Wartime memoir of Philip Neres, stepson of Lev Rabeneck

Philip with Madeleine and his stepfather, Lev Rabeneck in about 1950, after the War

This is a memoir of the wartime experiences of Philip Neres, (born London 21 March, 1922) stepson of Lev Rabeneck, and son of his wife Madeleine from her first marriage. It was found among Philip's papers following his death in Madrid on August 7, 2005, by his friend Francisco Anderiz of Madrid. Philip relates his recruitment by S.O.E., being dropped into occupied France, some of his espionage episodes, and his eventual capture by the Gestapo. After the War, Philip worked first for IBM in the Middle East, and later for the Economist Intelligence Unit, set up in 1946 to provide detailed research and analysis.

Introduction

On 21 March 1943, I spent my twenty-first birthday in Annecy, at the home of a sixty-five-year-old widow, Elise Geoffroy who, very bravely, had offered me hospitality in her apartment for as long as I required. I deliberately use the words ‘very bravely’, for it was an act of courage to offer such hospitality to an Englishman in the year of grace 1943, in a small town in France, officially in the Italian zone of occupation already honeycombed by members of the German Gestapo.

Elise[1] was a widow with three children. The oldest, François, married to Jeanne, helped his mother run the draper’s shop bequeathed to her by her husband. Her younger son, Jean, was a prisoner of war in Germany, and her youngest child Andrée who, though she lived with her mother, practiced dentistry in a very small town, St Julien, some thirty kilometres from Annecy on the way to the Swiss frontier, not far from Geneva.

Elise and her daughter lived in a very comfortable apartment on the fifth floor of No. 8 rue Camille Dunant, an art deco apartment block in the centre of the town, over which there was a splendid view from the balcony (which ran the length of their house). Annecy was a small sleepy town (some 30,000) or more correctly, city, since it was blessed with a cathedral and a live bishop, partisan of the Vichy regime. Annecy’s general appearance was enchanting, however, with an old château built on the bank of a narrow river flowing through the town and flanked by several buildings dating back centuries to the late Middle Ages. Most impressive of all, however, was its splendid position on the lake of Annecy, the Northeastern end of which it encircled. It had a casino, which contained the town’s only cinema, and which had been built on the water’s edge, with gardens alongside and, opposite, anything but a negligible restaurant – La Taverne – the best in town; whose inhabitants ate mainly in their homes. As a result, the restaurant’s customers were *“gens de passage”,* travellers or tourists, most of whom had descended from the Alpine regions and Grenoble and were on their way to Lyon or Paris during the warm months of the year. The majestic Hôtel Beau-Rivage overlooking the lake, as its name implies, was totally peopled for the season by French parents with ample financial means, and their progeny. The view from the hotel extended as far as the eye could peer across the length of the lake in the direction of Duingt and St Jorioz at the

[1] This is the first time I have called her by her Christian name, for, owing to the considerable difference in our ages, I used always to address her as “Madame Geoffroy”. To all intents and purposes I was known as “Pierre”, my *‘nom de guerre’* being at that time “Pierre Neveu’’.

opposite end of the water. At times, I hired a bicycle and cycled right round the lake, one of the most enjoyable promenades imaginable, on account of the impressive beauty of the mountainous landscape.

I was still at St Paul's school, by then evacuated to Berkshire, at the time of the allied defeat in June 1940. It was my last year at school, preparing for a history scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, which I obtained in December of that year. My mother was French, and I had spent each summer holiday in France, where my parents stayed in a villa at St Palais-sur-Mer, north of Bordeaux. I was bilingual in French, for my mother had always insisted that I speak to her in French and write to her in that language whenever [we] were separated. I had also spent two years at the Lycée Français in London before going to Colet Court (St Paul's preparatory school) and then onto St Paul's itself.

The "Fall of France", as it came to be called, made a deep impression on me, as my mother and I became separated from our French family across the Channel, as well as from many of our friends. Thus, when I appeared before the Joint Recruiting Board at Cambridge in the spring of 1942, prior to being mobilised, one of the Board asked me which of the three services I should prefer to join. When I replied that I should like to join the Secret Service for the duration of the war, I noticed that my interlocutor (a member of the Royal Air Force) exchanged glances with his two colleagues. The upshot of my appearance before the Board was that I was summoned to the War Office where I was interviewed by a Colonel Gielgud, older brother of Sir John. A few weeks later I was then interviewed by Captain Jepson, a well-known detective-story writer, in one of the flats in Portman Court, off Portman Square in London, used by the French Section of the Special Operations Executive, to which I shall henceforth refer as S.O.E. As almost everybody is aware by now, owing to the considerable number of books and press articles published about the then secret organisation, S.O.E. was set up in London

Getting into the Special Operations Executive

My first direct contact with S.O.E. occurred when meeting the writer Selwyn Jepson. Captain Jepson as he then was, was ensconced in a very small office on one of the upper floors of Orchard Court, off Portman Square. If my memory is not at fault, Jepson's office overlooked Wigmore Street. A slender, affable man with greying hair whose interest in detective fiction fitted him well for his work as recruiting officer for S.O.E.'s French Section under Maurice Buckmaster, Jepson had a keen expression which took in everything and everyone he scrutinized at first

meeting. He supplemented the information on the candidate he interviewed, that was contained in a folder placed before him on his desk, by a series of pertinent questions relating to the candidate's character, experience, interests and education. Jepson spoke French well and possessed a considerable knowledge of France past and present. He was, moreover, a Francophile, an essential qualification for anybody connected with S.O.E.'s French Section, and was possessed of a sense of humour, always a stabilizing asset when dealing with dramatic and dangerous situations over which too little direct control can be exercised.

My interview with Jepson had been fixed in June 1942, by Colonel Gielgud (John Gielgud's elder brother) of the War Office who had summoned me some weeks earlier from Cambridge, where I was an undergraduate at Trinity College, reading history, on the strength of my having appeared before Cambridge University Recruiting Board a short time earlier, in preparation for my imminent mobilisation. I was a little over twenty years of age, having been born in London on 21 March 1922. My mother Madeleine was French and had always spoken to me in her mother tongue, so that I should become bilingual in English and French. Two years spent at the Lycée Français in Kensington had taught me moreover to write French faultlessly. All in all, I was thus considered by S.O.E. to be an apt recruit to perform "clandestine activities" on the other side of the Channel, after a necessary period of training in the South of England.

So much has already been written about S.O.E.; its genesis and development, its members and organisation, its objectives, its achievements and its failures, as well as its impact on certain vital aspects of the Second World War in particular sectors of the battle areas, that I do not intend to repeat such information for fear of wasting my reader's time. My primary intention is to describe how a young Englishman, with French family connections and experience, faced a familiar country and society suddenly transformed under a new and startling guise which rendered it almost unrecognisable, and often very distasteful - a feeling occasionally redeemed by the individual heroism displayed by ordinary men women and even children in most challenging conditions for which they were quite unprepared although surprisingly not ill-fitted.

Most probably I should never have put pen to paper with reference to the above, but for the alarming revival of Fascism and its particularly odious Nazi brand, which is causing so much concern in Europe at the present time on account of all the danger which such recrudescence implies for

the present and future.[2] The First World War was fought "to make the world safe for democracy"; in view of the shambles that followed the Treaty of Versailles, nobody dared to coin a shibboleth to describe the aims of the "victors" of the Second World War. Thus, a fustian programme went by default on the second great occasion of a world conflagration, suggesting that the leading democracies had learnt their lesson in the most humiliating way imaginable. Yet what has just recently happened in the Balkans shows Europe up as an incompetent moral coward of alarming proportions and a pathetic source of danger to its friends and allies.

Getting Into France, 1943

While I was still stretched out on the camp-bed which had been provided for me in the Lancaster bomber flying me to a dropping area in France a few kilometres from Ambérieu, I began to wonder what my reaction would be to catching sight of the first German soldier I encountered on French soil. I had been asleep for about two hours or so in the aircraft – I have always fallen asleep very easily in anything that moves at speed, be it car, train, boat or aeroplane – but I knew now, on glancing at my watch, that very soon the flight-serjeant, who was the only other person in the body of the Lancaster, would come to rouse me in preparation for the jump. This is in fact what happened; a tap on the shoulder, a quiet statement that we were nearing the dropping zone and a cup of tea, together with the pertinent message, relayed from the pilot, that I should be fully ready in twenty minutes time. I got up from the bed, dressed and chatted to the flight-serjeant who was my 'despatcher'. The red light took longer than scheduled to flash three or four times, as the navigator was having difficulty locating the dropping area, for the aircraft seemed to have flown beyond the spot pinpointed on his map. But soon the light flashed, and the flight-serjeant told me to swing my legs over the circular gaping hole in the floor of the aircraft. I was to sit quietly facing the signals until the red light was suddenly replaced by a green one. When the latter flashed, the 'despatcher' shouted "Jump!" and I was away . . . . .

That night of 19 February, 1943, was a beautiful moonlit one, but rather too clear for my liking as I felt that half of France would be watching me descend to join it on the ground, with quite a lot of Germans amongst the

[2] Philip is certainly referring to the fascist uprisings in the Balkans in 1945-46; see this article: https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/conflict-post-war-yugoslavia

onlookers. No such thing happened, although something almost equally upsetting occurred.

The pilot had really lost his bearings and so I was dropped quite a distance from the landing ground which had been described to me in detail, at my last briefing in London. Nothing that I saw around me corresponded to what I had been led to expect: I was completely lost. But at least I had not landed in the upper branches of a tree, suspended in the air by one of the cords of the parachute. It was bitterly cold and the ground was so hard by reason of the temperature below zero (or so it seemed) that I was not able to bury my parachute, always considered a must. And so, I scoured around until I found a suitably large and very leafy bush, in which to conceal that mass of beautiful white silk which had wafted me down to earth from some 8,000 feet above sea level.

But in which direction was I to turn, as there was no landmark that I could now recognise owing to the aircraft's flight off course during the last minutes before the pilot flashed the green light from his seat in the cockpit? Every side looked much the same, as I had landed in a wooded area, though not in a dense wood. It was just after 1a.m. and the curfew would last until 6 a.m. If I were seen walking around between those hours I would probably be in for trouble. I had to get away quickly from the bush where I hid my parachute, however, the noise of the Lancaster's engines as it flew around in search of the planned dropping area, would surely have been heard by Frenchmen living nearby, as well as by any Germans stationed in the not-too-distant vicinity. Lyon, some 35 kilometres from Ambérieu, was thick with Germans. And I might have been dropped on the wrong side of Ambérieu, between that town and Lyon itself, too close indeed to Lyon for comfort.

I therefore set off in a direction leading to where there seemed to be fewer trees, in the hope of finding open countryside which might help me to gauge very roughly my position in the *département* of Ain. Ambérieu, whose full name is Ambérieu-en-Bugey, was then a small town of fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. The Larousse dictionary describes it as a *'noeud ferroviare'* (an important railway junction) and states that it is a silk-manufacturing town. My only hope was that, somewhere on the horizon, I would see some dim lights suggestive of the location of Ambérieu. I was carrying a small suitcase, with two changes of clothing and the essential toiletries which, hanging from the same parachute, had come down with me.

Meeting Emil Genon of IBM

One morning I called on Gaston Dethrollaz in his furniture shop in Annecy, ever sure of the friendliest welcome. He was particularly glad to see me as he wished to introduce me to an Alsatian refugee in Annecy, who had escaped from Strasbourg to avoid being drilled into obedience to the new German-controlled administration of his province. He had been a civil servant, working in a tax office in Strasbourg so long as the city remained French up to 1940. Gaston told me that the man was very brave and part of a French resistance organisation and that he might prove a useful contact for me in the days to come. I was naturally wary and bore in mind that S.O.E. agents were prohibited from getting involved with the French resistance without a definite approval and therefore permission of London HQ to which any potential contact had to be described with minute precision so that it could evaluate the worth, usefulness and especially security of any such new contact. I arranged with Gaston for a date and time to meet this Alsatian, if he were given a clean bill of health by London. I therefore met the man as if by accident in Gaston's shop and very quickly learnt that what had incited him to seek my acquaintance was more a matter over which I could help him rather than an offer of help to me. But the matter was interesting and so I took it seriously not to say eagerly.

The matter in question concerned a Belgian family from Brussels who were living as refugees on the [eastern] shore of Lake Annecy, at a place called Talloires, a few kilometres from Annecy. The head of the family proved to be the General Manager of IBM Belgium, Emil Genon, who had crossed into France to avoid arrest at the hands of the Germans. He had brought his wife, Jeanine, with him and his two children, a son aged sixteen called Georges, and his daughter Marina a year younger. Genon proved to be an important member of IBM, for apart from his responsibilities in Belgium, he had the ear of Thomas J. Watson, President of IBM, for many matters connected with the IBM World Trade Corporation located in Paris' superb Place Vendôme and, of whom Thomas J's younger son Arthur J. Watson was the President for many years. Thus, Genon was a man who counted for much in the IBM, for more than just his job in his native Belgium. He was a short, broad man and like so many short men, he threw his weight around in a very personal and pragmatic way. His impact had to be seen and felt to be believed. Very shrewd, he did not suffer fools gladly and expected the highest standards from his staff, although he was not always successful in selecting the right man for the right job, especially in the years after the war when his empire within the IBM grew to include South Africa, Egypt and the Middle East, except Iran and Iraq. But that is another story, and

though I worked directly for him from 1952 to 1956 in those countries, from which I derived great experience as well as enjoyment, I won't expand on that in this book. Suffice to say that we parted company after the Suez crisis, as a when I sailed for Europe on the last (Turkish) ship to leave Alexandria before the port was mined in August 1956.[3]

As a result of my encounter with the Alsatian, who reminded me of a large bear, hairy and heavily built as he was, it was arranged that I should meet Genon and his family as soon as possible, particularly since he suspected that the Germans had hit upon his trail and therefore he was liable to arrest, with or without his family. He had obviously heard about me through one of the many grape-vines existing in Annecy and its surrounding country, that I was running an escape line into Spain from around Perpignan, and that might provide a welcome way of making his escape from France. It was agreed that I should have lunch with the Genon family in their villa at Talloires, a delightful village overlooking the lake which provided a summer residence for prosperous French families during the hotter months of the year. The scenery in that part of France is superb, in winter as in summer; in the winter the mountains against which Talloires and the other villages alongside the lake of Annecy back, with a funicular at Talloires, are covered with snow. The waters of the lake become dark and almost threatening, and the roads are covered with snow. But it was early summer when I met the Genons and all trace of snow had long since disappeared. Instead, I entered a garden full of thriving plants and flowers which grow plentifully and most healthily in all seasons in the rich Alpine soil.

I crossed the lawn, and my hand was grasped effusively by Genon, whose congenial dumpy figure made a most reassuring first impression. I was presented to the family: his wife, who I later learned was his first cousin and a head taller than him, was a rather shy woman who turned out to be completely dominated by her husband Her son proved as shy as his mother, while the young girl, aged fifteen, had the makings of a strong personality, inherited from her father with, at the same time an innate gentleness made more evident by her perfect manners, whereas her father's courtesy could not altogether conceal his obvious exaggerated self-assurance which bordered on self-conceit.

After the normal exchange of civilities, Genon came straight to the point, and explained that he had recently become aware that the Gestapo were showing signs of interest in his presence and that of his family at

[3] It's clear from the tone of these fragments that Philip intended to write a book length memoir. But only the present fragments remain.

Talloires, no doubt in an endeavour to become acquainted with his past in Belgium and discover why he had left his country and become a voluntary exile in France. Genon was a Walloon and as such, by birth pro-French so to speak, as were all his family. He had fought in the First World War and later, after the Second War, he took me on a tour of the battlefields in Flanders. I was easily able to appreciate the unbelievable grisliness of trench warfare. As a child, I had always been horrified by accounts of bayonet attacks in Flanders or at Gallipoli in my father's illustrated books of the First World War.

Genon was extremely patriotic, and a brave man, as he proved under the great stress of trying to safeguard his family at Talloires. On the same day that I met the Genons, I was introduced to an extraordinary Frenchman who formed part of the family entourage, Ginet-Richard by name. He was always referred to by his surname. In fact, in all the years I came to know him in France and later in Belgium, I never got to know his Christian name as it was never mentioned. He struck me at first as rather a sinister, even Machiavellian character. Highly intelligent, with the brand of intelligence that is so highly prized at the Ecole Normale, in Paris, he was by profession a political journalist who had made quite a name for himself, working on the well-known *"Aurore"*. But he was just a shade too cynical for my liking, and I never came to trust him completely, though we got on well. He was not particularly British, and so the fact that I was half French helped to make me 'persona grata' as far as he was concerned. He became Genon's glorified personal assistant cum dogsbody. His French contacts in the political world proved useful to Genon, who preferred to follow French politics more closely than Belgian politics, as this was of course a period – that of Vichy – which witnessed many more intrigues and political somersaults, thanks mainly to Laval's moral dishonesty, than ever plagued the Belgian scene.

Other Belgians besides Genon had fled Belgium and sought refuge in Upper Savoy – and Genon knew them all, but preferred the company of his fellow-citizens, from Liège his hometown. Foremost amongst them was a senator, who was also the very clever editor of a famous Belgian newspaper, *"La Meuse"*. His name was Gilbert. Very cultured, which Genon was not, Gilbert was famous for his wit, of which he always produced samples at every meeting or social occasion. It helped to lighten the atmosphere of those troubled times, and made it a pleasure to be with him.

Without a doubt, Genon's most important outside contact while he was in France, proved to be neither a Frenchman nor a Belgian, but an American

spinster, a Miss Spring, an official from the United States in Vichy. Genon had established contact with the U.S. embassy in Switzerland soon after his arrival in France and, doubtless as a result of his intimate professional connection with IBM and the Watson family, this initial contact had developed into a very important and strong connection centred on interests other than IBM machines. I always suspected that Genon had contacts with the surviving elements of the French *Deuxième Bureau*, disbanded in accordance with German armistice terms negotiated at Rethondes in 1940.[4] He never referred to any such ramifications of his contact with the Americans, at Vichy, but it seemed to me a logical extension of the constant scramble for information, of both a military and a political character, which characterised the area within the geographical triangle Vichy-Bern-Geneva. The entire territory comprised by Upper Savoy and Geneva, was buzzing with agents of different nationalities – German, French, Italian, British, American who watched the Franco-Italian frontier at a time when the Italian partner of the Axis was weakening and causing great anxiety to the German High Command in the Alpine area, for the Germans began to realise that in a matter of months at the latest German forces would have to cross the frontier to replace Italian troops in Northern Italy on whose fidelity, let alone powers of resistance, they might soon no longer be able to rely.

Tracking German troop movements

For some time now, I had managed to recruit the station-master of Annecy among my sub-agents. He was most willing to supply me with copies of lots of the German troop rail convoys passing through his station. These copies contained the number of men who passed through his station in these military convoys as well as their unit numbers. I managed to engage a male courier known to move between St Julien, a small French town very near the Swiss frontier, and Geneva on harmless business, as far as the Germans were concerned. Such men were known as *'frontaliers'* and plied an innocuous though quite remunerative trade between Switzerland and France, acceptable to both sides and what was essential, accepted by the Germans as unavoidable and hence permissible by default. The courier was a most reliable man in his late forties, recommended to me by Andrée Geoffroy, the daughter of Elise Geoffroy, who sheltered me in her comfortable apartment in Annecy, as I described in Chapter ____.[5] Andrée practiced as a dentist in St Julien, to which she used to go every day to treat her patients in her *"cabinet dentaire"*. The courier came to Annecy every other day to fetch the reports and took

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deuxième_Bureau
[5] In the Introduction of this memoir

them across the Franco-Swiss frontier to Geneva. It was just a matter of a few kilometres and the operation took very little time. The courier had to deposit his package in the house of a Genevan citizen, of modest background, who did not publicize his pro-British leanings and therefore was unlikely to arouse the suspicions of the Swiss authorities, and more serious still, of German agents who operated in Geneva. This person than delivered the packages at different times of day to the Americans in Geneva, two of whose members were detailed to process the information they contained and pass it on to whomever it concerned. This network became particularly valuable as soon as Italy denounced its alliance with Nazi Germany in September 1943, and the German High Command rushed troop reinforcements to Northern Italy to constitute what was to become the Gothic Line under the brilliant command of Field Marshal von Kesselring. (ends)

Escape from Seville to Lisbon

At gloaming, one late Saturday afternoon in the second half of October 1943, David Muirhead drove his large black Cadillac into Seville. The temperature was hot and dry and the city looked dusty as a result. I was seated in the front, at David's side, with false papers identifying me as a King's Messenger; the diplomatic bag, in the form of large sacks with corresponding large seals, was stacked at the back of the car. The 'Diplomatic Bag' was actually more genuine than me, since it contained embassy mail to be driven to Gibraltar from Seville.

We had a very pleasant journey from the Embassy in Madrid, without any untoward incident. Every now and then, as we drove through cities and townships, the local *"guardia civil"* whom we passed, sprang smartly to attention and saluted the Union Jack flying from the car's bonnet. At one point, though, about midway through our long drive, David suddenly swerved from the main road up a narrow lane, quite deserted, and stopped the Cadillac some three hundred yards out of sight. He opened its boot and picked out a number plate with which he replaced the one which had hitherto been used. He explained to me that this peculiar operation was meant to scotch any Spanish effort to monitor his journey because the Military Attaché's car would otherwise be easily identifiable, if it used the same number-plate wherever it travelled.

At about 2.30 pm, we pulled up in front of a most attractive building set in a large garden with several fountains, rose bushes still flowering and many other plants and trees. It proved to be one of the Government paradors, subsequently well-known to tourists after the Second World

War. We had stopped at the parador built just outside the town of Bailén, famous for its humiliating surrender (1808) of the French general Dupont, after a tough battle which he had lost to the Spanish general Castaños, a veteran aged 50. The weather was splendid and the food and wine excellent as we sat at a table in the garden to enjoy both. I was sorry to leave such pleasant surroundings to resume our journey to Seville.

In those days there was relatively little traffic on Spanish roads, even the main ones. This was a definite blessing as even the country's main roads were narrow and maintained in a very poor state of repair. It was about 8:30 when we got to Seville, some twelve hours after our departure that morning from the British Embassy in the heart of Madrid. David Muirhead drove straight to the British consulate, where its titular head was awaiting us. After the usual exchange of civilities, we sat around a table in the Consul's office, where we were invited to sample some of the Consul's sherry. The Consul, _____ Montgomery, was connected in peacetime with British sherry and port companies which flourished, as they still do, in Jerez de la Frontera, a beautiful, and maybe the cleanest [town] in Spain. Indeed, in the latter respect, it vies with the larger and better-known San Sebastian, at the other extremity of the country.

Montgomery explained to David Muirhead and myself what he had planned and arranged for the following day, in order to get me clandestinely across the Spanish-Portugese border, on the way to Lisbon from where I was due to depart by air for the U.K. My first surprise came when our host informed me that I would not be alone on the journey, which I was to make in the company of a Dutchman who had escaped from the Netherlands, and sought to join his country's forces in exile in England. This presented no problem, and I was glad at the idea of making the journey with a companion, to help relieve the monotony of what was bound to involve a long trek, once over the Portuguese frontier.

Meanwhile, I couldn't spend the night in a hotel – for that would draw attention to my presence in the South of Spain. I no longer had any Neutrality papers, nor could I count on the protection of the British Governmental service in my capacity of King's Messenger. I was to be put up for the night in the house of a modest Andalucian family, headed at the moment by the wife of one of General Franco's prisoners since the end of the civil war. She turned out to be a kind woman, with many problems of her own. As the wife of a political opponent of the regime she was under strict surveillance, with very little money to support her family of four children. I suspect that she gave shelter to people like me to eke out a financially precarious existence. The British Consulate must

have included her on its secret payroll. The consul told me that her husband was under permanent sentence of death, which might be carried out at any time, under the slightest pretext. Any sensible conversation with the unfortunate woman was impossible as she could not speak English or French, and my knowledge of Spanish was limited at the time to pointing to items on a Spanish menu.

The following afternoon, a very ramshackle taxi came to collect me, which had already picked up the Dutchman. He was my senior by about ten years, spoke English fluently but wore a permanently dour expression, perhaps a premonition of the fate in store for him, months later, at the hands of the Gestapo on his return from England to Holland, on his second mission as an agent for the Dutch secret services. His name was __________.

The taxi then headed for the British Consulate where we were to be given instructions for the journey by the Consul himself. A third member of our clandestine party had also arrived at the consulate, a last-minute addition of whom we had not had warning. He was a droopy young man with thick glasses, who had spent most of his life in France but, since he was born of a British father and had come into this world in the U.K., had to leave France as best he might, now that there was no longer an Unoccupied Zone. His story seemed odd to me but perhaps I was over-suspicious because of the poor impression the fellow, about 25 years of age, made on me. But subsequent events justified my misgivings, as I shall relate in good time.[6]

We were told by the Consul that the same ramshackle taxi would take us to the Portuguese border where, at a frontier-post manned by Spanish and Portuguese guards and customs officials, the taxi would stop but we would be waved on by the Spaniards on duty who had been generously bribed to let us cross the border without any questions being asked. It seemed too good to be true and that is just what it turned out to be!

After a very slow and bumpy road in the unprepossessing vehicle, we came to a sudden stop, some four hours after leaving the Consulate. By then it was dark, and we could hardly make out our surroundings. But almost immediately one of the doors was wrenched open and a Spanish policeman faced us with an unpleasant frown. He shouted for our passports, while our driver made for a nearby thicket by the side of the wood and disappeared for ever more. The Dutchman and I had the same

[6] An episode not covered in the present memoir.

reaction, and jointly opened the door on the opposite side of the vehicle, through which we darted, calling on the third passenger to follow suit. But it was no use as the vehicle was quickly surrounded and we were frogmarched to the nearest municipality which rejoiced in the name of Rosal de la Frontera. There we were taken to the local police station for interrogation in an unusually civilised way, for the country and time concerned.

The consul proved to have been unusually provident, or else this may not have been the first blank to have been drawn in his career as organiser of an escape line. Whatever the reason he had thoughtfully provided each of us with a reasonably generous sum of money, in Spanish currency, which was to prove our immediate salvation as far as elementary creature comforts were concerned. [ends][7]

“Laval au Poteau”[8] and my subsequent arrest

As the night express from Toulouse to Annemasse, (some 18 kilometres from Geneva, in the French department of Haute-Savoie) came to a standstill in the station at Avignon, the train’s passengers were abruptly awoken by vociferations of ‘Laval au poteau’ proffered by dozens of young men standing in a long line along the platform, who beat with their naked fists against the heavy steel framework of the carriages. The din became tremendous and was pregnant with drama, for these young Frenchmen had been forcibly mobilized to work in factories in Germany as part of a deal made by Laval with Fritz Sauckel, the brutal gauletier of Thuringia, appointed by Hitler to recruit labour from every territory in Europe occupied by the Third Reich. The first 250,000 Frenchmen recruited in 1941 were ‘volunteers’, of whom few were women. As the number proved insufficient to free German workers required by the Wehrmacht for service on the Russian front, the S.T.O. (*Service de Travail Obligatoire*) was set up and many French prisoners of war in Germany were transferred from camps to work in German factories. This [was] in contravention of all international agreements affecting prisoners of war, nor were such workers protected by any international convention.

By the end of 1943, the year in which I reached France, some 600,000 such French workers were already employed in German factories. Later, large contingents of young Frenchmen were forcibly sent to Germany in exchange for the liberation of prisoners of war repatriated to France. This new development was known as ‘*La relève’* (the substitution), and its

[7] It remains unclear whether Philip and his companions were able to bribe the police and make it to Lisbon, or whether they were stopped at the border and taken hostage.
[8] A slogan meaning literally ‘Laval to the stake’. By an irony of fate, Laval was excuted tied to a stake, in 1945.

ratio was very heavily weighted in favour of the Germans: 50,000 prisoners of war in exchange for some 250,000 Frenchmen between the ages of 17 and 24, selected from France. There then began the attempted exodus from France of thousands of such young Frenchmen over the Pyrenees. The fortunate ones among them were able to cross the mountain frontier in an organised manner as part of groups headed by guides, usually Spanish, to whom large sums of money were paid in advance. A small number of these guides proved worthless creatures who led the refugees into German traps along routes other than those followed by the honest '*passeurs*', as the guides were called in the then current local French terminology.

As the months passed, more and more young Frenchmen managed to avoid getting sent to the factories not only by crossing the Pyrenees, but also by hiding far from their usual home addresses in isolated areas of the countryside, thus forming the nuclei of what became known as the '*maquis*', in several different regions of France. To help offset such potential losses to German factories, the Gestapo in plain clothes began to seize young people in the streets, in cinemas and bars, to examine their identities and age groups. Those who could not justify the fact that they had not yet been sent to Germany were imprisoned and eventually sent to join batches of youngsters such as those who waited under guard at the station in Avignon for special trains to deliver them to Germany for distribution within the plants there, as best fitted their specialization, if any. The noose around the necks of Frenchmen between the ages of 17 and 24, or of able-bodied men around that age who might serve a similar purpose, was gradually drawn ever more tightly, until such time as it became highly imprudent for them to be out in the streets in towns and cities. Barriers would suddenly be erected at the ends of avenues or main streets, and people were caught as in a net by the Gestapo, at times helped quite shamelessly by French police, though the latter on the whole abstained from such co-operation and even helped potential victims to make quick escapes down side streets which had not yet been cordoned off. Trains were also searched by the Gestapo, and vehicles stopped on the roads to lay hands on those who were going to ground, known colloquially as the '*embusqués*'.

It was on a train from Toulouse to Bayonne that I was arrested on 18 May, 1943, at about 2:30pm. According to my false identity card, I was just over 18 years of age, and had been born in Casablanca, French Morocco. A birthplace beyond the frontiers of France had been chosen to make it more difficult for the French police (if hostile) or the Gestapo (invariably so!) to check should I be arrested, such as then happened. It

was important to make things difficult for those who perpetrated an arrest, it gained time for those connected with the arrested person(s) to take vital precautions or to vanish, if possible, trying to remain out of reach of any investigation that might ensue.

An hour or so before my arrest, I had boarded a train at Pau, a beautifully situated town, whose famous château was the birthplace of King Henry IV of France, whereas one of the humbler quarters of the township was the scene of the birth of the first King of Sweden of the still current Bernadotte dynasty, whose father had been a pastry-cook there. I had just come from Oloron-Sainte-Marie, a few miles to the south of Pau, and earlier still from Lourdes and Tarbes. What was I doing in that area of the Pyrenees, quite a long way from my customary terminus, Perpignan, where I seemed never to encounter any danger?

At Tarbes was one of the best safe-houses of the network I was sent from London to control and expand. It was a large bar and restaurant set in the heart of the town, and as such ideal for strangers to visit without calling attention to themselves and causing comment. It was also the home of the owner who rejoiced in the codename 'Thomas'. He was an imperturbable man 6 foot tall, between 45 and 50, who kept a sharp eye on things and people around him. I liked and trusted him fully, as I did his wife. On this, my last visit to him, Thomas told me about a young Polish intellectual who happened to be in hiding in Oloron-Sainte-Marie, of whom he had heard because he wanted to escape from France to join the Poles in the U.K. Thomas asked me what I thought could be done to help him and whether I would be interested in handling the matter via Perpignan. It took two days to get the details of the man's name and provisional address, a modest hotel in the very small town of Oloron-Sainte-Marie, where we'd stick out like a sore thumb if we met up. Our meeting needed to be engineered in such a manner as to appear utterly casual to any third party's prying eyes. Thomas' informer regarding the young Pole was himself a resident in Oloron and agreed to set up the 'casual' meeting which was to take place at 11 o' clock, one weekday morning, on the small hotel's verandah, overlooking the street. It was agreed that the Pole should be seated at a table with a glass of beer and reading a book. I was to appear with a newspaper under my arm, and sit at another table. There would be few people on the verandah, as that hotel was in no way a social centre. Conversation between the two of us should be a casual occurrence, after a reasonable time.

I arrived at the appointed time, to find the Pole quietly reading a book. I had met only one Pole so far in my life, the son of the then exiled Polish

Prime Minister in London who, like me, was an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge, and with whom I was only superficially acquainted. The young man now seated a few feet away from me turned out to be very tall, over six foot, with a dreamy expression, and with hair and a complexion so blond that would have enabled him to be a real representative of the Nazi Aryan myth. He had been studying classics at the Sorbonne, and had only recently fled the French capital to avoid being caught in the coils of the German forced labour raids. Born of Polish immigrants in France he spoke French perfectly. This would greatly ease any attempt to organise an escape into Spain to which we referred in considerable detail during our meeting. He had enough money to finance a longer stay in the hotel during the relatively short time that would be required to organise his clandestine departure and crossing of the Pyrenees. Furthermore, his papers, including genuine identity card, were in order, although his age remained an insuperable liability.

After an hour or so, I bade farewell to the young Pole and wished him luck, I had explained to him the mechanics of the operation, from the moment he would be contacted by a member of the escape-line, and had fixed the necessary password that would on that occasion be given him, as well as his required set reply to confirm his own ‘bona fide’. Alas, the entire plan fell through because of my own arrest a few hours later on the train I had boarded at Pau. I was obviously unable to implement my part of the undertaking and no one else could know what had been decided on that nondescript hotel verandah. Consequently I never heard anything more of the young Pole, nor he of me. I only hope that, somehow, he managed to get away safely and survive the war. No doubt he was led to imagine that I was a bounder!

Captivity in Bordeaux (part 1)

Hotel Edouard VII, Biarritz, where Philip was kept prisoner before being moved by train to Bordeaux

At the end of two weeks uncomfortable confinement at the Hôtel Edouard VII, after I had been declared a hostage with nineteen other prisoners, we were handcuffed and made to climb into some German army trucks and driven to the railway station in Bayonne. Needless to say I and those nineteen fellow-prisoners felt greatly relieved that the members of the French resistance had shown such self-restraint during those two weeks and had not thought fit or possible [to] kill or injure any German soldiers or officers in the Bordeaux area, thus saving us from instant summary execution without trace, for family and friends would not have been informed of our hurried demise, nor would our names have been published in any newspapers reporting the death by shooting of "twenty hostages".

The journey to the station took only a short time and we were made to jump out of the trucks clutching our scanty possessions and told to line up along a platform to which we were led by several German NCOs. We remained handcuffed which made it difficult to climb into the old-fashioned carriages of a waiting train, owing to the steepness and the height of the steps which we had to mount as best we could under the watchful eyes of our guards. The carriages reserved for us had their windows streaked with stickers saying *"Nur für Wehrmacht"*, which immediately resulted in the other passengers, ordinary French civilians,

walking hurriedly past with hardly more than a furtive glance at us. They were used to such sights whose nature they had come to understand only too well. We waited, seated on the wooden seats of our 3rd class compartments, old style, for about an hour until with a sudden jerk, our train puffed slowly out of the station on its way to Bordeaux, as we learned from a surprisingly talkative and not unpleasant corporal who walked up and down our carriage. The train made slow progress but we at last glided into Bordeaux's Central Station. There our military escort was stronger than at Bayonne, doubtless because Bordeaux was a much larger city able to spring more unpleasant surprises on the Germans, greater care was taken by the military to prevent any attempt at escape or rescue from a large station teeming with travellers. After being counted for the n'th time, we were marshalled along a clear gap in the multitude hurriedly made by the French travellers who had no wish to rub shoulders with the German military or the members of the Gestapo who had mingled with our escort. And so we arrived quite quickly at our destination and jumped again out of similar military trucks. Our destination proved to be the Fort du Hâ, which as I learned years later, was the remnant of [ends][9]

Fort du Hâ, Bordeaux, used to detain deserters and resistants during the occupation[10]

[9] Philip's memoir ends here but see below about Fort du Hâ.
[10] https://www.frankfallaarchive.org/prisons/bordeaux-fort-du-ha-prison/