

Preface

On 5 January 1942, a French police inspector named Rondeaux, stationed in the 10th arrondissement of Paris, caught sight of a man he believed to be a wanted member of the French Resistance. André Pican was a teacher, and he was indeed the head of the Front National of the Resistance in the Seine-Inférieure; there was a price of 30,000 francs on his head for the derailing of a train carrying requisitioned goods and war materiel to Germany.

Rondeaux's superior, a zealous anti-communist Frenchman and active collaborator of the Gestapo called Lucien Rottée, thought that Pican might lead them to other members of the Resistance. Eleven inspectors were detailed to follow, but not to arrest, him.

Over the next two weeks, they searched the streets of Paris in vain. Then, on 21 January, an inspector carrying out a surveillance of the Café du Rond near the Porte d'Orléans thought he saw a man answering to Pican's description. He followed him and watched as he stopped to talk to a thickset man in his thirties, with a bony face and a large moustache. Rottée's men stayed close. On 11 February, Pican was seen standing outside a shop window, then, at '15.50' entering a shop in the company of a woman '28-30 years of age, 1.70m high, slender, with brown hair curling at the ends'; she was wearing a 'Prussian blue coat, with a black belt and light grey woollen stockings, *sans élégance*'. The policeman, not knowing who she was, christened her 'Femme Buisson-St-Louis' after a nearby métro station; Pican became 'Buisson'. After watching a film in Le Palais des Glaces cinema, Pican and Femme Buisson were seen to buy biscuits and oysters before parting on the rue Saint-Maur.

In the following days, Pican met 'Motte Piquet', 'Porte Souleau'

and 'Femme No. 1 de Balard'. Not knowing who they were, the police officers gave them the names of the places where they were first seen.

On 12 February, Femme Buisson was seen to enter the Café au Balcon, where she was handed a small suitcase by 'Merilmontant' – a short woman in her mid-thirties, 'c. 1.55m, dark brown hair in a net, black coat, chic fauve leather bag, red belt'. By now, Pican had also met and exchanged packets with 'Femme Brunet St Lazare' ('34, 1.60m, very dark, pointed nose, beige coat, hood lined in a patterned red, yellow and green material'), and with 'Femme Claude Tillier' ('1.65m, 33, dark, somewhat corpulent, bulky cardigan and woollen socks'). 'Femme Vincennes' ('1.60m, 32, fair hair, glasses, brown sheepskin fur coat, beige wool stockings') was seen talking to 'Femme Jenna' and 'Femme Dorian'. One of the French police officers, Inspector Deprez, was particularly meticulous in his descriptions of the women he followed, noting on the buff rectangular report cards which each inspector filled out every evening that 'Femme République' had a small red mark on her right nostril and that her grey dress was made of angora wool.

By the middle of February, Pican and his contacts had become visibly nervous, constantly looking over their shoulders to see if they were being followed. Rottée began to fear that they might be planning to flee. The police inspectors themselves had also become uneasy, for by the spring of 1942 Paris was full of posters put up by the Resistance saying that the French police were no better than the German Gestapo, and should be shot in legitimate self-defence. On 14 February, Pican and Femme Brunet were seen buying tickets at the Gare Montparnasse for a train the following morning to Le Mans, and then arranging for three large suitcases to travel with them in the goods wagon. Rottée decided that the moment had come to move. At three o'clock on the morning of 15 February, sixty police inspectors set out across Paris to make their arrests.

Over the next forty-eight hours they banged on doors, forced their way into houses, shops, offices and storerooms, searched cellars and attics, pigsties and garden sheds, larders and cupboards. They came away with notebooks, addresses, false IDs, explosives, revolvers, tracts, expertly forged ration books and birth certificates, typewriters, blueprints for attacks on trains and dozens of

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torn postcards, train timetables and tickets, the missing halves destined to act as passwords when matched with those held by people whose names were in the notebooks. When Pican was picked up, he tried to swallow a piece of paper with a list of names; in his shoes were found addresses, an anti-German flyer and 5,000 francs. Others, when confronted by Rottée's men, shouted for help, struggled, and tried to run off; two women bit the inspectors.

As the days passed, each arrest led to others. The police picked up journalists and university lecturers, farmers and shopkeepers, concierges and electricians, chemists and postmen and teachers and secretaries. From Paris, the net widened, to take in Cherbourg, Tours, Nantes, Evreux, Saintes, Poitiers, Ruffec and Angoulême. Rottée's inspectors pulled in Pican's wife, Germaine, also a teacher and the mother of two small daughters; she was the liaison officer for the Communist Party in Rouen. They arrested Georges Politzer, a distinguished Hungarian philosopher who taught at the Sorbonne, and his wife Maï, 'Vincennes', a strikingly pretty midwife, who had dyed her blond hair black as a disguise for her work as courier and typist for the Underground, and not long afterwards, Charlotte Delbo, assistant to the well-known actor-manager Louis Jouvet.

Then there was Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, 'Femme Tricanet', niece of the creator of the Babar stories and contributor to the clandestine edition of *L'Humanité*, and Danielle Casanova, 'Femme No. 1 de Balard', a dental surgeon from Corsica, a robust, forceful woman in her thirties, with bushy black eyebrows and a strong chin. Maï, Marie-Claude and Danielle were old friends.

When taken to Paris's central Prefecture and questioned, some of those arrested refused to speak, others were defiant, others scornful. They told their interrogators that they had no interest in politics, that they knew nothing about the Resistance, that they had been given packets and parcels by total strangers. Husbands said that they had no idea what their wives did all day, mothers that they had not seen their sons in months.

Day after day, Rottée and his men questioned the prisoners, brought them together in ones and twos, wrote their reports and then set out to arrest others. What they did not put down on paper was that the little they were able to discover was often the

result of torture, of slapping around, punching, kicking, beating about the head and ears, and threats to families, particularly children. The detainees should be treated, read one note written in the margin of a report, *avec égard*, with consideration. The words were followed by a series of exclamation marks. Torture had become a joke.

When, towards the end of March, what was now known as *l'affaire Pican* was closed down, Rottée announced that the French police had dealt a 'decisive' blow to the Resistance. Their haul included three million anti-German and anti-Vichy tracts, three tons of paper, two typewriters, eight roneo machines, 1,000 stencils, 100 kilos of ink and 300,000 francs. One hundred and thirteen people were in detention, thirty-five of them women. The youngest of these was a 16-year-old schoolgirl called Rosa Floch, who was picked up as she was writing 'Vive les Anglais!' on the walls of her *lycée*. The eldest was a 44-year-old farmer's wife, Madeleine Normand, who told the police that the 39,500 francs in her handbag were there because she had recently sold a horse.

Nine months later on the snowy morning of 24 January 1943, thirty of these women joined two hundred others, arrested like them from all parts of occupied France, on the only train, during the entire four years of German occupation, to take women from the French Resistance to the Nazi death camps.

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In the early 1960s, Charlotte Delbo, who had been one of the women on the train, sat down to write a play. She thought of herself as a messenger, bearing the story of her former companions. Twenty-three women, dressed in identical striped dresses, are talking about life in a Nazi camp. They are barely distinguishable one from another, all equally grey in their ragged and shapeless clothes, their hair and features purposefully unmemorable. 'The faces,' Delbo wrote in her stage instructions, 'do not count'; what counted was their common experience. As in a Greek tragedy, the violence is reported but not seen.

'There must be one of us who returns,' says one of the women. 'You or another, it doesn't matter. We have to fight, to stay alive, because we are fighters . . . Those who return will have won.' A

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second woman speaks up. ‘What of those we’ll leave behind?’ Another replies: ‘We won’t leave them. We’ll take them away with us.’ And then someone asks: ‘Why should you believe these stories of ghosts, ghosts who come back and who are not able to explain how?’

In 2008, I decide to go in search of the women who had left Paris, that freezing January dawn sixty-five years earlier. I wonder if any are still alive, to tell the story of what drew them into the Resistance, of how they came to fall into the hands of Rottée’s men, and what battles they and their companions fought to survive, then and later.

Charlotte Delbo, I discover, died of cancer in 1985. But seven of the women are still alive. I find Betty Langlois, at 95 an emaciated but steely woman of immense charm, with the same sharp shining brown eyes that look quizzically out of her early photographs, living in a darkened flat in the centre of Paris, full of potted plants and mahogany furniture. She gives me brightly coloured macaroons to eat and a present of a small stuffed tortoiseshell toy cat, curled up in a brown cardboard box. Though she does not have a cat herself, she loves the way this one looks so lifelike and she gives them as presents to all her friends.

Betty sends me to Cécile Charua, in Guingamp in Brittany, who laughs at my formal French, and teaches me many words of bawdy slang. At 93, Cécile is sturdy, humorous and uncomplaining. I visit them both several times, and on each occasion they talk and talk, recounting scenes and episodes that seem too fresh and real in their minds to have taken place over half a century before. Neither one of them, in all this time, has spoken much about what happened to them. It is Cécile who tells me about Madeleine Dissoubray, 91 and a retired teacher of mathematics, living on her own in a little flat on the edge of Paris, surrounded by books; and later, at the annual gathering of survivors held every 24 January, I hear Madeleine, an angular, upright woman, with a firm, carrying voice, describe to a crowd of onlookers what surviving has meant. She is unsmiling and totally contained.

I have trouble finding Poupette Alizon, who has drifted away from the others and is estranged from her daughters. But then a

lucky turn takes me to Rennes, where I trace her to a silent, elegant, impeccably furnished flat, full of paintings, overlooking a deserted park and some gardens. Poupette, at 83 somewhat younger than the others and in her long flowing lilac coat as elegant as her surroundings, seems troubled and a bit defiant. Poupette, too, talks and talks. She is lonely and life has not worked out well for her.

Lulu Thévenin, Gilberte Tamisé and Geneviève Pakula, all three alive in 2008, I cannot see: they are too frail to welcome visitors. But I meet Lulu's son Paul and her younger sister Christiane.

Betty dies, soon after my third visit, in the summer of 2009. She has had pancreatic cancer for seven years, and no one survives this kind of cancer for so long. The last time I see her, she tells me, in tones of pleasure and pride, that she has mystified all her doctors. Surviving, she says, is something that she is very good at.

Having spent many hours talking to the four surviving women, I decide to go in search of the families of those who did not return from the Nazi camps or who have since died. I find Madeleine Zani's son Pierre in a village near Metz; Germaine Renaudin's son Tony in a comfortable and pretty house in Termes d'Armagnac, not far from Bordeaux; Annette Epaud's son Claude convalescing from an operation in a nursing home in Charente; Raymonde Sergent's daughter Gisèle in Saint-Martin-le-Beau, the village near Tours in which her mother grew up. I meet Aminthe Guillon's grandson in a cafe in Paris. Each tells me their family stories and introduces me to other families. I travel up and down France, to remote farmhouses, retirement homes and apartment blocks, to villages and to the suburbs of France's principal cities. The children, some now in their seventies, produce letters, photographs, diaries. They talk about their mothers with admiration and a slight air of puzzlement, that they had been so brave and so little vainglorious about their own achievements. It makes these now elderly sons and daughters miss them all the more. When we talk about the past, their eyes sometimes fill with tears.

This is a book about friendship between women, and the importance that they attach to intimacy and to looking after each other, and about how, under conditions of acute hardship and danger, such mutual dependency can make the difference between