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## SEVENTEEN

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# Saving Thousands of Jewish Children

“I am horrified, Marc!” Mr. Churchill paced as he spoke. “The situation is beyond belief. The French Militia is treating its own people worse than the Nazis are.” He was as furious as an angry mother bear protecting her young. “We must find a way to save as many Jewish children as we can. It’s just too painful to talk about. My secretary will fill you in on the deplorable situation. I’m sending you to Die to talk to the commander, whom you already know, to see if the youth camps can take some of the children. This is assuming that you can find a way to get them out of Paris. See what you can do. May God be with you.” He stomped out of the office. He was too upset to waste time on pleasantries.

I went into the secretary’s office. She was a little

woman, on the plump side, an older, motherly type, very kind and extremely bright. She always hugged me. This time she said, "You are the only ray of sunshine in England."

"That's easy. There isn't any sunshine in England," I retorted. She laughed. I knew she liked me a lot because I always made her laugh. That was something Mr. Churchill had always done for me, from my earliest memories of him.

When I was a child, my tutor would take me for a few days at a time to visit my godfather, Monsieur Duvernay, who lived only a few houses from where Mr. Churchill vacationed in Cap d'Antibes. This is how I originally came to know Mr. Churchill. I was a very shy child and had very little access to playmates in Monaco. So, when staying in Cap d'Antibes away from the eyes of my father, my tutor found families with children in the neighborhood and got them together with me so that I had someone my own age to play with. At home in Monte Carlo, my father would not allow me to play with other children.

Regularly, I would see Mr. Churchill sitting in front of his easel, painting in his garden. He would call us kids over to him. "Wait right here," he would say. Then he would call a servant to bring us some Petits Beurre LU, cookies that we all loved. Often, I would see him drive off with his chauffeur, cigar protruding from his lips, his car filled with canvases in search of new landscapes to paint. I thought that he always looked so serious unless

he was talking to us. When he did, his whole demeanor changed.

One time when I was with him at the estate in England, he reminisced about his life while staying on the Côte d'Azur, the sunny French Riviera. "I loved painting the scenery, especially on the Mediterranean coast. Sometimes I painted on the coast of Italy as well, where I would paint all day and go to the casino of San Remo at night. I also enjoyed taking the *train bleu* to Biarritz, where I could paint during the day and enjoy their casino in the evening. When I went to Monaco, I'd frequent the casino and the clubs. That's where I met your father, Franck, at his nightclub. You are not like him at all, thank God. There, I saw such entertainers as our dear Josephine, Mistinguett, and Yolanda. When I stayed in Monte Carlo at the Hermitage, I didn't need a car. I would take a horse-drawn carriage to get around. If I decided to go to Nice or Cannes, I would take a limousine and driver. The casino in Nice was fantastic, the Casino de la Jetée. There is a pier that extends out into the water, but what am I saying! You know that. Your godfather was the architect." He chuckled at this bit of absurdity on his part, then went right on with his reminiscence.

"When I had time, I loved to take a limo up the Grande Corniche to have dinner at the Château de Madrid. It was an excellent restaurant, even though it was under your father's direction. But enough of that. I don't want to remind you of unpleasant memories.

Below, I would sometimes stop at the Réserve de Beau-lieu sur Mer where the maître d' spoiled me. I would call him a few hours in advance, and he would prepare an exquisite bouillabaisse for me with langoustes, sea snake, various Mediterranean fish, rainbow wrasse, mollusks, shrimp, and mussels. My dinners would last delicious hours. It was a beautiful life in France before the war, and it will be again," he said with determination, concluding his pleasant reverie.

But now he was infuriated about the fate of the Jewish children in Paris and Drancy. The secretary told me, confidentially, that the prime minister had sent his son, Randolph, on the very same mission on which he was now sending me. He had become frustrated and angry when his son had come back with a shocking report about Jewish children but no solution as to what could be done.

His son's report had also included information about Joseph Kennedy, who was at that time the American ambassador to England. Randolph had put him under surveillance by Scotland Yard. It was discovered that messages were being sent from the American Embassy indirectly to Berlin, so Randolph planted a false message with Joe Kennedy that Churchill and Roosevelt were going to meet in Bermuda. Scotland Yard was able to determine that the message was put into code and sent from London to the American Embassy in Madrid, then on to Ankara, Turkey, and finally to Berlin.

The secretary went into further detail about Kennedy. "Why is she so free with this information?" I asked myself. "Maybe I'm privy to a lot of information because of the precarious nature of my missions. Who knows? Or maybe it's because they trust I'll say nothing."

"The prime minister feels that it is his duty to inform Mr. Roosevelt of the suspicious nature of Kennedy's dealings," she told me. "It has been discovered that Kennedy has been in touch with several American industrialists asking them to manufacture arms, ammunition, and airplanes for Germany. They will be paid in gold and jewels gathered from the pillage of Europe. This wealth is being held in safety in South America and elsewhere. The suspicions are becoming more and more serious owing to the tracing of the transmission planted by Randolph," she said.

"After being so informed, President Roosevelt ordered that all messages of a sensitive nature should *not* be sent to the embassy in London. Only normal day-to-day business is to be conducted through the London office," she told me.

"Here is the situation that you will confront, Monsieur Marc. Hundreds and hundreds of Jewish children are being pulled from their parents' arms and taken to a transit camp called Drancy on the outskirts of Paris. The report that Randolph gave his father described the sordid conditions and deplorable disorganization of the camp. The only food that he identified was cold cabbage soup. It was winter, and many of the children had no shoes and were dressed in ragged clothes. Most of them had

dysentery and had to wash their dirtied undergarments in cold water with no soap, then try to let them dry a little in the cold, wet weather, only to have to put them on again still damp, dirty them again, and then repeat the endless process. The mattresses on which they spent their nights and most of their days were never cleaned.”

She continued, “Randolph reported that many of the youngsters knew their first names only and didn’t know what ‘Jewish’ meant, as many Jews were totally integrated into the milieu in which they lived. From the children’s barracks every night came cries of desperation, voices of anguish calling for their mothers and fathers. Many were in a state of shock, bewildered and lost. Each of the barracks contained about forty children and a French woman guard. The guards tried to appease the children by telling them that they would rejoin their parents soon.

“And it gets worse,” she said. “Two days a week the children, aged from about six to seventeen, would take cold showers outside with no privacy whatever. There was no soap or hot water. For each one hundred children, there were about four towels. Every four days, trucks would come to pick up a load of children and bring them to the train, where they were packed into cattle cars, forty to sixty per car. Minimal ventilation came from the top of the cars. Many children suffocated if they sat or lay down. Once a day, the sealed cars were unlocked, and the children were given soup to eat and water to drink. There was no place to wash, and there was no bathroom.

The children would try to get to a corner to defecate or urinate, but that was not always possible.

“Randolph said that this was their world as they traveled toward the camps in Poland, a trip that lasted five to seven days. Many died on the way. Even the German population who came into contact with the reality of this situation was horrified by the manner in which the French were treating the children. It was the French Militia who took the initiative to round up the Jewish children in this manner, store them in the camps, and send them in boxcars to Poland.”

The secretary told me that the proof was irrefutable. This situation was described in a letter written by the chief of police, Jean Leguay, of occupied France to the *commissaire général aux Questions juives* of the Vichy government, Darquier de Pellepoix. Minister Laval, who was in charge of the Vichy government under the president, the *maréchal* Pétain (*maréchal* is a higher rank than general), was quoted in the letter to have said, “Purge France of all undesirables.”

Now, as I recount this story, I cannot help but wonder how these people could have lived with themselves. After the war, it was estimated that between 1942 and 1944, almost two thousand children under six years of age, and six thousand between the ages of six and thirteen, were deported from France. The French Militia received one hundred francs per child. As far as can be determined, not one of these children survived. I am still furious about what happened. I should have done more.

Somehow, I could have saved more of them, I tell myself, but how? I still don't know.

The secretary and I were fighting tears when she finished telling me the story.

"I understand why Mr. Churchill didn't want to go into detail. He didn't want to struggle to maintain his composure as I just did in front of you," I said to her. "How could they do such things?" I asked. Visions of vengeance filled my mind, but I would not subject this kind woman to my visions of retribution.

The secretary then gave me the new password: "The Moulin Rouge is open at night." The response was to be, "The Moulin Rouge is always closed during the day."

So my mission was to find a solution to this travesty. There was a small group of good French people who were trying to save Jewish children. They belonged to no formal organization. They were just people who had hearts. Their headquarters was in a bar/restaurant, predominantly lesbian, across from the Moulin Rouge on the place Pigalle. They had gathered well over three thousand children and were hiding them in people's homes and cellars all over Paris. There was great difficulty in feeding and taking care of them all. Food was so scarce. What was to be done?

I was parachuted in near Die, where I was met by the *maquisards*, the partisans belonging to the group *Combat*. A colonel of the group was disguised as a member of

the French Militia. He told me that he would handcuff me and that I would pose as his prisoner. We drove to the train station in Die, and the colonel requisitioned an entire compartment for the two of us. He was extraordinarily bold and sure of himself.

“I am not to be disturbed during the voyage under any circumstances,” the colonel told the man who took our tickets. With that, he shut the compartment door and pulled the curtains. We changed trains in Grenoble for one to Paris. Once again, the colonel demanded a private compartment. When we passed into the German zone, papers were checked by the German military. The colonel showed his *Ausweis*, which was not questioned.

Once we arrived in Paris and exited the train station, the colonel removed the handcuffs. He hailed a bicycle taxi and gave the driver the address of a home near the opera house. A middle-aged woman opened the door and asked us to come in.

“Madame, this is Michel Carbonell, the man I told you about who wants to rent a furnished room.”

“So nice to meet you, monsieur,” she said warmly. The colonel said good-bye and left.

As she walked me upstairs to my room, she told me that her husband was a prisoner of war in Germany. “I haven’t seen him for more than a year, monsieur. He was a tenor in the opera before the war. I pray continuously for his safe return.”

We came to a closed door on the second floor. “This is the bathroom and shower, monsieur, and your bedroom

is here right next to it. The colonel had me put your belongings in the armoire and the chest of drawers.”

I looked in the armoire and drawers. I found six suits, twelve shirts, an overcoat, a jacket, hats, shoes, underwear, and socks. Everything was the correct size and of good quality. All these clothes! They must have expected me to be there a long time.

“Here are the keys to your car that is parked in front and some coupons for gasoline,” she said before leaving my room. Later that day, I took the Peugeot that had been left for me to the bar/restaurant on the place Pigalle. I approached the woman at the bar and quietly said, “The Moulin Rouge is open at night.” She responded appropriately and called a young woman over to escort me to the meeting place. Her friend was about twenty years old, blond, pleasant looking, and likable. She took me behind the Moulin Rouge, down into a cellar where there were five men and women. We talked for hours. I mostly listened, asking a question here and there. They filled me in on the wretched situation.

All of a sudden, I started feeling hot and sweaty, like I was coming down with a cold. I drove back to the house and went straight to bed. I had a fever and soon developed a cough. Looking on the bright side, I figured this gave me a lot of time to think. Madame brought me *tilleul*, an herb tea, dry toast, and a syrup that her husband often used before he would sing. Many singers used it because it soothed the vocal chords. I stayed in bed and utilized my time well, reflecting and planning. In two days, not only was I well, but I had a plan of action, too.

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I telephoned the office of the *ministre des Invalides*, the minister in charge of military veterans who had lost limbs in World War I. The *ministre*, Monsieur Paget, was the father of a boy who had been educated with me when I was locked up with the Jesuits at the Athenium in Nice from the age of seven to fourteen.

The person who answered the phone said, "He is not available, monsieur. Would you care to leave a message?"

"Yes, I would. My name is Michel Carbonell. Have him call me back at this number." I left the telephone number of the house where I was staying. Of course, he wouldn't know who I was by that name, but I hoped he would call back anyway. If not, I would go to Nice to visit him personally at his home.

He called back a few days later. I told him who I really was.

"My boy," he exclaimed, "I am so happy to hear from you."

"How is your son?" I asked.

"He is still safe in Nice, thank God." After we talked for a while, I explained to him the awful plight of these Jewish children being shipped off to Poland.

"Monsieur, thousands more are being hidden here in Paris. I have devised a plan to secure their safety. To me, it seems straightforward and quite doable; however, it ultimately depends on you."

"Go ahead, tell me. If it's possible, I will do whatever it takes."

So I began to explain what would be necessary. "I will need two buses painted olive green and black, two bus drivers in French Militia uniform, and documents that authorize the transfer of French children to the youth camps in unoccupied France."

Monsieur Paget was quiet, thinking on the other end of the phone. "Yes, my boy. I know I can accomplish that. Do not worry about a thing. I'll supply what you need. Is this the telephone number where you can be reached when everything is organized?"

"Yes, it is, monsieur."

With much enthusiasm, he concluded the conversation. "I will be in touch, and may God bless you."

I then returned to the bar/restaurant and talked to the woman behind the bar. She was the owner. She called the same young woman, Simone, who escorted me once again to the cellar. This time there was only one man there. I recognized him from the time before. We greeted each other, sat down at the table, and I began to explain.

"Choose sixty children who will be the first to leave. I need a photo of each child like those used for official identification cards. I need to know the birth date of each one. They will need warm traveling clothes and shoes as well as work clothes and boots. They will need as many pairs of socks as possible, as they'll be staying in forested areas." The man agreed to take care of everything.

Then I went to the home of a man I had worked with before, Roland Girard, who made counterfeit papers. His wife escorted me down to the cellar.

“Roland, it is so good to see you,” I said as he welcomed me. We sat down, and I explained what I needed. “Roland, I need you for an enormous job. All in all, I need around three thousand *cartes d'identité*, but only sixty to begin with. You will be given the names, information, and photos you need as time goes on.” I explained the awful situation, and the man enthusiastically agreed to do the job. All seemed to be progressing well.

From there, I went to the library. What I needed was a book with a lot of names. I selected one that listed all known amateur and professional archaeologists. I sat down at a long, dimly lit table and copied the names down, one by one, skipping any that sounded Jewish.

The next day, I met the same man in the cellar at the place Pigalle. He gave me the birth dates and addresses of sixty children. I drove to each address and gave each child his or her new name and explained to each that this Christian first and last name was his or hers from that moment on. They were to forget their old names for their own safety.

One little girl, eight years old, stands out in my memory. “I don’t like that name,” she said. “I want to choose my own name. I choose ‘Sarah.’”

“That’s a lovely name,” I told her, “but just for a while your name needs to be Suzanne.”

She insisted, “No, I don’t like that name.”

I asked, "Do you have a friend whose name you like?"  
"Oh yes, my friend Ange. Isn't that a beautiful name?"  
Her eyes were wide with admiration.

"Well, there it is!" I responded. "From now on, you are Ange, just like your dear friend. It's a wonderful name, and you look just like a little angel, too!"

She was very pleased, and I was relieved. I eventually placed this girl with a local family because she was too fragile for the youth camps.

I gave each child a name and explained to him or her what life was going to be like. "But I don't like that name," many complained. Some wailed, "I won't be able to remember that name because I hate it so much!" I worked with each child as best I could and worked out swaps so that each child was more or less satisfied with his or her new name.

It took more than a week to get the papers organized. I used the time to visit the different camps in unoccupied France so that each was prepared for this great influx of children. The commander at Die helped me immensely. More than three weeks later, the first sixty children were on buses on their way to the youth work camps to start their new lives as Christians. The plan worked smoothly.

With the system now in place, I left its continuation in the capable and powerful hands of Monsieur Paget, whose influence extended throughout France. Many veterans who lost limbs in World War I were anxious to help in any way they could to free France from German occupation once and for all.

Later, I got word that all the children concerned had been placed in the youth camps except those who were ill or mentally confused. For those, Paget had found several monasteries willing to take care of them until they were strong enough or able enough, if ever, to go to the youth camps. As the older children in the work camps developed, they were eased into partisan groups and worked for the Resistance.

Before leaving, I went to visit Monsieur Paget on the weekend at his home in Nice. It is truly Monsieur Paget who needs to be remembered for the success of this rescue operation. Without him, this plan would never have worked, and thousands of Jewish children would certainly have perished.

After leaving Monsieur Paget, I decided to go to one of my parents' apartments in Monte Carlo at 52, boulevard d'Italie, since I knew they were staying at their apartment in Nice. The concierge knew me and let me in. I put my things away and went to see some neighbors in the building, the Van Hof's, who lived on the third floor. Madame Van Hof invited me to dinner with her, her son, Claude, and her daughter, Dominique. It was wonderful to see them again.

Afterward, I went down to my parents' apartment and began thinking about the Jewish children as I went to sleep. How could I prove that each child was who his identity card said he or she was? An identity card was

simply not enough. There must be further proof. Each child needed to have a baptismal certificate. How could I get three thousand baptismal certificates? I wondered. It didn't seem possible. Then, out of the blue, the solution struck me.