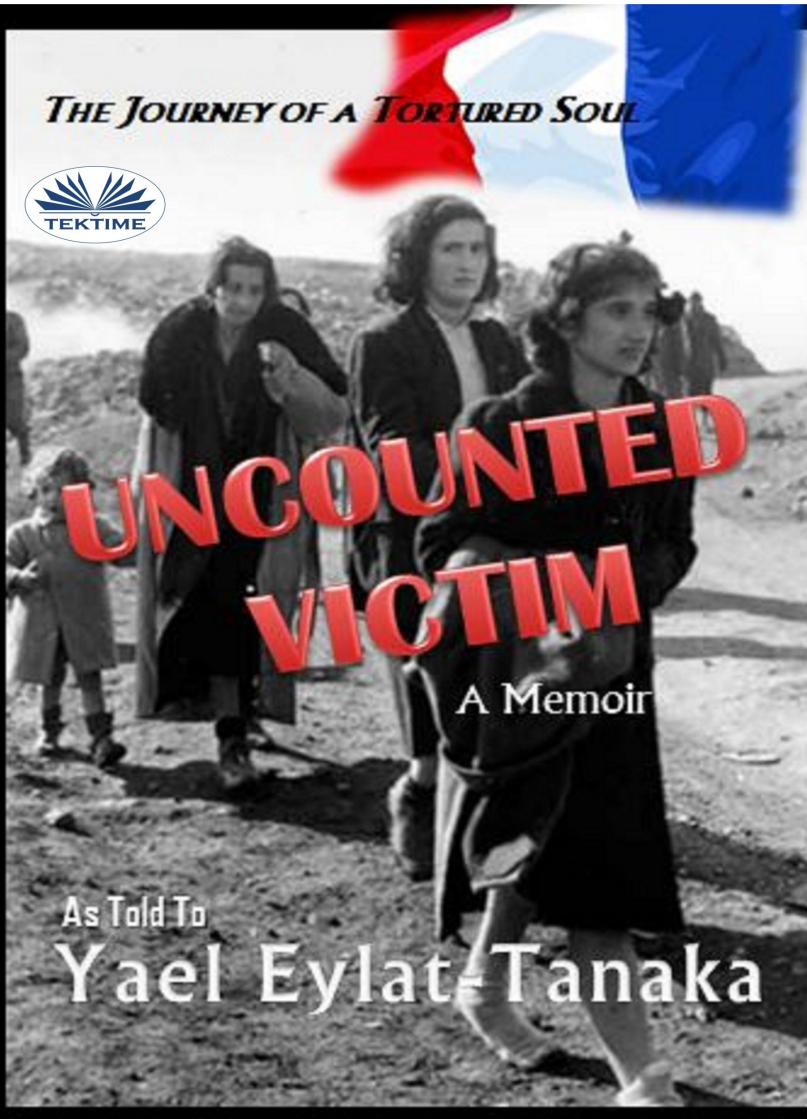
THE JOURNEY OF A TORTURED SOUL
TEKTIME
UNCOUNTED VICTIM
A Memoir
As Told To
Yael Eylat-Tanaka

Yael Eylat-Tanaka
Uncounted Victim

Аннотация

This is the story of the other victims of German occupation in France, the story of my mother who was separated from her family and fled, and the torture that remained with her forever.

These are the memoirs as told to me by my mother. I have attempted to tell her story as accurately as she presented them to me, piecing together her own written journals, along with various anecdotes that supplemented and peppered stories over my lifetime, without embellishing by interposing my own interpretations of events. This is not a suspense novel, although certainly the events recounted herein were suspenseful to those who experienced them. They certainly sounded suspenseful to me as I heard and read them. So as to avert embarrassment to anyone reading these words, I have on occasion chosen to use pseudonyms, while trying to keep the gist of the story true to form. My mother was French, and occasionally some French words and phrases appear throughout the text. I have included translations wherever appropriate. She also lived and studied in Italy before moving to Israel, and eventually to the United States. Again, where words and phrases are included in those languages, and I have included translations to the best of my ability.

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I wish I could bid the reader enjoy the story; but it is admittedly too terrible to be enjoyed. My heart aches for my mother – and for so many others who have suffered similar experiences, and worse.

Yael Eylat-Tanaka

Tampa 2016

Prologue

This is not an autobiography. Every word written here is as truthful as my memories can be, filtered through the passage of time and my experiences. Yet much has been omitted out of respect to those no longer with us who cannot correct whatever events can be seen only from their own point of view. Other situations have been left out to avoid any embarrassment to those who are still among us.

The purpose of these pages is to record salient portions of my life that I never had the opportunity to describe fully. I am thinking in particular about my daughter whom I did not wish to tire with stories of events that happened before she was born or while she was growing up. Then, more pressing life problems came to the fore, and it seemed that these reminiscences always took a back seat to more immediate concerns. Yet our past is forever imprinted in my memory, at times in convoluted and distorted schemes, to be sure, but nevertheless, our memories are the fabric of what makes us who we are, permeating every cell of our being. I have endeavored to always look ahead to a brighter future rather than dwell on the past, and yet the past has always been an inescapable part of who I had become. We cannot change the events themselves; at best, we can only reframe our outlook and understanding of those events. I have not always been successful.

Chapter 1
Childhood

I know very little of my grandparents. I have only vague memories of the maternal side of the family, but have a much more vivid memory of my paternal grandmother, Memé, who was a very strong presence in our family. My father was deeply attached to her. She was the matriarch in the family, eclipsing my own mother to the latter's deep frustration. When my own daughter was kidnapped by her father, Memé told me that she, herself, had been divorced from her first unhappy marriage.

My family hailed from Turkey, and my memories of childhood stories include the life of my predecessors and their culture. My father told the story of my grandfather bringing Sultan Hamid, to whom he had been counselor, a beautiful parrot that he had caught on his land, or of returning from the vineyards after the grape harvest, with the children perched atop donkeys, and as they passed the cemetery at dusk, the adults would tell them stories of the dead and the children would blanch in terror at what they imagined what going on.

Although I didn't know my grandfather, he was a very religious Jew, and as such observed the tradition of never shaving his beard. If a single hair fell from it, he would conserve it in his prayer book. He took a new wife, my grandmother Memé, after

she divorced her first abusive husband and had abandoned her first born son. He, himself, had grown children who were older than she, who persecuted her, but he, himself, treated her with love and respect.

These flimsy memories are all I have of my origins. Tiny threads of my childhood, perhaps peppered with some photographs and anecdotes from other members of my family.

My mother was also Turkish. From her stories of her youth in Izmir, she and her family lived in the Greek and Armenian Quarter of Izmir. My grandfather owned a china and glass shop and sent his children to a missionary school headed by Scottish Protestant missionaries. I remember how my mother glowed when she sang the hymns she had learned at school and spoke of Mr. Murray, the principal, who used to call for her to come and stand in the front row so that he could better hear her singing. Of course, those were religious hymns, and the name of Jesus was frequently heard in the house, which displeased my father deeply.

Living among the Greeks and Armenians, my mother learned to speak those languages and sing their songs, which thrilled me as a little girl. I still remember some of them, even though I never learned their meaning. Those songs sounded very romantic to me, and I would often ask my mother to teach me Greek. Since she attended a Scottish missionary school, all her schooling was held in English and she remained fluent in this language her entire life.

Naturally, she also spoke fluent Turkish. When the grownups

at home did not want the children to understand something, they would switch to Turkish when speaking among themselves, until the children began to understand the gist of their conversations.

As a young woman, my mother's best friend in Izmir was Allegra Romano. The two did everything together. I found some photographs of the two with some inscriptions on the back from my mother to Allegra written in French. My mother and her family emigrated to France after World War I, as did her friend, Allegra, and the two remained friends, eventually marrying two brothers, my father and my uncle, Raphael. However, because my father was so much in love with my mother and my uncle, Raphael was rather a rake, my aunt Allegra became deeply jealous and resentful of my mother, and their friendship floundered. I believe that my mother still loved her and missed her deeply in spite of the deterioration of their relationship.

When my mother and her family were still living in Izmir during the Great War, they witnessed the terrible massacres of the Greek and Armenian communities by the Turks, which event has since been called genocide. This frightened them so much that my mother suffered for a long time with stomach ulcers and nightmares. The savagery of the Turks toward the Greeks and Armenians living in Turkey caused a tremendous exodus of the Jewish population who had lived there since their expulsion from Spain in 1492 by Isabel of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon at the behest of the Inquisition. The Jewish community in Turkey realized that the previous five centuries of more or less tranquil

life in Turkey had come to an end, and all those who had the means emigrated. Many fled to the Americas. My extended family emigrated to France, and settled in Lyon.

My mother and her family arrived in France about 1920, and went to live with her married brother, Vidal, in Lyon. My uncle was quite friendly with two young men, Henri and Raphael, who had also emigrated to France from Turkey around the same time as he had. My uncle liked one of the brothers, Henri, and decided to introduce him to his sister, and so invited him to his home. My mother told me later that she was doing some needlework in the living room, and my father started teasing her and playing with her threads. That was their introduction. They courted and married shortly afterward.

Since they had been newcomers to France, the newlyweds were of meager means, so they began their married life in the same apartment that the two brothers shared with their mother. My mother's best friend, Allegra, was eventually introduced to Henri's brother, Raphael, when she visited my mother after her marriage, and eventually they married too. They also lived in the same apartment with their mother, my grandmother, Memé, who had a veritable court over which to rule. Imagine: Two sons who both married and both chose to share a single apartment. From what I understand, life was not always very easy for the two young couples, particularly because my grandmother favored Raphael who was much less serious than his brother. I remember him always joking and laughing. He also played around a lot.

From the stories I heard as a child, he frequently did not come home in the evenings, to the great chagrin of his bride. My father, by contrast, was very much in love with my mother, and was home every evening, being always very affectionate with her. She became pregnant with my oldest brother almost immediately.

The two young couples lived with their mother in the same apartment. Slowly, however, my mother's friendship with Allegra began to deteriorate and frictions developed. Compounding the tensions, my grandmother favored Raphael and his jovial and irresponsible manner, and harbored a corresponding antipathy toward my mother. That my mother was pregnant and Allegra was not only added to Allegra's resentment.

Fortunately, my mother's first born was a boy, my brother, René, whose Jewish name was Salomon, and everyone started calling him Momon, and later, simply Momo. Shortly afterward, my mother became pregnant again, this time with me. By then, Allegra had become pregnant. The two young brides had to contend with their mother-in-law who decreed that my mother should not have a second baby so soon after the first. From the family stories I heard, I understand that Memé was quite unpleasant to my mother during her second pregnancy with me, while being very attentive toward Allegra who was carrying her favorite son's child. It may be that my grandmother's dislike of me began even before I was born, and diminished only when she became senile. I was later told by my grandfather that Memé did not visit my mother in the hospital when I was born, and when

I was brought home, she never even approached my crib to look at her new granddaughter.

When I was five or six, my mother told us that I was born at Hotel-Dieu Hospital in Lyon. As all small children, my two brothers and I were quite curious and excited to learn about our own beginnings. This was the kind of rare adult conversation destined to keep us quiet and mesmerized at least for a few minutes. Our mother went on telling her young audience that this hospital was run by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, and that one of the sisters shook her in her bed, urging her to "Wake up, my chubby one, you have a beautiful baby girl." I felt extremely proud to have been characterized as a beautiful baby girl, not realizing at that time that no nurse would call a newborn beautiful. While basking in that gratifying emotion, I vaguely wondered whether babies were born during the night when their mothers slept, and why would my mother sleep in a hospital? These questions were never answered to my satisfaction.

On and off while still very young, I garnered some snippets of information about my early childhood. Maman always used to say that I had been a very easy baby who could quietly play with a toy for hours. She mentioned that because of my quietness, she once forgot a medicated plaster she had applied to my back when I was ill, and when she finally remembered and ran to my crib, my back was all swollen and red hot; yet I had not cried to alert her. Of course, I did not remember the incident. By contrast, the rest of my childhood was anything but quiet.

The seeds of self-esteem and self-worth are sown early. I wonder now if that incident had infused in me the concept that I was not worth remembering, even by my own mother …

When I was about three, my family moved to Valence, about one hundred kilometers south of Lyon, a medieval city on the river Rhône, where two of my uncles had previously settled. That is where I grew up, sandwiched between my two brothers, René, a year and a half older, and Jacques, two years younger. My paternal grandmother, Memé, lived with us, and occasionally, my paternal grandfather would stay with us for extended visits. He was extremely affectionate with us three children. He was a religious Jew, and I can still see him in my mind's eye praying every morning turned toward Jerusalem, his head covered with his tallith and tefillim on his left arm. We are Sephardic Jews, and as such, the Jewish laws and way of life were observed at home, particularly by my mother and grandmother. No work was done on Shabbat or during the Holy Days. This is curious, considering my parents' education and exposure at a young age to Christian missionaries.

I recall how Maman used to light the candles on on the mantle of the fireplace in her bedroom on Shabbat eve. For the Holy Days, she would cover the beds with lace bedspreads and pillows. To this day, the scent of hyacinths, carnations and mimosa transports me over the years to our apartment at Passover time when Maman used to decorate the rooms with these flowers and the precious handmade lace bedspread made by my uncle's

mother-in-law.

I had been introduced to that lacework on a trip to Lyon one day during childhood. My mother took the three of us to stay a while with her brother, and when my mother saw the intricate lacework done by his mother-in-law, she ordered a bedspread especially for her. She received it sometime later, and used it only on the High Holy Days. I later learned that it was because the poor woman and her son had seen their entire families deported by the Germans to Drancy, a concentration camp south of Paris, and no one ever heard any more about them. My poor aunt must have had a broken heart thinking about the agonizing death of her poor mother and father, her many brothers, and then, in 1944, the death of her own son at 17 in a bombardment as he was saving people in a shelter. My aunt's son was later decorated by their town posthumously, but I am sure she would have rather had her son than the medal. How many times did I thank God that my own parents died in their beds and not in the horrors of the Holocaust …

Many years later, when my brother, René, went to Israel to visit our parents, my mother gave that gorgeous lace bedspread to his wife as a gift, who later gave it to me as a remembrance of my mother.

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It is Hannukah 1991. I was lighting the candles this evening when a childhood memory suddenly emerged. It is again Hannukah, this time before World War II, and we are all gathered

in our kitchen in Bourg-les-Valence around the hannukiah. I must have been around nine or ten years old. We had a visitor with the family, a Mr. Yerushalmi, probably a friend of my parents, but I had never met him before. That evening, it was my turn to light the hannukiah, as we three children took turns each evening. As I was about to light the first candle and we were starting to say the blessing, Mr. Yerushalmi suddenly stopped everything with an anguished appeal to my parents: "Certainly, the girl is not going to light the hannukiah; she might be impure!" I was so ignorant of adult things that beside the humiliation of being called "impure" with its dirty connotation, particularly in public and in the presence of my father and brothers, that I did not understand what our guest meant. Being his hosts, my parents asked me to pass the taper to one of my brothers, and I was left to wonder what had been my sin, if any. I do not recall having had any explanation later, but the incident reinforced in me a feeling of ostracism I had always felt, since I was constantly reminded that I, being a girl, could not do what my brothers were allowed to do.

I did eventually understand what our guest meant. He must have been one of the very Orthodox Jews who look upon women as "impure vessels." Many years later, in Israel, when my father and brother, Jacques, were so immersed in their study of Buddhism and used to read aloud to each other from their books, I happened to pass by the room where they sat and heard of them reading, "…car la femme est impure …" (…because woman is

impure). I ran out of the room shocked that even with my mother, my daughter and myself in the house, they did not hesitate to read such insulting material aloud. Naturally, such experience would not endear the study of this philosophy to me, much as my father encouraged me to.

We were taught very little about Judaism, yet certain traditions were deeply ingrained in our family. We knew we were Jews, and when we occasionally returned home from school crying that children had called us filthy Jew, our father would tell us that we should be proud to be Jews. In spite of his assertion, we felt different from the other children, and sometimes disliked by them. Our festivals were not those of our friends, and we did not go to church or catechism as they did, and our day of rest was Saturday instead of Sunday.

At Passover, after the house had been given a thorough cleaning of all traces of leavened foodstuff, we ate matzoh for eight days. The first night was always devoted to the Seder with the long Haggadah recounting the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt read by my father.

At the time, particularly for my family with its emphasis on tradition, there was no question that I would celebrate my Bat Mitzvah. I was not even aware that such a ceremony was conducted for young girls in other countries, but my brother, René, started studying for his Bar Mitzvah that would mark his entry into manhood and the Jewish community when he reached the age of 13. I loved him very much and felt very close to him,

and I aped everything he did. Listening to him memorize his lessons about Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Faith, I learned them too and the first lines of one prayer in particular are still clear in my mind: "Oui, je promets du fonds de mon âme de te rester fidèle, o, mon père et mon dieu …" (Yes, I promise from the depth of my soul to stay faithful to you, oh, my father and my God …)

We fasted on Yom Kippur, the children as long as we could last, and when the goodies prepared for us on the kitchen table tempted us beyond control, we broke the fast, sneaking *rechicas* and the delicious *trovados*, the traditional cookies dipped in honey that our grandmother had baked for the breaking of the fast.

That was more or less the extent of our religious upbringing. Maman and Memé taught us what they had been taught, but our father preferred that we learn in a more enlightened way. He did not believe that all traditions were worth living by. Today, his outlook would have been considered that of a reform Jew, allowing his mind to question and to interpret the Scriptures more intellectually. As a result, my father was less orthodox in his understanding of his own Jewish faith than either my mother or grandmother, and rather than seeing his children taught religion in what he viewed as a narrow way, he decreed that no religion at all was to be imparted to us. The unforeseen consequences of that decision would be revealed in the not too distant future with a tragedy that would rock our family.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

There were so few Jews in Valence before World War II that there was no temple or synagogue in the city. One year, however, my parents decided to conduct services in our apartment during the High Holy Days. Since a quorum of ten men is necessary to conduct the prayers, barely that number of Jewish men was found in Valence and invited to our home. My parents moved most of the furniture out of the dining room and covered the armoire with a white sheet. A Torah had been brought in from one of the temples in Lyon and placed in that makeshift Ark. The women sat in the other rooms and looked on from the doorways as the men prayed in the "sanctuary." I vaguely remember an incident during those Holy Days when one of the men sat in the sanctuary during services and crossed his legs, putting one foot atop the opposite knee. This created quite a stir among the other men who reproached him for his lack of respect in this "holy" place. I mention this as an instance of how sacred Judaism was to my family in spite of my father's modern attitude and edict that the children not be given any particular religious education.

That year, since we were going to have a "temple" in our home, along with many guests, my mother had my aunt, Allegra, sew a new silk dress for me. It was light blue and the skirt finely pleated. The fittings at my aunt's house and my joy at having to wear such a delightful new dress during the Holy Days knew no bounds! Sadly, I had disobeyed my parents or gotten into some mischief the week before the festival, and I was punished where

it really hurt: my vanity. I was forbidden to wear my new dress which hung ready and gorgeous for all to see on the hanger, but not on me! And I never did wear it, for I suddenly outgrew it and the dress became much too small. This disappointment marked me quite deeply, for I realized that I must have been not only a handful for my parents, but certainly quite vain. I can still hear my mother's friends commenting what a beautiful little girl she had, and Maman trying to curb what evidently had gone to my head. My best friend had a mirror in which I admired my long curls, to my father's despair, to the point that he vowed to cut off all my hair while I slept if I did not stop gazing into that mirror! I cannot believe that he meant it, even though I believed him then.

I never did stop looking at myself in the mirror.

When we were still very small, Maman took the three of us to Lyon to stay with her brother's family. They lived in the old picturesque part of Lyon, Place St. Jean, and I still have a few disconnected memories of those days, feeding the pigeons on Place des Terreaux, or sitting on the potty in one of the bedrooms. One Saturday morning, when leaving the Temple du Quai Tilsitt, Maman stopped to talk with a gentleman of her acquaintance on the steps of the temple, and I jumped and hugged and kissed him because he said something nice to me. I was sternly reminded that little girls do not hug and kiss strange gentlemen. I already was impulsive, but I never could resist a smile and kindness. Many years later, Maman told me that she had temporarily left my father when she took us to Lyon because

her mother-in-law, Memé, was making her life miserable and my father seemed more attentive to his mother than to her. He wrote her some love letters, begging her to return and telling her how empty the house felt without her and the children. He missed hearing her sing, he wrote, and he loved her. We were already back at home and many years had passed when she showed me those letters.

As mentioned earlier, my father's brother, Raphael, lived with our family in Valence, along with his wife, Allegra, and their son, Sami. Sami was an only child, and he practically grew up with us and used to call my brother, René, his frère-cousin (brother-cousin). My grandmother, Memé, adored him, it was said, because he was the child of her favorite son. She also favored my brother, René, because he was the family's first born. René was a very good child, quiet and serious and hard-working, with a gift for music. I admired him very much and would memorize whatever lessons I heard him recite when doing his homework. I had a good memory and this was good preparation for my own classes later on; but while I was a good student, I was also a rebel. I would rather play with my dolls than do anything else! Once, René and I were charged with knitting a sweater, each knitting one-half of it; by the time René had finished his half, the two sleeves and the collar, I was still struggling with the front. The ribbing was fierce, yet he was so good at it, and I was too lazy and only wanted to play. Also, I was unruly and impertinent, talking back to my parents. I must have been quite a handful!

I felt unloved, particularly when compared unfavorably to my older brother who could do no wrong. In retrospect, I realize that I have always felt very close to him and always loved him very much. I suppose I learned to love him by imitation! This deep love has remained with me all my life. Evidently, whatever we learn as children molds us and colors our personalities forever. There has been no sibling rivalry between the two of us, as I do not remember feeling any jealousy toward him, and I believe the deep love and profound affinity between us have kept me from being resentful in spite of my parents' and grandmother's attitude toward me and their constant praise of my brother.

When René was nine years old, he was enrolled at the music school. All my pleas to be enrolled too came to naught: I was a girl and was not allowed to do things that boys did. René excelled in this, too, and soon started learning to play the clarinet and eventually joined the Valence Orchestra as clarinetist. A school friend of mine who attended the same music school told me in admiration that my brother was "hors concours," meaning beyond rating and raves. I loved him and basked in his glory, and was happy turning the pages of his music when he played his clarinet at home. Our apartment was always full of his music, either when he was practicing his scales or playing pieces like Rimsky-Korsakoff's Shéhérazade, or von Soupé's Cavalérie Légère or Le Marché Persan. Nowadays, whenever I hear Weber's Clarinet Concerto or Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, I am again that little girl turning the pages for her beloved brother.

How I loved and admired him! I still do, of course, in spite of all the years, all the changes, all the distancing and coming close again – he is and always will be my anchor, the brother I look up to, the brother I loved because he was everything I was not: quiet and serious, good and beloved, and I ebullient, playful, rebellious … and unloved. Did the fact that he was so loved make him so sure of himself and lovable, or was he loved because he was lovable in the first place? I suspect the former, and believe that to love a child is the greatest gift parents can impart on him or her, and that is the root of self-worth and self-confidence.

I went to an all-girls' school. The boys' school was separated by the nursery school, and I remember how I wondered at age eleven or twelve, why the older school girls found the boys so interesting. Once, before classes began, I was told that my brother, René, had been run over by a car. I ran out of the courtyard and saw him lying in the street, a crowd surrounding him. I could not help crying upon seeing him outstretched on the pavement and in pain. Much later, I identified that pain when I read a letter from the French poet, Madam de Sévigne to her ailing daughter, saying, "J'ai mal a votre gorge …" (your throat hurts me …)

I loved school. I enjoyed learning and must have been a bright child because I skipped the second grade. Being a star pupil made me the teacher's pet in most of my classes. However, my friends and I were in dread of the principal. Mademoiselle Herbet was an extremely severe unmarried woman who was a holy terror to all of us girls. What a surprise she was for me, though! I came to love

Mademoiselle Herbet and I am sure she loved me. I could read her affection and approval in her eyes, and she even invited me to her apartment to have tea with her after school. Her apartment was located on the second floor of the school, and we tip-toed with awe when we passed her door on our way to classes. I recall that one day she called on me in class and asked that I recite our lesson for that day. In great shame, and after a long silence, I admitted to her that I had not studied the lesson. She responded, "Too bad, you can sit down. I am giving you a zero." That zero was a terrible mark on my record, and I felt quite humiliated. Mademoiselle Herbet called on some other pupils, and listening to them, I was able to memorize the geometry theorems that I had not studied the night before. I whispered to my friends that I knew the lesson now, and in great excitement they told the teacher that I could recite it now. Mademoiselle Herbet called on me again, and I recited the theorems without error, to the uproar acclaim of the entire class who begged her to lift the awful zero. She did to my great relief. What a victory that was!

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During one of my recent trips to France, I went to see my elementary school along the Rhône. Nothing had changed. I could even smell the chalk! With tears in my eyes, I remembered my innocent childhood gone by. I wanted to run and tell my parents that I was home again and had seen my school … but of course, they were nowhere to be found; gone with my childhood and the best part of my life. I wanted so much to tell them all I

had seen and experienced, how the streets that looked so large as a child were now so narrow. I wanted to tell them that I was back at the beautiful park where Maman used to take us three children, that I had seen our old friends who were still living in their apartment on the next street, and that they had not changed at all. They told me that Martine, my friend, was now a nurse and living in Germany. I wanted so much to share with them all this nostalgia … but of course, I could not. I felt as if I had lost them again and experienced my grief anew. I stopped at the boulangerie where we bought our bread and cakes and found it exactly as I remembered it, with the same aromas, the same variety of breads warm from the oven, but it was not the same.

It is true that one can never go back …

The games we would play as children … Some mornings, my father would call us from his bed inquiring whether we were awake. If we were, he would say, "Parlons de lit à lit" (Let's talk from bed to bed). We would start chatting, eventually joining him in his bed, but I always waited for him to tell us stories about "l'Italie," imaging sunny vistas, but he would correct me and remind me that we were talking "de lit à lit," an alliteration.

And I had my dolls. A particularly beloved one had her carriage that I had furnished with pillows and blankets. One day while playing with this doll, I realized that my mother had gone out shopping and left me at home with my grandmother who was forever cursing me, and I began crying in despair at the prospect that my mother might never return. I still remember the pain I

felt and the fear of never seeing her again.

My grandmother had an incomprehensible hatred toward me. She would often curse me, and my mother would not dare defend me. My father, her son, would not dare offend her by standing up to her. For example, she was very handy with her fingers, and was always doing some needlework. I asked her once to show me how to make the heel of some stockings, and she answered, "Learn by yourself as I have!" Innocently, wishing to ingratiate myself, I said, "But you are an accomplished housewife," which was a compliment in those days. Her response was, "May you never reach the day of being an accomplished housewife!" I ran to tell my mother who was so shocked, she sent me to ask my father what this meant. He asked me where I heard that, and when I told him that Memé had said that to me, he became pale, but did nothing. She knew that she could do or say anything and no one would ever oppose her.

Another time she said, "Que te quedaras en la cuna!" (You should have died in your cradle). No wonder I was in fear of being abandoned by my mother into the hands of such a harpy!

At about that time, when I was around ten or eleven, our school distributed some kinds of shoes or clogs to children in need. The principal of the boys' school was in charge of the program, and when I presented myself to him to receive the clogs, he touched me in an inappropriate way. I was so ashamed that I did not say a thing to anyone.

Then a grocer in the next street where my mother used to send

us shopping did the same thing in broad daylight. This time I told my mother, and both she and my father went to confront him, but he denied it.

Later, I was hospitalized at Granges Blanches in Lyon, and a young intern touched me inappropriately while he was examining me. Again, I told my parents who made a big to-do, but he again denied everything.

Years later in Italy, a priest hugged me in his office and inserted his hands under my blouse. I reported him to the bishop, but the priest denied it, of course.

In those days, women's voices did not have as much weight as they do today, although even these days, they seem to have tall fences to climb.

Throughout my life, the men over me took advantage of their rank with their remarks or behaviors, and the only thing I could do was leave if I did not wish to tolerate that treatment. I always worked for the president or senior partner of a firm, and unfortunately, there was no one above these men to whom I could complain, and they seemed to exploit that situation. The only time I reported it was to the unemployment office who called me and my boss to a hearing, but as I was new in the United States and not yet fluent in English, I was penalized by the unemployment office for having "lied."

To be sure, the old ways of doing things shock the modern generations. Spanking children used to be common place, and for the most part, nobody died. But that is not the type of

abuse I'm talking about. I refer here to taking advantage of those who cannot defend themselves for one reason or another, either because of their youthful age or their gender; their culture or physical strength.

Indeed, abuse of the weaker by the stronger has always existed, and it is only now that women and children have begun to expose it, and the media has become more sensitive to exploring such unsavory stories.

Abuse has taken many forms through the ages and across cultures, from stoning to driving spikes through wrists and ankles for presumed blasphemy, drawing and quartering for high treason or incinerating people. All such atrocities deserve their own obituary, a prayer and resolve that they should never be allowed to be repeated.

As awful as that butchery was, every bit of suffering inflicted on any helpless creature, should be considered despicable and reprehensible.

When I was nine or ten years old, I had my tonsils and adenoids out. At that time, this operation was done without anesthesia. I have never understood why the adults in charge thought it was all right to submit a child to such suffering simply because the child was helpless, either because of its age, or because it was rendered so by the application of restraints. Didn't those adults have memories of their own childhood to think back to? Was it that the operation was presumably so quick that it would be just like tearing off a Band-Aid, and the child would

soon forget about it? Here I am writing about it all these many years later, still painfully traumatized by the experience.

I was rolled into a folded sheet the length of my entire body, like a sausage, and a nurse held me on her knees and held my head back so that the surgeon could get inside my mouth. My screams didn't matter; in fact, they helped him get the mouth gag in, and in an avalanche of incredible burning pain from which I thought I would die, the surgeon worked inside my mouth. I don't remember how I breathed through the blood and his fingers and that damned gag and the nurse forcing my head back. Believe me, it was not a quick stripping off of a Band-Aid.

My daughter suffered a similar fate, but fortunately she was given ether. However, to hear her tell the story, the very act of being tightly restrained on the lap of the surgical attendant with her head forced back, unable to cooperate and participate in her own care, was devastating to her. She feels traumatized to this day by that experience of a procedure which to so many otherwise wise adults is nothing more than a temporary discomfort.

At another time, while at camp, my friends and I ate too many plums along with their pits which led me to have an attack of appendicitis. Our usual surgeon was away, so an old doctor operated on me and botched the operation. The following day he had to reopen the wound to clean out an infection in my stomach, but this time he went in without anesthesia. You can still hear my screams in New York City!

We grew up. René joined the Boy Scouts, and I was allowed to join the Girl Scouts.

Chapter 2
Germany Invades France

I was 12 years old and living with my family in Bourg-les-Valence when World War II began in September of 1939. I heard the adults speaking of Neville Chamberlain, then British Prime Minister, who had gone to Germany to try and convince Hitler to be less fanatical in his politics of annexation (he had already annexed Austria and the Sunderland in Czechoslovakia. We had anticipated war after Hitler's rise in Germany, when he finally took Danzig in Poland on September 1, 1939 (now called Gdansk). There had been international appeals and conferences to avert that catastrophe, with Neville Chamberlain returning with his slogan, "Peace in our times" by which he seemed to appease Hitler and the world. In France, we sang patriotic songs before the war challenging Hitler to come to the Maginot Line, a line of defense built along the border with Germany, but leaving the Belgian border undefended and through which the German hordes eventually invaded France. But, in the span of ten months, French forces were beaten and defeated and overrun by the German army that crossed the Maginot Line.

Whatever peace had been agreed to between France and Germany lasted just a few months, and in 1940 the French army capitulated and the German armies invaded France. The very

nationalistic French media kept singing popular songs, taunting Hitler and defying him to come to the Maginot Line, a fortified bunker built between France and Germany and meant to stop the invading German armies. Instead, Hitler's armies bypassed the front and the Maginot Line, instead crossing undefended Belgium and making their way to Paris.

One day, Rene's best friend came to our home pale and haggard, and told us that an armistice had been asked by Maréchal Pétain and that France had lost the war. The French government had left Paris and taken refuge in Vichy, and the German forces had invaded France.

The French government retired to Vichy in the center of France under the direction of old Maréchal Pétain and Prime Minister Pierre Laval. Both of them were considered collaborators by the French population because the Vichy government was very accommodating to the occupying German army that imposed all kinds of restrictions on the French. Together with the government, two military academies, St. Cyr and Le Prytanée Militaire, left the occupied zone and installed themselves in military barracks that had been vacated by the French soldiers sent to the front. All the available food had been requisitioned by the Germans and we started having butcher shops selling horse meat which, by the way, was very tasty.

The first German orders were that every Jew in the occupied zone had to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothing. The Jews had a curfew and even though we lived in an unoccupied

zone, we kept hearing that some of the French population helped the Germans arrest Jews during the night. These poor people were never heard from again.

We also learned from those who were successful in bypassing the Demarcation Line that thousands of Parisian Jews, including children, were rounded up and dropped at the Paris Velodrome d'Hiver and "forgotten" there. Those who survived the cold and exposure were taken to Auschwitz.

We lived in constant fear. We were bombarded by the allies' planes that were trying to destroy the two French military barracks in our neighborhood, and we feared being awakened during the night to be deported, betrayed by our own compatriots.

We were hungry. Our rations included a single 200- gram piece of bread per day. Of course, we had no eggs, flour, butter, sugar or chocolate. Only horse meat was available, but that also soon disappeared from the shops, being diverted to the occupying troops.

One of the first orders imposed by the German army was a ban on any nationalistic expressions of patriotic songs or military parades in the city. The 14th of July being France's Bastille Day, everyone was in suspense anxiously anticipating what the cadets in our city would do considering the Germans' ban. How would they celebrate France's Independence Day?

On the 14th of July 1940, all the cadets from St. Cyr and Le Prytanée military academies, donning their best uniforms,

flaunted their disdain and paraded on the city's boulevards where the German Commandantur had its headquarters. They sang patriotic songs, such as,

Vous avez eu l'Alsace et la Lorraine
Mais malgré tout nous resterons Français
Vous avez eu l'Alsace et la Lorraine
Mais notre coeur vous ne l'aurez jamais.
You got Alsace and Lorraine
But nevertheless we'll remain French
You got Alsace and Lorraine
But our hearts you'll never get.

Amazingly, there were no fearsome reprisals or punishments aside from forbidding the cadets from leaving their barracks for a month. There was great joy, as the reprisals could have been extremely severe.

Among the people who succeeded in crossing the demarcation line, one of them stands out in my mind: He was a Hungarian Jew, Mr. Spitzer, who had been living in Paris and was now trying to survive in the unoccupied zone.

He worked as a "plongeur" (dish washer) at a restaurant and used to come to our home for some companionship. In his broken French he told us that one day, as he was coming home from work, he saw his wife and children being taken away in a truck by the Germans. He knew that he was helpless and couldn't do anything to save them. I was crying and I remember my father saying "Tu vois, tu as fait pleurer my fille." (You see, you made

my daughter cry).

His was hardly an isolated story in those days. We all feared for our lives. We all feared deportation, and worse.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.