



May 1943 : fourteen Jewish girls escaped a roundup at a convent in Brussels

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In the late summer of 1942, in the heart of Cureghem (Anderlecht), an area with a large Jewish community, the convent on Clemenceau Avenue was on the front-line for the persecution. When the neighbourhood was raided, Sister Marie-Aurélie¹, the mother Superior agreed to take in Jewish girls. The convent cared for the sick and needy people in the neighbourhood, and was never intended to house and educate young girls. Nevertheless, thirteen little Jewish girls aged between 20 months and 12 years were hidden there in the first days in early September 1942, entrusted by their parents to the parish priest, Abbé Bruylandts² or directly to the Mother Superior, a well-known figure in the neighborhood. « *"Families and neighbors came to us, asking us to hide their children"* wrote Mother Superior in her diary. *"It was a procession of mothers coming to ask for a place for their little girl. Four little sisters were the first to arrive on September 1st. Their little brother went to our vicar, Abbé Bruylandts who provided shelter for boys"*³.

Abbé Bruylandts also worked closely with the CDJ (Jewish Defens Committee) - and put the Mother Superior in touch with the leaders of the resistance network. Thus, in addition to the girls permanently housed, others children would pass through the convent while awaiting a permanent hiding place. *"From every corner of the city, people came to ask for a place for their children,"* writes Marie-Aurélie. *"From eight o'clock in the morning until evening, it was a struggle with these poor, grieving parents [...]. For the children I couldn't admit, I was put in touch with the organization that secretly placed the children. After each request, I got in touch with these ladies in one form or another, and within 24 hours, the parents were assured that the child would be saved."*



Sister Marie-Aurélie

¹ Sister Marie Aurélie (Eugénie Leloup). Born in 1881, she made her religious profession in 1904 and joined a community in Paris, where she worked to care for the sick. In October 1930, she was sent to Anderlecht to run the Avenue Clémenceau convent. She died on 25.10.1948.

² Jan Bruylandts: (6/09/1916 - 4/06/2001), parish vicar in Cureghem from August 1941 to April 1947

³ "Chronicles of the couvent", Archives of the Congregation of the Très Saint Sauveur (Oberbronn, France)

As the nuns were busy with their outside activities, the Mother Superior asked the CDJ to send her someone to look after the girls. And so it was that Gutki Stolnicki a young 22-year-old Jewish schoolteacher - accompanied by her little sister Sarah - arrived at the convent in October 1942.



Gutki Stolnicki called « Mademoiselle Renée », with Sarah.

"I was like a big sister, a consoler" explains Gutki: "I was supposed to bring a semblance of order and normalcy into the lives of these distraught little girls. I tried to organize classes for the older girls and entertain them. At the same time, it was a shelter for me."⁴ For the girls, life is getting organized. In addition to the activities supervised by Gutki, they take part in the many chores that punctuate convent life, as well as the daily prayers, which have a very important place. Some of the older girls are baptized and leave the convent to attend school and mass on Sundays. Since the convent is not a boarding school where they could blend in behave anonymously with other children, they do not go unnoticed.

The nuns lived in fear of denunciation until the morning of May 20, 1943, when a raiding led by German policeman Otto Siegburg, accompanied by the Jewish informer "Jacques", arrived at the convent. The day before, the Jewish Department of the Nazi police had informed the AJB - Association of Jews in Belgium⁵ that the illegal hosting of Jewish children by "Aryans" would no longer be tolerated. Otto Siegburg and Jacques find the girls' ration cards in the Mother Superior's office and demand that they be gathered in the courtyard. Realizing that not all the girls were present - some of them were at school - and that they would need a truck to transport them, Siegburg and Jacques decide to return the following day, threatening the Mother Superior with reprisals if all the girls were not present. After the Gestapohad left, Mother Superior alerts Abbé Bruylandts, who goes to great lengths to save the girls. He manages to pass on the information to Queen Mother of Belgium Elisabeth and Cardinal Van Roey. The AJB was also informed, and tried to negotiate with the occupying forces, but, like the Queen, obtained only a guarantee that the children would not be deported. Cardinal Van Roey preferred to abstain, fearing - that his intervention might aggravate the situation...

At the end of the day, "we were in our dormitory overlooking *Sergent De Bruyne Street*", says Gutki. "We were crying, praying, expecting the worst. It was late at night, when suddenly, through the dormitory door, a voice announced in Yiddish: 'Kinder, mir zenen Yidden. Mir kumen aich rateven' (Children, we are Jews. We've come to save you). It was the voice of *Tobie Cymberknopf*". Tobie Cymberknopf lived in hiding with his friend Bernard Fenerberg, a 17-year-old Jewish boy who is helped by Abbé Bruylandts. Bernard comes to the abbot's house daily to receive a meal. So he learns of the raid and informs his friend Tobie, whom he knows to be in

⁴ Yad Vashem, *Righteous File no. 9552*, mail from Gutki Stolnicki, March 2003.

⁵ Jewish Council set up and controlled by the Germans

contact with the resistance, and in particular with Paul Halter⁶, commander in the Belgian armed resistance. Halter hastily assembled a small team around him, including Andrée Ermel, a female combatant of his group⁷: *"I gathered what partisans I could find that day, or sympathizers, because most of the members of the group were sympathizers. And it was with them that I organized the action on Clémenceau Avenue."* In the early evening, Paul Halter sends Andrée Ermel and her boyfriend to speak with the Mother Superior. She is suspicious, and Abbé Bruylandts is called in. The discussion is heated, with the Mother Superior fearing reprisals. *"And as the hours wore on", says Paul Halter - "the hours wore on, and a quarter to ten, I said 'now we can't wait any longer, there's going to be a curfew at ten o'clock, we've got to act. So we stormed in, revolvers in hand".*⁸



Paul Halter in 1942

Finally, they agree with the Mother Superior to fake an abduction. The resistance fighters ransack her office, lock up the nuns and leave, asking them to wait an hour before calling for help. They left the convent with the girls via the back building on Sergent De Bruyne street. With the exception of the youngest, who was led by Andrée Ermel, the other girls and Gutki are led out to Bernard Fenerberg's parents' unoccupied apartment. Andrée Ermel takes the little girl to her own mother, while the other girls spent the night in Bernard Fenerberg's apartment with him and Tobie Cymberknopf.

The next morning, the Gestapo - who had been alerted during the night by the police - proceeded to question the Mother Superior and some of the nuns, but without any consequences for them. Before that, at dawn, they arrested the Heiber couple. Maurice Heiber was officially head of social aid at the Association des Juifs en Belgique, but in hiding he headed the CDJ's children's section, in which his wife Estera Heiber also played a key role. The Germans had suspected him of having had been in contact with the Resistance for some time. Meanwhile, two CDJ social workers take charge of the girls, all either in religious institutions or in private homes... in varying degrees of happiness. Not all of them would find in their new family or religious institution a climate as benevolent towards them as that of the nuns of Anderlecht. All survived the war, but some lost one or both parents and would live the painful journey of orphans of the Holocaust.

Unfortunately this episode was not an isolated event, but appears to be the first act of the "War on Children"⁹ implemented by the occupying forces in Belgium in the spring of 1943. Less than three weeks after the failed roundup in Anderlecht, the Germans got wind of another group of children in hiding at Gatti de Gamond secular boarding school in Woluwe-Saint-Pierre (Brussels). Fourteen children and nine adults were arrested, including the school's director and her husband. The children were sent to the Dossin barracks in Mechelen, and then deported to Auschwitz...

⁶ Paul Halter (10.10.1920-30.03.2013): joined the Armed Partisans at the end of 1941; became company commander in January 1943; arrested in June 1943, interned in Saint-Gilles prison and deported to Auschwitz on the September 20, 1943.

⁷ Andrée Ermel (24.07.1920-30.07.1995): joined the Armed Partisans in July 1942. Arrested in July 1943 and deported to camp Ravensbrück.

⁸ Audiovisual archives of Auschwitz Foundation, interview n°011, 02.06.1992

⁹ Expression used by Salomon Van den Berg, one of the leaders of the Association of Jews in Belgium in his « War Diary » (p. 98).