Gare due Midi** with "the smokestack in front" we requested having the train turned around even though we knew very well that this position was foreseen for the unmooring in a normal position, after the changing at the front that we had to do at **Forest-Midi**, in order to depart again toward **Antwerp!**

Stationmaster Decoster supported our request, and the Germans suspected nothing. This resulted in 20 minutes of delay.

Returning to the station, we proceeded with the decoupling of the two train cars. All was ready, but the signal stayed on stop. **Chief Decoster**, threatened by a revolver, was forced to give the order to depart. It was 4:50, already about 8 hours and 20 minutes later than the scheduled departure.

We allowed the blower to function without disconnecting it, using up an abnormal amount of water.

We arrived at **Forest-Midi** at 5:15; we had a new loss of time because of another train's presence in the main track, which obstructed the crossings of each track.

In conclusion, our water reserve was insufficient for waiting this long, the machine was unhooked and sent by hydraulic crane to the workshop, in order to once more refill its reserves, which took 40 minutes.

At 5:55 we departed **Forest-Midi** for **Schaerbeek** and the blower went into action, even during times when we were at a standstill. This brought on considerable water losses.

We encountered numerous stop signals and our three guards yelled at us to ignore them. We refused despite their threats and some epic discussions resulted, during which the train remained in place.

They made us control the pressure, and finally, at the entrance to **Malines**, they forced us to go through stop signal. Consequence: we were directed onto a track to the garage instead of being taken care of at the main track.

We had intended to take on water at **Malines**, because we knew that since the bombardments at **Malines** this would be impossible, and that we would have to go to **Muysen** to find the necessary liquid.

The second in command at the Belgian station of **Malines**, **Maurice Laporte**, having given the go-ahead, allowed us to depart for **Muysen** with a German train employee onboard.

We had asked the second in command at **Malines** to convince the Germans to return to **Brussels**, in order to borrow the line from **Liege** due to a collision in **Antwerp**. When we arrived in **Muysen** at 11:30 p.m., we did not move any further until the next day at 5:30 a.m.

(On his end second in command **Laporte** explained to the German guard that the train was much too long and that it blocked all the tracks to **Antwerp** or **Louvain**. He explained that no train could go out and then the German yelled: let's go to Germany via **Schaerbeek**.) (excerpt from another document)

At this hour the German in charge of the station came to give us the order to depart **Malines**. The officer overseeing the train refused to leave. It was only around 7:15 that we gave the authorization to get going.

Precise orders no longer were given to us and everyone was on their own.

After our departure from **Muysen**, we stayed in distress on the sidelines at **Malines**. We asked for a tow machine, and that is how the 109 locomotive came to the front of the train, under machinist **Gerardy** from **Brussels**.

[p.31]

At **Malines** another incident occurred: the occupants of the D.C.A. train car were required to be replaced in line in the convoy. When this was arranged, the train car in question and its occupants stayed in place and, at 8:30 we left for **Brussels**.

When we arrived at **Schaerbeek**, the train continued as if it were normal to settle in definitively in the **Bruxelles-Petite-Ile** station. It was Sunday, 3 September; we noticed that there was a great confusion. It was 10:15; we had completed the trip from **Malines** to **Brussels** in 1 hour and 45 minutes, while the evening before we had taken 7 hours 30 minutes to get to **Malines**."

Thus ended the report from the brave **Verheggen** and **Pochet**.

At the **Bruxelles-Petite-Ile** station, at the moment the convoy arrived, the two machines were assailed by some Germans who were of the same ilk, who pretended to requisition passage on the train in hopes of escaping on it. **Verheggen** took advantage of the

confusion to slip away, which resulted in a few slaps inflicted by furious officers upon his three guards. As for **Pochet**, he let the fire go out.

The S.S. who had carried machine guns around the train quickly disappeared.

The Swedish consul, the Swiss consul, a representative of the **Red Cross of Belgium** and another from the **Surete Belge** had obtained from the German ambassador, **Juncklaus**, the freedom of some 1,500 prisoners. They showed up at the **Gare du Nord** in order to obtain information about dispatching, when they learned that some patriots wanted to contribute to our liberation by force. They arrived fortunately in time to avoid this dangerous mission which had become useless. **Doctor Van Dooren**, whose wife was part of the convoy had, on his side, undertaken to overcome the train master who seemed to be reticent to liberate us without the necessary orders.

The arrival of the diplomats brought an end to his hesitations.

The Belgian personnel at the **Petite-Ile** station, who had taken every opportunity to not allow our convoy to leave the station, ended the ordeal by opening the doors to the train cars. I present herein to my readers the description of my “inside story.”

These details of the technical part of the odyssey of the ghost train, are excerpts from the brochure by **Rene Ponty**, president of **Amicale**, upon the occasion of a ceremony of homage to our heroic train workers, during which they were presented with awards and gifts.

P.S. **Mr. Demuyter**, our deputy, pilot, and guardian of the doors, sat in a very good seat during this honorific tribute!

[The following photo of Robert Beckers, his wife “Didine,” and daughter Christine was taken on the day he returned home from the train. It was provided courtesy of their grandson Benjamin Beckers.]



Let us introduce the heroes of this story

Our civilian collaborators

For obvious reasons of security, the members of the team only knew each other under false identities. Fortunately, most of the names of our hosts were unknown.

The witnesses who would have been able to complete our awareness have disappeared; more than 50 years later, it is practically impossible to complete the list of everyone who participated in our adventure; I have learned that some of them did not return from the camps. I would like to pay homage to them as well as to others, but alas I am out of commission.

[p. 32]

The following information is incomplete to be sure. I ask your pardon to those men and women who were not included.

The members of the protection team:

Robert and Didine Beckers

Jacques Bellière

Mr and Mrs Jean Bille

René De Mot, 117 Rue van Zuylen, **Uccle**

Mme Furnemont, 115 rue Gatti de Gamont, **Brussels**

Mr and Mrs Marquet, rue van der Meersch, 36

George-Andre (Ge) Moulart, 76, rue du President, **Brussels**

Mrs S. Petit, 2, avenue du Boulevard, **Brussels**

Arthur Robier, avenue George Lecoit, **Brussels**

Mrs G. Villain, 14 avenue Michel Ange, **Brussels**

The contact providers of addresses:

Rene Fuss

Mrs Maguitte Campion

Miss Lorthioir, 112, chaussées de Vleurgat

Mr H. Lheureux, rue des Moutons, **Uccle**

Mr and Mrs Georges Dasse, 13, rue de la Jonction, **Brussels**

Mrs Furnemont, 115, rue Gatti de Gamont, **Brussels**

?, 51, rue Van der Broeck, **Brussels**

Mr and Mrs Marquet, 36 rue van der Meersch, **Brussels**

Mrs Cardinal, 29 rue des Cottages, **Brussels**

?Cafe de la Regence, place Fernand Cocq, **Brussels**

86, rue Emile Banning, **Brussels**

rue des Primeurs, **Forest**

Radio transmission locations:

Van Dievoet, rue de Crayer and avenue Moliere 517 (6 times)

Mrs Lorthioir, chaussee de Vleurgat, 112 (5 times)

Dr Paul Lorthioir, rue Faider, 76 (5 times)

Marquet, rue van der Mersch, 36 (5 times)

Mrs Furnemont, rue Gatti de Gamont, 115 (6 times)

Andre Beckers, Ottignies (2 times)

Mrs Depage, avenue du Parc de Woluwe, 44 (4 times)

Desoer, avenue Emile Duray, 42 (3 times)

Deschamps, rue Gustave Fuss 61/61 (3 times)

Bossaert, rue Joseph Smets, 14 (3 times)

Dosogne, avenue des Arts, 28 (3 times)

S.A.M.D.S., (Marquet), rue Bara, 128 (3 times)

DeMot, avenue van Zuylen, 117 (3 times)

Lt. Gen. Baron de Callatay, rue Jacques de Lalaing, 37 (3)

Eeckaute, rue de Titien, 48 (3 times)

Mrs Salon, avenue Leon Mahillon, 84 (2 times)

Bastin, avenue Brugmann 162 (2 times)
H. Lheureux, rue des Moutons (2 times)

[p. 33]

Closset van Bets, rue Montoyer, 20 (2 times)
Dassesse, rue de la Jonction, 13 (2 times)
Rene Fuss, avenue du Haut Pont, 12 (2 times)
Kirkpatrick, rue de l'Abaye, 22a (2 times)
Mrs A. Simont, avenue Rogier, 100 (2 times)
Cardinal, avenue des Cottages, 29 (2 times)
Denis, avenue Emile Verhaeren, 20 (2 times)
Maguitte Campion, rue de Bordeaux, 63 (1 time)
Moulaert, avenue de l'Observatoire, 47 (1 time)
Rey, rue van Artevelde, 31 (1 time)
Van Dooren, rue Mercelis, 80 (1 time)
Villain, avenue Michel Ange, 14 (1 time)
Legrand, rue Decroly, 8 (1 time)
Laurent, avenue des Phalenes, 30 (1 time)
Countess Marzorati, avenue Helleveld, 24 (1 time)
Thoumsin, rue de la Source, 70 (1 time)
? rue Dusselenberg, 51 (2 times)
Utters, avenue E. Bockstael, 310 (1 time)
Poncellet, avenue de la Toison d'Or, 62 (1 time)
Denis Van Cauwenberghe, avenue des Courses, 26 (1 time)
De Vigne, avenue Lonchamps, 209 (?)
Rasquin, rue Doidonnee, rue Royale (l'Abeille) (?)
Tits, rue de la Montagne, 52 (?)
Lorthioir, La Bicoque, Alseberg (1 time)
? chee de Wavre (entr rue Limauge and rue Wayez) (1 time)

All of these patriots were warned, at the time a meeting was arranged that, like us, they risked the penalty of death, in case a misfortune should happen. Refusals were extremely rare. I regret that I cannot remember all of them, my memory is fading!

The Missionaries

JACQUES DONEUX:

Hillcat - Rene - (Dansaert, Jean Leonard)

Paratrouper formation from August 20 to 26, 1943

Parachuted in on August 11, 1943 as radio operator for **Andre Wendelen (Hector1)**

Also maintained radio liaison for the **National Belgian Movement**

At the end of the mission he returned (in June 1944 via Pampeluna) (doc. W.U., CEGES)

Excerpt from **Jongen** report: "I would like to salute here the essential role played by radio operator **Hillcat** who was one of my most faithful collaborators. This captain from the British army parachuted in with **A.W.** in August 1943. He transmitted [p. 34] all of my requests for parachute drops during those months, as well as other messages, without ever letting himself be caught. He returned to England when his mission was completed and wrote his memoirs." "*They Arrived by Moonlight*" whose contents is passionate from beginning to end, and in honor of its author whose modesty is evident throughout. The copy that I possessed disappeared mysteriously, but I had the joy of finding it again recently, allowing me to recall certain memories at this time.

ANDRE WENDELEN

(Tybalt, Hector and Hector 1, Limbosch)

Wendelen was wounded during his parachute training. He was operated on and they removed a kidney. That did not keep him from returning to the training and being dropped by parachute three times in enemy territory.

His comings and goings were as follows:

Left on August 23, 1940 for Great Britain

Parachuted on January 27, 1942 on Mission Group G and Mandanus

Parachuted on August 11, 1943 on Mission Claudius-Tybalt, coordinated by the resistance, financial resources, etc.

Brought with him 1,5 M BEF, some diamonds, 2 radio emitters, 1 S phone (emitter/receptor for guiding the planes)

Returned to Great Britain on November 4, 1943

Parachuted on August 4, 1944

Each time he took enormous risks, while avoiding successfully any threat or harm to the security of his collaborators.

WITOLD LOBET

(Victor Leduc, Hector 2, Tybalt 2, Victor the Abbey)

Succeeded **A.W.** after his departure for Great Britain (November 4, 1943) as head of Mission Claudius-Tybalt. He was arrested in **Brussels** on March 27, 1944 and hung at **Buchenwald** on September 6, 1944. (documents W. Ugeux, CEGES)

Excerpt from Jongen report: "**Lobet** assumed a heavy burden during some difficult months, from August 1943 to March 1944. All reports came to him, including information and documents destined for London . . . everything depended upon him to keep my transmission to London in order, for he alone knew where my radio operators were hidden, with whom I only had a distant rapport. At the time of his arrest in March 1943, no radio operations were compromised because Lobet never spoke of them.

JACQUES JONGEN

He began in the resistance in 1942. **Wendelen** assigned him on a mission in 1943.
(Jongen Report)

On July 15 1943 (August 1943?): second return **Wendelen** for Mission Tybalt with Hillcat as radio operator. A.W. was successful in convincing the British Special Operations Executives of the sabotage group's efficiency and to persuade them to intensify materiel assistance.