

« A young boy and the “Good War” »

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With my heartfelt thanks to the late Paul GRISSO (1922-2003) - 106th Infantry Division, 442nd Infantry Regiment, Company G - POW - 1944-1945 - for fine-editing the text.

I was born in March 1938, in Brussels, Belgium. Toward the end of 1942, my parents, my brother, 4 years older than I, and myself moved from a very small house to a fourteen unit apartment building above a movie theatre in the commune of Saint-Gilles. The building still stands but the cinema downstairs has been replaced some time ago by the Centre Culturel Jacques Franck.

My earliest childhood memories, naturally are of the World War Two period; not necessarily of the war itself, but rather of the conditions in which we, as children, had to live under German occupation. The adults, of course, understood the situation better than we children could.

Food and ration stamps :

One of the things I remember best is the long lines for bread we were sometimes subjected to. Once, in the dead winter of 1943, when my turn finally came in a long queue outside a bakery, the lady told me sadly that there wasn't any bread anymore, although I had the required bread stamps... Not only was I freezing but also a little bit uncertain about the reaction of my mother when I got home and told her there was no bread available... Happily for me, she understood and managed to bake a bread herself with some flour that my father had obtained through somebody who knew somebody who had relatives who had a farm in the countryside...

It was mostly, even for the bare necessities, a question of finding a way to get more bread than the official maximum daily ration anyone was allowed to buy, in exchange for food stamps issued by the local authorities, under orders of the Germans... In August, 1940, the maximum daily ration of bread was 225 grams; butter : 35 gr; meat, if available : 90 gr, including 20% bones... These rations were often revised during the course of the war and, for example, in August, 1944, right before the liberation, the rations were : bread, 250 gr; flour, 185 gr; butter, 33,3 gr; meat : 20 gr (the maximum monthly ration of meat was a royal 600 gr...); potatoes, 400 gr...)

One of my uncles had some connections and could obtain “extras” : coal (to cook and to warm the apartment) and sometimes some flour, vegetables, potatoes, sausages ... so, our fare was slightly better than that of the average citizen. I don't remember having ever been hungry during the war, neither does my brother. Of course, we hadn't the same comparison

criteria that our parents had. I'm sure *they* didn't always eat to their heart's content, although I never heard them complain...

Once, I went with my mother by tram outside Brussels to fetch vegetables, potatoes, etc., from some farmer. On the return trip, my mother was worrying about the possibility of a German round-up where they would stop the car and search everybody for forbidden goods... What she feared happened when some armed German soldiers stopped the tram not far from the city limits and had everybody get out amidst shouts and a lot of commotion. They lined everybody up on the sidewalk and forced us to lift our hands above our heads. I remember a lady beside me who had a little dog, and when she lifted her arms up, she hoisted the little puppy yapping and wriggling at the end of its shortened leash way up high.

Luckily for us, the Germans stopped their search when they found a young man whose papers apparently weren't in order. They took him away and allowed everybody else to get back on the tram. I heard stories at the time of people having been rounded-up in similar circumstances, with the Germans getting their hands on all the forbidden goods, in order to serve themselves, and just letting the "culprits" go...

I once went with my father to the rue des Radis, a street in the poorest section of Brussels, where the biggest black market operations were going on. There you could find about everything anybody could dream of : butter, sugar, ham, chocolate (!), etc., but all at prohibitive prices. For example, un-roasted coffee was sold at a price amounting to a worker's monthly salary... All of this was strictly prohibited, of course, and there were look-outs posted on every street-corner to warn of any approaching German soldiers or Brussels-policemen... As I was strolling with my dad, looking at the wares laid out on blankets on the ground, there suddenly were shouts all over the place, with every merchant putting their goods in big jute bags and running away in something like panic trying to escape the approaching danger.

I never knew if it was a German patrol or policemen, but we got out of there in a hurry. In a few seconds it seemed to me, the street was empty as we also had taken a back-street. When the Germans ordered the Brussels policemen to make a round-up, most of the policemen warned the look-outs sufficiently in advance in order not to have to make arrests, but when the Germans themselves came, they really meant business. It was said that when merchants were caught, and many were, their possessions were taken and they were put in prison awaiting whatever fate the Germans decided upon.

Air-raid alerts :

I remember the air-raid alerts and the sirens wailing. At the beginning of the war, we were bombed by the Germans. I have no recollection of that, of course, being really too young at the time. From August 1942 till the end of August 1944, approximately, there were British (at night) and American (in daytime) bombers attacking railway tracks and depots as well as German military installations. These last were rather far from where we lived, but there was a railway station and depot about four kilometres from our home and this was often targeted. The Germans forced Belgian railway workers to repair the damage each time after the frequent alerts.

At night, when the alert sounded, I was almost always the last one with my mother to reach the cellar and its necessary four levels below, where all the inhabitants of the block

were gathered, most of them hastily clad in bathrobes or with coats over their nightgowns or pajamas. Nobody talked much most of the time. Everybody was listening to the sounds of the overhead bombers and the distant explosions. Sometimes these were not so distant when the bombers missed their target. Luckily, none of these stray bombs ever fell on our immediate neighbourhood, but there always was the *fear*, that I sensed in everybody around me in the beginning and which I personally began to feel myself after a while.

At first, it had been like some sort of annoying ritual to have to get down to the cellar, but after a while I realized this was a reaction to a very real danger of having the whole building falling on our heads... It took me several years after the war to get out of the habit, when planes were overhead, of ducking and looking for a nearby shelter. They sound sirens even now some sixty years later every first Thursday of the month at noon and I still can't suppress the millisecond burst of some deep-planted feeling of fear.

My mother's nerves took a serious beating during those times and she never fully regained a real peace of mind, even after the liberation, always worrying about something or another. A lady neighbour suffered also from nervous complaints due to the stress and anxiety of those times, so much so that for a very long time after the war, in fact, for as long as I knew her, whenever there was a thunderstorm, she felt jumpy and ducked under her table waiting for the storm to pass. This was not hearsay, as I personally saw her many times cowering in fear under her table. When fireworks were planned in the Commune or in the City, she often went to another Commune or even to the countryside to "escape" the loud cracking noise. Even the sound of the air rifles at the shooting gallery that was set up each year on the temporary fairground less than a kilometer from our building always put her on edge.

When there was an air-raid alert during the day, my reaction was always to seek shelter, wherever there was any. If I was on the street either alone or with my mother (my father was at work in an office), we had to decide what we should do: either run to the cellar in our building, or if we were too far away, to our nearest assigned public shelter on the corner of a street not far from where we lived. As we never wandered too far from home, most of the time we went to that shelter, everybody running like mad from all directions hoping to reach it in time. The door of the shelter was rather narrow and there was often shoving and cursing because people couldn't get inside fast enough. Once inside, everybody was cramped standing in the small quarters, most barely speaking to each other, some nervously trying to evacuate the fear by joking about the whole matter... Each and every time, I sensed the air full of fear and anxiety as we all listened, listened..., awaiting the siren sounding the end of the raid.

Sometimes the alert lasted ten minutes, sometimes an hour or more, but somehow people came to get used to that way of life. There was nothing else they could do, and since no bomb ever fell in our immediate vicinity, there seemed to prevail a certain type of fatalism. From time to time, we heard news that people had died or had been wounded in a bombardment in the suburbs of Brussels or in other cities around the country, either because the bombs had missed their targets, or because the civilians were employed in one or another Nazi-occupied building or installation on forced labor or service for the Germans.

I remember a few times that the alert sounded when I was at school. As there was no shelter nor cellar in our school and our "personal" air-raid shelter was too far away, all the teacher could tell us was to duck under our desks and wait. We sometimes saw groups of

bombers high up in the sky and didn't realize at the time that they were *friendly* (American) planes...

A daring attack on the Gestapo... :

One event which struck me as the first real heroic action I ever heard of happened in the winter of 1943. Jean de Séllys-Longchamp, a Belgian born in 1911 had, like many others, left the country after the capitulation on May, 28, 1940 (the King, leader of the Army, had decided to avoid unnecessary added bloodshed) to continue the fight. He had reached England and volunteered for military service. He chose the Air Force and earned his wings in a Belgian squadron attached to the Royal Air Force (RAF). On Wednesday, January, 20, 1943, he and another pilot left the airfield of Manston, England, on a strafing mission to Belgium. They attacked locomotives in the vicinity of Ghent, in Northern Belgium. The mission accomplished, only the other pilot flew back to Manston, not knowing that de Séllys, flying alone in the direction of Brussels, had other plans.

The young pilot's plan was to strafe a Gestapo (German military police) installation in Brussels, but he had received no answer, neither positive nor negative, from his superiors upon his request to risk such an adventure. So he took it on his own to get on with his daring enterprise. Flying very low to evade German radar, he flew his *Typhoon* above Brussels and approached his objective, a 12-story building on the Avenue Louise. In a deafening noise, he fired his cannons and saw the shells mounting up the façade of the building, with glass and concrete flying everywhere. He threw two flags, one of Belgium, the other of the United Kingdom, before zooming upwards above the building and taking altitude to get out as soon as possible. Twenty five minutes later, after having flown low over hilly Flemish countryside, the seashore and the sea, escaping detection by radar and anti-aircraft guns, he landed safely in Manston.

Four Germans had been killed in the raid, amongst them one of the highest officers of the Gestapo in Brussels, Muller. A dozen were wounded, and the building was in shambles. The news spread all over Brussels and the people rejoiced at the kick in the butt that raid meant for the Germans who made life harsher and harsher everyday for the hungry, un-free population. The Germans were raving mad and arrested many innocent civilians as a retaliatory measure, but that courageous gesture from one of ours, fighting on despite a seeming German invincibility, lifted the spirits of a whole country.

When my father came home in the afternoon, he excitedly told us the news of the daring attack that the whole city was spreading around. He listened as usual to the BBC that evening and got more details about the pilot and his "forbidden" mission. The following day, like hundreds of inhabitants of Brussels, we went to take a look at the site, but were pushed back by angry soldiers. All I could see were shattered windows and bullet marks all over the façade.

de Séllys saw his rank reduced, but at the same time he was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross for his gallant action... He died on a mission above Ostend in August, 1943. The building he strafed is still standing on n° 453 of the Avenue Louise, and a plaque on the façade recalls the incident, as does a memorial nearby.

« Le faux SOIR » :

The Germans invaded Belgium on May, 10, 1940, and they quickly occupied the whole of the country after a capitulation that was deemed inevitable by the King, hoping to avert useless bloodshed. All newspapers and other media were progressively requisitioned by the German Military Government. In Brussels, publishing freely till the last moment, some newspaper owners voluntarily ceased publication as a patriotic gesture. They dismantled presses and machines and put them away in various secret places, together with reserves of printing paper. Others were forced to continue publishing under the same banner, as the occupying forces wanted to spread information that suited their purposes.

The main Brussels-daily, “Le SOIR” (“the EVENING”) had continued publishing scathing articles denouncing the German invasion of our neutral country but had to cease publication on May, 18. From the 14th of June, the paper restarted publication under German orders, with the help of some of the staff and journalists who had chosen to not resist the usurpation of the paper nor the censorship. Nor did some traitors in the staff hesitate afterwards to solicit denunciations from the population in order to “please” the occupant.

The stolen “Le SOIR” printed articles dictated by the occupying forces and was evidently a propaganda tool. Despite this negative aspect, most people in Brussels still bought it because it was the only source of any news they had and most didn’t believe *everything* that was printed anyway. Some of the news was in fact practical and useful, information about places and distribution times of ration stamps, free missing-person notices that the publishers adroitly offered people to help them find relatives, etc., the main purpose of course being that this meant more papers sold.

In October 1943, a member of the Résistance hit upon a daring idea : Why didn’t they try to publish a false “SOIR” ? On October, 20, he talked about it with the head of another Résistance movement and they both agreed it was a wonderful idea, despite the many risks and problems involved. Money, a lot of money, was needed, as was a very good printing press capable of issuing a perfect look-alike of the usurped “official” paper. People were needed, not only to write the text and print it, but also to distribute the false papers in the few dozens of kiosks and booksellers disseminated in the city. In utmost secrecy, with the help of the Resistance and some other trusted plain citizens, the “journalists” wrote articles and passed the proofs around to compare texts; printing paper was cunningly redistributed from official newspaper printing plants to secret caches; carefully selected workers distributed the type; a master-printer agreed to print the 50,000 copies that were deemed necessary to make a sufficient impact; others planned the simultaneous distribution of some 5,000 papers in the kiosks, the other 45,000 issues to be sold clandestinely afterwards. All this feverous, underground activity went on for 20 days. It was a time full of secret meetings at wellchosen cafés, of contacts with printing workers employed at the “official Le Soir” newspaper who were forced to work there and with the constant fear of being denounced and arrested, or of seeing the project abort for some reason or other.

The publishing date was set for Tuesday, November 9, 1943. In the few days preceding that date, the papers were printed, packed in parcels of 50 copies to be distributed by trucks to

pre-arranged meeting places, mostly in cafés, because if the Germans found anything out in any of those places, the owner of the café could always tell them that it happened often that people forgot parcels in their watering holes. In the cafés, the parcels were taken up by those who had to carry them on foot or on bicycle, each to his designated kiosk. Copies travelled well outside Brussels to supply other groups in the country, but these were not sold in kiosks, only sold on the quiet. The benefits from the sales were destined to help Résistance groups and needy townspeople whose homes had been destroyed in bombardments.

The group of patriots had asked via secret coded messages that London send a few RAF fighters to fly above Brussels at an appropriate time on November 9 in order to facilitate the operations during “a specified alert” (London did indeed send planes, but they came one day late.) In another side operation, meant to distract the enemy and retard the distribution of the usurped official “Le SOIR”, the group had planned putting delivery trucks on fire on the morning of the great day in order to disrupt the normal delivery agenda of the “stolen SOIR” (this daring operation succeeded only partly as one of the trucks was put on fire by incendiary handmade bombs, the young resistance men having been seen by a passer-by who alerted the newspaper staff.)

November 9, 1943, around 4:15 pm. Already, the first customers are waiting for their newspaper at their usual kiosk. Normally, “Le SOIR” reached most newsstands at 4:30. Around the city, the “carriers” walked or rode towards their delivery points, gave their parcel to the vendor. They told them that the reason of their early delivery and of the minimal quantity of papers was because there had been a failure at the printing plant and that the rest of the papers would arrive at 6:00 pm. Each parcel was bound with rope and had a red label with a note about the printing failure. Some papers were sold to customers who simply walked away, their paper folded under an arm, or put in a briefcase or bag. But others started reading the paper right away... and began to smile, some to laugh, not for long however, as they feared being caught laughing at a photo of a sorry-looking Hitler, or reading the caption above the photo of a B-17 US bomber : “In full action”.

In fact, all the texts of the two page paper, made a mockery of the Reich propaganda; the Belgian traitors and collaborators and the rationing. The obituary section printed the names of known collaborators. There was an advertisement section full of wisecracks on the everyday life of the occupied country. One article announced that the bread ration would reach 500 grams on November 11, 1918, date of the WW1 armistice when Germany had been vanquished. The movie theater announcements told of films with such titles as “OLYMPIAD – Part 1 : the Marathon from El Alamein to Sidi Barani” with (Field Marshall) Rommel in his greatest role; “The UNSINKABLE” with the whole of the British Navy; “The WITHDRAWAL”, a unique documentary on the new uses of the rubber band; “OLYMPIAD – Part 2”, the Marathon from Sidi Barani to the Coast, with Rommel in a custom made role; “WHERE IS THE EDITOR ?”, a detective film, with Himmler and the Gestapo... and so on and so on.

Soon, the whole city was laughing and talking about the extraordinary, unbelievable feat. The first thing *I* knew about that event is seeing my father coming home that evening, very excited, waving a paper in his hand. My mother told us afterwards that she had been worried something was wrong because my father’s eyes were moist, but at the same time, that funny, secretive expression in the same eyes had immediately reassured her. Dad then told us to be patient, that he’d explain that he’d read the “special” reports to all of us after dinner. All

he agreed to tell us was that “C’est un faux SOIR !” (“It’s a false SOIR !”) We ate rather quickly and he then began to read. Of course, I didn’t really understand what it was all about, but I laughed just as the rest of them, mostly because every now and then my parents broke into irresistible laughter and my father had to take his breath to get on with his reading. He didn’t read all of it that evening, but the juiciest parts only. My mother, who was laughing her head off, abruptly stopped laughing and got a strange look in her eyes that I didn’t understand then but that she explained afterwards as coming from some kind of fear of being caught laughing at something terribly secret and forbidden... As for my brother, he was laughing more heartily than I could, because, lucky guy, he understood almost everything, especially the (for the times) dirty words.

The next day, people who had missed buying the “false” paper, tried frantically to obtain one, from a neighbour or from a friend or acquaintance, and, if that didn’t succeed, “would somebody, *please, read* it to me ?” Some people made money by selling their copy, with sums reaching one thousand francs, a fortune at the time, the price of one kilo of butter on the black market. Imagine : photostats of the paper were sent secretly to London and soon there were reprints, about 10,000 of which were sent to agents all over occupied Europe.

My father kept his own genuine paper for long years after the war, but somehow, someday he had to come to the conclusion that he had lost it. We never learned what had happened to that journalistic rarity. My mother consistently swore she *never* would have used it to peel her potatoes... Anyway, years afterward, there were copies printed as souvenir and it was only then, when I could read and understand all the articles, that I really appreciated the humor and the danger that hung above every participant to the daring act and the anger of the Germans. I still have got that copy and I cherish it as a memento of another event that I lived uncomprehendingly through.

The Germans searched for the perpetrators of this farce at their expense, and in February, 1944, the Gestapo discovered the presses and arrested four of the patriots. Later, they arrested 10 other members of the faux SOIR team. They were all convicted, from four months to fifteen years in prison. Four of them were sent to camps in Germany, two never came back; the master-printer Fernand WELLENS, who took the risk of printing all issues in his own printing-works; and Théo MULLIER, who had supplied a flong (typing-mold) with the “Le SOIR” banner, the list of the kiosks and sellers who were directly furnished by the paper, as well as the quantities distributed and time of delivery at each selling point.

The Germans in our midst... :

I have very few recollections of any contact with the Germans themselves, except the sight of occasional groups of soldiers who marched through the streets of the city or of our Commune and neither I nor my brother nor my parents ever had to directly suffer from any German soldier. There were German flags hanging on every public building, red and white and black, with the black swastika in the middle. Sometimes, from our window, we could see Germans patrolling the streets at night to check if the curfew was well respected. All lights had to be blacked out from around 9:00 pm till about 6:00 am. This was meant to make it harder for the Allied bombers to locate the city at night.

The only direct contact I ever had with a German soldier was sometime at the end of 1942. I think when we were playing with my brother near the “Dents de Hail” one of the

ancient gates to the inner city of Brussels. It had been snowing and it was rather cold. A German soldier about the age of my father and seeming to me from my 5-year-old perspective, a really big, tall individual, approached us, told us something in a language we didn't understand and offered us some candies. My brother immediately told me to not accept them and that we had to leave immediately and go home (our parents had told us never to accept anything from a German, that they might have put poison in the food they'd hand us etc.,) Disappointed at not getting the sweets we never had a chance to get in all those years, but having to obey my big brother, I followed him as we turned our backs on the German and began to run for home. I turned to see if he was following us and I saw him just standing there, not moving an inch and with such a sadness in his whole attitude that I hesitated until my brother told me to hurry up. I'll never forget the look in the eyes of that soldier and it was years afterwards that I really understood what must have been going on in the poor guy's mind. He probably had children of his own in Germany and was surely sick and tired of the war.

On forced labor and the coming invasion... :

Time went by and I heard about sons of neighbours or acquaintances who had been deported to Germany on forced labor. Most of them came back in the months following the liberation of the country, some after the end of the war in Europe. In 1946, I saw the last one coming back; he had walked all the way from somewhere in Russia. Some of the men never came back and as far as I know, nobody ever heard of them. There was also sometimes talk of the actions of the "Résistance", and the retaliatory measures taken by the Germans after sabotage-action (trains derailed, German soldiers or officers shot, etc.,) but that matter was so *taboo* that most people talked more openly about it only after the liberation.

The months went by and the positive evolution of the conflict (the Germans were *really* not invincible after all) made it so that everybody sensed that an Allied invasion was imminent, somewhere in France (logical) or even on the Belgian Coast (could be, since the Channel is narrower at that point.) In the meantime, my brother's only shoes and mine were in such bad shape that our parents, who hadn't the means to buy expensive leather footwear bought us *wooden* shoes to go to school. Not only did we feel sort of ashamed to have to wear such footgear, but those clogs were really a pain in the feet because they were rather heavy and cumbersome. They were open in the back, with no strap, so with each step you had to press your toes downward so the naked wooden insole would stay close to your heel, otherwise the heel of the shoe fell down on the ground, each step sounding like a beetle hitting the cobblestones and we thought we could be heard coming a block away. Besides, you couldn't run with them without risking a sprained ankle. I don't remember how long we had to wear them, but those wooden clogs were pure physical and mental hell.

My father, who had emigrated to Britain with my grand-parents a few years before World War One and lived there till their return in 1923, had been to school in the city of Blackpool and of course learned to speak and read English fluently. In fact, French being my mother-tongue, that was the language we spoke at home, but I've always perceived a very slight English accent to the way my father spoke in French. Anyway, being fluent in English, my father listened regularly to BBC-radio, something which was absolutely *verboten* by the Germans. Anybody caught listening to the BBC could be arrested and put in jail, most of the times either to be sent to a labor camp in Germany or even sentenced to death, most often by shooting or hanging. I remember him standing on a stool every evening to be able to put his ear to the loudspeaker of the radio, that had been put on a shelf on a wall of the living room. He

always put the volume so low that *we* could barely hear anything. As a measure of precaution, he often asked my brother and I to go listen from the inside of our apartment's door if anybody suspect was coming up or going down the stairs and could have guessed what was going on inside.

He always tuned in to hear the news bulletin and when there was nothing special, he just said so. I didn't understand exactly why he was acting in that secretive way, but I learned some strange-sounding words like Stalingrad, Roosevelt, Churchill, "the Allies", "the Americans"... When there was some Allied victory, he soon told us and the neighbours about it and everybody considered him as some kind of "war correspondent" who kept everybody informed. I'll never forget his excited voice when on June 6, 1944, he spoke about "le débarquement" (the landing) in Normandy, telling everybody that "Ils ont débarqué" ("They have landed"), the Allies have landed, the Americans are coming... And since then, although we had to live through the bombings and the hardships and the privation, even I could feel there was something really big happening, that as the adults said, we were going to be liberated (another new expression...) soon.

In the summer of that year, during the holidays, we were playing in different places not far from home. One of these places was a large square, the Place de Parme (now Place Morichar), and we played football (soccer), marbles, hide-and-seek, "war" with wooden rifles and swords. On one side of the square was the back of a public secondary school, a wing which was being used by the Germans as an infirmary. In the days following D-Day, we saw a lot of trucks bringing German soldiers wounded in Normandy or elsewhere in France. From day to day, the stream of trucks seemed to be growing as the casualties mounted. We saw mainly walking wounded, some on crutches, many wearing bandages around their heads. We kids weren't really so interested in the lot of those "Boches", but in a strange, almost sadistic way, we were happy that those Nazi bastards were being paid back in their own coin.

In August we heard that the Allied advance was progressing rapidly, then that Paris had been freed, that the Germans were in retreat all over the place, that the British and Americans (not forgetting Canadian, Czech, Polish, Belgian forces) were going to liberate Belgium everyday now. Then "They've crossed the border"... "They're coming... They're coming..."

Their last day in Brussels... :

Near midday on Sunday, the 3rd of September 1944, I was with my brother in a second-hand book- and magazine-shop not far from home. When we got outside, we saw that the cupola of the Palais de Justice (Court of Justice) was in flames, engulfed by thick black smoke. As I remembered that everybody said it was a very tall building (in fact, at the beginning of the 20th century, when it was built, it was the largest building in the world), I thought that it would crumble and certainly fall upon us, at least the cupola, being on top of the structure. My brother didn't have to order me to run for home; I beat him to our building, running the fastest kilometer I ever ran in my life. My mother was relieved when she saw us coming. We told her what we had seen and she told us not to go out anymore in the afternoon as we usually did on Sundays before we all together went to pay the weekly visit to my father's parents. They lived in another Commune about 3 kilometers away and the ritual pilgrimage was scrapped that afternoon because of the uncertain evolution of events.

In their retreat, the Germans had put the official building on fire, mainly in order to destroy their embarrassing archives. After the Germans hurriedly left the premises, many people formed a chain to carry buckets of water to fight the fire alongside the firemen, or to get a maximum of papers out of the burning structure. The fire was rather rapidly mastered but the cupola was entirely destroyed and had to be restored after the war.

After lunch, my father took my brother with him, leaving for I didn't exactly know where nor *why*, somewhere near the Gare du Midi (Southern Railway Station.) Being "too small", I was left home alone with my mother, and all I could do was look out the window of our apartment on the street side. I saw German trucks full of soldiers, staff cars, motorcycles, individual soldiers on foot, some running, others on bicycles, all wanting to get away from the approaching Allied soldiers.

From my ideal position about fifteen meters above ground, I could see about 100 meters to the left and 300 meters to the right, so I could follow their retreat for a relatively long time. The atmosphere was really one of panic for those troops and they all seemed to head for the Railway Station, turning left on the church square down the street. My mother was worried sick but didn't forbid me to keep looking, thinking the Germans were too preoccupied with their retreat to begin shooting at people at their windows.

There was a temporary lull in the streaming of troops and vehicles when suddenly I saw a German soldier on his bicycle (most probably stolen from a Belgian civilian under the menace of a gun, as were most of the cycles the fleeing occupation troops were riding on), pedalling furiously down the street at very high speed, his helmet and gasmask container dangling on his back, both trying to follow him as best they could, he was cycling so fast. Arriving on the church square, he made an oblique left turn towards the station, but the front wheel of his bicycle caught in one of the streetcar tracks. That blocked his move and sent him flying through the air, then sprawling on the ground a few meters away. I started laughing like mad as I had once at the cinema when they had showed Charlie Chaplin movies. Before he had a chance to regain his spirits and stand up, the German trooper was kicked in his behind by passers-by who took turns at it before running away to safety. After all, he was *armed* and could react in a mean way.

After a few moments, he finally stood up, dusted himself up, checked his equipment and bones, looked around (there wasn't a soul to see anywhere near him any more), and got laboriously back on his bicycle. The front wheel made a buckling, crumpling movement when it turned, but the guy somehow managed to get ahead on his miserably diminished mount, disappearing from sight, a lonely, humiliated, frightened member of the Army of the Thousand Year Reich, pedalling towards what would certainly be a very dark future. Even after all those years, I can't help smiling when I recall that incident, in later years feeling more and more sorry for the poor guy on his busted bicycle, and wondering about his fate.

In the afternoon of that same September 3, the first British tanks and the Welsh Guards reached Brussels. From here on, my memories jump from one flash to the other, not necessarily in real chronological order. I remember people, droves of them, in the streets, dancing, singing, shouting, hugging the soldiers, jumping on their tanks with flowers, accepting the chewing gums, the chocolate, the cigarettes... While my brother (lucky boy) was still with my father in the city, I went on a stroll with my mother to see the British troops at the *Route de Hal* near our home. There was a throng, the tanks could barely advance through the

chanting, happy crowd and I couldn't see so much of it because I was too small. I could only some times catch a glimpse of a tank, or only the threads of halftacks or legs of soldiers through the legs of the people lining the boulevard. We made our way back home via another avenue and I saw people hurtling furniture from balconies, other people putting the furniture pieces on fire in the middle of the sidewalk or of the street, wherever they had landed. My Mom told me the furniture belonged to "collaborateurs", a term which meant absolutely nothing to me, but that I added to my vocabulary of strange, war-related terms, as were "Stuka", "Spitfire", "Gestapo", "Kommandantur", "résistants", "tank".

Everything that anybody seemed to think about was rejoicing, searching for friends or acquaintances they had not seen for a long time, heading for the city centre to fill the streets, dance in the streets, fill the cafés, dance in the cafés or on the sidewalk in front, applaud and hug every passing Allied soldier. My brother and I jumped on the open-door streetcars, overflowing with passengers, everybody riding for free, the conductor being so happy himself that he didn't bother to ask for fares. When we couldn't get inside the car or hang outside clinging to the handrail in the middle of the open doors, we just climbed in front or on the back of the tram where there was a thick black metal bumper. We had a glorious sight riding on the boulevards, passing in front of the Bourse (Stock exchange), the square black with people, some military vehicles, soldiers mingling with the crowd, everybody really *MAD* with joy.

I think there was no school on September, 4, and my brother and I just *had* to venture out into the street to see the action. There were young men in black Citroën front-wheel drive automobiles, rifles in hand, with brassards marked "F.I." ("Front de l'Indépendance", one of the Resistance organizations), searching for German snipers and collaborators, some of whom were still firing. Sometimes, you could hear shots and shouts in the distance, with the F.I. guys scrambling to join in the fight behind another block. We saw some women with shaven skulls, walking alone, with a dazed look. People nearby were shouting insults at them, in words I didn't understand and which my brother didn't want to explain. At the time, I suspected he didn't understand either and was only faking that he did.

When we got home, our father had returned from one of his outings and had brought back various objects he had "found" at I don't know which former German-occupied building : there was a German helmet, seemingly brand-new, with a red-white-and-black insignia on one side; a Wehrmacht gas-mask in its case; a MAUSER pistol, without bullets (my mother: "Thank God ! Thank God !"); some German insignia, coat buttons with the swastika; a Belgian French-language geography book without its cover, which I promptly asked to keep. That book, with its photographs of Belgian sites and especially its maps, started my love for maps and geography and I must say I looked at it almost everyday for a long time afterward. The Mauser, helmet and gas mask were put in a little closet above a box-room in a corner of the kitchen and stayed there for years until, for some unknown reason after my father passed away, my mother gave it all to a cousin of mine, who probably has still got them in an attic somewhere.

In the evening, my father, who had left again in the meantime, brought home with him two British soldiers he had met near the station. They were named Bill and Tom, and looked very tired but happy to be in other "premises" than in a ditch alongside a road or in a foxhole or riding in a truck. One of them lifted me in the air as if I was a Soviet gymnast and seemed so happy to find himself in a familial environment, with somebody, my father, speaking his language. They had cigarettes ("DUAYER'S Navy Cut" and "LUCKY STRIKE" and

“CAMEL”) for my father, chocolate (“CADBURY’S”) for my brother and I. It was the first time I remember having eaten chocolate; it was de-li-cious. They had oranges... and chewing-gum (“CLARKS” and “WRIGLEYS”). I put one gum in my mouth and began chewing. After a while, for some unknown reason, I went outside on the little balcony on the inner-side of the apartment and when I came back, the fruity taste of the chewing-gum having vanished, I had swallowed it. When the adults saw me coming back inside, they asked what I thought about the chewing-gum. Bill and Tom nearly choked laughing after they learned I had swallowed it.

The soldiers then left with my father and we never saw them again. My father kept a correspondence with them well into 1945, and in April or May, he told us one of them had been killed in Germany, was it Bill or Tom, I don’t remember. That was the first time anybody I knew had died and that news hit me like a bomb : “*killed*”, that means he’s *dead*... To this day, I regret not having found in my parents’ papers any address or the photographs of both of them in uniform I remember that they had sent my father for Christmas 1944... How I would have liked to thank the surviving member of the pair, and not only for the sweets...

The celebrations for the liberation went on joyously for days and you could feel, even at my age, that people were happy, really happy, and there wasn’t that gloomy atmosphere anymore. Of course, the war was still raging, there were still regions of Belgium that had not been liberated, there still wasn’t enough food, there were still quite a lot of Belgians, civilians and soldiers alike, in captivity somewhere in Germany. But I remember that, practically every evening, my parents took us with them, my brother and I, to enjoy strolls in the city centre, with temporary stops in cafés, of course, simply, as almost everybody else in the whole of Brussels, to enjoy the atmosphere and the freedom to go wherever you wanted.

Life at school :

I had entered primary school in September 1943 and our life at school didn’t make a lasting impression on me, as it was mostly listening to the teachers, learning the rudiments of reading and writing and playing mostly football (soccer) or marbles in the school playground. I remember that one of my companions, who had entered the class at the same time that I did, at one time suddenly didn’t come to school anymore. We learned afterwards that he was Jewish and that he and his parents had been arrested in November, 1943, presumably denounced by a collaborator. A few weeks after the liberation, around November ’44, a boy, his name was Kahn, joined our class and we wondered where he came from, as he had not been with us since the beginning of the school-year nor the year before. We learned he was a Jew and had been hidden together with his parents for all the duration of the occupation in an attic in the house of non-Jewish Belgian people who, like many others, had taken the risk of harbouring them to spare them deportation to Germany and, possibly, to an extermination camp.

Back to the cellar... :

In August, 1944, already, the Germans had sent rockets to bomb London and other British cities, with heavy damage and many civilian casualties. Shortly after the liberation, on September, 6, the Germans sent one V1 rocket-bomb towards Belgium from a base in Germany. It landed in a field near the city of Hasselt, making no damage nor casualty. This alerted the Allied military authorities to the obvious target : the port of ANTWERP, vital to the supply of Allied forces advancing toward Germany itself. Expecting more rockets, an early-

warning system had been organized, on the model of what had been done, with relatively good results, in England.

On October, 13, at 10:00 a.m., a V1 rocket suddenly appeared in the Antwerp sky. When flying, the V1 rocket made a crackling sound, much like a two-stroke motorcycle engine, but when its motor stopped and didn't make that sound any more, it meant it was going to fall. That first rocket hitting at Antwerp, fell near the Royal Museum of Fine Arts and killed 38 people, with 140 wounded, 45 of which in critical condition. Hundreds of houses in the vicinity had their windows broken and roofs damaged. A few hours later a second rocket exploded : 14 dead, 15 wounded. A third fell that day but made no victims. The advance-warning system had not worked. This was not due to bad planning, but to the proximity of the launching sites, not so far from the Belgian border : there just wasn't enough time to alert the Air Force nor the civil authorities of the city. Furthermore, there were no observation posts on the German side at that time in the war.

On October, 21, nine rocket-bombs fell on Brussels, fifty more in the following weeks. In Antwerp, at the end of November, there was not a single pane of glass available to replace the broken windows. The authorities thought this wasn't so bad, because a great deal of the wounded were hit by shards of flying glass blown out of their frames by the blasts. Other cities were targeted : Tourcoing and Lille in France; Diest, Hasselt, Tournai, Liège in Belgium.

From the beginning of December, Hitler decided to shift the main thrust of his rocket attacks from London to cities in Belgium, mainly Antwerp and Liège. Many bombs aimed at London had been destroyed by the RAF or artillery, or had simply fallen into the sea. Furthermore, preparing his Ardennes offensive, he decided to target regions where the Allies had large supply depots near the German border. The bombings aiming at Antwerp and Liège intensified and Antwerp began to get twice as many rockets than were aimed at London.

On Saturday, December, 16, while the Germans launched their offensive in the Ardennes, Antwerp was hit by no less than 6 rockets, one of them falling on a crowded cinema, the "REX", killing 271 and wounding 200, of which 97 seriously. The cinema was showing "Magic in Music", with Allan Jones, Susanna Foster and Margaret Lindsay, with fresh newsreels about the Italian campaign. Many American and British soldiers were among the unlucky spectators.

From September, 1944 to March, 1945, 698 Belgian cities had been hit by V1 and V2 rockets. Almost 8000 such bombs fell on the larger cities, making mainly civilian victims : 6,448 dead, and more than 22,500 wounded. Thousands of houses had been destroyed or were badly damaged.

My personal recollections of those dreaded rockets, is that, unlike the Allied bombers that were detected long in advance, thus allowing the alerts to be sounded soon enough, those flying bombs came "unannounced", the alerts sounding at most a few minutes before they came over, not allowing everybody to reach a shelter. Many times when we were at school, the alert sounded and all we could do was jump under our desks, as usual. At first, we found it was fun, as this allowed us again some kind of recess from class, but after a while, we sensed the growing danger, having heard the damage and casualties those bombs could make. The fact that they were aimed at military *and* civilians alike, and that they could explode really

If you were on the street when the alert sounded, it was pure, white panic, everybody listening to the distinctive sound of the motor of the V1 and fearing the sound would stop. When the noise stopped, you had a maximum of 30 seconds left before the rocket hit the ground and exploded, in principle not far from where you were. The V2 made almost no noise and was even more scary because, when its motor stopped, either by pre-programming, or the calculated fuel supply having run out, it fell abruptly to the ground at 1300m/second.

When we were at home, during the day or at night, my parents decided it was useless to try to reach the shelter two blocks away, and that it was better to immediately head for our cellar. It was the same old story again than when the Allies had been bombing, but this time it was the Germans again, and with more vicious weapons. So, we met the frightened neighbours again, and my mother and the lady living in the apartment immediately next to ours nearly went crazy when the V1 rockets stopped making sounds, or V2s were announced. I remember one night in the cellar when we heard the engine of a V1 stop, and a few seconds afterwards, the not too distant sound of a big explosion, the ground lightly shuddering under our feet. A rocket had fallen a little more than a kilometre from our home, near the Palais de Justice, destroying a whole block of houses in the poorest section of that part of the city, killing dozens of civilians. It was the only time we heard a rocket explosion so nearby. The fear was always there. Even I was afraid because I had seen newsreels and an information film about these rockets and seen the damage they could wreak.

One evening, having reintegrated the apartment after yet another alert, my father told us in no gentle words (he was usually very calm and polite) that he was sick and tired of those alerts and of having to hurry down four flights of stairs each night and just stand in the staircase or the passageways of the cellar. He told us that the next night we would sleep in our own little cellar, normally used to stock with coal (I personally had never seen a piece of coal in there) and that was it !!!...

So, the next day, when he came home, he and a friend hauled a wire mattress and a mattress down into our cellar. They installed a bed and that same evening, after supper, without waiting for any sound of sirens, we four tramped down, each armed with his own thin blanket, to our dark (there was no electric light, all we had was a flash-light), little (with the bed inside it, one could barely move) hotel room, my brother and I rather excited at being part of some sort of adventure. My mother and father positioned themselves normally, side by side, and my brother and I shared, head to foot, the space at the feet of Mom and Dad. Needless to say, nobody did sleep well, each of us not wanting to annoy the others by moving, or either being woken up by involuntary movements of any of us who had finally fallen asleep. To add to my parents' agony, mainly my father's I think, there was no alert that night, and when we got out of bed the following morning, each and every one of us had a cold, sneezing our noses out. My mother wasn't saying anything but you could *hear* her think. Blankets under one arm, handkerchiefs close at hand, we were going up the stairs toward the apartment when my father said calmly, very calmly, "That's the... tchoo !... last time we sleep in the cellar". Case closed. My brother and I weren't at all unhappy with that wise decision, mainly I think because although we liked each other, we had not fully appreciated each other's feet so near our noses.

“NUTS !”

On December 16, 1944, the German Army launched an offensive that started what was to become known as the Battle of the Bulge. When people heard that the Germans advanced, that undermanned American troops began to retreat, that many GIs had been made prisoner by the German divisions, everybody feared that maybe, *just maybe*, the hated Germans would come back. An uncle of mine, who was born in Bastogne and lived there until he moved to Brussels after his 4-year stint as a prisoner of the Germans in World War One, had family in the region of the fighting and was depressed about not being able to do something or even come in contact with his relatives. Everybody listened permanently to the news on the radio, my father having details also via the BBC to which he listened without fear since the liberation and even I, barely 6_ years old, followed the evolution of the battle. I looked into my geography book to locate the towns and villages that were mentioned in the news bulletins and “followed” the events happening only 100 kilometers away.

When news came that an American general had replied “Nuts !” to a German ultimatum in the encircled Bastogne, and a few days afterwards that the German advance had been stopped, Allied reinforcements had finally come through and were pushing the enemy back, everybody heaved sighs of relief. “Nuts” was literally translated as “Des noix”, but I remember the adults, who were talking in the evening in the kitchen after my brother and I were put to bed in the little room next to it, using more expressive language evoking male body parts, words I had began to hear, and confidentially use, but didn’t dare utter in the presence of my parents or any other adults for that matter. I remember I was proud to “understand” what they were talking about. I remember also my admiration for the American heroes who were fighting over there. And when newsreels were shown in the movie theatre downstairs or in 3 others in our immediate vicinity at the time, I remember I looked with awe at the pictures of US soldiers running towards enemy positions, or keeping watch from their foxholes in the snow, or marching in the winter mist; artillery cannons blazing, tanks rolling, and, in January, when the skies had cleared, US fighter planes strafing retreating German columns. We went at least twice a week to see films, mostly American ones, which had of course not been shown during the occupation, and the newsreels were almost as much appreciated as was the main feature.

Map reading... :

So life went on, food began to be more easily available, the Allied armies, after having penetrated into Germany, were advancing, and everybody sensed this war couldn’t last long any more. I couldn’t follow the advance in my geography book, because there were only maps of Belgium in it. So, I borrowed my brother’s geography book (he was 4 years older than I) to trace the events in Germany. After a while, I began to hear strange place names, of that other war in the far away Pacific... Iwo Jima had a special ring to it, especially after I had seen Joe Rosenthal’s photo of the second flag-raising atop Mount Suribachi. That picture made a big impression on me at the time (it still does) and I remember seeing the newsreel of that flag-raising some time later in the movie-theater downstairs. Then there was Okinawa, Tokyo, Yokohama. I searched for all these names also, but didn’t find all of them in my brother’s book. Luckily, there were maps in the paper, so my father helped me sometimes in finding the

islands nearer and nearer Japan, the Japanese cities that were bombed by USAF Superfortresses.

Then came news of the liberation of camps in Germany and there was talk of unbelievable horrors that had been committed by the Nazis. Although my parents never did show us the ghastly pictures of inmates in concentration camps that were published in the weekly magazines that they sometimes bought, I was so curious about that matter that I finally managed to see some of them, either through a classmate, or an older pupil at school. I could not believe what I saw, and couldn't help telling my parents about it. They "explained" as best they could to the young boy that I was, that the Germans (they didn't use the word "Nazis" at the time) had built big prison camps where they had put thousands of people from the occupied countries, that they could not properly feed all of them but that soon all that would be over and the prisoners would go back to their homes. When it was learned that there were also *extermination* camps, all I heard my father say in my presence about it was "Les salauds !" ("The dirty skunks !..."), answering to the questioning little boy that it could not be explained and that I would understand later.

When we heard in May about Hitler's suicide, the surrender of Germany, the end of the war in Europe, there were again mad days of rejoicing, although, in the humble opinion of a seven-year old, not so "crazy" than at the liberation. Anyway, there was much rejoicing and hope for really better times. In the meantime, Paula, the daughter of our upstairs neighbours had met a member of the US Air Force; his name was Peter. I met him only once and didn't understand what he said. He had been a prisoner of the Germans after his plane went down somewhere in Germany. I don't know if he was a fighter pilot or the member of a bomber crew. He had been tortured but didn't talk, according to bribes of information I heard from my parents and so, Peter became another of my American heroes. A few weeks after their meeting, Paula and Peter were married and left for the States. I have never heard of or about them since then and I think Paula's parents didn't like talking about that union which I thought I understood they didn't totally approve of, what with their daughter leaving for a foreign, far away country with a relatively unknown, although charming, young man.

Prisoners had been coming back since the liberation of camps in March and April and I saw many of them walking the streets, almost always alone. In their striped pajamas and caps, most of them thin and emaciated, walking like zombies, they were always a poignant sight, in spite of the fact that they were coming home. For some of them, there was no home anymore because their house had been destroyed, most or all of their family dead or having vanished. We in our family had no such problems, because everybody had escaped injury and was either too young or too old, or just plain lucky, not to have been sent to Germany on forced labor.

In the summer of 1945, one apartment on the first floor of our building was for rent and in it moved a woman in her thirties, I think, rather small, with short, dark hair. Her name was Cattrell and I remember she didn't seem at first to want to mingle with the neighbours. After a while, the ice was broken, and it was learned she was a Jew and had come back a few weeks before from a place called Ravensbrück in Germany. She had lost her husband and all her family members. All had died in concentration or extermination camps. I didn't hear nor learn all the details when she spoke to the group of close neighbours that had taken the habit of assembling in the evenings in our apartment. The conversations began after my brother and I had been put to bed and we didn't hear distinctly what they were talking about, their voices being often so low. I remember one such evening when I had to go to the toilet and passed

through the kitchen full of adults. Everybody fell suddenly silent. Mrs Cattrell had one sleeve of her blouse rolled up and was showing them the number tattooed on the inside of her forearm. I couldn't help but stop and stare at the strange mark but my parents told me to get on with my business and go back to sleep.

When I came back, Mrs Cattrell took me gently on her knees and began calmly and with simple words to explain that the Germans had arrested her and her husband a few years before. They had been sent to separate prison camps in Germany and she finally ended in the women's camp at Ravensbrück. She had been liberated by the Russian Army in April, 1945, and had come back to Brussels. She had learned in the meantime that her husband and all her relatives were dead at the hand of the Germans. She said the number on her forearm was just an identification because her papers had been destroyed. She added she was glad to have found new friends in the building and that she was happy to be alive. I went back to my room but didn't fall immediately asleep, those numbers on her arm and the reasons of her arrest and deportation still puzzling me. After a few months, during which she seemed to fall into a severe depression, she moved out of the building and I never saw her again. All my parents said afterwards was that she was so sad to be all alone in the world that only doctors could really do something for her.

Reading and going to the movies... :

As I perfected my reading abilities, I read comic books and war-related stories in youth magazines. There were stories about the sinking of the Bismarck, the Résistance fighters in France and Belgium, the exploits of British pilots notably during the Battle of Britain and in the Dam Raids, accounts of D-Day in Normandy and the battles that followed, about RAF and USAF fighter and bomber pilots in their raids over Germany, about the Doolittle raid, the Marines in the Pacific.

In August of that same year came news of the atom bombs dropped on Japan, then VJ-day and the end of the "good war", as Studs Terkel called it years later... That was the last great explosion of collective joy that I experienced, but I have no specific recollection of what I did on that day. In 1947, we had another, local but not less joyful, occasion to rejoice: the clock of our church came back from Germany! It had been taken down by the Germans in 1943, for the same reason that practically all church bells in Belgium, Holland and France were stolen : melting the metal so it could be used to make bullet and shell covers. By what circumstances and luck our bell was saved I don't know, but I remember that almost every citizen of our Commune, believer or not, was there to watch the proceedings and the hoisting of the bell back into place at the top of the church tower.

My life in the immediate post-war years was mainly going to school and playing with the other kids in our favourite playing-grounds or parks. Besides reading a lot, I often went to the movies to see the latest American western, adventure or war film. There were still few recent French films at the time, and most of them weren't of the "action" kind. For the most part, they had been made before the war, and they were all in black and white. American films were in color and were shown in the movie-theaters in the city centre in the original English-spoken version with subtitles in French and Flemish (the second of the three official languages in Belgium.) We had to wait a few weeks before dubbed French-language versions (voiced-over in French studios, with Flemish subtitles) were available that were shown in less central theaters like the ones in my neighborhood. It often happened that we couldn't wait to see the

dubbed version so late after the first showings in the city, so we went, Dad, Mom, my brother and I, almost every Saturday or Sunday evening to see a film in the city. If the film was good, we had a chance to see it again a few weeks later in French. I remember the trailers and the excitement at the thought we would next week see another of those fine films in a theatre not only “near you”, but right downstairs.

We saw quite a lot of films in those years after the war and some of them were about the war itself. Among the many documentaries my brother and I, as well as all our friends, were so avid to see were “The Fighting Lady” about the carrier war in the Pacific, official films about the landings in Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge. There was “The True Glory”, one of the best ever made, in my opinion, summing up the war in Europe from D-Day to Berlin.

There was a spate of Hollywood war films until far in the fifties. In retrospect and having seen some on TV long afterwards, not so many of these were really good films, neither in the acting nor in the rendering of the “real” war. Some stay in my memory as being the best of the lot : “Battleground”, with Van Johnson and James Whitmore; “A Walk in the Sun”, with Dana Andrews; “Objective Burma”, with Erroll Flynn; later, “Sands of Iwo Jima”, with John Wayne, “Twelve O’Clock High”, with Gregory Peck.

A trip to the Ardennes... :

We youngsters who had lived through the war years and especially those my age who hadn’t understood too well what had happened around us in those times, were eager to learn a maximum on the “historical” events. Our history teacher was in his forties. Some were saying he had been a résistant during the war, but he himself always stayed evasive about it, just saying there was a job to be done and that it was only normal. In 1948, when I was ten and the youngest of my class, that teacher organized a trip through the Ardennes region for our group. He took us to places like Bastogne, Laroche, Houffalize, towns and villages where many damaged houses could still be seen, the reconstruction having barely started, as everywhere in Belgium at the time, especially in rural areas. Our family wasn’t travelling much in those days and except for one trip to the seaside, this was my first visit outside Brussels. The teacher explained the terrain (wise thing I had taken a good map with me), gave details about the Battle of the Bulge and about the American and German forces that had fought there only a few years back.

On the Place Mc Auliffe in Bastogne, we climbed on top of a Sherman tank (it still stands there) and from there we left towards Henri-Chapelle to visit the US military cemetery there. I think it was still a temporary burying place at the time because I don’t remember having seen any big building or monument anywhere around, as there is in the present-day beautiful resting place. There were 10,000 graves there our teacher told us. All we could see were crosses, white crosses all over on that large, barren field. The teacher told us that the men buried there were young people from all over the United States, many of them 18, 19, 20-year olds... These boys could have been our older brothers or cousins and they were resting here in our country so far from their homes. That thought and the sight of so many graves really struck us and moved us very deeply. I remember on the return trip right after that sad visit, nobody said very much in the motor-coach, except an occasional “Have you seen those crosses, all those crosses !? God !...”

It was from that time on that I became still more interested in everything that could be read about the war, especially the US part in the conflict. I read (more and more in English as I was learning it as a third language in school and had a little help and encouragement from my father) stories about the “ordinary” doughboys, flyboys, sailors, leathernecks who had passively or actively participated one way or the other in the conflict. I read, among many others, Bill Mauldin’s “UP FRONT”, Ernie Pyle’s “BRAVE MEN”, Bert Stiles’ “SERENADE to the BIG BIRD”, “YANK, the GI Story of the War”, “CARRIER WAR”. I bought booklets issued during and right after the war by Information agencies about battles in Africa, Europe, the Pacific. I acquired back issues of “LIFE” Magazine from late 1944 and 1945 that could be found here, even some copies of “YANK The Army Weekly” of the same years where I began to really understand the little picture in the words of the US servicemen themselves. I am an avid reader of all kinds of books and articles covering many subjects and I can’t explain why I’m so particularly interested in stories about World War Two but that’s the way it is...

Finis... :

What I had started writing as a short description of my “memories of war”, has become a rather lengthy thing after all. I think this is due to the fact that, in order to facilitate the comprehension, I had to expand on my memory “flashes”, thoughts that are oftentimes nothing more than just that : flashes, pictures, “still shots”, often detached from any context and that sometimes came, and still occasionally come, to my mind. I am surprised to note that, strangely, almost all of these memory flashes are in black and white or shades of gray, sometimes blurred on the sides like when they showed somebody’s dream in old movies. Very few scenes in my recollections of that time are in color. One of these few is about the wounded Germans at the Place Morichar infirmary where I always see the red blotches on the bandages.

A final note : The fact that I wrote this modest piece is because I wanted to share my experience as a child during the war in an occupied European country with Americans who were also involved in the conflict or lived his or her own experience through it. My thoughts go especially towards US veterans, whether they were in the ETO or PTO.

I want to expressly state here that I, along with many Belgians of my generation and older, will ever be grateful to all the men and women, especially in the US Armed Forces, who came to liberate us from a totalitarian regime. If any veteran isn’t sure of why he fought or why he or she was involved, I dare hope he or she has no doubts about it anymore. This seems so banal, some would say almost corny, to write but I really mean every word of it.

From the bottom of my heart to all those “old soldiers” and to those who passed away :

MERCI & God Bless You.

Brussels, March 2002.

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