Days of Terror: an Excerpt

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Translated by Charlotte F. Werbe

Even small children could see that this was an evil war: it targeted the Jewish people one by one. Every Jew in hiding was eventually found. Surely Germany said to England, "Wait, don't rush to end the war, Jews are still being found, I'll see to it that every last one is caught." And the Germans kept their word. Because the spying was so organized, and those discovered hiding Jews were so harshly punished, almost no one would hide a Jew no matter how much money was being offered. If a German found a Jew, the Christian family would be taken and never seen again.

My children were instinctively scared whenever they saw a German; they'd tremble and cry. When I went to the store with my youngest boy, he was constantly on the lookout. "Berele," I asked him, "what are you looking for?" "Papa," he responded, "I'm looking to see if there are any Germans coming into the store."

The war was so evil that even Christians had begun to take notice. They all became pessimistic and yelled that the Germans were waging a war that the English seemed to desire, and that the whole war was nothing more than a comedy. The Flemish peoples' hate for the English was growing as fervently as their hatred for the Germans.

A year went by, and while Jews were being deported, we were still at home. Once, at the beginning of summer, my wife said, "I heard that pregnant women aren't taken by the Germans." "Good," I said to my wife, "I'll see to it that you fall pregnant." And a few weeks later my wife told me that she was pregnant. She began to reconsider if it would really be a good idea to have a small child under these circumstances. It involved

such great costs. So my wife took some kind of a pill that she bought at a drugstore, and nothing came of the pregnancy.

I needed money again. I thought about selling some goods. But what would happen once I'd sold the goods? Where would I get money after that? Goods were becoming more and more expensive, so it would be better for me to wait to sell them.

Then I went to Hertsfeld's son-in-law, the Dutchman, with a proposition. He had once promised that he'd lend me money. I told him that I'd give him five percent per year, and I'd leave my post book worth thirty thousand francs with him as collateral. And I'd also give him a promissory note for this amount. But when the question of lending me money came up, he started to shake his head. The Dutchman was wealthy and his business was booming because he traded in gold and diamonds.

At first he hesitated to lend me money. But as he learned more and more about the situation of the Jews, he said that if I gave him a notarized document with the sum of money he'd lent me and the number of my post book—and if my wife and I gave him the right to withdraw the money from our account—he'd lend me money at five percent. That was how I borrowed against my post book, and by the time the Germans came and took us, he'd lent us fifteen thousand francs.

Exactly one year after the Jews had begun to be deported, my wife mentioned again that she was pregnant, that she wouldn't terminate it, and that she wanted a girl. I noticed that she was thrilled to be pregnant.

In the meantime, my two sons came down with the measles. My eldest was now six years old, and he had to switch from preschool to elementary school. So we signed him up. But a few days before he went, the director of the school called me in and said that since my son was Jewish, he couldn't be with the other children.

My son became very depressed that we didn't let him go to school, and he began to cry all the time. The poor thing didn't understand, and we didn't want to tell him why he couldn't go to school. We didn't want to hurt our child.

I tried to teach my son a few times, but I was impatient, and when he didn't understand I'd hit him and just skip over what he

didn't understand.

Later we received an inquiry from the superintendent of the school district because my son wasn't going to school. I told him that our son was being homeschooled, and the director of the school clarified the reason for this, so the superintendent left the subject alone.

I spent a lot of time reading. My wife also read from time to time. There was a library nearby, close to the place where I'd found the Catholic priest. For that reason, many of the books from this library in Kranske were of a Catholic leaning; for example, a lot of them were written by various "fathers" and priests. These books were fascinating. For example, there was a book whose author I don't remember. I think he was from Saint Gilles, a small town in Waasland, in Flanders. The book was called *My Thirty-Fifth Year of Being a Father in Mongolia*. Or the travel books: *All about Asia*, by Constance de Deken, and *All about Tortarie*, by M. Law. I will never forget the book about a French anarchist pretending to be professor, with a preface by Cardinal Mercier. The book was called *Albert* and was written in diary form. The story was about a young eighteen-year-old rebel who became involved with a band of anarchists who committed various robberies and murders. Many of the anarchists were captured and jailed, among them Albert, even though he didn't participate in the attacks and wasn't even aware of them in the first place.

Albert, the book narrates, was a distinguished man. He turned back to Christianity because he came to believe that man could improve through learning, not through law. He planned on becoming a missionary when released from jail. The director and the priest of the jail both enjoyed their discussions with Albert.

In jail he wrote in his diary every day, even when he didn't believe, to become a man of conviction. His sharpness and recall got the attention of the officer of the jail, and they once took his diary because they were afraid he'd destroy it.

Albert was writing his diary in the jail in Brussels during the war of 1914, and he was so desperate to be free, or to see his mother at least once more, his heart gave out from homesickness, and he died a prisoner. This is one of the smallest and most beautiful books I'd ever read.

The Kranske library had the added benefit of feeling like home. First off, it didn't have any regulations, like the length of time a book could be borrowed. A book could be kept as long as needed. And unlike the national library, I didn't need to show a card borrow a book. I just had to give an address. Also, the books were free. There were two librarians: a young man, my neighbor, who went around all week collecting money in the street, and a tailor, the son of a poor man who lived nearby. Both young men were quiet and decent. They worked all week, and Sunday they sat in the library.

I used to read many Flemish writers. I didn't know that such a rich Flemish literature existed. I became familiar with numerous writers, like Henrich Konsians, Emer Vute, Vard Vermeylen, Viktor Meyer, Gerard Walschap, Gustav Zegers, and many more. I often came across books that made me very sad. For example, the book *Slaves of the War of 1914* by some Flemish writer named Leon Vershunen, who was from the city of Ruselar in West Flanders. He composed songs about Belgian deportees suffering in the French work camps. How the people who'd weighed eighty kilos when they entered the Lager weighed only forty kilos after a few months. The deportees used to die like flies. He told the story of how one time a German soldier pierced a young man, a doctor's son, who'd only been there for one day, with a bayonet.

The young man was completely innocent. He pleaded with the German soldier in French that he was innocent. But the German jumped on him at every turn, and then with his bayonet he stabbed him in the heart. The young man let out a huge scream and lay there dead. Then, Vershunen explained, the German cleaned off the bayonet with his pocket kerchief as if nothing had happened. I became very upset when I read this, and I thought about all the Jews who'd fallen into German hands.

Another time I read a book written by a Dutch journalist named MacFeld. He was captured in Belgium by the Germans in the war of 1914. As a journalist from a neutral country, he narrated at length the horrible acts the Germans committed toward the Belgian population. Books like these completely undid me. I used to shake from fear. Then I'd look after my children with even greater care.

In the summer of 1943, Italy capitulated. Everyone thought the war wouldn't last much longer. My wife was happy because she was pregnant. She reckoned that by the time she had the baby, the war would be over, because every day England said on the radio, she's going, she's coming, she's traveling, she's riding, she's going to liberate Europe! And so this went on until the time drew near that my wife had to go to the maternity house.

On Saturday morning the 27th of March 1944, my wife went to the maternity house, and in the afternoon I was called and given the news that that my wife had given birth to a girl.

I quickly dressed and went to the maternity house. Our daughter was a beautiful little girl of four kilos, with blue eyes. My wife was overjoyed. We decided to give her our mothers' names since my wife's mother had been dead for some time and I guessed my own would soon pass away. My daughter was thus named Mirl Birl. In French, her name is Mirele Bela.

On Sunday the 28th, I hastily dressed my two sons and brought them to visit their sister and mother. My boys were thrilled to have a sister, and my wife was the happiest. She kissed the hands of the little speck of a girl and clasped her to her breast. "My mother," she later called out, because she bore the same name as her mother.

During the ten days that my wife stayed in the maternity house, I frequently visited her. On the tenth day, my wife returned home with our little girl.

The child had lost weight. She had lost 300 grams, and at home she couldn't bear the ration milk and constantly threw up. My wife had breastfed her for three days in the maternity house but then had such awful pains that even with the best of intentions, she couldn't breastfeed any longer. So the baby had to be fed with a bottle. The day my wife came back from the maternity house and saw that the baby couldn't stand ration milk, she ran to a farmer and begged and pleaded that he give her at least half a liter of milk every day. In the end, the farmer gave her one liter of milk per day. My wife called two doctors on the day that she returned home because she was so afraid for her child. She would give

her life for her baby. As soon as our baby received milk from the farmer, my wife stopped wringing her hands from worry and our girl began to grow. Our baby shone like the sun. "Such a beautiful child," everyone said. And truly, it was rare to see a baby such as this. My wife used to say that the glory of God lay in our little girl.

When our child was only a few days old, the nurse from the maternity house said to my wife, "Madam, that is a beautiful child you have there. It is rare that such a child is born." My wife used to dance and jump and hold her all day and give her kisses. Many neighbors became my enemies because of our baby. One neighbor, who had been our best friend, became a foe after my wife gave birth.

And she was always a good baby; she never really cried. At night, at around 9, she'd be given her final meal of the day and be put to bed, and she'd sleep all night! These are some details about my baby, but let me also add that on her fourteenth day, we also heard her beautiful laugh! People don't want to believe this; I have to convince them.

My child was soon—praise be to God—two months old. She blossomed like a rose. And my wife and I were so happy. Then June 6 came, and the English landed in France along with Americans. I was suddenly struck with the sense that disaster was imminent. Every time I'd leave home, I'd imagine all sorts of horrible things—that there was a car in front of our house and the Germans were coming to get us. I was thrilled when I'd reach my front door and see that this hadn't come true.

But one day, on Friday morning, June 9, I went for bread at the bakery because it was really hard to get bread otherwise. I was going to bring home bread for my wife. When I was returning from the baker's, it was around ten in the morning, and a neighbor screamed to me from far away, "Run, the Germans are coming for you!" I ran to the first door that I found open and began to wring my hands and cry horribly. The people that were in the street didn't see where I'd gone, and that was good, because I was sure they'd betray me. The Gestapo agent who'd come looking for us before had searched everywhere, and he convinced the Flemish people that if I returned to the house, they'd leave my wife and children at home. My wife knew as well as I did that this was just a

ruse, and she was wise enough to send a neighbor to tell me that I should run. I didn't even get to see my wife and children again before I ran. The neighbors told me that my wife and children were sobbing.

When I'd gone to the bakery, I was dressed in tattered pants and a ripped shirt. And I had no money on me. All my money, over 7,000 francs, was in my house in my dresser. But I was frightened that I'd come home and not a single cent would be left. The neighbors explained that the police were constantly patrolling my street, but I didn't believe them.

The Flemish man into whose house I'd run quickly threw me out. "Get out," he said to me, and I sat in the field, and at that precise moment it began to rain. Then I went to a second Flemish man, whom I used to often visit. I sent him to a woman with whom I'd left my suitcase to ask that she bring it back to me. He brought the suitcase to me, and I quickly changed. I only had one shirt; the rest were at my house, and no one wanted to go get them. This second Flemish man also threw me out. He gave me one hundred francs to leave his house. I was running in and out of the field. I wanted to go to Klusterheyde, a village near Lierre, where I knew a farmer.

On the way, I went to my friend's house—a coal merchant. There I broke into sobs and spasms. "My children," I screamed. "My small little birds, they will be murdered." Everyone there cried with me. When I showed up, they were about to eat lunch. But they couldn't touch their food. They urged me to eat something. The coal merchant tossed his meat on my plate and didn't eat any. May God reward these people with kindness. For evident reasons, I won't publish their names right now, but when God saves me from the hands of the Germans, I will write their names on high. The coal merchant gave me a greatcoat, which at the time was worth a lot, and two leaflets for bread stamps, which were worth five hundred francs. He also gave me a few good shirts from his son and two hundred francs. His wife washed my face with water. Then I left his house and took a back way that crossed over a field, toward the village where I needed to go.

All the bridges were filled with Germans on guard, and I had to present an identity card. Thankfully, the coal merchant was located

outside of Lierre. We went through a field, and it rained. My clothes were completely soaked, and my shirt was drenched.

In the afternoon, I arrived at the farmer's house in Klusterheyde. I broke down and told my misfortunes to the farmer Engels. I begged him to let me stay with him. He told me that he'd help me.