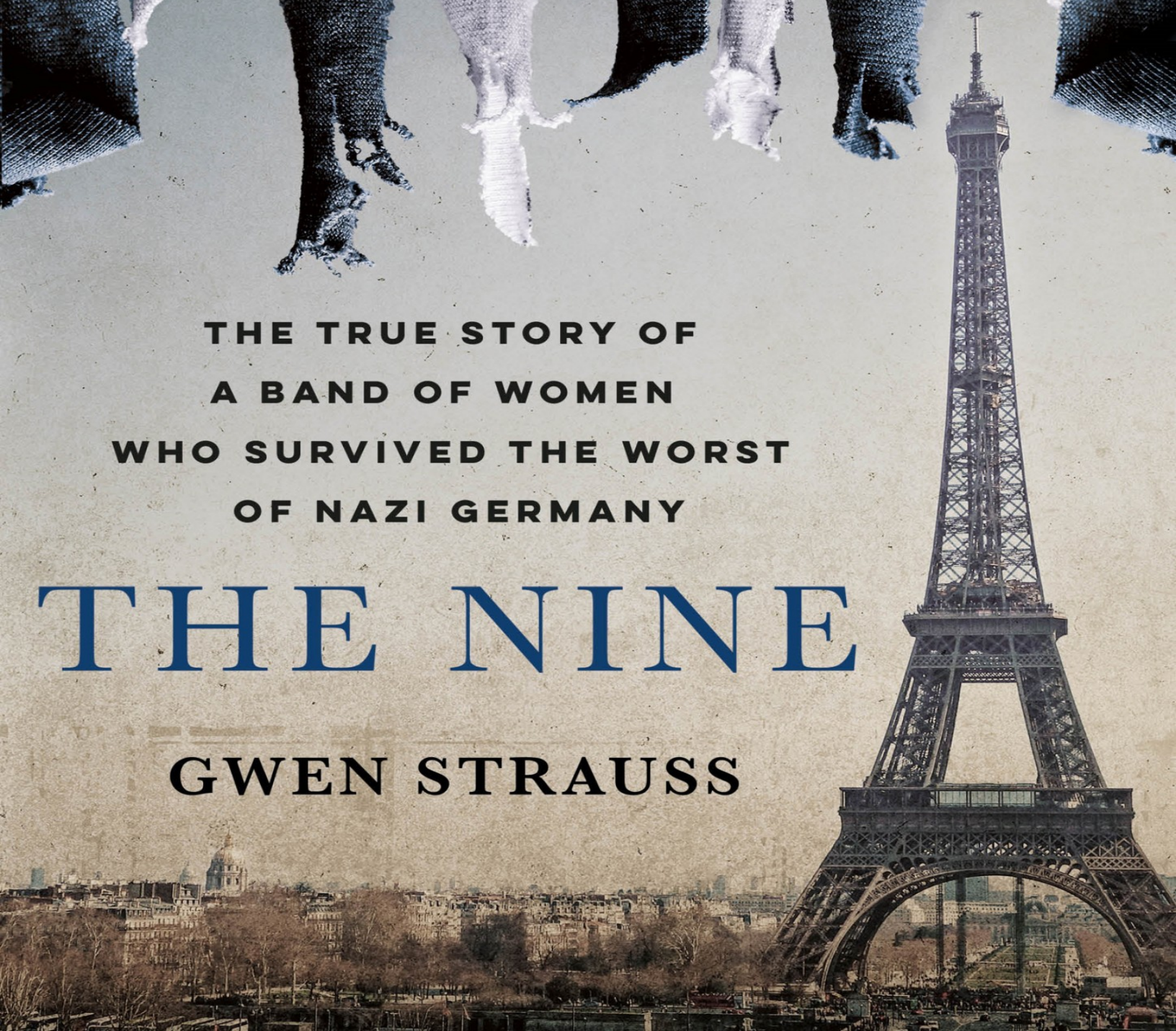




THE TRUE STORY OF
A BAND OF WOMEN
WHO SURVIVED THE WORST
OF NAZI GERMANY

THE NINE

GWEN STRAUSS



THE NINE

*The True Story of a Band of Women
Who Survived the Worst of Nazi Germany*



GWEN STRAUSS



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
St. Martin's Press ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

For Eliza, Noah, and Sophie

*Ce que nous avons partagé
Dans la peur, le froid, la faim, l'espoir.
L'épreuve, tant physique que psychique
Ne se répète pas, même pour nous.
Elle se limite au monde de jamais plus.
Ce que nous avons enduré ensemble
Est à nous, à cette vie, de ces instants,
Comme une transmutation de l'une, à l'autre,
dans une autre vie.*

What we shared
In fear, cold, hunger, hope.
The ordeal, both physical and mental.
Can't be repeated, even for us.
It is limited to the world of never again.
What we have endured together
Is ours, that life, those moments,
Like a transmutation from one to the other,
in another life.

—NICOLE CLARENCE, ONE OF THE NINE

THE NINE

Hélène Podliasky, my great-aunt, known by the eight others as “Christine.” Twenty-four years old when arrested while working in the Résistance in northeastern France. A brilliant engineer, she spoke five languages. Considered the leader during the escape.

Suzanne Maudet (Zaza), Hélène’s friend from high school. Twenty-two when arrested while working with the Auberge de Jeunesse in Paris. Recently married to René Maudet, she considered herself the scribe of the group. Wrote an optimistic book about the escape immediately after the war; it was finally published in 2004.

Nicole Clarence held a position of importance in the Résistance. Twenty-two when arrested in Paris a day after her birthday. She was one of the “57,000,” the name given to the famous last transport of prisoners deported from Paris in August 1944, days before the city was liberated.

Madelon Verstijnen (Lon), one of two Dutch women in the group. Twenty-seven when arrested after she came to Paris to join her brother in the Dutch resistance network. She and Hélène spoke the best German in the group and were the advance scouts. Stubborn and brave, she wrote her account of the escape in 1991.

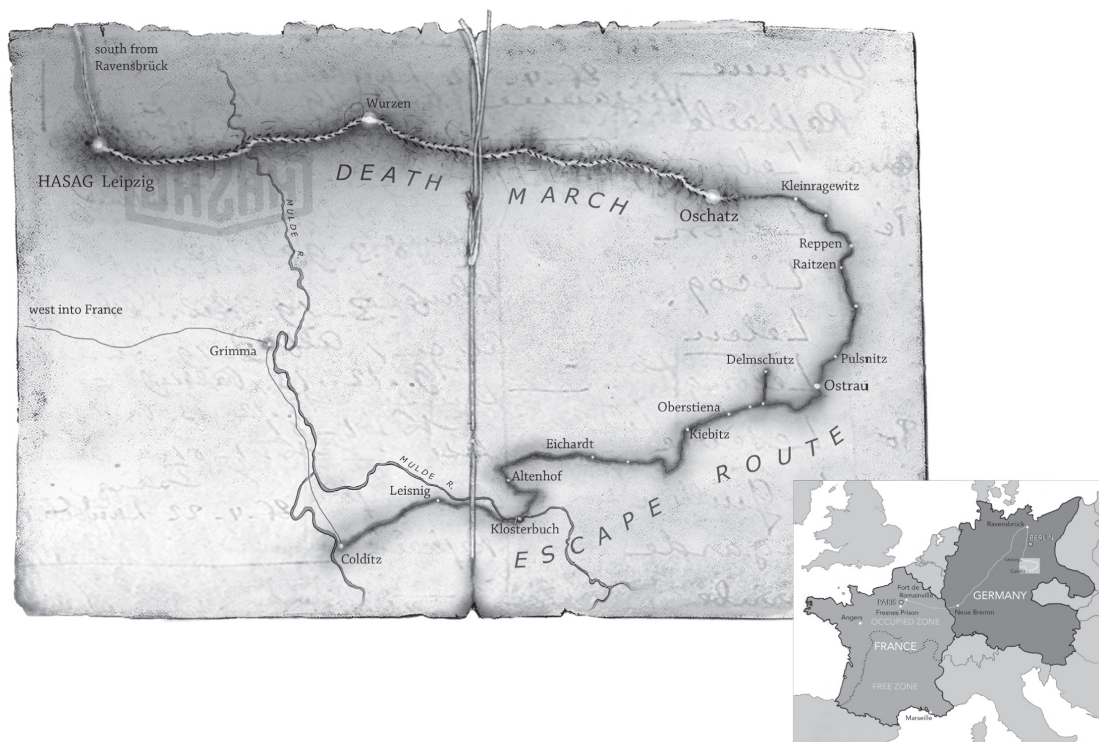
Guillemette Daendels (Guigui), Lon’s friend from Holland. Twenty-three when arrested with Lon the day after their arrival together in Paris. She was serene, the group’s diplomat. She became close friends with Mena.

Renée Lebon Châtenay (Zinka), the bravest of the group. Twenty-nine when arrested after she went to a prison in search of her husband. Gave birth in a French prison. Part of the Comète network, she helped downed and stranded Allied soldiers escape to Spain.

Joséphine Bordanava (Josée), Spanish and the youngest of the nine. Twenty when arrested in Marseille. She was raised in foster care in the south of France. Worked with the Marcel network, providing care parcels to hidden Jewish children and Résistance families. She was known for her beautiful singing voice.

Jacqueline Aubéry du Bouley (Jacky), a war widow; suffered from diphtheria during the escape. Twenty-nine when arrested in Paris. She worked in the Brutus network. She was tough, spoke her mind, and was prone to colorful curses. With Nicole, one of the “57,000” on the last transport out of Paris in August 1944.

Yvonne Le Guillou (Mena) worked with Dutch resistance networks in Paris. Twenty-two when arrested. She was flirtatious, charming, and whimsical, always falling in love. A working-class girl from Paris, but her family came from Brittany.



Map of the escape route and map of Europe

CHAPTER ONE

HÉLÈNE



Hélène Podliasky

A WOMAN BROKE FROM THE line and ran into the field of undulating bright yellow rape flowers. She ripped the blossoms from the stems with both hands, stuffing them into her mouth. Though exhausted and dazed, everyone noticed, and her action sent an electric panic through the rows of women. Stunned, Hélène waited for the sound of the gunshot that would surely follow. It could be machine-gun fire that would take out a whole section—any section, maybe theirs. The guards could do this: shoot indiscriminately into the rows to teach them a lesson. But nothing happened. All she heard was the continuous drumming of wooden clogs from thousands of marching feet.

When the woman ran back to the column, Hélène saw that her face was speckled with bits of yellow; she was smiling.

Then another woman ran into the field and gathered as many flowers as she could, using the rags of her tattered coat to hold them. When she got back into

line, women jostled one another to reach her, grabbing at the flowers in a frenzy and eating them.

Why were they getting away with this?

Yesterday, a woman only a few rows ahead of H  l  ne had been shot in the head when she tried to pick up a half-rotted apple.

H  l  ne looked around. Their column was overextended. There were gaps between the rows and the sections. There were no guards in sight.

“Now!” she whispered urgently to Jacky, elbowing her.

“But we agreed to wait for dark,” Jacky whispered back, her voice raspy and terrified.

H  l  ne tapped Zinka’s shoulder. “Look!” she said. “No guards!”

“*Oui*, I see.” Zinka nodded and grabbed Zaza’s hand, saying, “It’s our best chance.”

They came to a curve in the road. A dirt road intersected their route, and parallel to that was a deep ditch. H  l  ne knew this was the moment. They had to go as two rows, all together, so they wouldn’t be noticed. Zinka, Zaza, Lon, Mena, and Guigui, who were in the row in front of her, slid out, and then H  l  ne led Jacky, Nicole, and Jos  e. A fifth woman who had fallen into their row balked, saying she was too tired.

“Forget her, then!” H  l  ne hissed, and pulled her friends along. “Quick!”

They were nine women in all. Holding hands, they slipped sideways out of the column and jumped into the trench, one after the other. They lay flat on the ground in the deepest part of the ditch, where the earth was damp. H  l  ne felt her heart beating against her ribs. She was so thirsty she tried licking the mud. She couldn’t bring herself to look up to see if they were about to be discovered, to see if she would die shot in a ditch as she licked the earth. Instead she looked over to Lon, who was staring up at the road.

“What do you see?” H  l  ne whispered. “Are we visible?”

“Just feet.” Lon watched the endless rows of women trudging by, half of them barefoot, half of them in wooden clogs. All of the muddied, bare feet were red and bleeding.

Lon reassured her that they were hidden from view. In any case, the marchers had passed so many corpses along the way that this heap of women at the bottom of a ditch probably looked just like another pile of dead bodies.

With their arms draped around one another and their hearts pounding, they waited for the beat of the clogs dragging on the ground to fade. When the

column was no longer in sight and they could no longer hear the rhythmic pounding of feet, Lon said, "It's clear."

"Now! We need to move." Hélène stood and led them along the ditch in the opposite direction. But they were soon out of breath and overcome with sheer euphoria. They climbed out of the ditch and collapsed in the field. They lay there looking up at the sky, clasping hands, and laughing hysterically.

They had done it! They had escaped!

But now they were in the middle of Saxony, facing frightened and hostile German villagers, angry fleeing officers of Germany's Schutzstaffel (SS), the Russian army, and Allied bombers overhead. The Americans were somewhere nearby, they hoped. They had to find the Americans or die trying.

★ ★ ★

My aunt, Tante Hélène, was a beautiful young woman. She had a high forehead and a wide smile. She had raven-black hair and dark eyes with thick, sensuous eyebrows. She appeared small and delicate, but you sensed an underlying strength. Even in old age, when I knew her, she had a regal demeanor; she was always elegantly dressed and impeccably manicured, and she radiated intelligence. In the photos of her in her twenties, she looked poised and clever. She was a natural leader.

In May 1943, she joined the Résistance, working for the Bureau des opérations aériennes (BOA) for the M region. The BOA had been created that April to act as a liaison between the Forces françaises de l'intérieur (FFI, the name used by Charles de Gaulle for the Résistance) and England. The BOA's role was to ensure the transport of agents and messages and to receive parachute drops of arms. The M region, which was the largest in the FFI, covered Normandy, Brittany, and Anjou. Right before the Normandy landing, managing this territory was crucial and dangerous. The Gestapo was successfully capturing or killing an alarming number of leaders and network members. In the frenetic months surrounding D-Day, Hélène's region was a hotbed of activity both for the Résistance and for the Gestapo's increasingly vicious and desperate attempts to break the underground networks.

Hélène was twenty-three years old when she joined. On a break from her physics and mathematics studies at the Sorbonne, she had taken a significant job as a chemist in a lamp company. But as her Résistance activities grew in importance, she left that job to work full-time in the struggle against the fascists.

She lied to her parents about what she was doing. Her nom de guerre was “Christine,” and in the Nazi records she is recorded with that name.¹ She would always be known by the group of women who escaped together as Christine.

Her commander, code-named “Kim,” was Paul Schmidt. At the start of the war, Schmidt was the leader of an elite troop of French mountain infantry. In 1940, he fought in Norway; his battalion was evacuated to England, where he was treated for severe frostbite. After his recovery he joined the Forces françaises de l’intérieur and returned to France clandestinely. In March 1943, he was put in charge of the BOA and set up a series of “reception committees” in the northern region. Hélène was one of the fourteen agents he recruited. She was responsible for finding terrain suitable for parachute drops. For each drop she had to gather a team of Résistance workers to be ready at the landing sites. Eventually her work evolved to include establishing liaisons between the different Résistance networks in the M region. To communicate information to London about the reality on the ground she coded and decoded messages that were broadcast over the radio.

She waited with anticipation for the full moon, when the planes could find the drop site at night. Three days before, she’d listened to the radio. The secret codes were broadcast on the BBC, during a special fifteen-minute portion called “Les Français Parlent aux Français” (the French speak to the French). Hélène often wondered what ordinary listeners thought when they heard phrases like “les souliers de cuir d’Irène sont trop grands” (Irene’s leather slippers are too big).

She and her team were waiting in the shadow of the woods that skirted the small field of her favorite reception site in Semblançay, outside Tours. They heard the engine of the plane approaching. She turned her flashlight on and off in Morse code, beaming the agreed-upon letter as a signal. To her great relief, after a moment the little airplane blinked on its lights.

“Now,” she whispered to her team, and one by one, like dominoes, they lit their flashlights, outlining the perimeter of the reception area. The little plane circled a few times. Hélène’s heart raced as she thought of people in the village hearing the loud engine or seeing the white silk of the parachutes glowing in the moonlight as they descended to earth. As soon as the containers hit the ground her team ran into the field to gather them. They were filled with small arms, explosives, a new transmitter, and new code sheets. And for the morale of her group, the British had included chocolates and cigarettes.

As they filled their pockets with cigarettes and their backpacks with small arms, her team heard the plane returning to circle again, and they paused. Something else dropped into the night sky. Hélène saw the dark outline of a man floating down beneath a glowing white silk parachute. She quickly distributed the contents of the remaining packages to her team, ordering them to disperse in different directions. It was better if they left before the parachutist landed; the less anyone knew, the better. Only two men remained behind to get rid of the empty containers and to bury the parachutes. Not for the first time, she wished she could keep the lovely silk to make a dress. But there were orders.

The mysterious man unhooked himself from the harness and lit a cigarette. He stood off to the side and watched Hélène directing the two remaining men. She did not approach him either. Before they spoke, she wanted to gather her thoughts. Besides, this part of the operation had to go fast. They had to be dispersed from the site within fifteen minutes, so that if anyone had seen the parachutes or heard the plane, they would find no one around when they got here.

Finally Hélène approached the new arrival. He was tall and thin. When he pulled on his cigarette, the ember glowed, and she could see his sharp, angular face. He seemed amused. "I wasn't told there would be living cargo," she said, barely hiding her anger.

"Fantassin," he replied, putting out his hand for her to shake. Reluctantly she took it. "And you must be Christine? I was told about you."

"Why wasn't I told about you? I don't have anything prepared." When she was scared, Hélène tended to sound angry. *Fantassin* meant "foot soldier" in French, and the code name had been whispered about. He was someone important. She was glad it was dark so he couldn't see her blush.

"We didn't want to risk it being known that I'm back in France. The *boches* have breached our networks. We have to be very careful."

He handed Hélène a cigarette and lit it for her. This gave her some time to think.

"But I don't know where to take you," she said, dropping her tough demeanor.

"We trust you. I will stay in your apartment until I can make contact." He didn't ask her. He ordered her. And he seemed amused that it made her uncomfortable. If my mother knew..., she thought. Her mother had gone to a school where boys and girls were strictly separated, and the nuns who taught

them would tell the girls to avert their gaze as they passed the boys' building, to avoid the temptation of sin.

Her apartment was a long bike ride away in another town far from the landing site. Fantassin had a black leather briefcase that had been tied to his wrist during the jump so that it wouldn't be lost. Now he handed it to her and said that they would ride her bicycle together. She could sit on the back. With one hand she clutched the briefcase and with the other she held on to this strange man as he pedaled them through the night. She tried not to grip him too tightly, but she felt the heat from his back. They did not speak except for when she told him to turn here or there. A few times she made him pull the bike over and hide behind a wall or bush while she checked to see if they were being followed. It was a routine she had worked out over time, but this night she was especially careful.

The long ride in the damp early morning helped calm her nerves. They arrived just before sunrise. She was exhausted. Her place was small, one main room with a kitchenette and a tiny bedroom. She had decided she would give him the bed and sleep in the living room. But once inside the small apartment she felt suddenly shy. She told herself that this was her job. She stiffened her back and stood up straight.

Fantassin placed the briefcase on the kitchen table and opened it. It was full of money, more money than she had ever seen in her life. He reached in and handed her some bills.

"No," she said, feeling her face flush red, "I don't do this for money. I do it for France, for my honor." She might have appeared indignant, but she was scared. She did not want him to think she was that sort of woman.

"It's not for you, it's for your team. For the men who were there last night."

"They do it for France too." She spoke almost without thinking, something she rarely did.

"For the families then, the ones who have already sacrificed," he said.

She nodded, because he was right. Her pride and discomfort had gotten in the way of her thinking. Many people were in hiding and did not have access to ration cards; they were hungry. This money would help them. She needed to pull herself together. She took a deep breath.

"You must be tired." His voice softened. "How old are you?"

She told him she had just turned twenty-four a few weeks earlier.

He sat down in the chair by the sofa and lit a cigarette. There was a long silence.

“You can take the bedroom,” she said after a moment.

“No, please, I will be fine here.” He indicated the couch.

When Hélène protested that he was her superior officer, he said, “Yes, we are soldiers, but please, let me also be a gentleman.”

Fantassin’s real name was Valentin Abeille. He was the head of the entire M region.² The Germans had put a large bounty on his head. At this stage in the war, the Gestapo was relentless. It had been able to plant a few double agents in Résistance cells. These groups consisted mostly of idealistic young people who received little or no training and were unable to keep a tight grip on security. Some of the younger men would boast about what they were doing to get *les boches*, told too many people, allowed themselves to be followed, or didn’t observe the proper safety rules. The average time a person lasted in the Résistance before being caught was three to six months.

In the end Fantassin was most likely betrayed by his secretary for the bounty. He was arrested by the Gestapo, and on the way to the infamous Gestapo torture site on the rue des Saussaies, in Paris, he jumped from the car. He was shot multiple times not far from the Arc de Triomphe and died soon after in the hospital. He had told Hélène during the brief few days they spent together that he could not allow himself to be taken alive. He showed her the cyanide tablets he carried. The less she knew, the better, he said.

While she worked in the Résistance, Hélène had more liberty than a young woman in France at that time would normally have. At the start of the war her parents and sisters had moved to Grenoble, where her father was now running a factory. Her parents thought she had stayed behind to pursue her studies. They would only find out the truth about her activities later, when someone from the network contacted them.

Hélène remembered those months as exhilarating. She was a young, independent woman entrusted with an important role and in charge of older men. Lives depended on her. There were moments of high adrenaline like nothing she had ever experienced before. One such shock came when she arrived at the assigned drop site one early evening and was greeted by a group of French gendarmes. Sure they had been sent to arrest her, she felt ice-cold panic wash down her spine. She had already turned to cycle away when one called out the password. She froze, trying to make the calculations. If they knew the code, then

they must know everything. She felt a wave of nausea mixed with a resigned feeling of relief. The game was up. There was no point in running away. But she mechanically answered their code with her own, and then the men walked up to her, asking for their orders.

It took her a moment to realize they weren't there to arrest her. This was her reception team. What she had assumed was the end of the line for her was only another strange twist. An entire barracks of uniformed gendarmes had joined the Résistance together. This incident bolstered Hélène and gave her a sense of invincibility.

On February 4, 1944, she was supposed to deliver a message to General Marcel Allard, who commanded a part of the M region. When she arrived at the small hotel in Brittany where they were meeting, she saw him running out one door just as a group of five German soldiers entered by another. She was trapped in the middle. They arrested her simply because she was there and they were rounding up everyone in the hotel lobby. The message she was carrying was sewn into the lining of her purse, and miraculously the Gestapo did not find it. She was able to maintain that she did not know this Allard fellow they were after. They had nothing on her and her papers were in order, so she played the docile, empty-headed girl—a role she had played before.

They held her in the prison in Vannes for a few days, but one guard reassured her that it was only a matter of paperwork. Not to worry—she would soon be allowed to go home to her mother and father. But then instead of releasing her, they transferred her to a prison in Rennes, where she was held for two weeks. Still there was no formal interrogation. They asked nothing besides why she had happened to be at that hotel at that particular moment.

Then one day two guards came into the cell where she was being held with twenty other women and called her name. The men handcuffed her and led her to a waiting black car. The men bristled with a violent anger, and refused to answer her questions or to speak to her. They transported her to the prison in Angers, in the Loire Valley, where she spent two months.

Fifty-eight years later, during our interview in her apartment, where Hélène had allowed me to record her story, she said, “Angers stays in my memory as the symbol of suffering itself.”

That was the place she was interrogated and tortured, sometimes to the point of being returned to her cell on a stretcher. The worst was *le supplice de la baignoire*, or waterboarding. They would take her into an ordinary bathroom

The German guard in charge of her cell was an Alsatian about the same age as Hélène. She spoke perfect German, so they talked occasionally. He was disturbed by what he saw the Gestapo doing to her. He hated them, and his eyes filled with tears when she was returned bloodied and battered on a stretcher. He whispered encouragements through her cell window, which she only half heard in her semiconscious state. He told her that she should just tell them what they wanted to know and then she would be left alone. He told her that he wished she wasn't so brave. One time he brought her a kilo of butter. She was grateful, but it was a strange thing to have to hide in her cell. She had no idea what to do with the butter, where to put it. She had nothing to eat it with. Later he brought her sugar, a much more practical gift.

He took a short letter she had written to her family and mailed it to her godfather. Hélène knew that way it wouldn't be traced to her. The young Alsatian soldier must have kept the address because later, after the war, he looked for her by contacting her godfather. He wanted to know if she had survived and how she was. But by then, so many worse things had happened to her, and she was no longer the relatively innocent young girl whom he had guarded in the prison cell in Angers. She wrote back to him to say that yes, she had survived, but that was all. She asked him not to contact her again.

In the prison in Angers she wasn't permitted to have anything in her cell, and all alone, with no books, no paper, no magazines, she felt herself slipping over the edge. She begged the guard for a pencil. On the white walls of her cell, she worked on mathematical problems. When I asked what sort of problems, Hélène scribbled down an equation on a scrap of paper.

$$\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} dx e^{-ax^2} = \sqrt{\frac{\pi}{a}}$$

I showed my sister Annie, a mathematician, this equation, and asked what Hélène had been doing. Annie said, "She was computing the Gaussian integral," which involves e and pi. Annie explained that e and pi are called "transcendental numbers." Transcendental numbers, like imaginary numbers, exist outside of ordinary math. In the history of math, the concept of imaginary numbers was the cause of great anxiety and drama through the ages as different mathematicians gradually discovered their necessity. In the early nineteenth century, a hotheaded

young French mathematician named Évariste Galois was expelled from the École Normale for political activity. Though he was recognized as having promise, his mathematical ideas were too radical to be accepted by the establishment. He wrote feverish letters the night before he died in a duel, making some notes in the margins of his proofs that involved transcendental and imaginary numbers. Galois recognized there were some problems that cannot be solved with only the concrete numbers of our daily existence. His final words to his brother were, “Don’t cry, Alfred! I need all my strength to die at twenty.”

In her cell, at twenty-four, Hélène was gathering her strength to die. She worked on a number of classic mathematical problems, showing that you cannot trisect an angle or square a circle using just a straightedge and compass. There exist numbers that cannot be constructed.

Later, when Hélène landed in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, she would recognize her friend Zaza from the lycée they had attended together. They would cling to each other in the shower, fearing that the rumors were true and that the tiny holes in the ceiling would soon release a gas that would kill them. But instead they were drenched in freezing water. They were assigned numbers: Hélène became prisoner number 43209, Zaza number 43203. The prisoners endured endless roll calls, the *Appells*, when they were counted again and again. People became numbers and then nothing.

Not only are real numbers infinite, my sister says, but there must be an infinite amount of transcendental numbers as well. But we know of only a few. Annie thinks that this could be because of our human obsession with our tools: the straightedge and the compass have limited our imagination. Our thinking limits our understanding.

As I write this story, I wonder whether language also limits our thinking. The families I interviewed, the descendants of the nine women who escaped that day in Germany, would say the same thing: that their mothers or grandmothers or aunts felt unable to fully describe what they had experienced. There was a limit to what they could say; their stories, if told at all, were only half told.

At the prison in Angers in June 1944, they could hear the sound of bombardment in the distance. The Allies were storming the beaches in Normandy. Hélène’s young Alsatian guard told her, “Tomorrow you will be free, and I will be the prisoner.”

She allowed herself to hope. But then she sat all day in her cell, with her arms hugging her calves and her chin on her knees, looking at the complex