

Saturday, September 27, 1942

Dear Henri,

I am writing to you from the train to Louvain.

As I predicted, my parents, my brother and I were caught in the raid. On Thursday night, the Gestapo came to our house; they opened and broke through the front door of the house next to ours and they entered our house through the roof. This done, they gave us ten minutes to pack our bags.

Once we got to Malines, we noticed that we were missing many things. On the other hand, for bread, we had only one half loaf for four people; we had forgotten the rest on the table at home which shows you how upset we were. What atrocities at Malines! Children, from four months old to all ages, were crying. They are given only a little milk each day. The adults are starving to death. A quarter of a loaf of bread for the whole day and a little black coffee at morning and at night. At noon they give us some soup, but what a soup! Since I hadn't eaten anything all day long I had a few spoonful. But I had such a stomachache from it that I suffered all night long and the next day also.

I arrived at Malines at six in the morning. They searched us, and took everything: money, passports, and pocketknives. At that time, there were only 180 people in the barracks. Then, every half hour, cars came with people from Liege, Brussels...then at night, a large group came from Antwerp. We thought that we were going to stay until noon, so we asked to be able to write to people to bring us some bread, but unfortunately we left the next day at four in the morning. On Thursday, there were 180 people in the convoy; on Saturday, 3,000. Rachel is here with us.

We don't know where we are going.

In any case, we have been traveling for four days, and for this journey received only one loaf of bread - just enough not to starve. The little children cry all day long. People caught Friday in the street don't even have a spare shirt - nothing at all. They were going to receive packages, but we left too soon. I heard that they were going to deport all Jews from Belgium. So, be careful and hide well so that they don't catch you. I'm sending you my most recent photo; I hope you'll print it and distribute it to the people I know. I'm throwing this letter out of the window in the hopes that it will reach its destination. Think sometimes of your friend Bella. Greetings to everybody.

Bella

1940 Germany invades Belgium in May. ————— **1941**

In the fall, Nazis banned Jewish students from attending schools. Teenage friends Marcel Sobolski and Henri Zylbermenc form the Jewish Student Group and become President and VP, respectively. Bella Blitz, 14, is elected Secretary. The group gathered in a secret place in the forest. They met twice a week to discuss current events, socialize, laugh and feel united.

1942 summer

In the summer many Jews ignored Nazi orders to report for work at factories in the city of Malines (Mechelen), but then Nazis started rounding up Jews against their will. Henri's cousin, Paula, was caught in one of these "round ups" and taken to Malines. Malines was a camp in which the Jews were held for processing before deportation. Nazis wanted Jews outside the camp to believe Malines was a work camp, so they encouraged inmates to write home and talk about working. Additionally, Nazis used the addresses on the postcards to locate other Jews. Paula sent Henri a postcard on September 14th and Henri thought she might be attempting to send a clue that something bad was going to happen to her. It proved to be the last message she sent. The next day she was deported to Auschwitz Concentration Camp in occupied Poland, where she perished.

1942 fall

In the fall of this year, Nazi raids were increasing, so group officers Marcel, Henri, and Bella decided it was no longer safe to meet in public. Henri and his brother, Jack, kept their home as a "safe house" and base of communication. To avoid raids, Henri and Jack never stayed in one place long; they slept under bridges and bunked with non-Jewish friends, making only brief stops at the "safe house." Nazis rarely raided homes in Henri's neighborhood because the King's residence was also located nearby. Students, therefore, could safely convey messages to others by sending mail to Henri's address.

1942

Another group member named Mirjam had immigrated to Belgium from Germany and joined the Jewish Student Group to meet children her own age. In October, the Gestapo broke into Mirjam's home and took her family. She hid until the Gestapo left and then ran to the "safe House." Using underground contacts, Henri found a home and job for Mirjam as a teacher in a Jewish orphanage. A month or two later, the Jewish underground learned of Nazi plans to raid the orphanage and Mirjam volunteered to smuggle 12 orphans into Switzerland. That was the last Henri knew of Mirjam.

1942

Group Secretary Bella and her family were taken by the Nazis in the fall, and were then loaded into cattle cars bound for Auschwitz. In a desperate attempt to reach Henri and warn the group, Bella wrote her letter and threw it out the barred window of the cattle car. Miraculously, the letter was found and someone secretly sent it to the "safe house," where Henri found it in late October among a stack of other messages. Bella's letter confirmed that Malines wasn't a work camp, but a place where the Nazis processed Jews for deportation to Auschwitz. As Bella knew they would, Henri and the others warned other group members about the danger. Bella's transport arrived at the gates of Auschwitz. She was never heard from again. Henri once wrote of Bella saying, "In the most horrible days of her life, she still thinks of others. I must save this letter for posterity." Henri survived the Holocaust, married, and moved to America. He saved group member photos and letters and donated them to The Museum of Tolerance, where he volunteered until his death in 2011.