CHILDREN, WE'RE AT WAR

By Jean-Jacques Greif

World War II began on September 1st, 1939, when the Germans attacked Poland and bombed Warsaw. The French thought that the Germans would bomb Paris in the same manner, but nothing happened for months. This period is known as "the phony war." In May and June 1940, the Germans invaded and vanquished France. They occupied the northern half of the country. The French government moved to the small town of Vichy, capital of "Free France." Marshall Pétain, a great hero of World War I, became head of State. He accepted to "collaborate" with the Germans.

As in Germany, new laws deprived the Jews of their elementary rights. Then they were arrested and sent to death camps. Some French people approved these laws and helped the police find and arrest Jews. Others hid and saved Jews.

The war ended on May 8, 1945.

July 1945

Me I am Jacquot, but my name used to be Jacob. My last name is Lenoir. It used to be Sylberstajn or something, with all kinds of strange letters. I think there was a z somewhere, but I don't know where to put it anymore.

My parents are coming to pick me up next week. I'll certainly become Jacob Sylberwhat again. They'll tell me where to put the z. I wonder whether I'll recognize them. I told Madame Christiane I was scared. She said I shouldn't worry.

"You think you have forgotten them, but as soon as you see them your memories will return. Besides, adults don't change much. Whereas you… You should wonder whether they'll recognize you. Before the war, you were a nice seven-year old boy. You're still nice, but you've become a big fellow and a teenager. Pretty soon, you'll need to shave. This sweet seven-year old Jacquot, whose name was Jacob, they'll never see him again. I guess they'll feel sad because they haven't watched you grow up."

"I have written everything in the notebook my mother offered me," I said. "This will give them an idea of what happened to me."

"You're right. I wish I had written such a notebook when I was a child. I would be glad to read it today."

"Maybe my grandchildren will read it in the year 2000!"

1939

I begin my story on September 3, 1939. I'm in Mimizan. I spend my vacations in the Pylon summer camp, like always.

My best pal is Marmot. He got his name because he is the king of sleepers. I must wake him up every morning.

"Come on, Marmot, get up! Madame Christiane has blown the horn already. It is seven."

"No… Lemme sleep… Five more minutes…"

"You'd better not. Just by the way she blows, you can hear she is in a bad mood."

"Ain't news. Ever since Ol' Dan went away, can't touch her with a ten-foot pole. He didn't send a single letter."

"She should be happy he's gone. When he's there, they fight all the time."

"That's because they're married. My parents also fight all the time."

"Me, I know where he is."

"Everybody knows. Went into the army."

"Isn't he too old for military service? He's at least thirty, I'd say."

"Ain't military service. General mobilization. They take even old guys."

Madame Christiane is really nervous. This is because of the Ocean wind, maybe.

She scolds the mailman.

"So what, Mailman? You're one hour late!"

"You mean you don't know? The war began today!"

Madame Christiane blows her bull's horn. This is not wake up time or lunchtime, so we know what it means: general meeting on the green, near the fig tree. She blows some more to get silence. Her hair sticks out of her head like straw. Her hands are shaking slightly.

"Children, children… I have terrible news: we're at war!"

Marmot and Nuts pretend to shoot the Germans with machine guns: "Ta ta ta ta ta!" A big girl screams as if someone had kicked her, then starts crying.

A week later, the mailman brings Ol' Dan's first letter. Madame Christiane calls a new general meeting.

"I just received some news from Monsieur Daniel. Before going to the army, he set up a big meeting with your parents. He asked them what they wanted: We can keep you children in the camp until the end of September, as planned. Or we could keep you after that. We wouldn't close the camp for winter like we usually do."

"Longer vacations?"

"That's swell!"

"But why, Madame Christiane?"

"The Germans bombed Warsaw with their planes and killed thousands of people. They might do the same thing in Paris. Many people send their children to the countryside to keep them safe. But you are already in the countryside. Most of your parents chose to leave you here. Monsieur Daniel wrote a list."

"What if bombs fall on our parents, Madame Christiane?"

"Let's hope not. They have gas masks. Everybody received one. Wait a minute, Monsieur Daniel writes something about that… Where is it? Ah, here : *Our concierge has become a real dragon. She stopped me because I wanted to go out without taking my gas mask. You're supposed to tie it to your belt. She says I must stick paper bands across my windows. If the blast of a bomb breaks the windows, pieces of glass won't start flying around. In the evening, if I don't close my shutters and my curtains tight after the curfew, she shouts: Lights! Lights!*"

There's a great silence, all of a sudden. I guess we're all trying to imagine our parents going around with gas masks tied to their belts and the concierge shouting: "Lights! Lights!" Madame Christiane smiles. She's quite happy with the result of her little speech. I wish I could read the letter and see whether Ol' Dan really wrote all that.

"Anyway, children, worrying to death won't help. To take our minds away from the war, I thought we might have a Veillée tonight."

"Play theater, Madame Christiane?"

"What are you talking about, Nuts? You know that we can't have theater without rehearsing first. We'll just sing and dance."

"Hey, Nuts, you're nuts!"

At the end of the evening, we sing *O Night*!

O Night! How deep thy silence
When golden stars twinkle in the sky!
I love your radiant cloak.
Your quietness is infinite, your splendor is immense.

Twinkling stars, all right, but we can't have deep silence and infinite quietness if the wind goes on tormenting the pines in the forest. They moan in the dark like lost children.

If I went back to Paris, I would enter the third year of lycée. In Mimizan, they don't have a lycée. It being just a village. There is Mimizan-Plage, that's where the summer camp is, and Mimizan-Bourg. Madame Christiane enrolled us in Mimizan-Plage's communal school. This is much smaller than my lycée. Pupils don't change class every year. There are only three classes, so how could they? Me, I am in Mademoiselle Lucas's class with Marmot, Nuts, Gisèle and Marguerite. I can read already, as I am nearly eight. There are also small kids in the class who are learning how to read, such as Fanny the redhead.

Cossack and several others are in the middle section, in Monsieur Etchegoyen's class. Cossack is older than the others, but he comes from Russia so he doesn't speak French that well. I think Marmot should be in Monsieur Etchegoyen's class already. He is nine, isn't he? I don't know how he'll make it if he goes on sleeping in school.

In Paris, Big Michel and Marie-Claire were pupils in the secondary lycée already. Monsieur Delmas, the school director, took them in his class. It is called "finishing class."

I can't even count the pupils in my class, there are so many of them. At least one hundred, I think. Marmot complains.

"We're pressed like sardines in a can."

"Have you ever seen sardines in a class?"

"Of course. Don't you know they say 'a school of sardines'?"

Mademoiselle Lucas tries to be heard above the din. She's always picking on an Alsatian fellow named Schmitt.

"Do you understand what I say, Schmitt? You're really dumb. Why did they give me such morons?"

The class is full of Alsatian guys who speak a dialect that nobody understands, They live in a place called "the evacuees's camp," on the other side of Mimizan. Mademoiselle Lucas explained it to us.

"The government evacuated border zones, because heavy fighting can be expected there. Your comrades from Alsace and Lorraine came here to breathe the good air of the ocean."

The Germans are not bombing Paris, so Big Michel, Nuts and several other kids go home to celebrate Christmas with their families. When the bus comes for them, we sing This is just Au Revoir.

This is just Au Revoir, brothers, this is just Au Revoir
Yes we'll meet again, brothers, this is just Au Revoir.
Must we part without any hope of a return?
Must we part without any hope of ever seeing each other again?
This is just Au Revoir, brothers, this is just Au Revoir
Yes we'll meet again, brothers, this is just Au Revoir.

We're all very sad, because we are not sure whether we'll ever meet again. There is a war on, after all.

Madame Christiane doesn't want us to be sad. She takes us for a walk. We follow a sandy path in the forest. In Paris, public gardens become dreary in winter when the

trees lose their leaves. In the great Mimizan forest, the pines keep their green needles. The only difference with summer is that the furze bushes do not display their small yellow flowers. We walk all the way to the Aureilhan lake. How strange: it looks like curdled milk.

"Madame Christiane, madame Christiane, the lake is frozen!"

"So why do you think I brought you here? The milkman told me about it. It doesn't happen often."

Cossack shows us how to glide on the ice.

"Take off your sandals. Easy glide in socks."

"You did it in Russia?"

"In Russia, with skates!"

This is great fun, except our socks are wet after three seconds. Our feet are as cold as dead mackerel.

They went to see their parents in Paris. Me, my mom comes to visit me here. She brings me warm clothes for the winter and also gifts for Christmas and for my birthday: a photograph of her and my dad in a red frame and the leather-bound notebook where I write all this. I'm glad to see her, of course, but quite sorry when she goes. I cry in my bed at night. She said my dad could not come. He is learning a military training in Brittany. They have a special Polish army there. They're going to fight with the French against the Germans.

1940

On January 3, I am eight. It is the first time I celebrate my birthday without my parents. Mathilda, the Spanish cook, bakes her famous almond pie. Madame Christiane offers me a book: *White Fang*, by Jack London. It is the story of a wolf dog in the Yukon.

Mom writes that my dad has finished his training. Even though he wears a uniform, he doesn't look like a soldier, she says. They're sending him near the Belgian border.

Madame Christiane listens to the radio every morning. She doesn't want the mailman to know things before her, like last time. In May, 1940, she tells us the Germans entered France with their tanks.

Marmot isn't afraid.

"We'll crush them in no time."

"I'm not sure. They came where the French were not expecting them."

The government ministers are afraid the Germans will catch them if they stay in Paris, so they flee to Bordeaux. Cossack's mother works in the Information ministry. She translates Russian newspapers, Cossack says. She comes to Bordeaux with her minister. Then she visits her son – Bordeaux being so close to Mimizan.

"My sweet birdie, we have fantastic luck. I succeeded in obtaining a cabin on a ship that sails to America to evacuate government members. We depart in three days."

"But Mama, what you say? Next week is communal school final test. Can't go."

She fails to convince him. So do we.

"You're cracked or what? They offer you America, but you prefer to stay in this backwater!"

"You nice kiddies. What me do in America?"

"You can take an electric elevator to the top of a skyscraper!"

“I not speak English. French already tough learn.”

So foolish! He doesn’t even pass his final test. He can’t write a word without at least two spelling errors. He’ll have to stay one more year in Monsieur Etchegoyen’s class. He doesn’t complain.

“Kind teacher. Not like Paris school. Master there he take pants down to give spanking. Pull hair and ears strong.”

“Don’t they do it in Russia?”

“Not never. Russia is civilized country.”

They study strange stuff in Russian schools. Cossack learned to catch insects. He always carries a small metal box tied to his belt. He puts all kinds of bugs there. Then he pins them to a corkboard. He sticks a label with their Latin name, say *Cockroachus greenus vulgarus*. He has books full of a billion insect names. He doesn’t need to open them, cause he knows all the names by heart.

After class, we climb the dune and go to the beach. In June, it is still quite warm at 5 pm. We like to play Tour de France. We built a road in the sand. We’re careful to include tricky bends and steep mountains. One day, as the fastest marbles are already halfway through the Alps, a dirty and dusty kid comes to us.

“Has someone already taken Bartali?”

“Our pal Nuts used to take Bartali. Nobody takes him since he’s gone.”

“Then I’ll take him. I’ve got my own marble.”

“Are you deaf, man? Nobody takes Bartali.”

“Come on, guys, don’t you recognize me?”

“Nuts! You nearly fooled us. Where do you come from?”

“From Paris, of course.”

“Did you walk all the way?”

“I walked, I galloped, I swam, I flew. I even travelled in a 63 Paris bus. Everybody panicked and ran away cause they were afraid of bombs. You should have seen the mess on the roads! At first, I was with my parents. I slept in a farm, in a train station, even in a church. We pinched food in the shops. Stuka planes flew low and shot at us. I tell you, people jumped into the ditch pretty fast.”

“They didn’t kill you?”

“Yes, they did. You’re hearing my ghost. I saw the craziest things. They wanted to hang a nun from a bridge. They thought she was a disguised German spy!”

“How come you’re alone? Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know. When the bus came by, they convinced them to take me aboard. You go to Mimizan, they told me. We’ll manage.”

A few days after the sudden arrival of Nuts, we listen to the news: “The French army holds the Loire firmly. The enemy will break its teeth on our defense.” We can’t hear very well, because of a crackling noise outside. What is it? Oh golly! The Germans are already there… What should we believe: the radio or our eyes and ears? They speed around Mimizan on motorbikes with strange soapboxes attached to them.

“This is called a sidecar,” Marmot says.

“There are at least one hundred of them.”

“You need glasses. The same ones keep going round and round to impress us. I don’t count more than fifteen.”

A little later, trucks bring whole regiments of soldiers. When they climb on the dune and discover the ocean, they shout like children. They undress and jump into the

waves in their trunks.

In October, I graduate to Monsieur Etchegoyen's class. So do Marmot, Nuts, Gisèle and Marguerite. As there is no more fighting in Alsace and Lorraine, the evacuees went home. We're glad we can sit on two buttocks. Good riddance! Monsieur Etchegoyen says we should pity Schmitt and the others.

"Germany simply annexed Alsace and part of Lorraine. Your comrades are German, now. They must do the Nazi salute and enroll in Hitler's youths."

"They already spoke German, sir."

"Alsatian. It is a dialect. Alsace and Lorraine were German between 1871 and 1918. The Germans pretend these provinces have always belonged to them. They've taken away our history and geography class books. They say they were untrue."

"Good news, Marmot says. That much less to study…"

"Don't rejoice too fast. They'll soon send us new books. These will definitely be untrue."

"They also seized all guns and shotguns, sir."

"Right. Hunters are unhappy, but wood-pigeons should rejoice."

"Who's the old fellow, sir?"

"He's marshall Pétain, our new head of State. They ordered us to hang his picture in every classroom. I must also begin the school year by dictating something to you. Please open your notebooks and write this: I promise to work with all my strength so that France becomes again the great and beautiful country I had begun to know and love. I promise I'll love it even more in its terrible grief."

Madame Christiane always has these strange ideas. She decides to change our names. Marmot says it is because of the Boches. My mom forbade me to use slang words like "Boche." One should say Germans.

Marmot asks:

"Are you catholic, you?"

"Me? Hmm, why, no, I don't think."

"You're protestant, then?"

"Protestant? No, I guess not."

"Then you're a Jew. If you're neither catholic nor protestant, you have to be a Jew. Me too, I'm a Jew. The Boches don't like Jews, so they want to kill them all. Madame Christiane changed our names so they can't find us."

"If you're a Jew, why hasn't she changed your name?"

"My parents already changed my name before the war. My old name was Moshe Apfelbaum. Now it is Michel Pommier. I am glad to have changed, cause all my pals used to call me Moche…"

"I still don't understand this thing. Why would the Germans want to kill all Jews?"

"Because they are blockheads, these Boches."

"Yeah, but when Madame Christiane changed our names, she didn't say anything about Jews. She said that it was risky to have foreign names. That the Germans want to send foreigners back to their own country. Me, for instance, I had a Polish name, so they would send me to Poland. I'm not going, you bet."

"Cossack could go back to Russia. Always says it's better over there."

"At least he's born in Russia and he knows Russian. As for me, I have a Polish name because my parents are Polish, that's true, but I'm born in France. I'm French, I speak French. I don't see what I'd do in Poland."

The mother of Fanny the redhead comes to the camp with Fanny's little sister. She asks Madame Christiane whether she can take her too.

"She seems rather young to me. How old is she?"

"Nearly three… But she's very quiet and obedient, believe me. I can't keep her. I'm hiding. I beg you…"

Madame Christiane accepts.

"What's your name, child?"

"Me, I am Tonette."

"Antoinette?"

"Tonette."

Her hair is as red as Fanny's. Besides, it is curly. She wears a tiny dress made of green velvet. The big girls play with her as if she was a doll. Everybody calls her Tonette.

Fanny, Tonette and the other tots sleep with Bergère, the first camp counselor, on the first floor of the stone house. Her real name is Bérangère, but we call her Bergère because she has woolen hair like a sheep and she comes from a farm. The big boys (that's us) sleep with Spool, the other counselor, in the second floor dormitory. She's called Spool because she always carries a spool of thread and a needle in her pocket. She's our head-seamstress.

Our dormitory is called "The Bandarlogs." That's the name of a monkey tribe in *The Jungle Book*. Hey, we're not monkeys! Except maybe when we jump on our beds and fight with our pillows.

The big girls sleep on the second floor of the wooden house. Their dormitory is called "The Taming of the Shrew." Next door is Madame Christiane's apartment. Serge and Laurence, her children, sleep with her.

If you go to Mimizan-Plage, follow the rue de la Poste. It is not a paved street like we have in Paris, but rather a gray sandy path. At the end of the village, between the dune and the forest, you'll find the Pylon summer camp.

"There used to be a pylon," Madame Christiane told us. "It carried a lookout for wood-pigeons hunters."

On your left after you pass the gate you'll see the stone house. It is painted a dark shade of pink. On your right, you'll see the green. It is not green at all. Whoever called it a green was joking. It is covered with black cinder. You'd better not walk barefoot on it, cause it hurts.

At the back of the green stands an old fig tree, which gives us yummy figs in autumn (right now!). Then there's the wooden house, painted white—or, as Madame Christiane says, in need of a new coat of white paint. On the first floor of the wooden house we have the dining-room, the kitchen, the office. In front of the wooden house you'll see a small courtyard with swings and see-saws.

The other day, while I was swinging by myself, I heard the word "Jew." Bergère was telling Spool that the Germans had made a law against Jews in France.

"Anyhow, I think you're safe here," she said.

I talked it over with Marmot.

"It certainly means that Spool is a Jew."

"For a woman, you should say a Jewess. Or you can say she's Jewish."

"Yeah, but is she? What do you think? How do you recognize a Jew or a Jewess?"

"I don't know. What I can tell you is that she speaks with an accent just like my parents, and they are Jewish."

When we come back from school, Madame Christiane sees to it that we do our homework promptly and learn our lessons. She gives Latin and math lessons to the big boys and girls who attend finishing school. She teaches them *Rosa rosam rosae* and the bisextrix of an angle.

"If you study Latin and mathematics seriously," she says, "you'll be able to go back to the lycée after the war and go on with your studies all the way to the baccalauréat."

Me, when I am big, I'll become an Engineer. My dad and my mom, they work with leather. They make wallets and ladies handbags. My dad is world champion for cutting leather. Just give him a piece of leather where another cutter will find nine wallets. I tell you, my dad will cut it so neat that he'll make ten wallets. He says this is just a question of geometry. "You see, Jacquot," he used to tell me, "if I had been able to study in Poland, I would have become an engineer. As I had to come to France without any diploma, I learned to work with leather. You, if you study well, you can become an engineer, or a doctor like your uncle Maurice."

Ha, I made a mistake: my dad didn't call me Jacquot. I am already forgetting that my name was Jacob.

As he cuts leather so well, he earned lots of money and started his own business. My mom helps him sew the wallets and handbags with a special machine. Instead of working for a boss, they work at home. Somebody comes to order fifty brown wallets and ten black ladies' bags. My mom, everyone finds her very sweet. My dad says she has good contacts with the customers. I remember a fat man who often came to our home. He was the buyer for the *Samaritaine* department store. When I look at the leather binding of this notebook, I think that my dad cut it and my mom sewed it.

Marmot says Latin is useless:

"When I'll be a bicycle racer, I won't even need their Latin."

"It helps you speak French better, Madame Christiane said so. When you win the Tour de France, journalists will come and ask you to speak on the radio."

"I'll say: 'I'm glad I won, and I hope I'll do even better next time.' This ain't Latin, man."

Madame Christiane knows lotsa stuff – not only Latin and mathematics. She makes us sing while she plays an instrument called a reed organ. She tells us the name of all the plants in the forest. She teaches us how to draw. She draws the pines in the forest with black ink in a big notebook. She says they're all different, but I think they're all alike. When a child is ill, she cures him, cause she's a trained nurse. To become the director of a summer camp, you've got to know first aid. Let's suppose a kid drowns when we swim in the Ocean, she can revive him with artificial respiration, she even showed us how.

Here in Mimizan the waves are huge. We walk into the foam and let them roll us around, we love it. Me, I learned how to swim in the Marne river, when I stayed with my uncle Maurice in Joinville, but I can't swim beyond the breaking waves. Except sometimes in the evening when the sea is very quiet. Or we can swim at low tide in small lakes called "baïnes" that the ocean leaves behind. What's really lousy is that we're not allowed to swim when Madame Christiane isn't there, on account of artificial respiration. Say we're on the beach with Bergère and Spool. We wait for her, we're on edge. Suddenly someone shouts: "Here she is! Here she is!" Madame Christiane just appeared at the top of the dune. Then everybody starts running towards the water.

We build sand castles. We work hard to raise the thickest and highest walls, but the tide is always stronger in the end. She first licks them to soften them, then she swallows them without saying thanks.

In November, the sea is too cold. Then Cossack, Marmot and me, we play at marbles and knuckle-bones on the beach.

When there's too much wind, we stay behind the dune for protection. Blackberry and furze bushes also hide there from the wind. We take pans or buckets for blackberries. Madame Christiane wants to make jams.

"I don't know whether I still have enough sugar," she says. "If I use the fake sugar they give us, it won't taste as good."

The fake sugar is called saccharin. They also sell a fake butter called margarine and fake potatoes called Swedish turnips – but they should call them rotten turnips. New names to learn, like Jacquot instead of Jacob. The fake coffee they make with barley beans and crushed acorns is called "Coffee Substitute", but people just say "coffee."

Everything is rationed: bread, meat, fish, milk, cheese, oil, rice, salt, matches, soap. Bergère showed us how to save soap:

"You wet your hands first. You stroke the bar of soap once. Then you rub your hands to get a lather. That's how we did it at the farm when I was a kid. We were poor."

"If we really want to save soap, let's take no more showers."

In summer, cold showers are okay. In winter, brrr… I think Bergère and Spool would give them up gladly—they don't enjoy them any more than we do. But Madame Christiane is firm:

"Come on, children! A good cold shower never killed anyone!"

"Once a month would be enough, Madame Christiane…"

"Of course not. Once a week is just right for your health."

We scream and holler, as if it could make the water warmer. When we come out of the shower, Bergère and Spool give us a good rub with a rough towel. We tremble, we shiver, then all of a sudden we feel better and we're very hungry.

We're hungry all the time. When we pick blackberries behind the dune, we can't help eating half of them. Then we're quite blue. That's a mystery of Nature: blackberries are black, blackberry juice is red, blackberry stains are blue.

I mentioned the dining-room in the wooden house, but I forgot to say that it doubles as a study-room for our homework. One day, when everybody is there, Madame Christiane asks us to be silent and begins a big speech. The tiny tots are not interested, so they chatter and we have to say: "Hush! Hush!"

"My children," she says, "we've been here together for one full year. When I suggested to your parents that they leave you here, we all thought the coalition of the French, English and Polish armies would vanquish the Germans easily and the war would be over in weeks. You didn't even have any warm clothes for the winter. It soon appeared that the war would last. Your parents sent money to buy food and some clothes. Last June, the Germans invaded France. Some of your parents have left Paris and are hiding to escape the police, who wants to arrest them and hand them to the Germans. The fathers of Rémi and Jules are prisoners in Germany."

"My father will break out of the prisoners' camp, Madame Christiane."

"Let's hope he does. Anyway, I haven't received any money for a long time. I went to see the Red Cross in Bordeaux, because I am a Red Cross nurse. They say you can be considered refugees, since you left your homes. This means I'll receive some

money, but in exchange we may have to welcome some other refugees. The Red Cross asked me what we needed most. I answered warm clothes. The camp is usually closed in winter, so there is no heating. They didn't give me any clothes, but two packs of Pyrénées[l] wool. So we'll close the weaving and pottery workshops for the time being. My children, you're going to knit!"

Bergère and Spool bring a huge pack full of wool. Marmot protests.

"I won't do it. Knitting is for girls!"

"During a war, people have to adapt," Madame Christiane says. "But if you want, Marmot, you can supervise the tiny tots. They'll unroll yarns and make wool balls."

"All right."

Me, I don't mind learning how to knit. It can be useful. Before the war, I already enjoyed the weaving workshop. I also tried pottery, but I found it too difficult. Besides, as soon as you've created a real nice vase, it falls and breaks.

Bergère and Spool show us how to hold the knitting needles and so on. Marie-Claire, a big girl who already knows how, helps us too. We just have to knit straight, then Bergère and Spool add a collar and sew the sleeves. We are supposed to knit one sweater for ourselves and one for a tiny tot. Bergère, Spool and Marie-Claire also knit socks.

Marmot is so proud to play boss with the kiddies that he would like to direct the whole workshop.

"If you go on like this," he says, "you'll all look alike. Wait a minute. I'll do something for you."

It's true the wool has no color. Madame Christiane says it is off-white. I call it dirty white. Marmot brings us a collection of small wool and cotton yarns which we used for weaving and embroidery. There are dozens of different colors. There's not enough to knit a whole sweater, but we can have different sweaters, no doubt about that. Bergère looks at the yarns.

"This blue one is long enough to make a line around a wrist… The red one is longer. It will make a band around a waist."

When we've knitted our two sweaters, we'll still have lotsa wool. We'll knit more sweaters. Madame Christiane will sell them to earn some money.

In the meantime, she sets up a large sickroom for refugees. We don't see any refugees, but the people of Mimizan come to get medical care. They bring eggs and sausages. Madame Christiane says they find it cheaper than going to the doctor's. Every Tuesday evening, she shows them how to do the artificial respiration if someone drowns in the Ocean. She calls it her first aid class.

Around mid-December, they raise a Christmas tree in our school. I can see right away it isn't a fir tree, but a pine from the forest. It is very beautiful nevertheless, with festoons and stars and all kinds of tinsel. There is a big party on Christmas eve. All the camp's children are pupils in this school (except Tonette, who is too small), so we prepare ourselves as well as we can. I even wash my hair, which I hadn't done for quite a while. We put on our new sweaters. We look like thirty brothers and sisters.

We march to school four abreast, like we do every morning. We sing:

A flower in our cap
A song in our mouth
A sincere and bright heart
That's all we need

We happy fellows
To go to the end of the world.

We enter the school's hall. We see the tree with its stars and tinsel. We also see cakes on a table, and the school's other pupils and their parents. A woman walks towards us. She seems very angry. She's as red as a tomato. She shouts:

"We don't want you here! This is a tree for the children of Mimizan!"

She points her finger towards the door.

Madame Christiane says nothing, although she usually has a pretty quick tongue. She brings us back to the camp. I feel like crying. I can see that Marmot does too. Actually, all the tiny tots are crying. On the road, Madame Christiane begins to sing:

Fresh morning wind,
Blowing over the top of the tall pine trees,
Jolly wind, let's walk into the…
… Fresh morning wind

We try to sing, but our hearts are too heavy.

She talks to us in the dining room:

"This was Miss Sardou, the sister of the paper mill's owner. You know, the factory that sends us stinking smells when the wind comes from the land. They make paper pulp with the trees of the forest. Most of the people in Mimizan work there. This good lady is unhappy because I've founded a Red Cross center and the Mimizan people come here to study first aid. She thinks that they are her workers, that they belong to her as if she owned them. She believes I teach them communism on top of first aid. It's so stupid I could cry."

"What's communism, Madame Christiane?" Fanny the redhead asks.

"It is a political system that exists far from here, in the Soviet Union. She thinks we are communists because we don't go to mass on Sunday."

I turn towards Marmot.

"I knew it! You're dead wrong, man. Neither-catholic-nor-protestant isn't called Jew, tis called Communist. My parents, they never said anything about Jew, but they are communist, I remember that. They even read a communist newspaper, *L'Humanité*."

"People could have taken our side," Bergère says. "After all, they're quite satisfied with your medical services."

"They have no money, so they come here when they're sick, but they don't like us," Madame Christiane says. "Our children get the best grades in school, whereas theirs can hardly read and write. Besides, our children sing and dance and have fun. They say it's a shame to sing and dance in such difficult times. We come from Paris and they consider that Paris politicians brought them this war."

It's certainly true they don't like Parisians. In school, the other children speak patois so that we can't understand them, just as their parents do in front of the Germans.

They jeer at us: "Parisiens têtes de chien, Parigots têtes de veau!" They provoke us. We fight often. They don't dare approach Marmot, though, cause he beats them into pulp. You could send them to the paper mill and turn them into paper.

"You should become a boxer rather than a bicycle rider!"

"Why not? Let's wait and see!"

1941

Mathilda, the Spanish cook, is gone. Bergère prepares the cake for my ninth birthday. It is smaller than last year. Madame Christiane says eggs are hard to find. She wants to buy hens, actually. The children eat a tiny slice. Me, I get two, cause it is my birthday. The children sing:

My dear Jacquot, tis your birthday.
On this solemn day, everybody will honor you!
This day and this cake,
You heart will remember them forever.

This song was composed by Madame Christiane. You won't hear it outside the camp. All the children know it, except the new ones, of course. There are five new children. They all changed their names, so I guess they're Jewish.

I felt so stupid – I cried when they sang. It is my second birthday in Mimizan, far from my parents.

After the messed-up Christmas, the village people didn't become any nicer.

"They should try to make amends," Bergère says, "but it seems they're moving in the opposite direction. They become colder and colder."

"They're probably ashamed of Miss Sardou's attitude," Spool says.

There are several distributions of real potatoes. They forget to tell Madame Christiane until the very last minute. She goes as fast as she can. Bergère and Spool help her push the camp's handcart. When they arrive over there, not a single potato is left.

"It is not as if we could buy potatoes on the black market," she sighs. "They cost ten times what they used to. More than twenty francs for a kilogram!"

The Germans killed one of their horses who broke a leg. Since they don't eat horse meat, they gave the corpse to the butcher. All the people in the village ate some, but they didn't tell us about it.

"We must find a way to earn money, no doubt about that," Madame Christiane says.

As children, we have cards marked "J" for "Jeunes," that allow us to get milk. Every morning, the milkman comes with his old truck and delivers our ration. Petrol is rationed too, but milkmen have a special permit. He likes us. He often talks things over with Madame Christiane. During the Christmas vacations, I don't go to school, so I can listen when they talk. I like to hear the conversation of adults. My mother used to say: "You're too young," but she was proud I tried to understand. When the milkman discusses current events with Madame Christiane, I sometimes hear the word communism. They often mention the Popular Front. My parents used to talk about it too. It is a government in politics.

Madame Christiane shows him our medical center. He looks at the instruments. He seems to be impressed. He asks Madame Christiane whether she wouldn't be able to repair a cream separator, by any chance.

"What's wrong with your cream separator?"

"It works, but not all that well. It doesn't separate fully. I wonder if it has anything to do with the power failures. People say Resistance fighters sabotage the generators. Or maybe the Germans ration power to punish us."

Madame Christiane, I know her quite well, after all this time. By the way she wrinkles her brow, I can guess she's thinking hard.

"I'm willing to look at your cream separator, but I can't do it right now, because we are very busy in the camp. In the meantime, I would like to know something: What do you do with your buttermilk?"

"My buttermilk? Why, I throw it away."

"I'd appreciate if you could give it to me."

"Sure."

On the next day, when the milkman has left us a barrel of buttermilk, she asks us to come and help her.

"Look, children. As the separator doesn't work well, there is still some cream in the buttermilk. I add this rennet, which I bought in Mimizan-Bourg. It is a liquid that comes from a cow's stomach. You'll help me fill up these bowls. We'll leave them in the kitchen near the stove. If things go well, the buttermilk will curdle. We'll put it in muslin pouches so that the water drips away. After a while, we'll have cheese."

I'm sure she'll succeed. She knows everything.

She does produce little round cheeses. She calls them Camemberts, but me, I have eaten real camembert and it is quite tasty, whereas her cow-stomach cheese… Moo…

The people of Mimizan buy her camemberts. After that, they attend the first aid courses again. They recommend the camemberts to people in other villages. Buyers even come from as far as Mont-de-Marsan.

Yeah, but the milkman asks every morning when Madame Christiane will come and repair his cream separator. She finds all kinds of reasons not to go, but in the end she has to, and we cease our production of camemberts.

Madame Christiane summons a war council: Bergère, Spool and all the big kids. What can we do to earn money?

"We could sell pottery, Madame Christiane!"

"Or rattan baskets…"

"Kites. I can really make good kites."

"That wouldn't take us very far. Because of the war, people only buy what they really need, not what's superfluous."

"Maybe we could breed animals," Bergère suggests.

"Sheep!" Marmot jokes. "You'd keep them, since your name is Bergère."

"I don't know about sheep, but I can tell you we had pigs in the farm. They eat anything and grow by themselves."

Then she thinks and says it's not such a good idea after all. Since we have a hard time finding food, we throw away very little. We couldn't even feed hens.

The baker's wife explained to Bergère how to make a soup with peelings. Before the war, I would never have eaten such stuff, but now I love it.

"Quite delicious. Besides, we save time. Instead of giving the peelings to the pigs and eating the pigs, we eat the peelings directly."

Marmot sneers.

"Say what you want. Me, I'd rather eat a good slice of ham."

When a child is just a little sick, Madame Christiane takes care of him in her medical center. When it's more serious, she takes him to Mimizan-Bourg to see Docteur Chevallereau. I went once because I had a rash all over my body. He is funny, this doctor. I like him. He told me I was allergic. I had a rash because of an omelet we had eaten the week before. I must not eat eggs. 'Twas the first time I had eaten any in

more than a year. Tough luck.

Docteur Chevallereau came to the camp to see Cossack, who has the measles. As it is catching, Madame Christiane put him in the attic, in what she calls the isolation chamber. She tells us she discussed with the doctor about an idea for breeding. I'm sure you would never have guessed: she wants to raise mice!

The doctor comes again a few days later for Cossack. He says he inquired.

"You know, your mice, that's really a wonderful idea. Labs have a hard time getting them, what with this war."

Madame Christiane explains to us that labs need mice to prepare vaccines and medicine. Laurence, her daughter, asks whether the labs hurt them. Madame Christiane says not. Me, I think she doesn't want to hurt Laurence's feelings. She is small, only five years old. It is quite obvious that the labs hurt the mice. Marmot agrees with me:

"They give them shots, I bet."

"And then they cut them into pieces."

We dismantle the boxes that we used for the cheese and we build cages. Madame Christiane writes to several labs to ask them how many mice they need. She types at full speed on the typewriter, tac tac tac tac, all the children come take a look.

During math class, we prepare a price list. On a line we write: "Male mice, 10 francs x … = …" If someone wants twenty-five male mice, he writes 25 before the equal sign, then he multiplies ten by twenty-five, the result is two hundred and fifty. On the next line, same thing for female mice, which cost fifteen francs each cause they can have children, then another line for couples at twenty francs each.

A lab in Mérignac, that's a town near Bordeaux, answers they want to buy mice. They want crowds of them, at least twenty every week, so they ask for a discount. Madame Christiane sends another letter, they answer, then she writes again. She adds and multiplies. She says we're going to earn lotsa money, and moreover it will be a very steady and predictable income.

When she's agreed on a deal with the lab, she goes to Bordeaux to buy the first mice. You don't need many, cause these rodents breed very fast. Oh, but she doesn't find any in Bordeaux. She goes to Paris. She comes back empty-handed.

"I went to quai de la Mégisserie, near City Hall, where they sell all kinds of animals, and even to the Botanical Garden's zoo… Not a mouse anywhere in Paris."

She is quite disappointed, and so are we. She types one more letter on her typewriter and sends it to Mériganc.

"Can't win them all," Spool says.

"Pigs are less trouble," Bergère adds.

Madame Christiane reads to us the fable of The Two Friends and the Bear:

Two friends, in need of money,
To a furrier, their neighbor, sold
The skin of a bear who was still alive
But whom they'd soon kill, or so they said.
He was a king among bears.
His skin would make the furrier a rich man,
As it would be a protection against the bitterest cold
And would certainly line two coats rather than one.
They promised to deliver the beast within two days,
Agreed on a price and went looking for Mr Bear.

Here he is, coming towards them briskly.
My two fellows are thunderstruck
And think about their deal no more.
One climbs a tree, the other one
Lies down on the ground, plays dead, holds his breath,
Having heard somewhere
That the bear won't usually bother
With a body that doesn't live, move or breathe.
My lord Bear, like a fool, falls for the trick:
He sees this lying body, thinks it lifeless
But, just to be sure, turns it around,
Brings his muzzle close to sniff around the face.
"It's a corpse, says he; let's bolt, for it smells foul."
Thus he vanishes into the woods.
The first man comes down from his tree,
Runs towards his friend, says it is a wonder
That he suffered nothing more than a great fright.
"Just tell me, what did he mutter into your ear?
For I could see he came quite near,
Turning you with his claws."
"He said one should never
Sell a bear's skin ere he lies dead on the ground."

We decide to learn the poem and to mime it at the next Veillée. Cossack will play the bear.

We now use the cages to put away our school stuff.

I find it very sad that all the tiny tots forget their old name. They even forget their parents. Instead of saying Madame Christiane, they say Maman Christiane. They also say Maman Bergère and Maman Spool. Me, I can look at my parents' photograph in its red frame, so I won't forget them like the tots. Anyway, even without the photogrqph I wouldn't forget them, cause I'm big.

We have oil lamps but not much oil, so we go to bed very early. We get up at seven and march into the forest to do our morning gymnastics before breakfast. We get up earlier than before cause the Germans forced us to set our clocks to Berlin time. We march four abreast to the gymnastics clearing. We sing A Flower in our Cap or My Blond do you Hear?

My blond do you hear
The whistle of factories and trains?
Let's go towards life
Let's go towards new mornings.

Me, I find gymnastics boring. Cross your arms, bend your knees, raise your legs. Always the same stuff.

Sometimes, German soldiers come gape at us and take photographs when we cross our arms and bend our knees. Madame Christiane explained to us that France is cut into two parts. In the North is the "Occupied Zone" and in the South the "Free Zone."

The camp belongs to a special part of the Occupied Zone called the “Forbidden Coastal Zone.” Except that it is not forbidden to us, otherwise we wouldn’t be there.

There are many Germans. They’ve hanged a flag with their Swastika sign on the wall of the Bellevue hotel, and also a panel marked “Kommandantur.” We hear them doing target practice in the forest. They wear a black uniform with a skull like pirates, or a uniform of a strange color called verdigris. Some carry a long knife or “dirk” on their belt. Often, they all leave in their trucks, then later a new bunch replaces them. People say they don’t come here to guard the coast, but to rest in the healthy Ocean air.

They have turned the barracks where Schmitt and the other evacuees used to live into a prisoners’ camp. They have put Senegalese Gunners there. People say these negroes will built the Atlantic Wall, to keep the English and Americans from landing in France. Me, I thought it would be a real brick wall running along the length of the beach. Marmot laughs at me:

“You’re really dumb. They’re just going to install cannons every one hundred meters to keep ships from coming near.”

“If it ain’t a wall, why do they call it a wall?”

“So how do you want to call it? The Atlantic cannons every one hundred meters?”

Anyway, the Germans must photograph the locations for their cannons. While they’re at it, they photograph us too. Why? This is a great mystery. We ask Madame Christiane.

“Why do they photograph us all the time, the Boches, Madame Christiane?”

“Did you notice that they’ve changed? In the beginning, they were quite young. In June, the Germans attacked Russia, I mean the Soviet Union. I think they send the younger ones over there. Now we have older soldiers. They have gray hair and a paunch. They are probably married. You remind them of their own children.”

This gives us an idea. Before the war, we played a game called Treasure Hunt. Madame Christiane would hide messages in the forest. Each message contained a riddle or a puzzle that helped you find the next one. The last message led to the treasure. The winning team could eat the treasure! So we invent the Chocolate Hunt. We send Fanny and Tonette take a walk around town. Every time they see German soldiers, they’re supposed to come close and play pretty. This is to remind them of their daughters in Germany. They hold each other’s hand, they look alike with their red locks, they have the sweetest smile in the world. The soldiers can’t help stroking their heads and then they always give them chocolate.

We follow from afar. Between two groups of soldiers, they bring us the chocolate. They can’t keep it in their hands, otherwise the Germans wouldn’t give them more. They can’t eat it either and paint their mouths brown. In the end, we share it with them.

There’s one snag. Fanny understands German. We give her instructions:

“You must be very careful. Don’t ever answer when they speak German. Only when they speak French.”

One day, Bergère comes running, quite red in the face and out of breath.

“As I was coming out of the bakery with our bread ration, a German talked to me. He’s a tall officer with a big dog on a leash. He speaks good French. He asked me whether I was going to the Pylon summer camp. I said yes. He said we should be careful, that they had received a letter denouncing us!”

A few hours later, Germans enter the camp in one of their green cars. We recognize

the tall officier and his dog. The dog reminds me of White Fang. They take Madame Christiane to their Kommandantur. When she comes back, I see she's in a bad mood, but at the same time she's laughing.

"They received a letter… I'm sure it's Miss Sardou again. She's really something! Supposedly we're communists and Jews. I showed them the children's list. Not one Jewish name. Wait till I tell you the best one: it seems we sing L'Internationale while marching. I sang A Flower in our Cap to them. They had to laugh. The officer, he with the dog, showed me the letter and tore it into two pieces in front of me before letting me go."

"What's L'Internationale?" Marmot asks.

"It's a communist song."

"How does it go? Can you sing it to us, Madame Christiane?"

"Certainly not. Then you'd go and hum it at school without even noticing… We'd be in deep waters! Actually, we'd better stop singing My Blonde do you Hear?, because it is a Soviet song."

Madame Christiane loves to sing. She knows more than a thousand songs, I bet. Besides, she has books full of them. She says that when she was in Paris she used to sing in a choir. She told us how she caught the bug of music.

"My father had a friend who was an orchestra conductor on a ship."

"The boss on a boat is called a captain, not a conductor, Madame Christiane."

"On the great ships that cross the Ocean, or crossed it before the war, there was a captain who was the sailors' boss and also an orchestra so the passengers could dance. So my father's friend was a pianist and conductor. Once he had dinner with my parents in our home. His name was Monsieur Pfister. He had a long red beard. After dinner, they sent me to bed. Monsieur Pfister sat in front of the piano and played Beethoven's Moonlight sonata."

"Can you play it, Madame Chistiane?"

"On the reed organ, it won't sound as good as on a piano. I'll play the beginning… There… Isn't it beautiful?"

"It doesn't sound like moonlight."

"I don't know who gave it that name. Not Beethoven himself, I guess. Anyway, I heard it from my bedroom when Monsieur Pfister played it. It moved me so much that I began to cry loudly."

"How old were you, Madame Christiane?"

"Four years old only. When she heard me crying, my mother came up. I didn't dare confess why I was crying, so I said I was afraid ot the wolf. She told my father, who raised his shoulders. What a stupid child! he said. When I grew up, I asked to study piano playing and singing."

Every Saturday evening, we have a veillée and we sing. Some songs I like very much, cause they have a sad tune: The Peasant's daughter, The Bridge in the North. At the veillée, we mime some of the songs. For instance, In the Jail at Nantes:

In the jail at Nantes there is a prisoner, a prisoner
Whom nobody ever visists, save for the jailer's daughter.
La la lalalay, la la lalala.
She brings him food and drink, food and drink
And white shirts when he wants to change
La la lalalay, la la lalala.
One day, she goes to him and starts crying, starts crying.

What is it, my beauty, that makes you cry so much?
La la lalalay, la la lalala.
They say in town that tomorrow you shall die, you shall die.
Lo, if tomorrow I'm to die, my feet please to untie.
La la lalalay, la la lalala.
The girl was young, his feet she did untie, did untie.
The fellow was fast, into the Loire river he sprang.
La la lalalay, la la lalala.
When he reached the shore he began to sing, to sing:
I love the girls of Nantes, especially the jailer's daughter!
La la lalalay, la la lalala.

We also rehearse theater plays for the big veillées we have in summer or for special holidays. Madame Christiane played in a theater when she was a student, and actually that's where she met Ol' Dan. She directs plays as if she had done nothing else in her life, but Spool is our stage designer. She's a champ for making sets and backdrops out of paper and curtains with old blankets. During the fall midterm break, we play "The Boat Pullers on the Volga." We play outside on the green. We move the benches out of the dining-room for the public. We anounce the theater evening in the streets of Mimizan, so that some locals usually come take a look.

For The Boat Pullers on the Volga, you need ten children of different sizes, who play the boat pullers. The tallest must be very tall, the smallest very small. They are on a line, from tallest to smallest, and they pretend to pull a heavy barge with a rope. They sing: "We're hungry… We're thirsty…" It's an old Russian song. Another child, very big and very cruel, lashes at them with a whip until they move ahead. He wears a huge knife in his belt. Cossack plays that part. After a while, he is not satisfied, so he asks the tallest boat puller to follow him. They go behind the blanket backdrop (this is called "backstage"). Then the cruel fellow comes back and wipes his big knife on his sleeve. He then kills the second tallest, and the third one. Every time, he returns back alone from backstage, wiping his knife on his sleeve and making terrible faces. After one of them disappears and before the next one does, the boat pullers keep on singing: "We're hungry… We're thirsty…" In the end, only the smallest one is left. Tonette plays this part, since she's the youngest of us all. The bad guy takes her backstage, but there's a surprise: she comes back and wipes the big knife on her sleeve.

Madame Christiane says the Volga is a great river in Russia.

"The Germans are moving very fast in the Soviet Union. Maybe they'll reach the Volga pretty soon. However, winter is very cold over there. If they don't enter Moscow before it goes to forty degrees under, they'll lose the war…"

"This will tech them a good lesson, Madame Christiane."

"Besides, Japan just attacked America. Germany declared war on the United States because they're allied with Japan. Fighting the Russians and the Americans at the same time might be a little too much for them."

She draws a map on the blackboard to show us Moscow and the Volga. She tells us the story of the emperor Napoléon, who lost his great army in the snows of Russia.

Before the war, there was a theater play I enjoyed above all the others. It was "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." Ravenous rats have invaded the city of Hamelin. When I was a tiny tot, I played one of the rats. I wore a gray suit and rat whiskers were painted on my cheeks. The good people of Hamelin went at us with their brooms:

“Take this, you bloody pest!”

“If they go on gobbling up our grain supplies, we’ll starve next winter.”

“We must do something.”

“Right you are, neighbor. But what?”

A piper comes to see the mayor of Hamelin.

“If you want, I can take all the rats away,” he says. Madame Christiane plays the piper with her flute. She plays the flute very well, and also the guitar and the reed organ. The mayor doesn’t believe in the piper’s promise.

“Are you kidding? You pretend that the rats will follow you when you blow into your fife? Who ever heard of such a thing? Music-loving rats! Next thing you know, they’ll play the fiddle with their tails!”

“The cities of Nurnberg and Regensburg are absolutely ratless since I operated there. You just ask them. Besides, you’ve got nothing to lose. If I fail, you’ll just have enjoyed a free flute concert. I’ll want no money then.”

“’Tis true we have nothing to lose. Our situation is so critical that we can try your flute trick. If other crooks come, we’ll also try what they have to offer.”

“If I fail, you owe me nothing. If I succeed, you’ll pay me one thousand gold marks.”

“One thousand gold marks! You’re rather greedy, my man.”

“Think about your grain supplies.”

“Ha, right. Our supplies for next winter… Okay, one thousand gold marks if it works. I don’t take a great risk, I’m afraid.”

Then Madame Christiane plays a beautiful melody on her flute, and all the rats follow her our of town. She comes back to see the mayor, but now that all the rats are gone, the people of Hamelin have forgotten how much they suffered and complained. The mayor barely accepts to let the piper into his office.

“What does this beggar want?”

“I come for my thousand gold marks, your Highness.”

“You blew into your reed and you pretend it’s worth one thousand gold marks! Ha ha, what cheek!”

“I drove the rats away.”

“I do remember we had some rats. They vanished when you gave your concert, or was it the day before? ’Twas probably some kind of coincidence.”

“You promised. You must respect your pledge, otherwise…”

“Otherwise what? Are you threatening me? What are you going to do if I don’t respect my supposed pledge? Play more flute? Ha, ha!”

“Yes, I’ll play some flute.”

When the next scene begins, the children of Hamelin are playing in a city park. Their mothers are watching over them. The last time I had a part in the play, I wasn’t a rat anymore, but a child. A big girl named Rachel was my mother. When Madame Christiane came and played the beautiful tune, we stood up and walked towards her. Our mothers tried to hold to us.

“My darling, what are you doing?”

“Why do you go to this nasty man? Stay with me…”

“Don’t forsake your poor dear mommy!”

Their pleading came to nought. We vanished backstage with the piper. Me, I would have prefered to stay with my mommy, cause I liked Rachel a lot.

I ask Madame Christiane why we don’t play The Pied Piper of Hamelin anymore.

“It’s true I removed it from our repertory. I feel that this story, with the children

taken away from their mothers by the piper, is too close to what happens nowadays. After all, the war did separate you from your parents."

Strange… When I gather my memories about the pied piper and Rachel, it comes to my mind that she's still in the camp. Only her name is now Marie-Claire.

1942

Madame Christiane is called to the Préfecture in Mont-de-Marsan. She wonders why. Maybe she doesn't follow all the new laws and rules properly. She replaces her shorts with an old gray skirt. She tries to comb her hair, but after five minutes it is already as disheveled as usual.

In fact, it is still the matter of the denunciation. They opened her mail in the Post Office.

"We could expect them to open our mail," she says when she comes back, "since we're suspect. They have built up a file this thick about my exchange of letters with the Mérignac lab. They refuse to believe in our adventure with mice. They think that the rates hide a secret code! They also mentioned letters Monsieur Daniel had sent me long ago, when I hoped the Red Cross and other organizations could give us money. As he is always in a hurry, instead of writing: 'Get in touch with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Population,' he wrote: 'Get in touch with M. H. and M. P.' Of course, the police asked me who were Monsieur H. and Monsieur P. I hope I convinced them this was a misunderstanding."

Madame Christiane is rather sad when she mentions Monsieur Daniel, I can see that. Spool told me that the Germans caught him at the beginning of the war. They made so many prisoners that they had a hard time keeping them inside camps before sending them to Germany. Thus Monsieur Daniel escaped and now he is hiding in the Free Zone. Madame Christiane hasn't received any news for months.

The Germans come again in their green car. The officer with the dog salutes Bergère. She blushes.

This time, it has nothing to do with the denunciation. They're ready with their plans for their Atlantic Wall, so now they want to build it. Marmot spoke abIout cannons, but actually the cannons are protected by fortresses called "Blockhaus." They'll build two Blockhaus on the dune, just in front of the summer camp. They've decided to "requisition" the camp. This means "steal", really. They want to install workers there who'll come especially from Germany to help the negroes. They tell Madame Christiane:

"We give you forty-eight hours."

When they're gone, she says:

"It is not possible… We must find something…"

She goes to Mimizan-Bourg to see Docteur Chevallereau. He is really a nice man, this doctor. He writes a certificate that there is an epidemy of scralet fever in the camp. On the certificate, he is careful to put a date a fortnight ago, otherwise the Boches, I mean the Germans, would see that he made the certificate on purpose.

Madame Christiane tells us what we must do, then she takes the certificate to the Kommandantur. A doctor from the Kommandantur comes back to the camp with her. We are lying in the isolation chamber, in the attic of the stone house. Not all of us, cause it would seem strange, but nearly all. We lie under two blankets, to be very

warm and as red as possible. Bergère and Spool have drawn pimples on our cheeks with iodine. They looked at the rash on my stomach for inspiration.

The doctor from the Kommandantur doesn't even dare come close to look at our pimples. He opens the attic door, mutters: "All right, all right," then goes away. The attic is very dark, so I wonder what he could have seen. Madame Christiane says the Germans fear contagious illnesses more than anything.

With this ploy, she gets two weeks of reprieve. Every morning, she takes her bike and looks for a new house. She comes back in the evening. She says:

"I have seen a large castle near Labouheyre, just what we need. You know what? An old duchess lives there all alone. There is room for one hundred children or more. I explained my business to her. She looked so angry that I expected her to take a gun and shoot at me."

She visits four castles where old aristocrats live, but none of them accepts to let us in. I am somewhat disappointed. I like d'Artagnan a lot. He is a "cadet of Cascogne." Well, this is precisely Gascogne. It seems today's cadets of Gascogne are less generous than d'Artagnan. Maybe they don't like women in shorts. Yeah, but if she wore her gray skirt, how could she ride her bike?

In the end, Madame Christiane finds an empty house ten miles from here in a hamlet called Gaye. The closest real village is Escource. The mayor of Escource says we can live in the house without paying a rent if we repair it and cultivate the soil. Madame Christiane is quite happy, because there are twenty acres of good soil that have been lying fallow for a long time. This means they were abandoned like the house.

"Forget about the summer camp," she says. "We're going to start a farming colony."

The milkman lends us his truck to help us move. He is pals with Madame Christiane, who repaired his cream separator. He always jokes about it:

"Ha, you certainly made good camemberts, in those times!"

This milkman's name is Leblanc. I think it is a pretty stupid name for a milkman. He should have chosen another job. Me, my name is Lenoir. I won't become a coal merchant. What's more, his daughter is in my class and all the kids jeer at us: "Lenoir is in love with Leblanc!" Even Marmot, who should be on my side or what are friends for, jokes with the others.

What's for sure is that Monsieur Leblanc doesn't like the Boches. He shows us a piece of paper:

Long life to	Hitler
England	must die
Down with	the English
The nazis	will win
Let's help	the Führer
England	be damned

"I've been told that there are people in Mimizan who admire the Germans," Madame Christiane says.

"But no… Fold the piece of paper and read each half separately!"

Madame Christiane doesn't want to leave anything to the Germans. She takes the beds, the tables, the benches, even the sinks. And also all the pots and pans and plates,

and of course food. She's lucky that Spool is quite strong. Cossack and her carry all the heavy stuff.

The truck comes and goes all day. I am glad she doesn't forget to take the books in the library. I notice I haven't mentioned the library yet, although I go there every day during vacations and every Sunday during the school year. It is a little room on the first floor of the wooden house, with a window that opens on the fig tree. The children are afraid of this room, because there are shelves with glass jars full of lizards, frogs and snakes. I have read The Three Musketeers, The Lady of Monsoreau, The Humpback, Michel Strogoff and many other books there. I looked at the snakes now and then. They are kept in alcohol, so they wouldn't come out and bite me.

Wait. I said the children were afraid. I forgot Cossack. He ain't afraid of lizards. He raises a good dozen of them in a big cardboard box. He spends his time hunting cockroaches and other bugs to feed his lizards. Except when a bug is pretty, then he pins it on a board with a label Bugus Mimizanus Raris.

I am sad to leave the room by the fig tree and the dune and the Ocean, especially in Spring when the weather is improving. We don't move very far, but Madame Christiane says the Germans will bury mines in the sand so the Americains can't land. Even if we come to Mimizan for a visit, we won't be able to go to the beach.

The German commander must be happy. With the mines, his men will stop swimming in the Ocean. Many have drowned. Nobody in Mimizan told them about the baïnes' exit. This is one of the first things that Madame Christiane explains to newcomers:

"Look, children. The baïne empties when the tide recesses. The outgoing water meets the coastal current. This creates such a powerful whirlpool that the very best swimmers are in danger of drowning. You should never swim near the baïne's exit."

Our new house is oh so ugly. Its walls suffer from leprosy. A pink flesh made of old bricks appears under its peeling skin. With its doors and shutters all askance, it looks like it is sneering at you.

It doesn't even have running water. We spent so much time and energy unfastening the sinks in Mimizan! We must draw water from a well and store it in big basins. We do get water from the ceiling when it rains, because there are holes in the roof, but this water is quite black after seeping through the attic's floor. The windows have no glass panes. We're lucky summer is coming.

Madame Christiane says what we lack most is a kitchen range. She couldn't take away the big stove in Mimizan, which was too heavy. Bergère must cook in the fireplace, like in d'Artagnan's time. Boo, the house is full of rats who run everywhere. If only we could sell them to the lab in Mérignac!

When we discover the house, we're somewhat troubled. Tonette and several other small ones begin to cry. Madame Christiane says:

"Come on, children, this is no time for whimpering. Let's work!"

She finds window panes in Escource. She shows us how to fix them to the frame with putty. We must be careful not to cut our fingers. The house has twelve rooms, this means many windows. We also learn plastering and painting. Cossack climbs upon the roof with Madame Christiane and Spool to insert new tiles. When it rains a lot, it still leaks.

The first few nights, I don't sleep well. I miss the hum of the waves. It was like a lullaby. Now I am so tired from working that I fall asleep like a log.

We are very happy because we don't go to school anymore. The milkman drove us

to Escource. It is the smallest city in the world. On three sides of the Plane Tree square are small houses with blue shutters. They bear painted inscriptions or signs saying : “City Hall,” “Post Office,” “Bar des Sports.” The church stands on the fourth side. There is a small lookout platform for forest fires at the top of the steeple. The school is behind city hall. You can recognize right away that it is a school because it has red and white bands around the windows. The schoolteacher says it is difficult to take all these new pupils at once. As there are not so many days left until the summer vacations and we are quite busy repairing the house, they give us a special exemption. From our new home, Escource is four miles away. Madame Christiane will find bikes for us before September.

The village after Escource is called Solférino. This reminds me of something.

“There is a subway station called Solférino in Paris, Madame Christiane.”

“It is a victory of emperor Napoléon III, a village in Italy. Forty thousand poor soldiers died there. You know I’m a Red Cross nurse. Well, the Red Cross was founded after the battle of Solférino. Henri Dunant, a generous Swiss man, happpened to be nearby. He found this massacre dreadful. He was schocked that they left the wounded in the field to die. He created the Red Cross to save these unfortunate fellows. What’s really strange is how I entered the Red Cross.”

“You wanted to help the wounded during the last war, Madame Christiane.”

“What are you talking about? I was a child then. After the war, I decided I’d be a painter. I went to art school. There, I met a student who was actually the daughter of Henri Dunant. She told me about the Red Cross. I started helping not the wounded, but destitute people whom Society left behind. I took care of needy children who didn’t go to school. Instead of becoming a painter, I became a social worker and nurse. Later, I founded this summer camp so that children could enjoy summer vacations whatever part of Society they came from.”

“Madame Christiane, you didn’t explain how the village came to be named Solférino.”

“Ah, you’re right. I guess I never told you that emperor Napoléon III planted the Landes forest. Before, there were only swamps here.”

Nuts seems puzzled.

“Did he really plant all theses trees by himself? It is hard to believe.”

Marmot laughs so much that tears swell in his eyes.

“Hitler is even stronger. He is building the Atlantic wall brick by brick! Have you no common sense? Maybe he planted one tree to start the forest. It’s just a way of speaking.”

The milkman takes us back to Gaye. It is not really a village, not even what you would call a hamlet, but a mere clearing in the forest. There are two houses beside ours: the Duports’ and the Villenaves’.

The Duports are the One-Eye family. The father is one-eyed, the mother is one-eyed, even the mule is one-eyed. Monsieur Duport is a shepherd. When he watches over his flock, he knits with two crooked needles. Madame Christiane takes photographs of him.

“It is a very old manner,” she says. “I’ll show these pictures to the museum of Anthropology when we go back to Paris.”

He comes visit her when he needs to fill forms, cause he can’t read nor write. He has eleven children. The elder ones can write, but not as well as Madame Christiane. They’re champions at marbles. The big marbles, the ones we all calots, they call them verrines. They spend hours throwing a ball onto a wall of their house. They call it

“playing Pala.” They hit the ball with their bare hands or with a small wooden racket. They hit the ball so hard that we can’t play against them at all. Even the smaller ones are too strong for us.

“It is like in the Boat Pullers on the Volga play,” Marmot remarks. “The smallest guy is the nastiest.”

“We’d better watch the baby. As soon as he stands, he’ll begin to play. Then we might beat him!”

We get our revenge when we flatten them at belote.

We hear an engine noise. It is a motorbike with a side-car. The tall German officier drives the motorbike and White Fang sits in the side-car.

“Ach, I was told you moved here. Bonjour, Miss Bérangère.”

Bergère becomes as red as a tomato. She doesn’t answer. After the motorbike is gone, the children taunt her:

“Oh là là, she’s in love!”

Madame Christiane says we shouldn’t joke with this subject. The other day, I listened to a conversation she had with the milkman.

“You see who Fat Gilles is?” he asked.

“Of course. The farmer in Mimizan-Bourg.”

“He is very skillful at killing and salting pork. He makes the best hams around.”

“I know that. I wanted to buy some before the war, but he asked a steep price and refused to lower it.”

“The Germans don’t find his prices too steep.”

“Of course. They count twenty francs per mark instead ot ten!”

“They love pork products. Not that they spit on goose liver and good wine…”

“I call it looting.”

“Fat Gilles earns good money selling to them. When people kill a pig, they bring it to him on the sly.”

“Killing a pig is forbidden?”

“You must declare it to City Hall and forfeit six months of meat coupons. Or even a full year. It depends on the pig’s weight. So you can undersatand that our peasants do it at night without asking anybody’s permission. Then Fat Gilles takes care of everything. You know his daughter?”

“Louise?”

“People call her Fat Lou. You know what? She’s on very friendly terms with a German guy named Hans. This helps a lot, as far as the ham sales are concerned. Can you guess what people call this Hans?”

“Well, no… I have not the slightest idea.”

“Fat Hans, of course!”

Then they started whispering and I didn’t hear very well. They said “collabo”, this means the people who collaborate with the Germans. I just heard the last sentence:

“The worst thing is that he is already married in Germany!”

On top of latin and mathematics, Madame Christiane also teaches us physics and chemistry. This began because of the plant-lice. We have cleared a piece of ground behind the house to make a vegetable garden. We have planted tomatoes, green beans, squash, carrots, turnips, leeks, cabbages, potatoes, pumpkins, onions, and also strawberries and melons. The people of Escource gave us seeds. They’re happy because Madame Christiane opened a surgery and gives first aid lessons. The trouble

is that all kinds of bugs and worms eat our vegetables. Madame Christiane says it is difficult to find bug-killing products, as they use the chemicals to make bombs for the war. She manages to buy a jug of sulfuric acid from a chemist who works at the papermill. She shows us how the acid reacts with soda to produce sulfate. There is a kind of eruption: Pchee!

"You'd better keep at a distance, children," she says.

She makes a vaporizer out of an instrument that was used in the kitchen to cover a cake with cream. She draws the piston and the cylinder on the blackboard to help us understand how it works. It uses pressure. We fill the vaporizer with sulfate dissolved in alcohol, then we spray it on the vegetables to keep the plant-lice away. Then you must wash and peel the vegetables thoroughly before eating them, otherwise the sulfate will poison you.

With sulfuric acid and chalk she makes sodium bicarbonate, which we use as toothpaste. I read the story of Robinson Crusoe in the library. Madame Christiane is as ressourceful as Robinson Crusoe. She is dressed like Robinson Crusoe, too. We wear clothes that are all patched up. Spool sews and sews every night. We look like gypsies, or like the Basques who make charcoal in the forest.

Here, the library is not a special room like in Mimizan, but a mere corner of the dining room. All the books are there, but we left the snakes in Mimizan.

The reed organ suffered when we moved. Madame Christiane takes it apart and shows us that its entrails are similar to the sulfate vaporizer's, except in the vaporizer pressure pushes liquid, whereas in the reed organ it is the pressure of air that makes music. She says pressure is a very important matter in physics. She teaches me music. I play pieces that Bach wrote for his children. He had even more of them than Monsieur Duport.

"Will I be able to play the Moonlight Sonata soon, Madame Chistiane?"

"You must study more. The beginning is easy, but then it becomes tougher."

When we arrived here, it was the season for sowing, but we couldn't do it, because we had to work in the house. It's not that easy, anyway. You must buy more seeds than for the vegetable garden, then rent a plow and a mule to dig the furrows in the ground. Bergère knows everything about it, as she was raised on a farm.

For the time being, we spend our Saturdays and Sundays removing stones and weeds from the fields. It's hard work. The stones are buried deep in the earth, so we have to dig around them with a pickaxe. When a rock is too big, we must break it with the pick. Even Cossack is barely strong enough to do it. Weeds are sometimes very tough. Cutting them does not suffice. We must pull them out.

"I brought you some gloves," Madame Christiane says. "Otherwise the thistles will hurt your hands."

"You call that gloves, Madame Christiane?"

"They're just rags!"

"Call them what you want. Look, you put your fingers into these straps. Spool went to a lot of trouble making them. What matters is that they protect your hands."

We've heard that the Germans just invaded the Free Zone. It wasn't really free, anyway.

1943

I'm eleven. Madame Christiane found an old stove in another empty house. Bergère made a cake. This is my fourth birthday without my parents. They wrote a letter to me. Mimizan's mailman comes on his bike every Saturday to bring us the camp's mail. They are in Barcelona, in Spain. It is not that far – it gives me a queasy feeling. Madame Christiane says they're lucky:

"They're out of reach now. The Germans can't catch them anymore. They probably walked across the Pyrénées mountains with a guide."

"Is that a job, Madame Christiane, guiding people across the border?"

"They are peasants who know the hidden paths in the mountain. They probably do some smuggling, you understand."

That's funny. We often play a game called smugglers and customs officers. The children are divided in two groups and wait on both sides of the old railroad tracks in the forest. Long ago, a steam-engine train brought wood to the paper mill. Now they use trucks. The railroad tracks are quite happy when we come and make them useful once again. The smugglers wedge a scarf in the back of their pants or skirt. They run down towards the tracks and run up on the other side. The customs officers must catch their scarf. When a smuggler loses his scarf, he becomes a customs officer and helps the other ones. The smugglers win if they can reach a line twenty yards beyond the tracks without losing their scarf.

I heard Madame Christiane talking with Bergère and Spool. She saw that I was there, but I think she let me listen because my parents are safe. She says Jews must wear a yellow star sewed on their jacket. With such a sign, the police can easily recognize them and arrest them.

"They have deported many foreign Jews to Eastern Europe. Nobody knows where. According to a communist handbill the milkman showed me, they just kill them."

Madame Christiane says they separated the mothers from the children to take them away. This is the same thing as in the Pied Piper of Hamelin, excepts the mothers vanished first. Then they deported the children. Madame Christiane went to Bordeaux to tell the Red Cross that we've moved. She says that there are some nasty bastards in the Bordeaux Préfecture.

"They went after Jewish children who were hidden in Catholic families to send them East to their death."

Now that I've grown up, I understand that I'm Jewish. Spool explained it to me. There is a Jewish religion, similar to the Catholic and Protestant religions, and actually Jesus was Jewish. Certainly my grandparents, in Poland, belong to the Jewish religion. Me, I am not that kind of Jew, because my parents haven't taught me religion. In any case, I am the kind of Jew that the Germans want to kill.

One thing seems strange to me.

"Tell me, Spool, are there many Jews in France?"

"Not that many. French people are mostly catholic, and some are protestant."

"Yes, but in the Pylon camp, there are many."

"French children go to the sea with their parents. Or they have grandparents in the countryside, so they spend their summer vacations with them. Whereas Marmot, you and the other Jewish kids, your parents worked hard and took no vacations. But you couldn't go to your grandparents in Poland. It would have cost too much. So your parents were glad they could send you here."

I am relieved my parents escaped to Spain. I often look at their photograph, but after all this time I ain't sure I really recognize them. The photograph has become a picture in a red frame, that's all. Sometimes, I see them in my dreams, but I don't hear

what they say. The other day, I was playing with some small kids. I know all the games and songs, so I am like a counselor to them. Madame Christiane went by. Fanny called her Maman Christiane, like she usually does. I wanted to ask her something and in spite of myself I also called her Maman Christiane. I felt I was blushing. She stroked my hair. Tears welled in my eyes, but I didn't really cry. I can't cry in front of the small ones, of course.

In summer, I would often take the small kids to morning gymnastics in the forest. I asked them to form two columns, I said "Left two three four…" to start them walking in step, and then:

Fresh morning wind,
Blowing over the top of the tall pine trees,
Jolly wind, let's walk into the…
… Fresh morning wind

All the small ones know this song, but they can't sing it in canon like their elders. Tonette can't even walk in step, she's too small. I hold her hand. She has to run and hop to keep up with the others. Her green dress has so many patches it's not even green anymore.

"Spool is my Maman Spool," she says, "and you're my Papa Jacquot."

At the beginning of September we gave up our morning gymnastics because it takes us more than one hour to reach school. Madame Christiane found only five bikes. The small kids, up to seven or eight years old, stay at home. She teaches them reading, 'riting and 'rithmetics. Ah yes, Nuts and five other children went back to Paris last fall – their parents came and fetched them.

There are twelve of us for five bikes. One child rides a bike, two ride another, some run behind. Then they change. Cossack says he is strong enough to pedal while carrying two kids, but if the bike falls apart then what? Marmot pretends he must pedal more than the others because he wants to become a bicyle racer. There are fights every day. Me, I like to run, but it bothers me that I arrive in class covered with sweat.

Our neighbors the Duports have invented a clever system. They are nine or ten with but one bike. A big one rides the bike, carrying a small one in the basket behind. He pedals for one mile or so, then he leaves the bike in the ditch and walks on. When the rest of the group comes, another big one takes the bike with a small one in the basket, then leaves it in the ditch one mile farther, and so on.

We're always hungry. When I went to school in Paris, I ate in the school canteen. We often had terrific food fights. We threw so much good food around! The school in Escource doesn't have a canteen. At lunchtime, they give us a bowl of soup. Madame Christiane says we're lucky.

"The mayor is a good man. He doesn't request any money for it. I don't know whether many schools are that generous."

A bowl of soup isn't much, though. We have vegetables in our garden. They're so tiny! Moreover, we must share them with lice, caterpillars, slugs and what not. Madame Christiane takes us into the forest to look for mushrooms.

"Ah, russulas! You can eat them. They're delicious. And look here, gray morels…"

She throws them into her basket.

"See here, Madame Christiane."

"These belong to the same family. They're called peppered morels."

She throws them into her basket.

“And now here by the tree, poisonous morels…”

She also throws them into her basket!

“What are you doing, Madame Christiane? We can’t eat poisonous mushrooms.”

“Oh, they’re not that poisonous!”

We half believe her, but we are so hungry that we devour her poisonous mushrooms without missing a beat. She even convinces ut to eat a salad of flower petal and strange leaves.

We’ll eat anything.

“I hope you kept your gloves, children. This is the best season for gathering up nettles.”

“We’ll eat nettles?”

“It will prick our tongue, Madame Christiane.”

“You don’t eat them raw. We’ll make a soup. See these small nettles with white flowers? They don’t taste good. We must pick up the big ones, the ones that really prick. Only you shouldn’t wait until they’re big, but find young shoots…”

“We must get the big ones when they’re small, Madame Christiane.”

“That’s right, Marmot. This soup is good with potatoes. We could try rapes…”

Once a week, Bergère takes our meat coupons to Escource and buys a leg of veal. Madame Christiane never eats any.

“Are you a vegetarian, Madame Christiane?” Cossack asks.

“At my age, eating meat isn’t necessary anymore. It is good for you, who are in the full process of growing.”

One day, we hear noises behind the barn. We find a yellow bitch with four small puppies. She is lying on the ground. They’re hooked to her tits. Their eyes are closed, but they don’t sleep – or they can suck while they sleep. I see that Madame Christiane wrinkles her brow. Oh, oh, she has an idea. I bet she’ll prepare Camembert with dog milk.

When we’re back from school, we go behind the barn to see the dogs. We’re surprised to find them gone. Later, we see madame Christiane cooking meat in a big pan. This is very strange: today is not veal leg’s day.

“What kind of meat is this, Madame Christiane?”

“I thought we didn’t need any dog here, so I drove away the mother and took the puppies.”

“You must be kidding. Nobody eats dog meat.”

“You’ve still got much to learn. The Chinese do. If they do, then why not us?”

“Well, I ain’t Chinese. I won’t eat any.”

“Me neither.”

“Suit yourself.”

Nobody wants to come near the stuff, so Madame Christiane eats the four puppies.

“Quite tasty,” she says. “It reminds me of frog legs.”

“You don’t need meat, at your age, Madame Christiane.”

“Do you want me to throw away perfectly good food? This will make me strong. You know what? When I was in Bordeaux, they told me there’s not one pigeon left on Pierre Laffitte square. Before the war, there were thousands. Some people even eat crows.”

Another of her crazy ideas: she buys starch in Escource. It is a white powder that you dissolve in water. Then you use the liquid to stiffen shirt collars. She puts the starch in milk that she cooks in a pan.

“This will give the milk some thickness. It will soothe our hunger.”

People here tell us to plant corn and rye. They lend us the plow, the mule and the seeds. We'll pay them back with part of our harvest. When Bergère turns over the soil with the plow, she still finds plenty stones and swears a lot. All the children want to accomplish the sower's grand gesture.

Madame Christiane sets up a scarecrow contest. It is the team of Serge, her son, who wins. She doesn't play favorites – everybody has to admit his scarecrow is the funniest. He is very skillful. He is a little younger than me. He is the only kid who doesn't say "Maman Christiane," although Madame Christiane is indeed his mother. He calls her Christiane.

Marmot is sore at having lost the contest. Marguerite sneers:

"Why don't you just stand in the middle of the field? Nobody could imagine a better scarecrow!"

These two are fighting all the time.

The Germans want to enter our contest. They come with negroes and plant high poles every thirty feet in the field to keep American planes from landing. These scarecrows for planes also scare birds. Madame Christiane talks with the negroes.

"Their troop is called 'Senegalese Gunners' because their headquarters is in Dakar," she says, "but actually they come from Tchad, much farther South and East. Their sargent's name is Amadou. He was preparing to pass the baccalauréat exam in Tchad when they mobilized him."

The peasants say that our harvest looks promising, especially considering it is our first one. It grows in every direction. Maybe the furrows weren't straight enough, or the sower's grand gesture was somewhat clumsy, or it is because of the German poles. What's more, two big oak trees grow in the middle of the field. The peasants say it doesn't matter, since our field is small. We won't harvest with machines drawn by mules, like they do, but reap with scythes and sickles. Next year, the Germans will be gone – we hope – and their poles too. We'll have to be more careful when we till and sow.

The vegetables grow much better. Our pumpkins are huge. Madame Christiane asks:

"What are we going to eat tonight, children?"

"Oh no, pumpkin soup again!"

When we eat our first potatoes, Tonette refuses to taste them. She doesn't know what they are!

"Try it, Tonette. It is very good. It's called pommes de terre."

"They don't look like apples."

"Pommes de terre."

"Me, I don't want to eat earth."

We barter our vegetables against milk, then hens and a pig. Tonette names the pig Gustave. We give him corn. We still have plenty left. Madame Christiane says we're going to eat it. Cossack protests.

"Nobody eat corn, Madame Christiane. It good for pig only."

"In this province, they eat it. They make a mush called 'escoton'. The Italians do it too, except they call it 'polenta.' It is quite good. The hardest part is crushing the grain. We'll have to carry it to the mill."

"We could borrow Ma Villenave's trailer, Madame Christiane."

Ma Villenave lives with her daughter and her grand-daughter. Her husband is dead. Her daughter's husband was sent to Germany for forced labor.

Madame Christiane ties Ma Villenave's trailer to her bike. She goes to the mill in the middle of the night. You're not supposed to grind grain for yourself. The Germans take all the flour, expect perharps one tenth they leave for the French. We receive coupons that let us have a little bread. With our secret corn flour, Bergère prepares delicious gruels and cakes, but I don't know whether I would have found them delicious before the war.

The mailman brings a new letter from my parents. This time, they're in Lisbon, in Portugal. I'm lucky. Marmot has never received a single letter from his parents. He says:

"You know, man, in any case, at my age, who needs parents?"

In fact, I'm sure he would like to receive a letter like me.

He says that we're old enough now to go visit the girls at night.

"The shrews would love it," he says.

Oh, waking up is so tough… Marmot finds it easy, after sleeping all day long. It's his turn to shake me. I'm dreaming that my little sister is crying after our Mom, who is gone shopping, but in fact I don't even have a sister. I don't understand what's happening, then I remember that we must go visit the girls. We put on our clothes. We've worn out our pajamas long ago. Now we sleep in our patched-up underwear. We walk down the stairs noiselessly. Marguerite is awake already. She even complains that we're late. She wakes up Gisèle. Several small girls share their room. They're fast asleep. Marie-Claire sleeps with Bergère and Spool. She's taller than them now. Cossack and her are nearly adults. There are no more campers and counselors, anyway. It ain't a summer camp, but just a kind of big family.

Marmot and Marguerite kiss each other on the mouth, so Gisèle and I do it too. Before, I thought the Dad kissed the Mom on the mouth to make children. Madame Christiane told us they make them some other way. This was when she wanted to breed mice. As we thought it strange that mice could kiss each other on the mouth, she gave us a lesson. The small ones thought you bought babies in stores. Actually, I don't even remember what she said. It was long ago.

I hear that Marmot and Marguerite quarrel in low voices, not to wake up the small girls. They can't talk without quarelling, anyway. So then Marguerite wants to switch. She pairs Gisèle with Marmot and kisses me on the mouth. I find all theses kisses rather tiresome, the more so cause I am very sleepy. As last we go back to our room.

The next day, during class, Marguerite sends me a little slip of paper. She has written A.T.K.O.Y.B.M, which means "A Thousand Kisses On Your Beloved Mouth." Marmot doesn't seem happy at all. Me, I think I'm in love with Marie-Claire, except she's too old for me. I'd never dare tell her.

My father is six years older than my mother. This means I could marry Tonette. She's the prettiest and the sweetest in the whole camp.

Another night we want to go visit the girls again, but we see a human shape in the staircase. We go back to bed at once.

"Did you see?" Marmot asks in a hushed voice. "He was all black."

"At night, eveybody is black."

"Yeah, but me, man, I tell you it was a negro. He was tall like the negroes. He escaped, I bet."

"Maybe it was Amadou, the sargent."

"When you hear noises in the attic, it ain't rats, it's prisoners that Madame Christiane helps escape."

“Are you sure?”

“Serge told me, but he says I shouldn’t tell anyone.”

“You can trust me. How does he know, Serge?”

“It’s because he sleeps in the same room as Madame Christiane. One night, he woke up and he saw her go away, so he followed her without making any noise. He says she hides negroes, Russian prisoners who build the Blockhaus, and even a British pilot with his uniform.”

“They’re all upstairs?”

“Of course not. She takes them to the forest. There, the Basque charcoal makers help them go to Spain. Once, she picked up a gun that was hidden in a hay stack and she gave it to a negro.”

It’s like the game of the smugglers and the custom officers. On one side, the escapees and the charcoal makers who help them flee. On the other one, the Germans and the collabos who try to catch them.

The milkman thinks the collaborationists will soon change side:

“They feel the wind is turning. The other day, Fat Gilles criticized the Boches!”

Madame Christiane has brought the radio she had in Mimizan. She listens to a program that comes from London.

“The Russians are beating the Germans. They’re retreating everywhere. They can’t avoid defeat. The Americans have landed in Sicily!”

In the meantime, the Germans are still there. They take Serge away. Madame Christiane stays calm.

“They want to frighten me. They hope I’ll tell them things…”

Me, I can see she’s worried. Serge comes back three days later.

“They kept me in a house in Labouheyre. I played marbles in the courtyard. I saw fellows with torn nails. ’Twasn’t a pretty sight. The Germans have tanks that make a bigger noise than anything. It is to fight the Americans when they’ll land here.”

One day, while I am looking for blankets in a cupboard, I find some pieces of paper hidden between bedsheets. I recognize at once pages from Madame Christiane’s notebook, covered with her black ink drawings. She hasn’t drawn pines in the forest, but the Blockhaus and the cannons. I hope the Boches won’t ever search the house.

They come exchange manure against vegetables. They have big rough hands like our peasants. Often, we forget they are our enemies. Spool speaks to them in their language. She gives us German lessons.

“It’s useful to be able to understand what they say.”

Sometimes, the soldiers speak Russian. Spool speaks with them too. Madame Christiane can do everything, but Spool knows all the languages.

“They say the Germans made them prisoners in Ukraine. They gave them a choice: either they died of hunger, or they enrolled in the German army. They belong to a regiment of cossacks.”

Our cossack is furious.

“Real cossacks not fight against fatherland.”

Once in a while, Cossack gets real mad. He shouts and swears in Russian, he growls like a bear. Then Spool says some words in his language and he becomes quiet in no time. When she speaks Russian, it doesn’t sound like a bear’s grunt, but like a dove’s cooing.

Gustave the pig has become gigantic. People come from Escource to see him. The reason he is so big, they say, is that he has the acorns of our two oak trees all to

himself on top of the corn. Bergère says we must kill him, otherwise it will be too late. We take him to a peasant who knows how to do it. We don't tell our small ones. They think we sold him to the peasant. The saddest of us all is Cossack. He has become pals with Gustave.

"We not from hunger die. It scandal kill him. He don't hurt nor nobody. Very smart he animal."

"Smarter than you are, but that don't mean much."

He ain't as stupid as he looks. When I play chess with him, he flattens me like a pancake.

"You not learn play chess in school? In Russia…

"Yeah, we know, in Russia everything is better."

We like Cossack, but we find him a little strange. These Russians are mysterious people, anyway. Some are prisoners, build the Blockhaus, escape. Others are soldiers in the German army, but pretend they were forced to enroll. Madame Christiane says it may not be true.

"According to the London radio, some of the so-called cossack regiments are even more ferocious than the worst Germans."

The mother of Fanny and Tonette comes fetch her daughters.

"Living without them is too painful."

"The war isn't over yet," Madame Christiane says. "There is still terrible danger out there."

"I have found a good hiding-place. I work at home as a seamstress. I think we run no risk at all."

We're all very sad to lose our little Tonette. Especially Spool, who took care of her. Tonette's tears run as fast as the Ocean's waves. Fanny tries to comfort her.

"We're going home. You know Frida. She's our mother."

"I dunno her. I wanna stay with Maman Spool."

1944

On June 6, the Americans and the English land in Normandy. The Blockhaus in Mimizan were built for nought!

The war goes on nevertheless. The radio says the Germans send flying bombs to England. Every morning, we look outside: Are the Americans there yet?

We see a suspicious boy on a bike. He looks like Nuts.

"Are you Nuts?" we ask him.

"Of course I'm me. Who else?"

"You came all the way from Paris on your bike?"

"Of course not. I put in on the train to Labouheyre."

"People are fleeing Paris again?"

"Some are. They expect a big battle when the Americans will arrive. My parents think the Germans won't wait for the Americans, but they sent me here to be on the safe side."

We see at least one hundred English and American airplanes in the sky. The German cannons shoot at them without hitting even one.

In the middle of August, a rumor says the Germans are going to seize all the bikes. We hide ours in a big blackberry bush near the corn field. The Duports amaze us: they hide their bike in the top branches of a high plane tree. How did they get it up there?

In the end, the Boches flee as fast as they can. They steal all the means of transportation they can find, and also chickens and rabbits. The officers yell orders. The men seem panicked and exhausted, like lost children. Their uniforms are wrinkled and stained. They have blown the generator of electricity, so we have no more power.

On August 24, we extract our bikes from the bush and ride to Mimizan. The French blue, red and white flag is swaying in the summer wind above the Bellevue hotel in place of the nazi swastika. People kiss in the streets. Honking cars speed around town. The passengers wave French flags.

"We've kicked the Boches away!" they shout.

They have red eyes and a thick voice. Some stand at crossroads, a shotgun in their hands. We meet Leblanc, the milkman. He is not happy.

"They found a cellar full of good wine at the Kommandantur. They got drunk, although there are still some Boches around. Have you seen the self-appointed sentries who guard the crossroads and ask averybody for their i.d.'s? My former errand-boy asked me for my papers. As if he didn't recognize me. I became angry. He said I insulted the French Resistance. I told him I found him excessively touchy, for someone who is a resistant since this morning."

These new resistants have arrested Fat Gilles. They found tons of wheat in his attic. He sold flour on the black market. Fat Lou is hiding. Docteur Chevallereau says that if people find her, they'll shave her head.

It is said that naked men are wandering in the forest. They are Boches who have buried their uniform and pretend to be Russian. The resistants put their German prisoners in the barracks where the negroes used to be.

The Mimizan summer camp is in bad shape. It looks like the Gaye house when we arrived there: broken windows, torn doors, refuse everywhere. They have even felled the big fig tree, who hurt no one. We have months of work ahead.

The police says we must not walk on the dune and the beach, because of the mines. The Army's demining unit is in Normandy for the landing, then they'll come here.

We also have work aplenty in Gaye. This time, the corn and rye have grown quite well. Several children left because their parents came for them, including Nuts. So our harvest team is on the small side. I have reaped so much that I have blisters on both hands.

We go to Mimizan now and then to clean up the camp. We discover it is full of insects called bedbugs. Madame Christiane tries to kill them with one of her chemical inventions, but they are very sturdy. She calls in a specialist. He says their nests are under the floor.

"There's only one way to do it. You must remove all the floors in all the buildings."

"These Boches!" Madame Christiane says. "Even after they're gone, they still pester us."

She thinks we'll need years before the summer camp is back on its feet. The main problem is that we lack money. People are not rich. Instead of selling our corn and rye, we exchange them against sheepskins. We do business with Duport, our neighbor, and other shepherds. If my father was there, he would make beautiful wallets out of all these skins.

Madame Christiane goes to Paris. She hopes to get some compensation from the new government for the German damage. She takes some skins to see how much money they might bring in.

We form teams that go to Mimizan every two or three days to remove the floors. One morning, I go with Marie-Claire. We work hard, then she suggests we go into the forest see the gymnastics clearing. The Germans have built a cement road between the dune and the forest, it feels funny. When we reach the clearing, I have the same pleasant feeling as when you meet old friends whom you haven't seen for a long time.

In Gaye, the pines grow staight like good children. Here, they fight the Ocean wind. They bend, they lean, they resist. Some look like boxers.

"You know what, Marie-Claire? When I was small, the pines seemed all alike to me. Now I recognize them quite well. Look at this twisted fellow. I remember we used to climb him. Next time I'll bring my notebook and draw them."

"They have changed. They look neglected to me. Maybe the forest workers went to Germany for forced labor. There are more thorny bushes than before. If Madame Christiane was there, she would ask us to remove them. Let's clear the undergrowth, children, she would say, otherwise it will choke the pines!"

"They don't smell like the pines in Gaye."

"Their perfume is tinged with the Ocean's – a touch of salt and seaweed. Do you notice that young pines smell much stronger?"

"Strange… I feel that the memory of this perfume was hidden somewhere in my memory all these years. Many things have been hidden there because of the war."

It is warm. As we're quite tired, we decide to take a nap. We lie on the golden mattress that many generations of dead needles have prepared for us. I wake up and look at Marie-Claire. Her eyes are barely open. I wonder whether she's asleep or awake. I don't know why, I move close to her ear and whisper:

"Rachel…"

She takes me into her arms and hugs me tight. Her eyes shine like a quiet sea under the moon.

"Do you remember that you were my mother in The Pied Pier of Hamelin?"

"Of course. Your name was Jacob."

She says that the city of Hamelin does exist somewhere in Germany. Its German name is Hameln. I didn't know that.

I hope she won't leave soon. Me, I am here for quite a while. I would like to see my parents again, at least I think so, but I'll be sad when I have to leave the camp and Madame Christiane and Marie-Claire. My parents sent a letter from Brazil. They say the Cariocas, that's how they call ladies who live in Rio de Janeiro, love my father's handbags. They're trying to earn money before coming back to France, so they can start again on a good footing.

Here, only six kids are left, all Jewish. Some know where their parents are, others don't.

Madame Christiane comes back from Paris in high spirits. She hasn't received any compensation, but she sold all the skins.

"They use them to make leather jackets called Canadiennes, that's the latest fashion. My children, you're going to visit the county's shepherds and buy all the skins you can find. Me, meanwhile, I'll get oak tannin in Bordeaux. We'll cure and tan the skins ourselves. Thus, we'll obtain a better price and we'll earn enough money to repair the camp right away!

1945

There are not many kids left in Mimizan: Marmot, Marie-Claire and me. Marmot

and Marie-Claire's parents will never return. They have vanished in the death camps. The parents of Gisèle are dead too. Her uncle and aunt came for her. She'll live with them. Marmot will also stay with his uncle and aunt. As they live in Palestine, which was the country of the Jews very long ago, they won't come for him before some time. Marie-Claire will go to America, where she has relatives. She has promised she'll write to me.

Madame Christiane told me that Fanny, Tonette and their mother were caught in a police roundup at the railway station when they arrived in Paris. They were deported to a camp and didn't come back. I won't be able to marry Tonette.

When I

red locks

small hand in mine

I don't remember what I wrote above. The page got wet, I don't know how, so it was erased.

We have destroyed most of the bedbugs. The demining unit came, but there are more mines left in the dune than bedbugs under our floors. The dune moves and buries mines very deep, then uncovers them without warning. Three Mimizan people have died already. Madame Christiane says she'll wait a few years before she goes back to the beach with children. We swim in the river that flows through Mimizan or in the Aureilhan lake.

Madame Christiane's brother settled in the Gaye house with his wife and son. He brings us good vegetables and eggs every week. Monsieur Daniel came back and Madame Christiane is pregnant.

I want to offer Madame Christiane a present, to thank her for taking such good care of me. Marie-Claire wants to buy the present with me. We don't have much money, but we've had an idea. Docteur Chevallereau goes to Bordeaux with his new car once a week. Tomorrow we'll go with him and buy a pair of white mice.

Postface

Madame Christiane is a real person. She was born in Paris in 1906. She studied painting and engraving in the Beaux-Arts school, then she took care of needy children for the Red Cross. She helped create what's known in France as "Active Education." Children learn various techniques in order to achieve "projects" in the field of art or arts and crafts. In 1927, she married a psychology student, Monsieur Daniel.

In 1930, Monsieur Daniel and Madame Christiane created a summer camp where they intended to apply Active Education methods. At first, they rented buildings in Brittany, then in the Jura mountains. In 1932, they found the ideal place: a summer house that Coco Chanel, a famous seamstress, had built for her employees between the Atlantic Ocean and the big Landes forest, in the South-West of France. The village was called Mimizan-Plage. The summer camp was known as "Le Pylône," because a wood-pigeon hunt lookout stood on a high pylon there long ago.

The summer camp “Le Pylône” still exists today. Several building have been erected around the “Coco Chanel house.” The baby that Madame Christiane is expecting at the end of the story directs the camp with his wife. The children spend their time in ways Jacquot didn’t imagine: they surf, sail boats, ride mountain-bikes, study computing. They still do pottery, too, and play The Pied Piper of Hamelin. If you want to know more, log onto www.vacances-enfants.org. As I write this, the site is in French. By the time you read it, an English version should exist too.

Serge, Madame Christiane’s eldest son, went to the best universities and became a well-known economist. He travelled around the world to help people and whole governments. While he was in Africa, Madame Christiane travelled there to visit him. She drove to Tchad in a Jeep. She had always dreamt of crossing the Sahara desert! I don’t know whether she looked for Sargent Amadou. Toward the end of the fifties, she used to spend every November and December in Africa. She was a social worker and a nurse in Tchad and Senegal. Serge says that a hospital in the north of Senegal bears her name. She brought back a small monkey called Souki. For several years, people knew her as “the lady with the monkey.” She loved Souki. She said he looked like a not very bright child. At dinner time, she told her children: “Give a seat to your little brother.”

Bye and bye, after 1970, Madame Christiane let her second son take over the summer camp. As she was still quite full of energy, she decided to study art history in the Louvre Museum School, then later in Paris University. She passed her master’s degree. Then, influenced by a teacher, she turned to prehistorical art. She studied prehistory and human paleontology (the science of interpeting stones and other remnants). At more than eighty years old, she was still digging in the South of France and near Paris with University teams. She began to specialize in “evolutive anthropology,” meaning the evolution of human beings and human societies, but she also worked in “social anthropology,” which studies human beings today.

I met Madame Christiane by chance in 1987. I knew her because I used to spend my vacations in the Pylon summer camp between 1950 and 1955, but I hadn’t seen her for twenty-five years. As I was a journalist, I interviewed her and published her story in a magazine under the title “The oldest student in France.”

In her story, she evoked the war years. I imagined that I was a boy who spends the war in Mimizan and wrote the text you just read. It was first published (in a shorter version) in the February 1996 issue of a magazine for teenagers. I gave Madame Christiane several copies of the magazine. By then, she was ninety. She didn’t study anymore. She spent her time painting and playing the piano.

“How strange,” she said. “I don’t remember that you were in Mimizan during the war.”

She had forgotten that she had told me all this eight years before, so she thought I was telling my own story. She said I had depicted her in too flattering a light. Saving children was nothing to be especially proud of.

“What else could I do?” she asked me. “Give away camp kids to the Germans?”

Madame Christiane died in her sleep in 1997, aged ninety-one. Her second son called me to tell me the sad news. I found it very hard to believe. I thought she would live to be a hundred.