Henriette Soyer also wrote the following vignette about the time she was put in prison by the Germans for two months in 1943.

Her vignette:

I had given permission for a family who lived in Dieppe, which had been bombed, to stay in the first gatehouse, where our chauffeur normally kept his things. The father (of the family) was coming on Saturday, and René had asked my permission for his 19 year-old daughter to come and stay the weekend in his room at the Château, while he and his wife stayed in my children's room, in order to save it from being used by the Germans for as long as possible. This didn't bother me at all since the gatehouse was very small, and I was glad to be a help. After a little while I noticed that the girl, Pierrette, was joking and laughing casually with the soldiers whose so-called rooms she swept. I was already unhappy with this behavior, when one beautiful day in July, while the carpenters were working in the inside of the Château to install shelves for the mortgage records of the departmental refugees, I heard cries and laughter; such a ruckus that I looked out of the window. In front of the steps, decked out in a German overcoat and cap, the girl, astride a motorbike, had her arms around the necks of some soldiers, all of them guffawing and staring at the legs, especially the thighs, of the young hussy, who laughed stridently. Indignant, I exclaimed to myself "It is shameful for a French girl to behave like that; if these men have killed neither her father, nor her brothers, nor any of her kin, it is only because they haven't had the chance! She disgusts me. Marie, tell this girl that I forbid her to come back and stay here."

The next day, or the day after that, while weeding the kitchen garden with René, she said to me in an unpleasant tone:

"Thanks to you, Madame, there has been a scene at the gate; father is unhappy, and all the same, it's unfortunate that you can do nothing to help the French while you are housing Germans."

"I am obliged to put up with Germans against my will, but I will not tolerate our own people to be bad French citizens, and I will not allow a girl to behave like that with her enemies."

From that day on the young madam, whenever I met her in the office or in the kitchen, would look me up and down, insolently and mockingly.

The officer who was commanding the regiment staying at my house called himself Koupka. (He told me he was of Russian origin.) He arranged to meet me outside, approached me with a charming smile (clearly false) and asked me to do him a favor!

"I have no favors for you. While you are at my house, I am nothing."

"But Madame, we aren't allowed to keep women."
"So?"

"If you could rent a bedroom to the young girl who does your house-keeping, things might be different."

"I am neither a land-lady nor a brothel-keeper."

He left, talking about nothing in particular.

On Friday 28th, April, 1942, I was in my bedroom when Monique, my granddaughter, burst into the room, deeply agitated, crying "Mémé, Mémé, the Germans want to see you." I walked into the Dais Room where there were, in fact, two soldiers. One of them yelled at me in German,

"You call us 'filthy bloody Bosch?' Well, you'll see what price you'll pay for that tomorrow, 2pm, at the police station in Dieppe." [ed: Bosch was a derogatory term used by the French for the Germans. Literally, it means "cabbage" or "head."]

"Don't shout so loudly and don't say anything stupid. I will go to Dieppe tomorrow."

I went out behind them. In front of the little door under my window, the girl and a score of soldiers were laughing. The next day, while I was on the station platform I saw the officer and the girl getting out of a German car; the latter was taking the train.

The Police Station in Dieppe had been established in a peculiar house on "Rue du General Chanzy." Several half-broken pieces of furniture furnished a room with ragged curtains; a tall policeman lay sprawled on a tattered armchair, snoring loudly. For two hours I stayed there, watching him with disgust, waiting to be called in. Finally, a door opened abruptly, and I was told to enter a bare room where four soldiers, for four hours, yelled in my ears.
"Ah, you say zat we are 'filthy Bosch? You, you are a filthy French person; you have forgotten zat you were once young? Don't you want a woman to be gay and kind to us? You have never worked! You don't understand zat we need entertainment? Do you have an income? How much land do you have?"

I replied to all of these questions with a most profound silence, and took the last train back to Bosmelet.

Saturday 19th September: summoned again to Dieppe.

"You said that we were filthy Bosch."

“I’m not stupid enough to say it, but I certainly think it.”

“You are sentenced to two months in prison.”

A charming lawyer, the sister of my good friends the Lecoeurs, advised me to consult a lawyer who specialized in German affairs. On Tuesday 22nd September, I met Mr Croson of Cormier. Since I had suffered from a collapsed lung, he managed to get me a medical exam. On the 5th October I was called to have this examination; I found myself in Rouen, where a great devil of a German received me in an empty room, told me to sit down, grabbed my head with both hands, looked in my eyes for a moment, and shouted “You’re fine.”

On the 22nd October, the lawyer wrote to tell me that I must spend two months in prison.

On Wednesday 28th, two soldiers on a motorbike stopped in front of the chateau steps and announced that I had 8 days to take myself to the “Brand New” prison in Rouen. As my little dog Tokio was watching me in a worried way, one of the men added a little unnecessary postscript:

“Poor little beast, you’re going to be sad without your mistress, when is she leaving you?”

“Tomorrow,” and I went to pack.

Bernard Lecoure kindly accompanied me on the train the following morning. I admit that I wasn’t too worried; I rather thought that it was a curious experience to have, undergoing two months in prison, and in any case it was necessary to face this test with courage.

I had gathered together a dozen hard-boiled eggs; 24 apples; 2 pots of jam; 6 little tins of liver pâté; and a packet of biscuits. With the parcels I would receive, time would pass.

Bernard Lecoure had the nice idea of introducing me to the priest of St. Sever, the chaplain of the prison, as soon as we arrived at Rouen. I was also going to see the Prefect at Prefecture, telling myself that his recommendation could perhaps help me, but he assured me that nothing could be done against the occupying authorities. Finally, after a good lunch, Bernard Lecoure escorted me to the prison, pushing my suitcase in the little handcart he had hired.

As an enormous door, whose grim look I shall never forget, opened and then slammed shut behind me with an awful noise, I felt a blow on the chest; it was already dark, and I was blinded by the light of an oil lamp that was swinging in front of my face.

“Go on, walk when you’re told to, there’s the registry.”

“What is your name? Have you any money, or jewelry? Sign there,” then they pushed me again, the door closed and I found myself in darkness. A very tall woman whom I could barely see, draped in a dark cloak, said “Follow me.”

We ran very quickly along endless wet and slippery corridors; we entered a room not quite dark enough to prevent me seeing the water which ran down the walls; it was deathly cold.

“Open your parcel. Oh! A fork – not allowed, a knife – not allowed. Seems fairly delicate, though; I’ll allow it.” Incidentally, this knife was a family heirloom; great-uncle Gitaut during the Terror. “Pick it all up, I don’t really know where to put you, maybe in a cell; no – never mind – in the infirmary, follow me.”

We climbed a dark and sinister staircase, a little corridor, a door which the large woman opened with an enormous key. “A woman for the infirmary,” Then she disappeared, and double-locked the door.

I was in an awful little, dirty, black kitchen; a woman in a white blouse was putting curlers in her hair. She was slim and quite pretty, but surly; another woman, fat and dirty with a welcoming face said:

“Here is the bread. There’s nothing else to eat. You’re sleeping in there,” and she gestured to a door. I opened it, and found myself in a long, gloomy room. I bumped into beds to my left and right, all of them taken, and there were cries and swearing until at last I felt an empty bed, right up against the wall. I undressed with a heavy heart and fell asleep.

Oh! What a terrible night! As soon as I began to sleep, I heard someone get up, dragging their slippers along the floor, and fill the bucket, generally making as much noise as possible. We were spared nothing, especially not the smell; the whole thing punctuated with jokes, and with exclamations of “Quiet, we’re sleeping.”

Oh the horror! The torture of the bucket we had to go in; the bucket you could only reach by getting yourself wet or by fouling your feet; what a night, and I had sixty more of them like it! The next day at 7, the door into the kitchen opened, the electricity was turned on, and the fat woman came in shouting,

“Good morning all, which of you is allowed juice?”

I could finally see where I was; it was a long room, with thirty or so beds lined up, between which were nightstands; containing not vases, but those awful buckets and all sorts of miscellaneous items: combs, jam jars, soap etc.

In the middle of the room, separating the row of beds, was black linoleum, a large, unlit stove, and the horrible bucket against the cold radiator. I can only count thirteen people sleeping; my bed is near the wall: the last of the row facing the windows. Luckily, one of them stays open, no matter what. The fat woman tells me she is afraid of germs. The bed facing me is occupied by a woman who never stops coughing; near her is a rather pleasant, strong, pale-faced brunette. Further away, a bizarre being is sitting up in bed, dressed in a sackcloth overcoat, with unequally-cut hair spiking down its head; its feet in enormous slippers – you can't really tell if it is male or female. You can make out three or four other creatures only by the lumps that show their bodies lying under the covers.

In my row, the bed to my right is occupied by a fat woman with grey hair. She has a nice, sympathetic face, and she asks,

"How did you sleep, my little lady?"

"How can you speak like that, my poor Renaud, without even knowing who you're speaking to?"

I looked at the women in the bed beside the cold radiator: she is very brown, with jet-like eyes, which shine like carbuncles; and a strong head if ever there was one. Beside the radiator is a closed door, in front of which is the ignoble bucket, in plain view; then 4 beds, of which only the two at the entrance of the room are taken; one by the fat woman who is giving out the juice and the bread, the other by the woman dressed in the white blouse whom we call the nurse.

All of this strikes me as sinister, and I say sadly to myself, sixty days and sixty nights! but the door opens, the fat woman comes in with her apron held out before her, giving her an enormous belly, from which she hands out rolls of bread to each of those sprawling creatures. She says to me,

"Take it; it's to last the rest of the day. 300 grams."

At the same time I hear, "Time for measuring." I get out of bed – should I get dressed? – but someone shouts at me "Go on, quickly, throw your clothes on." I exit through the kitchen; a woman grabs me in the corridor and says "Follow me"; always running, we follow corridors, tumble down staircases, until at last a door opens and I find myself facing two men in braided caps. One of them consults his papers, and says:

"You have a noble name; we put people like that in prison these days."

- and, because it reminded of the revolution, I reply: "Not for the first time."

He obviously doesn't understand, and looks at me, stunned. "Feet, arms, head: come on, you can straighten your arm more zan zat; your feet are big! So's your nose; eyes – okay, not bad; come on, fingerprints. Vell, vat are you vaiting for? Get out."

I turn back; I've just undergone measuring like a regular criminal; I'm going to have a measurement file. It would be funny if it wasn't so sad. I return to the evil food and the awful dormitory. It's ten 'o' clock. The fat woman comes in carrying a tray of bowls; the poor sufferers raise their skinny arms to seize them. When she reaches my bed, where I am sitting up, I look at what she's offering me ... dishwater, with three pieces of beetroot floating around, in an old pea-can.

"What is it?"

"The ten 'o'clock soup. You'll get something similar at five."

"No thank you."

"Take it anyway," says my neighbor. "Perdrix will eat it," and she points at the figure of indiscriminate sex, dressed in sackcloth. As though it had been watching, the figure glides over to me, reaching for the tin eagerly, and downing it in one gulp.

I eat a hard-boiled egg, an apple, and then the talking starts. My neighbor says cheerfully,

"It's your first time here; you'll soon see people get used to it. I've been here for two years – I've got two months left. All for helping a prisoner – a heavily pregnant woman – and you can see there's nothing wrong with helping a woman like that. No question, I could never have refused to help. How about you?"

"Oh, I don't know, in some cases," and to change the subject I start speaking to the brunette woman, who responds with a heart-wrenching moan.

"My God, you're really suffering, aren't you?"

"Oh yes, I am suffering, it's awful, it's been like this since the courthouse. I'll tell you one day, I'm on the Control; and you?"

The poor child: her head under the covers to stifle her moans.

I try the bed facing mine.

"Have you been here a long time? Why are you here? What's the Control?"

"The Control is when you're imprisoned by the Germans; you're allowed to wear your own clothes, while common prisoners must wear the uniform: a brown dress... I'm in here for false ticketing."

"I am from the Control," said my neighbor. Oh, those bastards, it's because I'm a Communist – yes, I am, and I hope the Russians get them to fuck off back home soon."

This woman is very sympathetic to me – she is a good sort, this woman with grey hair: Madame Renaud the abortionist.

“Come and sit next to me. You can have one of these little cooked pears my daughter-in-law brings me every day.”

I tell her that I’m not hungry, but I’m touched by such an unprompted offer, and we start chatting.

“When I came here I was full of life, but little by little I have withered away with the pain of cold, damp, lack of food, bad blood, boredom, until now I am helpless.”

What a pity. The day ends, and the terrible night begins. In the morning, “Soyer, get up, go and get your vaccination, hurry hurry, don’t get dressed, just throw your skirt and your jacket over your shoulder.” Corridors, staircases, courtyard, pavilion: in front of which are thirty-or-so woman pressed together, almost in height order, with their jackets draped over their backs. They seem young to me; they have gaunt faces, and waves of frizzy hair. A voice calls out “Soyer,” I cleave a narrow corridor through the flock of people. The tall, blonde supervisor raises her eyebrows, almost imperceptibly, and pushes me into a small room.

A man in a white shirt spotted all over with blood is sitting at a small table; another man, similarly dressed in blood-stained white clothing hands him a syringe. “Come on, straighten your arm." He suddenly yanks up my sleeve and plunges the needle into my vein – nothing is coming. "Wiggle your fingers, no, not like that, slower, harder" and even though it’s causing me no pain, I am afraid of fainting at this disgusting sight. There is dried blood on the table – blood everywhere – there are test tubes of it on the shelves. The two men speak briskly – almost rudely. Finally, I leave that place – the supervisor tells me to return to the infirmary, where I am told that, as part of the “test” (which basically means that I am held captive by the Germans) they have taken blood from me to determine whether or not I have syphilis. As though they were afraid of contagion! In spite of my age – my rank – I am being treated as a “lady of the night!” I regret not being young and diseased for I would try, despite the fact that they revolt me, to contaminate these men who are so worried about their precious health.

My neighbor, Madame Renaud, digs out a little bowl and offers me a cooked pear from it, to help me recover from my ordeal. “You look terrible,” she says, and we start talking. She asks me about my life, but I avoid the question and address a young woman, lying not far from me.

“…and you, what are you doing in Rouen?”

“I’m on the game” she replies in a clear voice.

Madame Renaud, who is a sly customer and has noticed my astonishment, says to me in an undertone,

“Oh you think she’s all sweetness and light in here? She’s different outside, with her bedroom in town!”

So vice and virtue are relative!

As the women are speaking a little loudly, the nurse bursts into the room and orders us to be silent as she approaches a patient with a shaved head, making her look like a boy.

“So, it’s not going well?”

“No, I’m suffering.”

No-one says a word, and the so-called nurse moves towards the cupboard at the end of the room (near my bed), opens the door (which I hadn’t noticed), grumbling all the while. She takes out a large jar of jam, a packet of biscuits and some fruit. Loudly, so that everyone can hear her, she says “It’s my dessert.” Then, after carefully locking the wardrobe, she leaves the room nonchalantly.

“My sainted aunt!” said my neighbor. “Just think - she gets more food than she can eat, and rather than share it with people, she throws it away and rubs it in our faces while women are starving. In which case Dr Robert, after examining them, declares them fit for the infirmary. You will see this soon; it’s pitiful.”

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After eight days, my rations had been eaten, and terrible boredom had taken me over. I was just thinking about drinking the vile black water, when the tall blonde supervisor burst into the room shouting:

“Who wants to replace Ansoume?”

“Me,” I said, at random.

“Good, come with me.”

I stood up from my bed and went into the kitchen. I found the fat woman with the nice face who brought us juice, bread and soup. “You must iron these,” she said, showing me ten or so German coats.

“I’ll never touch them! And also I don’t know how to iron, what will become of me?”

“If you want to, I’ll do your job and you can do mine?”

“What do you do?”

“I do the cooking, peel the vegetables, sweep the room, take the soup to the guards, the nurses, the inmates. You can assure yourself that you’ll keep busy.”

I set to work immediately, and, from that day forth, life seemed less hopeless. The good woman told me all sorts of things; she was imprisoned herself for nearly two years for keeping some stolen items in her shed which belonged to someone whom she believed honest and who, like her, sold shoes at the market. She was intelligent and reliable; she did all she should to support me in any way. It was she who had had the idea, guessing that I was different from the other prisoners, of my replacing Ansoume, who had left this hell of a prison after doing her time. The tall, blonde supervisor was the wife of the head guard, to whom I had been recommended by the prison chaplain. It’s thanks to that that I had been put in the infirmary – Paradise for many, horrible for me – but less horrible than the Control, where I would have had to go. There, no hygiene rules are followed, the air is stifling, and the conversations are foul, it seems. I made an unexpected acquaintance here; the young woman who had been a prostitute greeted me as I entered carrying the soup with a happy, cheerful “Hello, how are you?”, to which I responded with a just-as-cordial “Very well.” At the infirmary the good Dumouchel had a certain authority in her capacity of cook, having gained the supervisor’s sympathy as a result of the energy she brought to her work. She always insisted on having a window open because she was afraid of disease spreading; it was terribly cold but the odor was bearable as there was always fresh air. One can scarcely imagine how foul the atmosphere seemed everywhere. I remember carrying rations to the nurses; to a room on the ground floor with a dozen beds side-by-side, and a roaring stove in the middle of the room, from which were strung some ropes covered in tatters and disgusting rags. Seven or eight urchins, either half-naked or wrapped in rags, squealed while they played, they fought, or they rolled on the black wet soil. Topless, unkempt women, dressed in sackcloth, chattered loudly, some of them with enormous stomachs, trailing their feet and waiting for the moment they were to be called to the infirmary to give birth.

On the ground floor, in a huge gallery overlooked on one side by the balconies attached to three floors of the building, some miserable women were working on some German camouflage nets in a chilly atmosphere. The donated material was not hemp but something ersatz which unraveled when one touched it. The fibers from this material filled the atmosphere with thick dust which irritated one’s nostrils, one’s airways, one’s eyes, one’s skin; and even penetrated between one’s clothes and caused boils. The hands of these wretches were nothing but cracks and wounds. They earned a bit of money from this job that they put towards their release, but at the cost of many inconveniences. The dust, mixed with the smell from these ill-kept bodies was horrible; I walked past it to take the extra soup to some of the inmates, who weren’t too anaemic,

and each time I felt acute pity and anger thinking that these sufferings came mostly from the hands of our enemies.

On the top floor was the laundry room where I was to bring the ironing. It was less dirty there, and it didn't smell so bad; a few of the luckier inmates worked there to mend the ragged clothing. The clothes, however, were nothing to mention; before the war a maximum of fifty women stayed here, but under German rule the number was over two hundred. Since it was impossible to buy linen, and the women wore nothing under their uniform, one could follow their time of the month. In the gallery on the ground floor, a little further along than the nets, a trough ran along the wall, with several taps above it. The prisoners could wash themselves here, but without towels or soap, and in an atrocious cold, they never did. There were plenty of showers where sometimes, when the sheets had just been washed, there was hot water, but this freezing, dirty room attracted no one. You received a burst of water on your head to soak your hair, and since there was nothing with which to dry yourself, it was only when forced that some poor creatures ended up there during my stay.

On Sundays, mass was held in the prison chapel. All kinds of inmates would occupy single compartments, hermetically separated from one another. We were lucky if we could see the priest below us. It was very sad, and I felt sorry for my poor companions. The infamous nurse placed herself between them, murmuring prayers; there was nothing good in her, and her piety was nothing but an attitude. A supervisor was in front of the gate through which you could see the alter, with his chair and his paternoster; the rest of us sat on benches. Here, also, a terrible smell and an unbearable cold reigned, which I will never forget. On leaving the chapel the chaplain tried to say a friendly word to me, as the door to the freezing place where we heard mass closed for a week. Once a week there was the medical visit; the nurse's room was more carefully swept than usual. It was I who swept it every morning: a real ordeal. The broom had nearly no bristles, and great piles of dust lay under the beds - the beds on which were piled anything and everything: underwear, food, clothes. The mattresses, which were in a bad state, were leaking straw; the sick pulled out clumps of dirty hair when combing and threw them on the floor. Often they had lice, or scabies, and when they scratched their scabs they made red marks on the floor. Around that awful bucket, all sort of things stuck to the floor; I went very slowly, as I was so terrified of disturbing the air around it, and having lice jumping up at me. When I had made several piles of rubbish, good old Dumouchel came to lift them up with a shovel. Then, she grabbed the bucket and crossed the kitchen to empty it in the toilet which was reserved for the supervisors, the nurse, the cook, and certain lucky people including myself. Here as well, filth reigned; it's incredible to think that women such as these supervisors, with their nice clothes and their make-up, could bring themselves to use it. There were no seats, but two footprints, and the ground was always soaking and spattered. However, I actually preferred this place to the bucket, in full view of everyone. Around ten 'o' clock, we heard shouts of "Doctor," so the doctor passed through the kitchen and sat down behind a little table at the door of the infirmary, at the same time as those unfortunates who had obtained permission to be examined had crowded into the kitchen where they had left all or some

of their clothes. It was awful to see these more or less repulsive corpses come to show their misery. I tried my best not to watch, and angrily peeled my rutabagas.

These poor women were very briefly examined by the doctor, who paid no attention to their complaints. Most of them were fearfully thin; they would often faint of starvation. Many would cough from their very souls! As the remedy was lime, and there was none, the evil nurse let them file out, always saying “Nothing wrong!”

“Good!” the doctor would reply, and the poor woman left, shocked at the thought that she would not have those few extra grams of bread that she had hoped for, as she put her clothes back on in the kitchen and left, coughing. I watched this for the two months of my stay, envying those who were admitted and then allowed a vegetable drink (vegetables which I picked from eight in the morning to seven in the evening) and a little broth of boiled meat.

A poor girl from the street, who had slept with a Bosch, had received a blow on the breast; it had swollen up to nothing more than a ball of blood, and there was nothing to clean it but an old blue rag from an apron, soaked in fetid water from an old tin can. I felt sorry for her, and several times a day I refilled the tin with hot water in order to wash this horrible wound. This had the added benefit of infuriating the nurse, who cried “No need, she’s fine!” when the doctor walked past the bed. One day, when I was advising the poor child to complain, the other patients told me “It is better to keep quiet, otherwise, when you’re complaining, the director asks ‘What do you want?’ and before you can open your mouth he yells at you to be silent. Then, if you do not obey, they send you to the cells.”

As I was in the kitchen, where one was almost fed properly, I didn’t eat my bread, and at 5pm I would cut it into slices, which I garnished with whatever I could fine, and distributed them to my roommates. Unfortunately, there weren’t enough for everyone, which led to jealousy. It caused me great pain not to be able to do a bit more for these creatures.

I started the day by shouting “Who wants to wash their face?” Then, filling a little, old, fading enamel bowl with water, I moved from one bed to another. I admit that I was forced to empty the bowl every time, as people spat it in, and there were all kinds of filth. Never, ever, did the so-called nurse bother to provide some care for these women. I used all kind of tricks to get a rag for those who had nothing to wipe their face or their hands, for that was all there was for washing.

One day a woman showed me her feet; they were a horrible sight. No scissors to cut the nails, and it was impossible to get any – the regulations forbade it. Once, when the supervisors had locked us in, I was lucky enough to be able to get a bit of hot water from the boiler, and did the best I could to scrub myself in the tiny room to the right of the kitchen, where the piles of vegetables were washed and where the awful nurse

daubed the mangy things in mercurochrome, and smeared their heads with lice ointment. All kinds of dirty water had been emptied in the sink. Good Dumouchel let me use the doctor's bowl, and I washed myself, hiding from the nurse. All of the staff were recruited from the inmates, except the supervisors, who were assigned to the supervision of a floor every three months. At the end of three months they were sent to another floor, and so on all year round. Unfortunately for me, the tall blonde woman who was the chief guard's wife, and who had put me in the infirmary, was not the supervisor for the floor I was on when I arrived, but she did all she could have done to give me moral comfort or to help me, and she did it so well that I nicknamed her "my ray of sunshine." Alas, "the Lady" of the infirmary floor was a pretentious young woman, quite pretty, highly made-up, who had taken to disliking me the night I arrived because – it's incredible! – I had a noble particle in my name, and I had been placed in the infirmary without her having been consulted. She set her mind to doing everything she could to make my life a misery.

Our farmers, our friends – the whole village sent me packages to improve my usual rations, because they were sure I would die of hunger in this prison. One day, a letter from my granddaughters was very obviously placed in a packet of biscuits – something I had forbidden them from doing as it was strictly prohibited here. The German who supervised the opening of the packages saw it, and I was banned from receiving my packages for two months. I came to understand that the other inmates could get them for me. I sent a letter (which was very difficult to do) in which I said that packages should now be addressed to Dumouchel. The Lady supervising our floor, on remarking that she was getting more packages than usual, alerted the Director, who summoned both of us and said:

"Soyer, you are banned from receiving packages by the German Authorities. Dumouchel has been getting packages like never before; if this continues you will both be severely punished."

The wicked supervisor, who had attended the interview, was jubilant. I was called by the German director who asked me why I had been written to; I pretended not to understand and left without ceremony.

Finally, one fine day I heard someone cry, "Soyer, to the parlour." I was going to see my friends again, and be able to speak with them. I was shown where to go; a supervisor opened a door and I found myself in a small, narrow room, with an empty space of about one and a half metres running all the way along the room, between iron bars, on both sides, of about the width of my wrist. On one side of this great gate around thirty prisoners yelled, trying to make themselves audible to the thirty or so visitors who faced them. On the prisoners' side, a supervisor stood, watch in hand, counting out ten minutes for the unlucky people to speak with their friends face-to-face. The noise was incredible.

I saw F's nice, yet haggard face; the pretty figure of Madame L; my dear Madame T. I was so stunned that I didn't understand anything that the three shouted at me. I had been so certain, when I heard the word "parlor", that I would be able to sit with my friends that the sight of them behind these iron bars bowled me over.... The smell of this herd rose to my throat; I wanted to run away. I asked a woman who stood next to me if it was always like this, and if she had been in prison a long time.

"My husband has been sentenced to ten years in a fortress in Germany; I must serve five years. All this because they found two shotgun cartridges at our house."

I made a sign of friendship at my visitors, and left to return to my rutabagas.

Every day I was allowed to spend three quarters of an hour in a little courtyard, 80 paces long and 70 wide. I forced myself to walk the whole time I was there, pacing round like a beast in a cage. After a few days I was allowed to take poor R down there – my bed-neighbor, crippled with rheumatism. We chatted softly for ten to twenty minutes, then I helped her back up to the infirmary.

One fine day, Madame C, who stayed in the next bed along, was allowed to come down with me. She whispered in my ear that she was a laundress in Elbeuf: she had often housed Canadians and English people but one day, the Bosch, having suspected her, she was summoned to the Palace of Justice. They subjected her to several interrogations and eventually, to force her to talk, hung her from her wrists. Then, they threw at her feet a figure, whose face was little more than red pulp, but whom she recognized by his round, curly hair. Of course, she said that she had never seen him. The poor thing crawled to the edge of the table, reached for the German gun on top of it, and blew his brains out. As for the unfortunate woman, she fainted – for how long she did not know – and awoke to find herself in the infirmary, where I was. She suffered from terrible stomach pains, but had no regrets, and she said to me:

"I am sure that my husband and my son are also doing the right thing; I hope to see them soon."

While the lucky ones (if you can call them that, but everything is relative) of the infirmary were able to get some fresh air in this minuscule courtyard, the prisoners covered up in sackcloth would walk for half an hour, strapped in huge clogs which made a dismal noise, in an ever-so-slightly larger courtyard. The half-hour over: the long, brown line went out through a low door to make way for the next batch of prisoners. No-one uttered a word; one could hear only the sound of sad feet, shod in heavy pieces of wood, stomping. In the main manufacturing building overlooking the courtyard, Germans were stationed or imprisoned – I never knew. They leant out of the windows and seemed to take great pleasure from watching this sad spectacle. However, as soon as the alarm sounded to warn of Allied airplanes, they left their observatories and fled as fast as they could into their own private shelters. We, the poor French, had to return to our rooms where we locked the doors immediately, yet in the case of a bomb hitting we would have been certain to die in that place.

A poor girl of 16, sentenced by the Germans to three years in prison for reading a leaflet in the street, was terrified in those moments. I tried my best to reassure her but I was very nervous myself, so I adopted a pretense of immovable calm, and tried to make fun of myself for any fear of the Germans. After one of these incidents, an old prisoner was taken ill; her state was so pitiful that she had been admitted to the infirmary one morning, where she had eagerly swallowed the ten o'clock soup. She didn't stir all day long; at around midnight a women getting up to use the bucket had brushed against her bed. "Well, here lies grandmother!" which constituted the funeral of this unfortunate woman. At seven o' clock, she was covered with a sheet. Around midday, while I was looking for a tissue under my pillow, I noticed that the sheet twitched.

"Oh! she's moving" I shouted out.

"No, no – she is long dead, but her sheet definitely moved. Don't you know that when you die, the lice move away?"

I evidently did not know.

There wasn't just death at the infirmary – some poor things were born there as well. A girl whose husband had been a prisoner for 18 months and who, on top of her bad behavior, was a thief, appeared one morning with a prominent lump sticking out in front of her, leaving no doubts as to her state. She was dressed in dirty sackcloth, and was filthy herself, with repulsive hair hanging down her back. One afternoon, we saw a young, very elegant woman wearing a white coat. I learnt that she was a midwife, and that a baby would be born soon. Sitting at the kitchen table, I continued to peel my rutabagas; they were so big, and so hard that my hands were stinging. I stopped for an instant to look at something that had just been placed beside the mess-tin in which my vegetables were soaking. It was a large plate containing a red, quivering mass ... the placenta from the mother.

At that moment, the prison chaplain burst into the kitchen. "I'm going to the infirmary and I will return here soon," he said to me, "You had better come back tomorrow; we're looking after for a woman who has just given birth." That awful nurse took away the bloody plate, and I returned to cleaning the turnips.

"My ray of sunshine" had lost a child, and in memory of this loss she was very good to the poor things who were born and grew up in prison. She gave them everything she could, and I admired the way she took them up in her arms to play with them. They were so dirty that I could never bring myself to do this. One child of six, however, was quite funny, and I gave her a piece of sugar whenever I had one. Alas, she had every possible defect, which wasn't surprising given what she saw and heard in this despicable environment. It was unacceptable that children were left to grow up in such conditions. They should have been taken away at birth and placed in centers, where they would be clean and educated.

I was exposed to great psychological and physical torment there. I must say that I was surprised and touched by the prisoners' attitude towards me. With a few exceptions, they always and immediately showed a certain respect and trust which touched me. "You are not one of us, but you are not proud at all, and you are always friendly," they told me. Some of them were so morally corrupted that to discover a good feeling in them always moved me. As for a good woman like Madame R, I was determined that I would find her again, and that I would do my best when I returned to let it be known what she had done for the Allies.

Among the supervisors, there was one really bad woman, with neither pity nor understanding. She was hated by all, while Madame Dru, a good, simple creature, was appreciated. She had a gentle way of saying "Hello" or "Goodnight," which touched one to the heart. "My ray of sunshine" was truly loved and respected. I realized all the good that could be done in these places, yet so little was done to develop any of these kind feelings.

On the day I left, the whole room was so sad that my happiness at leaving this hell was, for several seconds, overshadowed; but when the massive, intimidating door opened to let me out, I cleared the gutter of that ugly street with a single leap.

Under the cataracts of water that streamed from the sky, the wonderful figure of our friend L appeared, dripping wet. Her mouth made the wonderful sound:

"FREE, FREE"...

I was out of that horrible pit, which I had often feared that I would never leave.

THE END