



Kehilat Gesher  
embraces  
Reform and  
Conservative  
Judaism

Kehilat Gesher  
קהילת גשר

The French-Anglophone Jewish  
Congregation in Paris and  
Saint Germain en Laye



## Odette Spingarn's Story...

*I was 14 when the war broke out in September 1939. In Paris, we'd all been given gas masks and everyone was talking about the bombings to come. My parents sent me off to relatives in Deauville for the winter. In May 1940, as the*



*Germans began to advance, my parents called me back to Paris, and we left by car for the Dordogne, my sister and her children, my mother and myself. It was just a few days before the exodus, the armistice, and a France that would be cut in two.*

*In September, we settled in Brive in Corrèze. I entered 10th grade in the local lycée and got in touch with the Jewish Scouts of France who were setting up in the town. We were all young refugees mainly from Paris and Strasbourg.*

*After the occupation of the southern zone, at the end of 1942, my parents and I left Brive for a little village in Corrèze, Larche with a population of 600.*

*My father had been born in Austria-Hungary and was a volunteer soldier during World War I; he was naturalized a French citizen in 1922. As a result, under the laws of Vichy, he could not leave Larche without permission from the authorities. It was there that we were all taken prisoner by German soldiers on March 31, 1944.*

*My father was shot and killed the next day. My mother and I were sent to Drancy and then deported on April 13, 1944. My mother entered Birkenau camp with me. She died on May 24 of dysentery.*

*After working in Birkenau until June, I was transferred to Briginski, an annex of "Canada", where I sorted the clothes that came in non-stop from the Hungarian "transports" between June and October. In late October, I was part of a "transport" that took us to Zchopau in Saxony to replace German workers in a factory producing spare parts for airplane engines.*

*I worked there until April 1945. The story that follows begins then and ends with the Liberation on May 8 and my return to France.*

ODETTE SPINGARN

**B**efore leaping, I cry out "Au revoir" to the colleagues that had given me a step up, so that I could pass through the tiny window of the cattle car. The train is advancing through the night at a moderate speed, and the wind whips my face. Holding on with my right hand, my body facing the front of the train, I kick hard against the wagon to project myself onto the ballast.

Getting up quickly, I try moving my legs, my arms: nothing is broken, not even a scratch. My small bag

is still squeezed tightly in my left hand. It contains a slice of bread and my spoon.

Standing perfectly still, I watch the red light on the end of the train dim into the distance. The train slows down and stops 100 meters away. I lie down in the ravine that runs along the railway track. Fear invades my guts. It's all over. A guard must have seen me. Between each wagon there's a little platform. They are going to release the dogs, and I'm more afraid of



that than anything else. I don't dare breathe and remain lying on my stomach with my eyes closed.

I hear brief orders. Guttural voices resound in the night. Minutes pass, and the train departs. I lift my head and follow the red light that disappears into the darkness.

I am free. It is April 14, 1945.

For five days, the electricity had been cut and work interrupted at the Auto Union (AUDI) factory in Zchopau, where we had been since September: 500 of us women had been sent directly from Auschwitz to replace the German workers manufacturing spare parts for airplane motors. Contradictory rumors had been flying around all week. The Allies were getting near; they are 100... 50... 30 kilometers away. Our "aufseherin"<sup>1</sup> are very nervous. That's a good sign. We hope they'll just leave us here. That would be too wonderful.

On April 13, we get a new "Oberscharführer," the worst one ever. He screams in an unending, paroxysm of anger, and the zealous "aufseherin" beat us with their fists. 300 women arrive from a nearby factory. We have to share our beds with them and here we are, 800 women, groveling in a huge room, fighting for 20 faucets. The next day a rumor runs wild: they're going to take us away. Where to? Another camp, most likely to gas us.

At 6AM, they gather us all in the courtyard. We all have our blanket and our slice of bread; it is a gloomy departure amidst shrieks and blows. The "transformed"<sup>2</sup> French prisoners who work on the floor below

us at the factory are herded into the back of the courtyard. They watch the scene, impotent and aghast.

One of them was able to whisper to us "The Allies are at Chemnitz." Chemnitz is 17 kilometers away, a ray of hope. If only the train weren't leaving this evening. The Allies are coming from the West. The Russians are getting closer in the East. When they meet, the Germans will be defeated. But, in the meantime, they're taking us...South towards Czechoslovakia.

We've been stuffed into the last car of the train. "Occupancy 40" but we are 120. To get a bit of fresh air, we've managed to pull out the nails from the plank that's blocking the window. Suddenly an idea is born and spreads from person to person. It takes hold of our little group of Belgian and French women joined by Bianca the Italian and Alice the Hungarian. Fourteen of us are determined to escape at any price.

The hardest part in the darkness of the car is to reach the window. I must cross the width of the car, stepping over the crouching bodies of the prisoners. They don't understand why I'm moving from one spot to another, and that doesn't make things any easier. They are suffering so badly, and I'm disturbing them; some of them take revenge and scratch my ankles during my slow advance. I think that each turn of the wheel takes me further away from the camp, and I'm in a hurry to leap. Finally I reach the window, and I jump; I'm the seventh.

I am free. The sentence repeats itself over and over in my head, as I climb up a little hill above the ballast. There I am on the road that runs along the railroad track. I cross over and enter a field. The road is dangerous.

The moonlight glows splendidly. By a strange optical effect, I cannot make out the surface of the ground. The field seems flat, and I can't help but fall as I hit each bump. I realize that I cannot walk much longer

1] Female supervisor

[2] Transformed military prisoners are not part of the concentration camps ; they have a superior status.



in the field, because it is too tiring. I stop to think and figure out where I am. I'm above the railway; the road runs along it for a while and then moves away.

My plan is simple. I want to get to Chemnitz and pass through the lines to reach the Allies. I know that Chemnitz is 17 kilometers from Zchopau. I need to reach Zchopau first, if I don't want to get lost. Once there, I'll see what to do. The train was taking us South, so I must go North.

The sky is beautiful and full of stars; I easily identify the Big and Little Dipper with the North Star. I bless my scout leaders who taught me how to figure out where you are. I check the direction that the train had taken. It was indeed the South. So I decide to follow the North Star and return to the road, heading North.

I walk easily on the asphalt, but in a zigzag, no longer used to walking other than in a rank of five. At every noise, I lie down flat in the ravine: pedestrians, bikers, cars, always going the other way. Soon my courage comes back. I no longer hide. I run into passersby. No one cares about me. I walk a long time. At intersections, I follow my star. There is little traffic.

Suddenly a car stops abruptly after passing me by. A soldier leans out and calls me. For a split second, I think of fleeing, but that is impossible. Too bad. Grace of God!

I approach, and the soldier very politely asks me the route for Annaberg. I am so surprised that I am speechless. His neighbor, impatient, looks me and asks "Gerade?" Relieved, I answer "Ja, ja, gerade." The car speeds off.

During the night, several soldiers in cars or on bicycles stop to ask me the way. For each one, my answer is ready. "Gerade." And the idea that I was perhaps sending them the wrong way warmed my heart. How

I would have liked to know if I myself were going in the right direction.

I hadn't seen them on this dark road in the middle of the forest, when they sprang up in front of me, the two of them with their electric lamp shining on my face, two enormous policemen. "Papers." I don't have any obviously.

The conversation begins. "Are you foreign?" "Yes, French." "And where do you work?" I hesitate to reply. I have no idea where I am. Am I far from Zchopau, from Annaberg? The policeman continues. "You must work in Scharfenstein?" "Yes, yes, Scharfenstein."

Safe again. I mumble, "Let me go home." They joke together. I barely understand.

"I am coming from my friend's house, yes, yes, a Frenchman. But I am late. Let me pass."

They are good men. They understand and shake my hand. "Aufwiedersehen." And I continue to walk.

The night is dark. I think I'm completely lost. I try to make out the signposts that I find at certain crossings, but they are on top of high poles and in the night, I can't see the letters. I try to climb up a pole, but to no avail. My hands slip, my feet slip, and I give up.

At the edge of a village, I am stopped by the "Volksturm," old villagers in civilian clothing who take their role as watchmen very seriously. "No papers? Let's go to the Mayor's office. No fooling around." I am pushed into a huge room at the back of which four men are playing cards under a smoky lamp.

They stop and look at me strangely. The interrogation begins and I respond reassuringly. "Yes I forgot my papers." "Yes I am foreign. French." "I work in



Scharfenstein in the factory.” “What is in my bag? Have a look yourselves, my bread and my spoon.”

After checking the bag, they become more human. “What am I doing on the roads at this time?” I am truly upset. I can’t say a word in German and I mumble “a French friend.” My upset is interpreted otherwise; they make a couple of jokes I don’t understand. I can leave, but don’t let them catch me again without papers.

I thank them and as I am about to leave, I suddenly remember that on the back of my navy blue jacket are two huge white letters “KL” (Konzentration Lager) indicating concentration camp in German. I am facing the lamp, but if I turn around, all is lost. Hesitatingly, I take three steps backward and suddenly grab my little bag by the string and with my two hands throw it up behind my back as far as possible, as if it were a heavy sack. Then I turn around and run, leaving them undoubtedly somewhat surprised.

The “Volksturm” escorts me to the edge of the village. I keep my bag in this strange position until the first curve in the path. Finally out of sight, I quickly take off my jacket and put it on inside out. Why hadn’t I thought of that earlier?

The first light of dawn appears. I am completely exhausted. It’s time to find shelter for the day. I leave the road, cross a field and enter a forest. I feel safer there than on the road and try to get over the most recent episode.

In a clearing, there is a wooden construction, a sort of high surveillance tower. A very narrow ladder leads to a platform. I think it’s a military construction and yet it would make a very good hiding place. I start to climb up. And what if I find one or two soldiers asleep up there? Or worse, awake? Maybe they’ve already noticed me...The closer I get to the top, the more I think I’ve been extremely careless. But, it’s too late to turn

around. I reach the top: no one. Later I learn the real and peaceful use of these surveillance towers, simple scaffoldings where hunters watch their prey as they emerge from the woods.

Sitting on the steps, wonderfully well hidden, I enjoy eating half of my slice of bread. At this precise instant, the sun rises, flooding the clearing and the treetops I overlook.

I could not be happier. This sunrise on my first day of freedom seems to be a very good omen. I would like to sing, to cry, to scream my joy. Whatever happens, I will have lived some unforgettable moments. Peaceful, happy and exhausted, I fall asleep.

Some hours later, I awake determined to wait until nightfall to leave. From my observatory, I can study the area perfectly. A distant village that seems to be in the right direction will be my next objective. It seems accessible without using the road and I decide to leave in the afternoon.

Having crossed the forest I find myself in a field full of crocus. I can’t help but stop and gather a bouquet. These minutes that may only be a respite during which I rediscover the gestures of a free being, are so marvelous.

I eat some grass to “cheat” on my hunger, and the leaves have a slight taste of artichoke.

At nightfall, I arrive in a large village. For a moment, I think it is Zchopau but I am unfortunately wrong. I pass through with my bouquet in hand, as though nothing were wrong. No one seems to notice me.

When I reach the other end of the village, I am completely lost. I have only one option left, to ask my way. It’s very risky, but there seems to be no other choice.



Standing in front of a café, I gather up all my courage to go inside, when I see a soldier on a bicycle in the distance...He's the one I'll ask for directions. I hail him down. He listens to my question and then in flawless French replies "Are you French, mademoiselle?"

Completely amazed, I nod yes. He continues. "You will soon go home. The war is almost over." "Do you know France?" "Yes, I lived in Paris for a long time." His tone is cordial and very courteous. I am dying to confide in him. Maybe he can help or give me good advice. I can't keep my secret any longer and I feel so tired. I begin by asking him the way to Zchopau, and while he is asking a Russian prisoner who knows the region well, I take my time to think. After all, why would I trust a Nazi soldier? He speaks French well, but that doesn't prove anything about his feelings. This is no time to weaken. He comes back and tells me very precisely which road to follow to get to Zchopau, 6 kilometers away.

God be praised!

I spent such a long time to travel these 6 kilometers. I stopped often because I was exhausted. On the road, I ate my last bit of bread.

Zchopau! I can't imagine getting all the way to Chemnitz : 17 kilometers more with who knows which difficulties to get across the lines; it's more than I can take.

I climb up into the forest above the factory. I know the forest well, because we were taken there several times during air raids. Last night was cold. This one is freezing. I can tell it's going to snow. Crouching down in front of a tree, I try to stay warm. It's not easy and I regret having left the blanket behind in the train. I'm fighting against sleep and one after the other I rub my numb arms and legs. I stand up, sit down and do gym movements to combat the cold and sleepiness. The night seems infinitely long.

When daylight comes, I go down on the road and ask a passing woman what time it is. "6 o'clock." In an hour, the workers will arrive in the factory. The "transformed" French prisoners, a group of 30, will be with them. We could never have any contact with them, our floor being carefully guarded and isolated from the rest of the factory. I know one of them nonetheless, Marquand. He is in charge of transmission belt repair at the factory and wears a special armband authorizing him to enter our machine room for his work.

We caught sight of him two or three times a month, tall, thin, always calm moving rapidly among us, going to do his work without distraction and leaving right away. But after his passage, we always found a few slices of bread under a rag on the machines. I knew he was a good guy and it was he I wanted to find.

Soon I saw the crowd of workers, on the road to Zchopau. I go down to catch up with them and try to spot tall Marquand. But the first person I see is my "vorarbeiter," the one who oversaw my work for eight months. He'd been an implacable man demanding the maximum of our miserable workforce. Our glances met, and I quickly turned away stepping up the pace. I had a kerchief on my head almost down to my eyes, whereas at work, he'd always seen me bareheaded. Did he recognize me? He must have thought it was a hallucination

I continue to go down. The crowd is thinning out and I still can't find Marquand. I pass three men speaking French. I walk up to them and ask if Marquand is coming to the factory this morning. "Yes, but he went back to the commando for his key. He won't be long. Do you want to see him?" "Yes" I say defiantly and continue to walk towards Zchopau to look for him. Finally I see him. He understands immediately. "I escaped and don't know where to go."



“Come with me.” He does an about face. We walk side by side in silence. The 32 prisoners of the commando lodged on the ground floor of a commandeered hotel in the middle of town.

The three-level wooden bunk beds were crammed into a tiny room. The ordinary conditions were insufficient, but these prisoners with a “transformed” status had great freedom. Other than for the evening call, the German inspections were rare. Each one worked in his specialty either in the factory or in town. The population was made of the old, women, and children. These men who came to help were well received and well treated.

Supplies were a crucial problem. Everyone was underfed in Germany at the time. Some prisoners working in food stores (butchers, sausagemakers, bakeries) managed to get extras for themselves and their friends. Many had a German girlfriend. Flattered and happy to have a French friend, these women were very devoted.

But despite their privileged situation, after 5 years of captivity, these prisoners who had all spent several years in stalags were exhausted. When I arrived with Marquand, almost everyone had gone off to work and we entered the small room without having been seen. After giving me a warm cup of coffee with sugar (Oh, what an unforgettable coffee) M. asked me questions and I tell him my story. I didn't know what he was going to be able to do for me, but I knew he would never let me down and I felt saved. I tell him my concern for the comrades who had jumped before and after me. Did they have as much luck as I? Are they possibly dying somewhere in the nearby countryside?

M. was a man of action. He was terse. “The commando chief is absent until tomorrow afternoon. Only he can make a decision about your case. In the meantime, I'll take it on myself to hide you here.” He took me to the

room, pointed out his bed on the third level and told me lie down and not move between 11 and 12 o'clock when the German cleaning women would come to do the room. He told his comrades and asked them to share the secret, as he left in search of the others.

I was too tired and nervous to sleep, but happy to be lying down. After a half hour, there emerged above my bed, the head of one of the soldiers. He handed me a slice of bread with some canned beef spread. I savor it slowly. An hour later, another one brings me a hot chocolate. These were from their last remaining packages; they hadn't received any packages for two months but they were clearly happy to share their food with me.

They came and went as per their schedules. Each one came to see me at some point and by the end of the day, I knew them all. And all day long, I received cookies, sugar cubes, bonbons, chocolates that I consumed bit by bit. I even got a powder case and something I enjoyed very much, a luxury soap bar! My heart melted at such kindness and the unanimity with which I'd been accepted, knowing the danger that I represented for each one.

At nightfall, M came back, with Alice and Bianca whom he had found, one in the forest, one in the street. We fell into each others' arms weeping and laughing at once; we had so much to say and we spoke all at the same time, exhilarated. We must have looked crazy and the French stared at us, speechless. But after a half-hour Marquand intervened. He could only keep one person at the commando, but he knew of other hiding places and he took Bianca and Alice.

Marquand left me his bed and slept on the ground that night.

I will never forget the delicateness of the 32 men and their courtesy during the 48 hours I spent with them.



When I had to undress or wash, there was always one to keep guard so that I would not be disturbed. They avoided walking around in improper attire.

A funny detail-- the toilet was located at the end of a corridor forming the entryway to the house. The main entranceway overlooked the street and was open all day. The door of the barracks bedroom lead to the same corridor near the entranceway, and was thus easily seen from the street. In order to remain hidden, I had to wear a hat and cape and hide between two Frenchmen. Need I say that each passage was the occasion of a giggle fit?

But I was very worried about the return of the commandant in chief. What would he do about me? I realized the enormous risk my presence created and nobody knew how long the war would last.

The morning seemed very long, but I was never alone. In particular, the intellectual of the group, a schoolteacher had the kindness of summarize for me the principal events of the previous 14 months. I had no news and lived in a total blackout with the exception of the many crazy unverifiable rumors. And that is how I learned of the liberation of Paris and the failed Hitler assassination attempt. At the camp, we'd had had only vague news about these two events and the battles that had followed. The Allies were indeed in Chemnitz. We expected them any day. As to the Russians, they were still 100 kilometers away on the other side.

At noon, Fleury arrived. He was short, wiry, bossy. He had a closed face but intelligent eyes belying a great sensitivity. Fleury had a lot of authority. The men respected him more than they liked him. But he always defended their interests with much courage, and since he did a good job, the Germans trusted him. He had the responsibility of several commandos.

He asked me several questions, vaguely told me he would see what he could do, and disappeared. I continued to speak with the Frenchmen who asked me many questions. They were not aware of the extermination camps and were all surprised and impressed to discover the number tattooed on my arm.

I told them as much as possible of what I had seen and experienced. These men who had obviously suffered for five years, who had been toughened by the war and who knew the Germans became pale as the dead. One of them who had children fell apart when he heard about the gas chambers. The others became crazy with rage.

In the evening, Fleury called me to his office. He was very relaxed. He had found a solution for me thanks to Marquand. He was going to hide me in a German family. Mrs Fulmann, a native of Hamburg, and a war widow, was very devoted to M. and would do anything for me, hiding me for as long as necessary. I was very happy about this solution. Since someone had to take risks for me, I preferred that it be a German woman! We spoke for a while and then, to my great surprise, he suddenly offered me champagne from a bottle that came from who knows where.

M. came back a little later with a huge bag of women's clothing. The clothes I wore were dangerous; I would stand out in the street. They were also full of lice. Despite my two daily inspections including the seams, it was difficult to avoid infestation. I was happy to get rid of it and asked M to burn everything.

I dressed in Frau F's clothes. Nothing was missing, including high heels and a black broad-brimmed hat. The size, while normal for a German woman was not suited to my 35 kilos and the black silk dress hung off me ridiculously. But I was able to use a belt to make the whole outfit look reasonably well. When I appeared in my new



clothes in front of the French group, they were delirious. "A real Parisienne," they said as they applauded.

And we spent another nice evening together waiting for darkness and my departure. One of the men played the harmonica. For the first time, I heard the song "France feels so good" and "You will see your village." We all were very happy and thought we would be freed by the Allies two or three days later at most.

But we had to wait 22 days. Frau Fullmann lived in a small four-room apartment on the first floor of a cute house in the center of town. Having lost everything during the Hamburg bombardments, and her husband having already died two years before that, Mrs F was a refugee in Zchopau with her four children, aged 8 to 12. Robust, her face still very young and framed by blond hair, Mrs F was strong and determined. She set me up in a room, closed me in and succeeded in lodging and feeding me in secret. Neither her children nor her friend who lived upstairs, nor the owner on the ground floor suspected my presence.

I spent all my time in the room or actually in half the room, because I avoided going near the window.

I made the least noise possible. I was afraid of coughing just when one of the children would walk past the door. Several times they tried to come in. But their mother told them that the room was locked up for storage. It was not her style to tell them lots of details and she knew how to be obeyed.

One day, we had a close call. Mrs F came to tell me that the police were coming to inspect the house. We didn't know why. Had I been noticed? Or was I going to be arrested during a different investigation? In any event, I thought all was lost. Without losing her calm for a moment, Mrs F emptied the armoire in my room and put me inside. 15 minutes later, the police came

to the house and a half-hour later, Mrs F came to free me. They were they to find out how much coal there was in each apartment!

The days seemed extremely long, alone with my memories. I understand during these three weeks why some of comrades who had been "in secret" considered this period the hardest of their captivity, harder than forced labor.

I was torn between the obsession of my tragic memories and those of my unending hunger. Mrs F brought me a slice of bread in the morning, a small bowl of soup at noon, another slice of bread at 4 and a final slice in the evening. The bread was so thin as was the margarine or the occasional bit of lard, that I imagined how small were their own food rations and that it must have been difficult for Mrs F to remove anything at all to feed me in addition to her children.

But the best time of the day was the evening. At 9pm, when her children were asleep, Mrs F came to get me and we spent two hours in the kitchen-living room, where Marquand came to see us almost every evening. We chatted and tried to catch the BBC. In this well-arranged, spotlessly clean room, there was an atmosphere of intimacy and security that I loved learning to appreciate again.

The evening of my arrival, after M had left, Mrs F had brought a big basin of warm water into the kitchen so that I could bathe. I undressed and was surprised to see Mrs F weeping when she saw how thin I was.

The Allies seemed decided not to advance beyond Chemnitz and the Russians were on their way. But the days passed and no one came to deliver us. We were impatient and that lasted until May 8. It was a beautiful day. White flags floated from all the balconies in sign of surrender.



Mrs F asked her friend who was small and thin to lend me a dress. I wore a plaid skirt and a white shirt that were more or less my size. M found me a red white and blue shield with a wonderful Gallic rooster. I quickly sewed it on my shirt and wore it proudly to go out. I was finally free and for good.

And we walked for hours, a group of Frenchmen and myself meeting many other French people, prisoners who for the first time left their barracks near the city. They were around a hundred in all.

Since I suffered from one leg with a vitamin-deficiency wound that oozed, I went to get help. Several times during the following days, I went back to get new bandages.

Our main immediate problem was getting back to France. We didn't know who would be the occupation authority, the Russians, the Allies...contradictory rumors flew around. The French prisoners were told to wait. The transformed prisoners had no orders. Some were sure that the Russians would arrive and were completely crazed. They told frightening stories of how the Russians acted like savages raping women, killing children, stealing and burning everything on the way.

They did such a good job in scaring everyone that of the 32 men in the commando, 20 decided to leave right away. Personally I didn't believe all these stories, although I later learned that some were true. I had so wished to see the Russians in Auschwitz that I couldn't imagine fearing them. And the last thing I wanted to do was to leave on foot without rations in a country as disorganized as Germany in May 1945.

About 10 days later, the French received an order to go to a place 5 kilometers from Zchopau, where trucks would come to get them. I left with them, having decided I would not leave them. Big disap-

pointment; I was not taken. Only French prisoners could get on. I gave Marquand and Fleury my uncle's address on Aboukir St, and asked them to give him my news.

I spent another 10 days in Zchopau. People went through the town all the time: German soldiers with white armbands, limping, walking with canes. Prisoners went to repatriation centers. I will never forget the two Greeks who found themselves with a group of French prisoners. One of them had feet so bloody he couldn't walk. The French had pulled him in a wheelbarrow until they couldn't go any further and left them in Zchopau. These two poor guys had worked for two years in salt mines. They wore striped garments. The elder of the two had white hair (we heard later that he was 32; he looked 50), was so weak that he spoke with great difficulty, and raised his hands pathetically "I want to see my wife and four children." We could tell he didn't believe it yet.

No one took care of us. Three Americans crossed the town and stopped in the mayor's office. I went to see them. Impossible to get a word out in English and they only spoke English. I tried to make myself understood. I showed them my arm, to no avail. Some Russian soldiers went riding through in a truck; they did not stop.

I finally decided to leave with the French prisoners who were stuck like me. Equipped thanks to a German family who had shown me much kindness, I had a dress, a raincoat, a sweater, shoes, and a backpack full of as much bread as I could carry. I took the train with my companions.

I should say that while not occupied, the zone in which we were situated was Russian. It was limited to the surroundings of Chemnitz by a large highway. That highway was our first objective. We got there on



a cold, cloudy afternoon. And there in a house without a door or windows, on the edge of the highway, exposed to the wind, we should await a French colonel in charge of organizing the repatriation and who alone could help us officially cross the zone, ie the highway.

It started to rain. After about one hour of effort, my companions and I managed to light a fire with damp wood to keep warm and heat a drink. But then night fell. No one came to look for us. We had to arrange to sleep on the floor of the hut and I was happy someone lent me a hood. Again my companions took good care of me. And I could appreciate the kindness of the French and their perfect courtesy.

The highway was guarded by a Russian soldier who stayed in a hut almost facing ours on the other side of the road. He was only sober in the morning. By noon, he began to drink and the evening was uproaring drunk. We spent our time watching him. He systematically stopped all Germans who used the highway. Whatever their vehicle (mostly motorcycles or bicycles), when they went in front of his stand, they had to get off. The vehicle was confiscated and if they protested, he gave them a broom and made them sweep the road for an hour. I don't need to tell you that this spectacle was a source of great joy for us.

But, in the evening things got worse. The Russian, totally intoxicated, was making lots of noise, and shooting his revolver into the air. In the middle of the night for fun, he set fire to the canon he had confiscated during the day. It was a wild display of fireworks, unique and unexpected.

Next day, still no colonel! After 24 hours of waiting, and exasperated to know that 50 meters from us, there were supplies and a repatriation mission, we decide that this joke had lasted long enough.

Naturally the Russian soldier is half crazy. He could shoot us if we cross his path "in fraud." But it's our last risk and we decide to take it.

We wait for the moment when he'll be busy stopping a cyclist and turn his back to us. We run as fast as we can. In a few seconds, we are safely "on the other side."

We sleep in a barn full of hay and the next day a truck comes to get us. We are joined by a larger group of prisoners. There is one last battle to wage: they don't want me. The truck only takes prisoners. I try to join them; they pull me out. Furious, I go to the front of the truck, climb on the huge wheel and sit on the hood, determined to stay. The American driver gets down from his seat and tells me to get in next to him. He offered me candies and every ten minutes let go of the steering wheel saying "Ho ! la ! la !," his only words of French.

Three quarters of an hour later we arrived at our first repatriation center. I was immediately directed to the camp prisoner side and the military prisoners to theirs. So I was suddenly separated from my traveling companions, only able to say goodbye at a distance.

Afterwards everything unfolded "normally." I was taken from one repatriation center to another, in a truck, in cattle cars (open this time). I was always seated near the door, my legs hanging over the empty space and I remember having crossed the Rhine like that. We had an almost maternal reception at Saint-Avoid where we had our first white bread.

And it was at Saint-Avoid that for the first time we got on "people" cars, to arrive decently in Paris. In the train, shortly before our arrival, by a strange effect of memory, suddenly the phone number of my relative Raymond came back to me.



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קהילת גשר

The French-Anglophone Jewish  
Congregation in Paris and  
Saint Germain en Laye



Upon arrival, at the Gare de l'Est<sup>3</sup>, our little group of  
deportees exited first. An officer announced very loud

“the deportees.” And we walked between two rows of  
General de Gaulle’s soldiers, in uniform and who pre-  
sented arms to us. We were not expecting that and  
we were profoundly moved.

[3] Paris train station for trains coming from the East

Translated by Denise Silber

**Odette Spingarn's testimonial is archived in Yad Vashem.**

She has authorized Kehilat Gesher to reproduce it on our web site :

**[www.kehilagesher.org](http://www.kehilagesher.org)**

in order to ensure greater availability.

Her story and beautiful writing are indeed very moving.