

EHRI Online Course in Holocaust Studies

Jenny Gans-Premsele: Vluchtweg. Aan de bezetter ontsnapt
(Baarn: Bosch en Koning, 1990) pp.30-42.

Persecution and Deportation in Western Europe

– Rescue and Survival of Jews in Occupied Western Europe – A Reappraisal

Translation: E02 Extract from Jenny Gans-Premsele Memoire

At the Beem family store there occasionally came a customer from Antwerp, whom they suspected was involved in resistance work. That very afternoon, they established contact. The man made a neat but somewhat strange impression. He hated the Germans, and understood that we wanted to go to Switzerland. He did not wish to profit much from our misery. He already had an agreement with two men from Rotterdam who had the same plan as us. We had to accept that, because he'd rather do it for six people at a time.

The next day he would travel with us by train to Brussels and take care of the tickets. For safety, the six of us had to sit apart from each other. Then we would travel from Schaerbeek station, on the train departing at ten past two, until the French border, on a local little tram we would cross the border, and then continue by train. Our identity cards would be sufficient for this. He would arrive at the station in Schaerbeek, five minutes before the train's departure. It sounded reliable and acceptable. In the presence of the Beem family, we agreed to it.

The next day, Monday, after bidding a most warm farewell to the Beem family, we boarded the train to Brussels. Moments later we saw our "passeur" [people smuggler] boarding. As per our agreement, we did not sit together, and we were curious about the two other refugees. It was not difficult to figure out, not even in the rather crowded train. A refugee was typified by a raincoat, a fairly flat briefcase, and a newspaper that he would hold up to cover his face as much as possible.

After a while we saw that the tickets were being checked. Did our "passeur" actually have them? That was indeed the case, and how! A furious inspector looked carefully about and shouted, "Where are the other passengers? What idiot takes a group ticket and then does not keep his group together? "

Terrified, we indicated each other's places, accompanied by the comments of the fellow travelers. The "passeur" had tried to be thrifty! Luckily, that was the extent of it, and later we could laugh about it.

In Brussels we disembarked and saw that the "passeur" walked out of the station and went into a cafe. There was plenty of time before we would leave from Schaerbeek. We decided to go to the station and, so as to avoid attracting attention, not to stand the six of us together. The Schaerbeek station was not large, and we were the only passengers.

It was almost two o'clock and Max and I sat down on a bench on the platform. At five past two there was still no "passeur." We became afraid that something would go wrong. Exactly at ten past two the train arrived, not the "passeur." We dared not board. The train drove away. Would they arrest us? Had we been betrayed? After some time had passed and there seemed to be no danger, we sought out our fellow refugees.

In consultation, we decided that our only option was to get back to the Beem family. Max and I, at the beginning of our flight, had intended to never return. But necessity knows no law. There was one alternative: in Antwerp we had been given an address of a Dutchman who lived there. To this it was added: "If you do not know at all what to do anymore, then go there before you report to the Gestapo." This we would opt to do only as a last resort.

Defeated and anxious, we returned to Antwerp. The Beem family was full of warm sympathy, though they themselves were not safe. In an attic room they had two cots, and with that we had to make do. Now even the neighbors could not notice. The two from Rotterdam knew of another place to spend the night, and would know where to find us the next morning.

Max wanted to go to the house of the "passeur": "I want to know what's going on. I do not believe he is unreliable. He gave his address, and I am going there once it's dark."

Bram Horodisch decided to go along. He could, if necessary, avail himself to bring us a message. After ten o'clock in the evening they departed. After one in the morning they came back to us, laughing and deflating our fear.

Their story was this: after they rang the doorbell, the door was opened and a woman's voice called out, "Are you there?"

Max replied: "No, I just come for your husband."

"If he is not here – well, then he's dead."

Max went in and said, "Could it be that your husband has had too much to drink?" and he told her what had happened.

She sounded indignant: "My husband never drinks, not even a sip. He always sticks to his appointments, and if you do not believe me, you can take the radio and other things as collateral. If he is not dead, then he comes. Something must have happened."

"Since you say so, I will keep waiting for him; it is him we need, not your radio," answered Max.

She did not entirely understand it, offered more household goods as "collateral," and finally agreed that both would stay waiting. Shortly after midnight a key was inserted into the lock and

the “passeur” appeared, sober and sound. At first, he did want to say why he had stayed away. After vehement insistence, it came out. He had indeed entered the cafe for a coffee and had planned to then appear at the station. In the bar he saw that it was... the thirteenth. On the thirteenth, he took no chances. Now, after midnight, it was the fourteenth, and everything was in order. After having slept, he would bring us to Brussels. We would spend the night there, and the next day, accompanied by him, would continue onward, on the train from ten past two. He promised it and offered... the radio to bolster his promise. That was promptly rejected out of hand, but he had to accept that we would no longer lose sight of him.

His wife said triumphantly: "You see now that my husband sticks to his appointments?"

Our men were too tired to comment, wished them "goodnight," and returned to the Beem family and to us. A report about the visit was given, and, despite the tight space, we were soon asleep.

The next morning we waited suspiciously. Fortunately, everything now proceeded as agreed. We continued to have a feeling of guilt as concerned the Beem family. They had taken on so much risk for us, yet we could offer nothing in return.

Brussels

Tuesday, July 14, we arrived in Brussels. The “passeur” was to take care of sleeping accommodations, and brought us to a cafe to wait. The two men from Rotterdam sat down at a table, the four of us at another table.

To our dismay the two Rotterdam fellows were noisy. They told each other jokes and shouted at a girl who was serving.

In a corner of the cafe sat two officers of the Wehrmacht. They were looking to see who was making so much noise. One of the two wanted to jump up, annoyed, but one of the Rotterdam fellows was faster than him, ran over to him and started a conversation. We did not stick around for that, and left the cafe as quietly as possible.

The “passeur” soon came to meet us. Moments later, the two Rotterdam guys arrived and we were brought to a tavern of some sort, where, upstairs, were our beds for that night. It turned out to be a brothel, not outstanding in clarity. The “passeur” convinced us that refugees were being searched for in Brussels but that we were safe here.

In the morning we received bread and coffee, and then we went to the station in Schaerbeek. On the train, which this time left with both the “passeur” and us, we heard what had happened in the cafe in Brussels.

The Rotterdam guy had said that he knew the officer from Hamburg. The officer denied having

been in Hamburg. He was only a year ago in the neighborhood and he mentioned a place name. The Rotterdam guy said that was precisely what he had meant, and asked the German what he had thought about that stay. The Germans had then made all sorts of comments and observations, and the Rotterdam guy said he was in total agreement, and even added on to the comments and offered the Hitler salute, which was stiffly answered. Then he left the café with his escape partner.

"You see," he remarked, "you should just try to stand out and be bold, that's the right attitude."

We had a different view, but we said nothing. Fortunately, it had ended well.

Occupied France – Nancy

The train took us to the French border without problems. There was no inspection. Without further adventures we reached Charleville, in France, where we spent the night at an inn, so as to travel the next day to Nancy. It was Thursday, July 16.

The "passeur" spoke of a birthday back at home and wanted to return. He could not go so long without his domestic life! Protest did not help, nothing helped. "He had done enough now." He pointed us to a house where we could spend the night, turned around, and disappeared. We went to the designated house and were duly attended to.

translated by Jeremy Schreiber