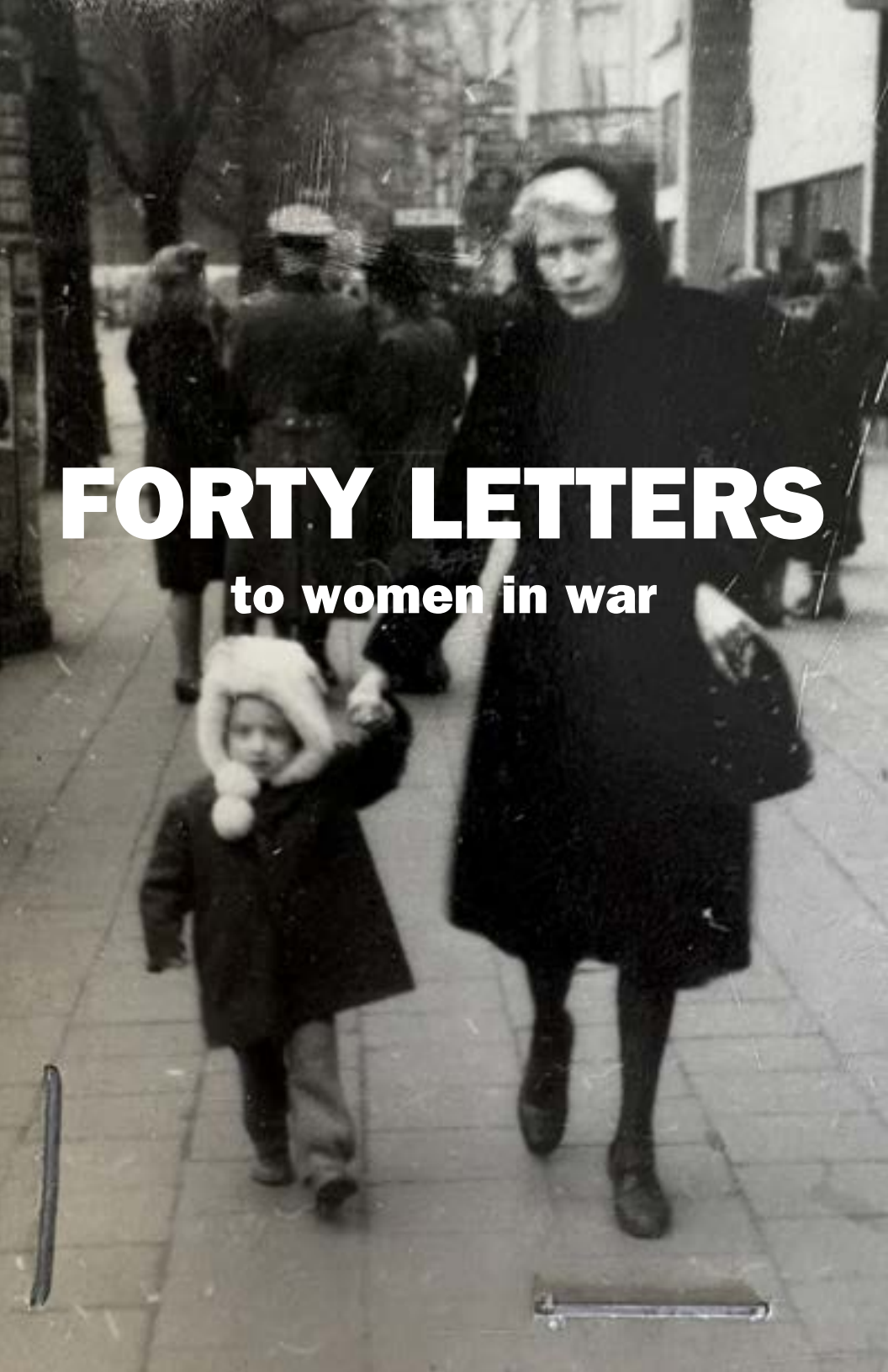

FORTY LETTERS

to women in war

In memoriam of

women in war

HOUSE OF CRAZINESS

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Intro

For nearly a decade, I have championed the visibility of women's stories through the annual Womenday Rotterdam Award and through my advocacy in national media. Whether naming the Rotterdam Swim Trophy after Marie Mastenbroek or dedicating the 2026 *Four Days In May* commemoration to "Women in War," my mission has remained the same: to ensure these voices are heard.

Alongside our third international commemoration, I am proud to publish this collection of forty carefully curated personal letters.

Writing this book was a journey that spanned nearly a hundred days. I traveled to the very places where these women once lived, talked with relatives, consulted archives, academic papers and many books to reconstruct the many facets of World War II through their eyes.

These letters speak of horror and resilience, transforming distant history into intimate stories that honor the profound courage these women carried.

Erik van Loon

- visit www.14mei.nl/women-in-war to learn more -

Forty Letters

B.
Josephine **Baker**, dancer - Saint Louis, US
Peggy **Banham**, shoe maker - Rushden, UK
Marianne **Baum**, housewife - Strassbourg, DE/FR
Frieda **Belinfante**, composer - Amsterdam, NL
Rebekka **Brilleslijper**, actor - Amsterdam, NL
Gilberte **Borgers**, housewife - Lokeren, BE
Lise **Borsum**, housewife - Oslo, NO

C.
Carla **Capponi**, partizan - Rome, IT
Yvonne **Cerneau**, hotel manager - Maisons-Laffitte, FR
Augusta **Chiwy**, nurse - Mubavu, CD

D.
Marie **Doležalová**, girl - Lidice, CZ

E.
Elisabeth **Eidenbenz**, teacher - Wila, CH
Mollie **Evershed**, nurse - Sussex, UK

F.
Dorothy Anyta **Field**, nurse - Lower Kingwood, UK
Denise **Flouquet**, nurse - Malo-les-Bains, FR

G.
Georgia, housewife - Distomo, GR
Berendina **Grolleman**, housewife - Hasselt, NL

H.
Kitty **van der Have**, secretary - Rotterdam, NL
Maria **van Hoeck**, cleaner - Antwerp, BE
Claire **Hollingworth**, war correspondent - Knighton, UK

I.
Noor **Inayat Khan**, musician and illustrator - Moscow, RU

J.
Andrée **de Jongh**, nurse - Schaarbeek, BE

M.
Louise **Magadur**, hairdresser - Pont-Croix, FR
Lee **Miller**, model - artist - photographer - Poughkeepsie, US

N.
Ellen **Nielsen**, fishmonger - Kopenhagen, DK

P.
Dina **Pronicheva**, actress - Chernikov, UA

R.
Élise **Rivet**, nun - Draria, DZ
Rosie de **Riveter,** worker - Earth,
Marguerite **Rouffanche**, grandma - Oradour-sur-Glane, FR

S.
Sophie **Scholl**, scholar - Forchtenberg, DE
Faye **Schulman**, photographer - Lenin, PL/BY
Irena **Sendlerowa**, social worker - Warsaw, PL
Simone **Sequin**, farmer - Thivars, FR
Maria Mathilde Hubertina **Scheen**, nun - Roermond, NL
Joukje **Smits**, teacher - Rotterdam, NL
Settela **Steinbach**, child - Buchten, NL

T.
Bobbie **Tanner**, firewomen - , UK

V.
Rose **Valland**, art historian - Saint-Étienne-de-Saint-Geoirs, FR
Rosalie Maria **Vandroogenbroeck**, nun - Sint-Kwintens-Lennik, BE
Simone **Veil**, scholar - Nice, FR

W.
Orli **Wald**, nun - Bourell, FR

X.
Qian **Xiuling**, nurse - Yixing, CN

3 June 1906 - Saint Louis, US

Josephine Baker

12 April 1975 - Paris, FR

Dear Josephine,

You share a name with my mother, born during the war and a great admirer of yours. Perhaps she was, like so many other girls, even named after you.

You were born thirty-four years before her, in the United States, and at nineteen you fled the racism that tried to crush your dreams. France embraced you. You danced in your banana skirt, befriended Colette, walked Paris with your cheetah Chiquita, and your famous, disarming smile made you the most photographed woman in the world. You built a life of glamour and freedom—only to give it up when fascism threatened the world you loved.

In 1925 you performed in Berlin to thunderous applause. Two years later, after Mein Kampf had spread its poison, the welcome had turned to hatred. Newspapers called you a “black devil,” a “jezebel,” a danger to their dignity. The brownshirts were - like ICE nowadays - so violent that you feared for your life.

Eight years later you married Jean Lion, a Jewish industrialist, and your resolve hardened. You vowed to fight the Nazis—to defend France, your husband, and yourself. That same year, your image appeared with a yellow badge on a Nazi poster denouncing “degenerate musicians.” It was the first time since 1600 that Jews where pictured with a yellow badge again. After the invasion of Poland, Jews in Poland had to wear it. From that moment, Europe was warned.

It is incredible that you survived the war—and that you managed to work as a courier, a spy, a smuggler of intelligence, even while the Nazis hunted you as an enemy of the state. You carried secret messages in your sheet music, gathered information in embassies, and used your fame as both shield and weapon. You became one of the true heroes of the Second World War.

But you were more than a star. You were a woman who refused to bow to hatred. A woman who used her fame not for safety, but for resistance. A woman who understood that beauty, joy, and freedom are themselves acts of defiance.

15 February 1924 - Rushden, UK

Peggy Banham

née Peggy Harper

Dear Peggy,

Congratulations on your 102nd birthday! As a mother of two, grandmother of four, and great-grandmother to twelve, you are believed to be among the last surviving members of the Women's Land Army who served during the Second World War.

While German submarines sank nearly 2,800 merchant ships—totaling over 14 million gross tons—and claimed thousands of innocent lives, while 76,000 tonnes of bombs fell on London, Coventry, Birmingham, and many other cities—killing around 40,000 civilians and injuring many more—while nearly 6 million British men marched to war, another vital army took root in Britain's fields.

Women from all walks of life joined the Women's Land Army to confront a severe food crisis. At just eighteen, you left Rushden's shoemaking industry—where you had worked alongside your parents since leaving school at fourteen—to join over 80,000 Land Girls who became the backbone of Britain's agricultural workforce.

You ploughed fields, milked cows, harvested crops, and maintained machinery in gruelling conditions. While exchanging letters and getting engaged by mail with your future husband, Geoff, who was stationed in North Africa—you and your comrades kept Britain fed. Your tireless work in the soil proved that victory was forged not only on the front lines, but also in the furrows of the countryside.

The food you helped produce nourished British troops but it also sustained the people at home. And as Allied forces liberated Europe, your efforts filled planes, trucks, and ships with desperately needed supplies—lifelines for starving children like my parents, and to countless families across the Netherlands, France, Belgium, and even Germany—who had endured years of hunger deliberately inflicted by Nazi Germany as a weapon of war and oppression.

In the name of my parents and millions more, thank you, Peggy, and all the incredible women who put their lives on hold to feed others—including those in my own family. May your birthday be filled with love and joy.

9 February 1921 - Strasbourg, DE/FR

Marianne Baum

née Marianne Cohn

18 August 1942 - Berlin, DE

Dear Marianne,

Some meetings decide a life. In 1927, when you were only fourteen, you met Herbert Baum in a Jewish youth group. You got married and together you became member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), but after the Nazi orchestrated Reichstag fire on 27 February 1933 and the federal elections six days after Hitler seized power and moved swiftly to crush all opposition. Civil liberties were suspended, the press was muzzled, assemblies were banned, and the KPD was forced underground.

It didn't stop you and after you were both forced to work at Siemens' Elmo-Werke in Berlin in 1941. You formed with help of French, Belgian, and Dutch forced labourers the "Baum Group" and started to publish among other "*The Way Out*". The group surreptitiously dropped leaflets around the city and scrawled anti-Hitler graffiti on walls. On one occasion, eight cans were placed on top of a building; when the timer went off, the air was filled with leaflets reading "*Hitler: Germany's Gravedigger.*" In April 1942, ten members carried out mass graffiti actions, painting slogans such as "*No to Hitler's suicidal policies.*" To fund the activities, you stole money, typewriters, paper, ink, and stencil machines, enabling them to continue publishing their antifascist underground newspapers and pamphlets.

Then, on 18 May 1942, you managed to set fire to the travelling anti-Communist and anti-Semitic propaganda exhibition "The Soviet Paradise". The German press had kept the attack secret. Goebbels nevertheless urged Hitler after this incident to deport all Jews from Berlin, and in the days after, the first 470 people have been arrested, 220 have been deported to concentration camps and 250 have been shot. Herbert got tortured till death and you and twenty-seven other members of the Baum Group - many of them were Aryan - were executed by guillotine at the Berlin Plötzensee prison or murdered in Auschwitz. Of your circle only Richard and Charlotte Holzer survived.

Herbert is remembered on a memorial stone and a street in Berlin. No statue or street bears your name, yet your courage continues to inspire young women worldwide.

10 May 1904 - Amsterdam, NL

Frieda Belinfante

5 March 1995 - Santa Fe, US

Dear Frieda,

You were born in Amsterdam and on the morning of your 36th birthday the Nazis invaded the Netherlands. By that time you had already broken historic ground as the first woman in Europe to found and serve as artistic director and conductor of a professional orchestral ensemble, Het Klein Orkest.

As a Jewish woman and a lesbian, you were now in mortal danger. In the wave of despair that followed the invasion, your brother Bob took his own life—one of hundreds of Dutch people, many of them Jewish, who chose suicide rather than face Nazi persecution. In 1941, anti-Jewish laws forced you to resign your position with Het Klein Orkest. But you refused to retreat. You chose resistance.

With your close friend, the openly gay artist Willem Arondeus, you forged identity papers to help Jews and others evade deportation. On March 27, 1943, you and your comrades in Arondeus's resistance group carried out a daring attack on the Amsterdam Population Registry, destroying approximately 800,000 records and severely disrupting the Nazis' ability to identify and track people for deportation.

After the bombing, you went into hiding. For months you lived disguised as a man until arrests and executions among your fellow resisters forced you to flee. With resistance help, you traveled through Belgium and France before making the perilous winter crossing of the Alps on foot with your companion to reach safety in Switzerland.

After the war, you struggled to rebuild your musical career in the Netherlands and emigrated to the United States in 1947. There you eventually founded and conducted the Orange County Philharmonic Society Orchestra from 1954 to 1962, only to lose the position amid financial difficulties and prejudice over your sexuality. Yet your passion for music endured.

Your courage, your refusal to vanish, became a beacon—shining long before historians began to recover the erased and persecuted stories of LGBTQ lives in wartime.

10 March 1911 - Lokeren, BE

Gilberte Borgers

28 April 1944 - Katowice, PL

Dear Gilberte,

In the first year of occupation, Antwerp—like much of Belgium and the Netherlands—saw little resistance. German control was widely tolerated, and local authorities cooperated with Nazi racial laws. After Poland in Nov ’39, Germany in Sep ’41, and the Netherlands in May ’42, Belgium too forced Jews to wear the Star of David from Jun ’42. Many citizens also supported the Nazis, and 25,000 Dutch and 23,000 Belgians volunteered to fight alongside German troops when the Soviet Union was invaded in June 1941.

In a climate of fear, early resistance came from scattered individuals like you—a single mother of two who chose to distribute clandestine newspapers. In May 1941, as a leader in the Communist women’s movement, you helped organize demonstrations and bakery raids—twenty-three in Antwerp alone, including a march of 800 women. These ‘bread riots’ helped spark organized resistance. You proved that resistance does not always start with sabotage or weapons—sometimes it begins with a loaf of bread.

Soon you were forced into hiding. In Rumbeke, you found refuge with Maria Tytgat, active in the Partisan Women of Roeselare. On 14 April 1943, you, Maria, and a neighbor were arrested. Maria and the neighbor were deported to Ravensbrück and survived. You were condemned to death for spreading words—only words. A year later, you were executed by beheading in Katowice, far from the city where you had taught women to stand tall, far from your children, who had already lost their father in the Spanish Civil War.

Yet you and many other communist resisters were never officially recognized. Fear of exposing networks kept many from applying, and postwar governments were not sympathetic. As a result, much of the communist resistance—especially women’s actions—vanished from official records.

Unlike many men who were far less heroic, you could never call yourself a hero after your beheading in Poland. But to me, you are one of the bravest women of your time. Your story does not belong in the margins. Your choices and sacrifices helped Belgium through its darkest years.

18 September 1908 - Oslo, NO

Lise Børsum

née Lise Alnæs

29 August 1985 - Oslo, NO

Dear Lise,

In Bertolt Brecht's famous poem "Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?" he relates how a German soldier sent his wife luxury items of clothing from the cities they invaded. From Prague she got high-heeled shoes, from Warsaw a linen shirt, from Oslo a fur collar, from Rotterdam a beautiful hat, from Brussels rare lace, from Paris a silken dress, and from Tripoli a necklace; but from Russia she got a widow's veil.

Without this imagery of spoils to the lived reality of occupied nations I might have forgotten that Germany invaded neutral Denmark and Norway on 9 April 1940 before they attacked us, the Low Countries, one month after. Denmark surrendered that same day but Norway resisted until 9 June 1940. France and Britain tried to help Norway, as they had in Poland, the Netherlands, and Belgium, but were forced to withdraw under German attack.

As Sweden could stay neutral you opened your home as a shelter and a passageway for Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, guiding them toward safety in Sweden. In those years of darkness, your house became a beacon of hope.

In April 1943, the Gestapo tore you and your husband Ragnar from that life of resistance. He was released, you were sent first to Grini, then across borders and prisons, until you were swallowed by Ravensbrück—the women's camp near Berlin. As a *Nacht und Nebel* prisoner, you were meant to vanish without trace. Yet you endured. You survived until April 1945, when the Swedish Red Cross carried you, Andrée de Jongh and 7,500 other women in the white buses home.

After the war, you wrote "*Fange i Ravensbrück*", one of the earliest testimonies from that place, ensuring that the world would know what had been done to women there. I found three copies worldwide and bought a first print in UK because your courage may not end —it should not only be remembered as resistance, but we all should keep your memory alive like your daughter Bente did on stage as you remind us that survival is not the end of the story—it is the beginning of responsibility.

13 December 1912 - Amsterdam, NL

Lin Jaldati

née Rebekka Brilleslijper

31 August 1988 - Berlin, DE

Dear Rebekka or should I say Lin,

I have joyful news. On May 10 2026, a chorus will sing your version of Dehmel and Matthus' *Ist das alles schon wieder vergessen?* during our liturgy Women in War and Witness at the Dutch Church in London.

The reverend asked me to send your recording to the chorus. As I could not find it online, I reached out to Rimco Spanjer, who sent me a copy. He is a devoted admirer of you and, together with others, he translated your and your husbands autobiography into Dutch. He also asked Jalda if they may sing you song. She agreed and I am very grateful that she gave permission.

In the meantime, I purchased the original Frau und Frieden LP-record *Lin Jaldati Sings* in Vienna. I was delighted and moved to discover Mordechaj's *Es brent* on it, as I open my dance triptych Free with that very song. The ballet is dedicated to Marianna, Salomon, and Frieda van Loon, who perished in Auschwitz on my birthday—29 years before I was born. Together with the notes on the back cover of the LP-record I decided to write you a letter too.

First, I was deeply touched to find out that you and your sister Janny took care that Margot and Anne - after you met them for the first time in Amsterdam Centraal and after in Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen - received a proper burial after they succumbed to typhus. For Otto, that must have brought a painful yet comforting sense of closure, knowing you and your sister were there for his daughters in their final days.

Your move to East Berlin after the war I understand. You and Eberhard could secure meaningful work and a future for your children and together with Bertolt, Helene and other artists you dreamt of a new world order in which citizens mattered more than corporations. Khrushchev scattered those dreams and I even think it hastened Bertolt's death.

In that light, it saddens me that you had to endure a divided city and passed away just before the Wall came down.

7 December 1918 - Rome, IT

Carla Capponi

24 November 2000 - Rome, IT

Dear Carla,

You were only twenty when Mussolini proclaimed his July 1938 *Manifesto of Race*. It declared Italians Aryan, forbidding marriage with Semites, Africans, and other non-Europeans. Non-Aryan citizens were barred from social and economic life. Almost a year after Mussolini and Hitler signed in Berlin the Pact of Steel: a military alliance binding them politically and militarily.

On 25 July 1943, two weeks after 160,000 American, British and Canadian forces overran Sicily, the fascist regime fell and King Victor Emmanuel III ordered the arrest of Mussolini. The situation in the fifty Italian concentration camps shifted and inmates, including Jewish prisoners, were gradually released.

But before this process was complete, German armies occupied northern and central Italy establishing the Italian Social Republic, and seized the camps. Now the North was occupied by Nazi Germany while the south got liberated by Allies, with growing support from groups like the GAP (Gruppi di Azione Patriottica) fighters.

You became Gappisti too and your first mission was to stop a German officer carrying defence plans of the city. You waited outside Hotel Excelsior, where the Germans had set up their headquarters, pulled the trigger, and escaped with the briefcase. On 21 March 1944 you took part in the Via Rasella attack, where thirty-three German soldiers were killed. The reprisal was brutal: the next morning 335 prisoners were massacred at the Fosse Ardeatine caves. Soon after, Rome was liberated.

In the months that followed, the number of women Gappisti peaked to nearly 35,000, and together with the men, the partisan movement grew to almost 200,000. While many women served as couriers or supporters, you reminds us that women also stood as fighters. Unlike many men, who got involved because they were faced with a choice between being called up to fight a war they no longer believed in and the life of a partisan.The women were true freedom fighters—choosing resistance while history still permitted them to do nothing.

Maisons-Laffitte, 11 January 1897

Yvonne Cerneau

24 April 1945, Bergen-Belsen, DE

Dear Yvonne,

You were born near Paris, and after your father's death you left your mother and nine siblings to move to London. There you married the Italian waiter Alec Rudellat, with whom you had Constance Jacqueline in 1922. Following your divorce, you worked as a receptionist at the Ebury Court Hotel near Victoria Station. In early 1941 you had just become grandmother, but when a bomb destroyed the hotel on May 10–11, leaving you without work, you chose to join Britain's Special Operations Executive.

After brief training, they chose you as the first female secret agent in France. On 16 July you visited a Jewish tailor near Oxford Circus to borrow French shoes, a handbag, and a dress from women who had fled France. The next day you drove with Vera Atkins to Tempsford Airfield, and that evening you climbed in a bomber bound for Gibraltar. Your flight must have been terrifying as two German Spitfires attached and destroyed one of the engines. At the colony a specially adapted felucca crewed by Polish sailors carried you to a remote beach near Saint-Raphaël.

From there you crossed the demarcation line between Vichy France and the German zone, reaching Tours to help establish the MONKEYPUZZLE network. Its task was to organize "welcome committees" for parachuted weapons. You also took part in sabotage, together with others you blow up a 300,000-volt electricity cable south of Orléans, and destroyed two locomotives in the Le Mans freight yard in March 1943.

In June 1943, driving with French resistance fighter Pierre Culioli and Canadian agents Frank Pickersgill and John Macalister to Paris, you were arrested in Dhuizon. You and Pierre escaped, but in the chase you were shot in the head and he in the leg before you both were recaptured. After recovering in hospital, you and Pierre were taken to Avenue Foch in Paris for interrogation.

Pierre survived Buchenwald. Frank and John were murdered in Mauthausen. And you—eight days after Bergen-Belsen's liberation—died, laid to rest in a mass grave among 5,000 others. Free at last!

6 June 1921 - Mubavu, CD

Augusta Chiwy

23 August 2015 - Brussel, BE

Dear Augusta,

They call you *The Forgotten Angel of Bastogne* as your story remained 65 years hidden until the British historian Martin King discovered your story in 2007 after hearing rumors of a Black nurse at the Battle of the Bulge. He tracked you down in a retirement home near Brussels and subsequently he spent months interviewing you, bringing your forgotten heroism to light. Leading to your recognition and honors, including a Belgian knighthood and a U.S. Army award for saving hundreds of wounded soldiers during the Siege of Bastogne.

The Siege of Bastogne in the winter of 1944–45 was brutal. It was the worst winter in Europe with temperatures down to -20c in Auschwitz, -12c in Bastogne and -10c in Rotterdam leading to widespread famine in the remaining occupied countries and American troops were outnumbered five to one, lacked winter gear and medical supplies.

Yet, the U.S. Army was lucky because you—a young woman born in Belgian Congo to a black mother and white father—had come to visit your father for Christmas and you arrived on 20th December just hours before the siege began.

The next day another Belgium nurse Renée Lemaire volunteered to one of the makeshift hospitals in the city. This hospital, ran by doctor John T. Prior, was already receiving lots of terribly wounded American soldiers. When Renée told about your presence in town. He didn't hesitate and went straight to you your fathers house to ask for your help and you accepted his call immediately.

Some soldiers had objections about being treated by you, to which John answered that they could also join the frozen corpses outside. On December 24h, while you, John and some others were sharing a quick glass of champagne, to mark Christmas eve, a bomb killed in an adjacent building 20 wounded soldiers, and nurse Renée.

You carried on, compensating for her loss you showed extraordinary courage, taking care of the worst cases, and going outside to retrieve wounded soldiers under intense enemy fire until the end of the siege on 26th December.

22 August 1932 - Lidice, CZ

Marie Doležalová

22 March 2021 - New Lidice, CZ

Dear Marie,

You were just ten when, on 9 June 1942, German forces surrounded Lidice. They executed 173 men, deported 184 women to Ravensbrück, and 105 children — the youngest only thirteen months old — to Łódź, Poland.

There, the children were subjected to invasive physical examinations. Those who displayed so-called “Aryan” features were singled out as candidates for *Germanization*. In the end, you — together with five other girls and one boy — were selected for the Lebensborn program, destined to be raised as German. The other children were murdered at Chełmno. After a year you were renamed Ingeborg Schiller and placed with the Schiller family in Poznan.

Together with you more than 20,000 children were kidnapped for Germanization since 1935 through the Lebensborn program, which operated across Europe facilities: twenty in Germany, nine in Norway, six in Poland, three in Austria, two in Denmark, and one each in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

The SS destroyed many records at war’s end to conceal the program and protect the adoptive SS families who often used the children like slaves. After the war you managed to escape and return to Lidice. There you learned your town was destroyed and your father killed. You were reunited with your mother, who had survived Ravensbrück—but as you no longer remembered how to speak Czech, you and your mother needed a translator. Only four months later your mother died of tuberculosis.

At the Nuremberg Trials, you and two other children testified about the SS organization Lebensborn, but the judges concluded Lebensborn was not a criminal institution under international law. They defined it as a welfare organization for mothers and children, ruling there was insufficient evidence to convict it of systematic abduction.

Your testimony, however, remains a living witness to the truth: that behind the legal verdict lay the suffering of countless children and families, and the attempt to erase identities, languages, and lives.

12 June 1913 - Wila, CH

Elisabeth Eidenbenz

23 May 2011 - Zurich, CH

Dear Elisabeth,

At Elne, near the French–Spanish border, you founded a maternity hospital for women and children fleeing Franco's dictatorship or the Gestapo. Even when the Swiss Red Cross demanded obedience to Vichy's racial laws—barring aid to Jews and Romani refugees—you defied them. Through determination and quiet disobedience, six hundred children were saved from certain death.

You began as a teacher in Zurich and Winterthur, but in 1938 joined during the Spanish Civil War in Valencia Ayuda Suiza, the *Swiss Aid Committee for the Children of Spain*. When Catalonia fell, half a million refugees fled into France. You followed the exodus and decided to raise funds to transform Château d'En Bardou in Elne into a maternity hospital.

From late 1939 until Easter 1944, the Mothers of Elne became a sanctuary. Women arrived from the camps of Rivesaltes and Argelès—where infant mortality exceeded 95 percent—exhausted, ill, and grieving. An article in the *Schweizer Illustrierte* exposed the scandal: women mistreated, many raped by guards, and their dignity stripped away. Soon after, the Vichy regime closed the camp and ordered the deportation of all 2,251 Jews, including 110 children, from Rivesaltes via Drancy to Auschwitz.

Against this cruelty, your hospital stood as a fragile refuge. You gave food, shelter, and dignity. You witnessed heartbreak—mothers forced to abandon older children, pregnancies born of violence—and yet you created solidarity, where strangers breastfed one another's infants to keep them alive. In the face of atrocity, you offered life.

When the Gestapo ordered the hospital closed in April 1944, your work was forced to end, but its legacy endured. Every honor you later received—the title of Righteous Among the Nations, the Légion d'Honneur, the Creu de Sant Jordi—you dedicated to Lucie, the Jewish mother who, after losing her own child, nursed others' babies until her arrest in 1943. In that gesture you reminded us that remembrance belongs not only to leaders, but to the quiet acts of women who gave life in the face of death.

Sussex, 1915

Mollie Evershed

7 August 1944 - Juno Beach, FR

Lower Kingswood, 1912

Dorothy Anyta Field

7 August 1944 - Juno Beach, FR

Dear Mollie and Dorothy

By 1943, you—along with more than seven thousand other nurses—were serving during the Second World War. Yet you are the only two nurses whose names appear among the 22,442 on the British Normandy Memorial in Ver-sur-Mer.

On 7 August, your ship, the Hospital Carrier Amsterdam, struck two mines shortly after leaving Juno Beach. Together with eight members of the Royal Army Medical Corps and thirty crew, you managed to save seventy-five wounded soldiers—carrying them up from below decks and placing them into lifeboats. You all worked relentlessly to save every hospitalised soldier and prisoner of war until the ship finally went down.

The "*Amsterdam*" had begun as a nightly ferry between Harwich and Hook van Holland. After the invasion of Poland, she was requisitioned as a troopship carrying thousands of soldiers between England and France. On D-Day she landed 420 American soldiers on Omaha Beach and immediately after she got converted into a hospital carrier. On her third medical run, she went down.

You saved so many lives—and I know your parents cherished the letters from men who wrote, "I owe my life to your daughter—God bless her." Yet about your own lives I could find so little. For you, Mollie, I found a school magazine describing you as "practical, steady, reliable, and always eager to help." For you, Dorothy, I found an interview in which your mother said: "She could easily have saved herself because she was a strong swimmer. But she was utterly devoted to duty."

To remember you, I bought two red poppies, folded this letter into two small paper boats, and at Juno I set them afloat for you. I hope they found their way to you.

1 May 1903 - Malo-les-Bains, FR

Denise Flouquet

17 October 1984 - Zuydcoote, FR

Dear Denise,

I am writing to you from your room at the Zuydcoote Maritime Hospital—the place where you once watched the dunes, listened to the wind, and breathed the salt air until you closed your eyes at eighty-two.

I recently met Dr. Auriane Marant in the chapel, and today she showed me your room. She was surprised when I first asked about you, but after hearing your story, she promised to name the room in your honor. She kept that promise; it is now “4.14 Denise Flouquet,” the only named room in the entire hospital. Isn’t that amazing?

Auriane also ensured I could visit Villa Faidherbe near Malo beach. I thought of how you and your father, a doctor, were called there from your home on Avenue Lemaire to treat the wounded soldiers of the Chasseur 9. On that night of May 21, 1940, as Germany attacked the port of Dunkirk, Commander Le Templier chose to sail rather than sink in the harbor, eventually grounding the ship on Malo beach at 11:00 PM.

Eleven of the twenty-three crew members were wounded. When the residents of Villa Faidherbe heard their cries, they began a rescue, and shortly after you and your father transformed the basement into a sanctuary. Throughout that night, you cleaned wounds, steadied breaths, and whispered reassurance. You stayed with them until the sun rose over the remnants of a ship riddled with 380 holes.

Only days later, thousands of French, Belgian, and British soldiers flooded the beaches as Operation Dynamo began. In those chaotic days, you took the wheel of your own car, turned it into an ambulance, and saved as many lives as you could.

After the war, you received the Croix de Guerre 1939–1945, became Vice-President of the Red Cross, and served as a member of the Malo City Council. Even after you emigrated to England, your heart remained here. In your final years, you chose to come home to Zuydcoote to close your eyes. I am certain that you came back to tell the boys who never left Dunkirk, that they did not die for nothing.

10 June 1944 - Distomo, GR

Georgia

Dear Georgia,

I only know your first name, as you chose to remain anonymous in Peter D. Chimbos' 2003 paper *Women of the 1941–44 Greek Resistance Against the Axis*. Still, I chose to write to you because your story is representative of millions throughout the world.

In the summer of 1944, when the Nazis retreated, they killed four of your close relatives. As most men fled to the mountains during the massacre of Distomo, you had to bury your loved ones. It was the women who remained behind, tending the sick, healing the wounded, and burying those who died.

At that time Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and their allies Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia retreated into northern Italy, carrying out scorched-earth tactics that killed thousands of civilians. Their withdrawal was shielded by local police forces—often tied to 1936-1941 dictatorship of King George II of Greece and his puppet prime minister Ioannis Metaxas.

On 12 October 1944 the mainland was freed. You did not celebrate; instead, you and many other Greek women—who had already suffered under the dictatorship and the 1941–44 occupation—wore black to mourn the dead. Yet the killing did not stop. After the war, King George II launched the civil war of 1946–49 against the Greek National Liberation Front (EAM) and its army, ELAS. This conflict claimed another 158,000 lives, especially in rural areas like yours.

Your story reminds us that history is not only written in battles, but also in the quiet acts of care that sustained communities while women carried the unbearable burdens of war. Not only in the past—like during World War II—but also more recently, in Srebrenica, where NATO failed to prevent the massacre of 8,000 Muslim men by Bosnian-Serb troops between 13 and 16 July 1995. Many Sebrenica women have since lived for decades in poor conditions in refugee camps, still mourning missing family members and fighting for recognition. And today, echoes of your suffering resound in Gaza and Ukraine.

29 March 1894 - Hasselt, NL

Berendina Grolleman

18 February 1945 - Ravensbrück, DE

Dear Berendina,

It is sad that your name was long absent from the memorial cross in the Schadijkse bossen at Meterik, where your husband Derk was executed in 1943. Things changed when Yad Vashem awarded you the honorary title of Righteous Among the Nations on September 6, 1989. Soon after, politicians all over the Netherlands tumbled over eachother to unveil your name on memorials, stolpersteine, streets and monuments, including the one at the very place where Derk fell.

You both were born in Hasselt, Overijssel, and married there in 1918. Together you moved to Maastricht, where Derk served as bailiff for Direct Taxes and as elder at the church.You had no children, but from the beginning of the war you chose to care for others. You sheltered Jewish families and Allied pilots, worked with resistance groups, and spread the illegal newspaper Trouw.

On 24 July 1943, four Dutch SD detectives arrested you and the Jewish couple Arnold and Johanna Sandhaus-Hoffnung at your home. Derk endured weeks of interrogation in Maastricht, refusing to betray his comrades. After a failed rescue attempt, he was taken to the Schadijkse bossen and executed on 14 September 1943.

You, Berendina, were imprisoned in Maastricht, Haaren, and Herzogenbusch, before you and 650 other women were transported to Ravensbrück on 6 September 1944. There, on 18 February 1945, you died of exhaustion in inhuman conditions.

While your story ended in sacrifice, the story of the Dutch SD officer Jeff Janssen, who was responsible for the deaths of you, Derk, Arnold – and probably many others took a different path. When the only survivor Johanna confronted him after the war. The court let him go, after he claimed ‘he did not mean to do any harm’. It is incomprehensible that the so-called ‘good’ Janssen did not give you, Derk, nor Johanna and Arnold the chance to escape. He got away with it and remained, after the war, with the police until his retirement. Your friend Johanna emigrated to America and never came back to the Netherlands again.

5 April 1920 - Rotterdam, NL

Kitty van der Have

12 June 1945 - Rotterdam, NL

Dear Kitty,

You were born on the same day as my father—he in 1943, you in 1920. He lived to 80. You never had the chance to raise a family, sail the world, or live the life you deserved. You were brutally killed shortly after the war—by Dutch resistance members.

Liquidations had been forbidden by the Dutch Armed Forces on 28 April 1945. Still, vengeance outweighed justice. One month after liberation, they tortured you, shaved you, silenced you, and dumped your body in two sewn jute bags into the river. Stripped of dignity, you were found days later. Though buried with military honors, police investigators were ordered to close the case—and they did.

You survived the war. You endured the 14 May 1940 bombing of Rotterdam that killed nearly 900 people. You witnessed the Loods 24 atrocities that ended 6,000 Jewish lives. You celebrated Antwerp's liberation on Dolle Dinsdag. You saw the following mass executions, and the encirclement of Rotterdam by 8,000 retreating German soldiers who had just fled Zeeland, Belgium, and large parts of North Brabant to seize your brother, your father, and 52,000 other men in the November 1944 raids in Rotterdam. You outlasted the hunger winter with temperatures below -10°C, only to be murdered by your own people.

They murdered you not for what you did, but for what you knew. You knew of their armed robberies, black market dealings, and self-serving liquidations. That's why they urged you to risk your life recovering a list with their names and crimes from the Sicherheitsdienst. The plan failed. Blood was shed. Their crimes were hidden behind your name. You became a scapegoat—not of the occupier, but of those who claimed to fight for freedom.

Kitty, your story reminds us that resistance was never pure, that liberation did not end cruelty, and that women bore suspicion more harshly than men. You were only twenty-five when they ended your life. The least I can do to confront this injustice is to name them who took you life without jail sentence: Chris Scheffer, Jos de Groot, Hans Sijpesteijn, Tjerk Elsinga, and Peter Louis Henssen.

16 November 1908 - Antwerpen, BE

Maria van Hoeck

6 July 1946 - Antwerpen, BE

Dear Maria,

In October 2025 I read the story that historian Anne Bekers wrote about you and the little boy Daniel you hid. It touched me so deeply as it reminded me of the biblical Daniel in the lions' den. There, King Darius had Daniel thrown to the lions, but God sent His angel to shut the lions' mouths.To me, Maria, you were one of those rare angels God sent into the darkness of the Second World War.

I found records showing that the Nazis denied you additional ration cards after your first husband, Leonard, disappeared. They informed you he had escaped to France. In fact, he had been arrested, transported to Dachau, registered as prisoner 44.398, and one year after he died in Augsburg on February 12. That's all I could find for you at the Dachau Archive.

I also learned that you, a cleaning lady, sheltered five Allied parachutist, distributed clandestine newspapers, and cared for little Daniël after his parents, Mordko and Ester, were arrested and murdered for being Jewish. From July 1943 until August 30, 1944, you kept the two-year-old boy safe in your home—until the Gestapo came for you as well. You endured the camps in Germany. After the war, you managed to return home but the war had broken you. On 6 July 1946—just one year after Europe got liberated—you passed away, only 38 years old.

We knew almost nothing about the little boy Daniël. After weeks of searching, I discovered he was born on 28 October 1941 in Brussels and through the USHMM, I learned that—thanks to your courage—he survived the war. After the war, he emigrated with his adoption parents Isaak and Rywka to Israel. I hope he is still alive.

I will try to bring him and the allied parachutist you saved and/or their descendants, in your name, to Antwerp. The story continues.

You are a true hero

10 October 1911 - Knighton, UK

Clare Hollingworth

10 January 2017 - Hongkong, CN

Dear Clare,

On 28 August 1939, just days into your job at The Daily Telegraph, you drove from Poland to Germany and spotted a large hessian screen preventing anyone from seeing the amassed German forces in the valley near the Polish border. The next day your report appeared as the front-page headline in The Daily Telegraph: “1,000 tanks massed on Polish border”. Three days later Nazi Germany invaded Poland and you had sadly the ‘scoop of the century’.

But your courage began earlier. In the months before, you helped thousands of Czech refugees escape Nazi-occupied Sudetenland by arranging British visas. You were not yet a journalist, but already a witness and a lifeline.

You followed the war across continents—reporting from Poland, Romania, Egypt, Greece, Algiers, Palestine, Persia. You defied censorship, dodged arrest, and refused to be sidelined. You were not formally accredited, yet you stood at the front lines. You reported Romanian King Carol II’s abdication in 1940, covered Montgomery’s advance in North Africa, and Eisenhower’s successful Operation Overlord campaign.

After the war, you witnessed the King David Hotel bombing by the militant Zionist group Irgun, whose leader Menachem Begin became later Prime Minister of Israel. You were the first to interview the Shah of Iran, and while covering Vietnam extensively in the 1960s–70s you predicted the Vietnam War’s stalemate. After you became the first woman defence correspondent at The Guardian, and later the first Telegraph correspondent in Communist China.

You lived through nearly every major conflict of the 20th century and were an inspiration to all, especially inspiring the growing cadre of women correspondents. In your long, distinguished career you paved the way for women by proving that being female was no obstacle at all.

Your bravery and groundbreaking reports from the frontline warned many and saved thousands.

Moscow, 1 January 1914

Noor Inayat Khan

Dachau, 13 September 1944

Dear Noor,

You were born in Moscow, just months before the First World War began, raised in Paris, and trained in music and psychology. Your mother, an American poet, and your father, a descendant of Tipu Sultan, nurtured you with love and a deep respect for others. You wrote children's tales, you believed in peace. Yet when war returned, you chose resistance.

Neither your parents nor your three younger siblings could dissuade you from joining Britain's Special Operations Executive. On June 16, 1943—nearly a year before thousands of Allied men and women landed on the beaches of Normandy—you got parachuted into France. Under the codename Madeleine, you transmitted vital intelligence under constant threat, evading the Gestapo for months even after your network collapsed.

Before writing this letter, I decided to visit the house where you grow up in Paris and from there, I will take the train to Dachau. In Dachau you and your comrades Yolanda Beekman, Madeleine Damerment and Eliane Olewman were tortured, and finally executed on September 13, 1944. By then, France and much of Belgium had already been liberated—thanks in part to you.

In 1958, the Dutch prisoner Joop van de Velde testified that you were cruelly beaten by Wilhelm Ruppert and another SS officer before they killed you. Know this: Ruppert was convicted of war crimes, sentenced to death, and hanged at Landsberg Prison on May 28, 1946. Justice was served.

France awarded you the Croix de Guerre. Britain bestowed upon you the George Cross. Yet beyond medals, you left us a legacy of quiet defiance and luminous courage. I wish I could bring you back, so you might see how your voice still echoes—in books, in stamps, in statues, and in the hearts of many.

You are, and will remain, a true hero.

30 November 1916 - Schaarbeek, BE

Andrée De Jongh

13 October 2007 - Brussel, BE

Dear Andrée,

A year afer nurse Edith Cavell was executed for aiding British and French soldiers, and young Belgian men, to cross the Dutch border and eventually enter Britain, you were born as the daughter of a school headmaster exact three kilometers from her place of execution and like many girls, you grew up inspired by her courage and chose to become a nurse yourself.

I am sure Edith, had she lived, would have acted as you did after the war—saving countless children from leprosy in Congo, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Senegal, a feat as extraordinary as rescuing 800 Allied airmen with the Comet Line you founded with 2.000 helpers who guided stranded airmen across occupied territory and the Pyrenees into Spain.

Women in your group carried the most dangerous tasks: sheltering airmen, gathering supplies and intelligence, and escorting them. You believed a young man with a young woman drew less suspicion than two men together—and you were right.

Early 1942 the Belgium Gestapo raided your home. Your father escaped but they managed to arrest your sister Suzanne. The Line, vast and brave, was vulnerable to counterintelligence. In November 1942, the Gestapo even used two supposedly downed American pilots, leading to the arrest of about hundred agents.

On January 15, 1943, the Gestapo arrested you, Francia Usandizaga —widow and mother of three—and three RAF evaders, at Francia's farm near the Spanish border. Her house was the last stop before the crossing, and you were preparing your 25th journey over the Pyrenees. The airmen were sent to POW camps; you and Francia were deported as Nacht und Nebel prisoners to Ravensbrück. Francia died there, your father got arrested and executed at Mont Valérien, and you were deported to Mauthausen. Two years later you were released, among 7.500 women, in white buses from the International Red Cross.

No honours can compensate for what you lost.

21 April 1899 - Pont-Croix, FR

Louise Magadur

12 May 1992, Pont-Croix, FR

Dear Louise,

I cannot fathom what the French Police and the German Wehrmacht did to you. It is unbearable to think that you—a hairdresser who had just opened her own salon in Paris—were arrested simply because you joined the communist-led resistance to oppose Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime.

You could choose between Jewish, anti-capitalists, artists, women, and some teachers resistance groups. Others hardly existed! Like many in Europe you decided to fight capitalism, a system that places profit above people and planet. Today we see the consequences: ecosystems destroyed, lives diminished, futures stolen.

Together you fought Hitler's regime, sustained by terror and the financial backing of Germany's industrial giants like IG Farben and Krupp, who profited from rearmament, war production, forced labor, and genocide. Against this machinery of oppression, you stood firm, transforming your salon into a place of resistance, solidarity, and defiance.

In January 1942, French policemen began a special mission to seize men and women in the Resistance. 230 moslty communist women were captured, you on 9 March. After six months in solitary, you were sent to transit camp Fort de Romainville, then deported in the infamous Convoi des 31,000 to Auschwitz.

Most felt relief at leaving prison, expecting work in Germany, not in hell. On arrival you were shaved entirely: hair cropped short, pubis shaved, then covered with a petrol-based paste. Still naked, they stripped your name and tattooed 31673 on your arm. Simone before you became 31672, Henriette behind you 31674. The next day you had to sew a purple triangle with an *F* on your uniform and within 10 weeks, 150 of the 230 French women had died, despite being treated better than the camp's Jewish population. Some succumbed to typhus, starvation, and dysentery. Others perished during roll-calls, by gassing, gunshot, or in brutal "games" like "the race" of 10 February 1943.

In 1945, you and the last 48 of Convoy 31,000 got freed!

23 April 1907 - Poughkeepsie, US

Lee Miller

21 July 1977 - Chiddingly, UK

Dear Lee,

As a student of life drawing and painting at the Art Students League in New York, you were discovered by Condé Nast, publisher of Vogue. He launched your modeling career, and in March 1927 you appeared on the cover of Vogue. For two years you became one of the most sought-after models in New York. Yet you longed to move from subject to creator.

Two years after your debute as photo model you followed your dream and became Man Ray's assistant, collaborator, lover, and muse in Paris. Together you rediscovered solarisation, where light and shadow reversed themselves like a dream. You photographed Meret Oppenheim and Dorothy Hill, creating images that embodied surrealism's paradox—beauty entwined with strangeness. Your circle included Picasso, Éluard, Ernst, and Cocteau, who saw in you not only a model but an artist.

After leaving Paris and Man Ray in 1932 you returned to New York to open your own studio. That same year your work was included in the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition International Photographers with Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, Cecil Beaton, and Margaret Bourke-White.

Then came war. After your photographs of the London Blitz appeared in MoMA's *Britain at War* exhibition in 1941, you sought accreditation with the British Army. They refused, but you secured accreditation from the U.S. Army instead. As a war photographer, you covered the aftermath of D-Day, the liberation of Paris, and recorded the first time napalm bombs were used in combat. Soon after, you made photographes of survivors, corpses, and guards in cattle trains and concentration camps that remain among the most searing testimonies of the Holocaust.

After the war you returned to fashion and portraiture, but the images of atrocity never left you. Your son Antony Penrose later gathered them in *The Lives of Lee Miller*, ensuring that your legacy endures—not only as a model or surrealist, but as a witness. Your photographs remind us that art can confront horror, and that beauty, when turned toward truth, becomes resistance.

15 October 1888 - Copenhagen, DK

Ellen Nielsen

née Lundquist

26 November 1967 - Copenhagen, DK

Dear Ellen,

On 9 April 1940, after sixteen Danish soldiers had fallen, your King and government surrendered within six hours. They believed resistance was futile and hoped cooperation might spare the country further suffering. You watched Denmark accept the *samarbejdspolitikken*, an uneasy coexistence with a totalitarian occupier whose grip tightened after Germany's defeat at Stalingrad in 1943.

Soon after they dissolved your government, the Germans imposed direct military rule and ordered the deportation of all Jews. On October 1–2, during the Jewish New Year, 464 were captured. That terror sparked a mass flight: about 7,200 of the remaining 8,000 escaped across the narrow Sound to Sweden. Each paid an average of 1,000 kroner—a fortune equal to two months of wages—to fishermen willing to risk the 3.5–10 km crossing.

You, a widow and mother of six, worked long days selling fish on Copenhagen's docks and according to the Raoul Wallenberg Foundation you began aiding Jews after two brothers (flower sellers from a nearby market) asked if you could help them to find a fisherman willing to take them to Sweden. You hid them in your home while arranging their passage. Soon, over a hundred refugees passed through your house on their way across the Sound.

In December 1944, the Gestapo arrested you and deported you to Ravensbrück the women's concentration camp. The camp commandant mocked your courage by assigning you to carry Jewish infants to the gas chambers and crematorium. When you refused you were placed in line for death. Twice you bribed guards with scraps from Red Cross parcels. The third time you had nothing left. Naked, resigned, you waited—until guards told you you would be carried to Sweden in the white buses.

Your story is one of unbearable trial and unyielding courage: a mother who sheltered strangers as her own, a fishmonger who became a lifeline for the hunted, a prisoner who endured the darkest cruelty without surrendering her humanity.

7 January 1911 - Chernigov, UA

Dina Pronicheva

1977 - Kyiv, UA

Dear Dina,

Last week I wrote a letter to Marguerite Rouffanche, and while I was writing, my thoughts turned to Ukraine. I don't want to repeat the horrors, but anyone who reads this letter should know about the massacre at Babi Yar.

On 28 September 1941, all Jews in Kyiv and its suburbs received an order to assemble the next day at the corner of Melnikova and Dokterivska Streets (near the cemeteries), bringing with them documents, money, valuables, and some clothing. Those who failed to comply would be shot. Assuming they were going to be deported, they obeyed. However, at Babi Yar they were led in small groups to the edge of a ravine, where 33,771 Jewish men, women, and children were executed by gunshot within two days, murdered by members of the SS, the Wehrmacht, and the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police.

You, an actress at the Kiev Puppet Theatre and mother of two who could bring them in safety just on time, had to march together with your sister and parents to the ravine, undress, and face execution. You miraculously managed to survive by leaping into the ravine before the shot, falling among the dead, and lying still while Nazis fired into the wounded. After they covered the bodies with earth, you clawed your way out at night. You and 29 others not only survived the massacre but also the ongoing manhunt until Nazi Germany surrendered in 1945.

At the 1946 Kyiv Trials, your testimony became one of the most cited accounts of the massacre. Your voice gave witness to the silenced. With your bravery at the trials, you showed the world that memory can resist erasure. Only fifteen killers were convicted. Most escaped justice, and it took another 50 years—until the collapse of the Soviet Union—before the massacre was fully acknowledged.

But Dina, there is hope that justice will be served, as shown recently: AI has no mercy. It has proven that Jakobus Onnen—a French, English, and gym teacher from Tichelwarf —killed "The Last Jew in Vinnytsia," and hopefully we will soon learn who killed "The woman protecting her child in Ivanhorod" and "The women and her in Mariupol".

19 January 1890 - Drari, DZ

Élise Rivet

30 March 1945 - Ravensbruck

Dear Elise,

You were born in Algeria, then a French colony, to a mother of Alsatian origin and a father who served as a naval officer. After his death in 1910, you and your mother moved to Lyon and shortly after on May 13, 1913, you took your vows and became Mère Marie Élisabeth de l'Eucharistie.

Your responsibilities grew quickly. You led the Providence Section, became novice mistress, and later directed the Providence house. In 1933, the sisters elected you Superior General.

When France fell in 1940, you joined the resistance. You hid weapons and ammunition inside the convent and sheltered Jewish women and children, disguising them as nuns and turning the congregation's rooms into safe passage for fugitives.

On 24 March 1944, after a denunciation, the Gestapo searched the convent, found the weapons, and arrested you. You were held in Montluc, then Romainville, and finally deported in a cattle car to Ravensbrück, where you became prisoner 46921. After months of forced labour you were sent to Grüneberg, a so-called "rest camp". In reality it was a fictitious place that the SS used as an alias to camouflage the killing of prisoners in the gas chamber.

On Good Friday, 30 March 1945, you and 125 other women were sent into the hut - a provisional gas chamber - beside the crematorium.

In the weeks that followed, the International, Swedish and Danish Red Cross started to evacuate with white buses around 7,500 female prisoners to Sweden and Denmark. On 27 April, 20,000 prisoners were set on a brutal and forced evacuation on foot toward northern Mecklenberg and on 30 April the Red Army liberated the camp—too late for you, and too late for the 20 to 30,000 women and men who perished at Ravensbruck.

For your actions you were honoured as Righteous Among the Nations, and in 1961 France placed your portrait on a Heroes of the Resistance postage stamp.

1 January 1943 - Pittsburg, US

Rosie the Riveter

Dear Rosie,

The iconic “We Can Do It!” poster, created by Pittsburgh artist J. Howard Miller in 1943, showed you—a determined young woman flexing her arm to boost morale among factory workers. Though displayed only briefly in a few factories, it was rediscovered decades later and became the enduring symbol most people now associate with you. Your name came from the song Rosie the Riveter, written in 1942 by Chicago songwriters Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb, celebrating a tireless woman who kept the war industry running while the men were away.

Great Britain had already mobilized millions of women into vital defense roles long before America’s iconic image took hold. They did not create a single unifying figure as America did with you. Instead, they brought in Land Girls to work the farms and Munitionettes to labor in munitions factories.

With this letter to you, Rosie, I honor all women of all colors who stepped forward to work long, grueling days in factories, shipyards, hangars, fields, and hospitals. Some became firefighters, air-raid wardens, pilots who ferried aircraft across oceans, secret agents behind enemy lines, and logisticians who kept the Allied forces supplied across battlefronts and continents.

Without your steadfast heroism, the victories would not have come, and millions of people—citizens, prisoners, and those held in concentration camps—might never have been freed.

You also made the world a better place. You kept economies alive, raised children without their fathers, stood beside soldiers scarred by war, built social movements, fought for equality and civil rights as politicians and activists, and carried the hope that future generations might prevent war.

Your legacy lives not only in posters, movies, and songs, but in the lives you helped save, the children you raised, the wounded you protected, and the freedoms you fought for.

19 December 1897, Oradour-sur-Glane, FR

Marguerite Rouffanche

Maart 1988, Saint-Junien, FR

Dear Marquerite,

On 10 June 1944, your town was annihilated. In a single afternoon, 190 men, 247 women, and 205 children were murdered. Among them were six non-residents—cyclists who had simply passed through the village when the SS arrived.

The men were driven into six barns and sheds, where machine guns awaited. The SS fired low, shattering legs, then drenched the wounded in fuel and set the buildings ablaze. Only five men escaped that inferno.

Afterward, you, your two daughters, one granddaughter and other mothers and children were herded into the church and killed by grenades, flames, and smoke. In the following chaos, you and one other woman carrying her baby leapt from a window, though machine guns were waiting on you. You were struck five times, yet managed to crawl into the bushes and survived. The mother and child who leapt beside you did not make it.

Later, the young American airman Raymond J. Murphy who eyewitness the massacre's aftermath testified in his debriefing among other: "I saw one baby who had been crucified." The thought that this might have been the child who escaped the church sickens me.

In March 1945, General de Gaulle visited your village and decreed that its ruins should remain untouched. Eighty-one years later, in January 2026, I visited your town. I walked from the museum through the long underground passageway and emerged in the center of the village, where I saw with my own eyes the rusted cars, bullet-scarred walls, the outlines of homes. All of it echoes your survival. All of it reminds us of the cruelty endured by civilians in martyred villages like Oradour—and Distomo, in Greece, where 228 civilians were shot, bayoneted, and burned alive on that very same day.

Marguerite, your testimony at the 1953 military tribunal in Bordeaux and your public speaking reminds us that atrocity must never be forgotten—that memory itself is resistance.

11 June 1866, Roermond

Maria Mathilde Hubertina Scheen

10 May 1940, Lafelt

9 January 1852, Sint-Kwintens-Lennik

Rosalie Maria Vandroogenbroeck

10 May 1940, Lafelt

Dear Maria and Rosalie,

No one ever wrote about the four nuns who died aside the Dutch rector of the monastery Lafelt-Vlijtingen on 10 May 1940. The rector is named but the silence about you hurts. It is as if your lives don't mattter, if those four nuns are to small for history. Yet you were there, and you were lost, and that matters.

I don't know exactly what happened or the names of the other nuns, but I promise to find out and remember them too. The most likely reason is that the monastery was targeted, as it's clocktower could be used as a lookout post. Perhaps it was an accident as a German plane attacked by Belgian fighters or anti-aircraft fire, had to drop its bombs to lighten the load, and the monastery became collateral damage. That morning, two Junkers Ju-52 crashed near the monastry—one at Vroenhoven, two kilometers away, another at Kanne, five kilometers distant. Between 10 and 12 May the skies around the monastry were littered with in total 26 German, Belgium, French and Britisch wrecks drawn by the Albertkanaal and its Vroenhoven Bridge and Eben-Emael Fort, It became Belgiums biggest airbattle in history.

Or perhaps death didn't came from the metal birds above but from soldiers who stormed the convent, mistaking four nons and one priest for disguised troops leading to one of the earliest civilian casualties of the war.

On that same day In Rotterdam four brothers of the Brothers of Saint Louis convent met the same fate. They got shot by Dutch soldiers who believed the rumor that German troops were disguising themselves as nuns and priests so they could invade the Netherlands unhindered. This rumor proved fatal for the brothers. After their death surgeons in the Zuiderziekenhuis hospital discoverd that the bullets that struck the brothers were Dutch-made.

So there are a couple of possibilities I have to research but know Maria and Rosalie that I will not rest before I find the truth. In meantime I will make a plaque with your names to be installed in the hallway of the church like they did for the four priest in Rotterdam.

15 February 1910, Warschau, PL

Irena Sendlerowa

12 May 2008, Warschau, PL

Dear Irena,

In 2025, I organized a bicycle tour along the Warsaw Ghetto wall, and there I first discovered your heroism.

As one of the few social workers, you were allowed to enter the ghetto under epidemic control cover. There, you smuggled in food, medicine, and hope to more than 400,000 people confined to an area roughly the size of New York's Central Park. In those appalling conditions—where deadly typhus, tuberculosis, and starvation claimed 100,000 lives—you carried not only supplies but also dignity and compassion.

In 1942, under the code name "Jolanta," you joined Zegota—the underground Council to Aid Jews—and took charge of its children's section. With immense courage, you and your network saved about 2,500 Jewish children, smuggling them out through sewers and typhus-marked ambulances, hidden compartments and coffins, even potato sacks—before the mass deportations that followed the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of May 1943.

You gave the children new Christian identities, placed them with willing Polish families, in convents and orphanages, and carefully recorded their real names on cigarette papers, burying the lists in glass jars beneath an apple tree so that one day they might be reunited with surviving relatives.

In October 1943, the Gestapo arrested and tortured you—breaking your legs and feet—yet you revealed nothing. Sentenced to death, you were already on the execution list when Zegota bribed a guard to help you escape. Marked as "executed," you lived underground until the war's end, continuing your work in secret.

After the war, you searched tirelessly for the children you had saved, though many had lost their entire families to the Holocaust. In 1965, Yad Vashem named you Righteous Among the Nations. Yet in communist Poland, your heroism was largely silenced. In 1995, Poland finally acknowledged your courage, naming schools, streets, and parks across the country in your honor.

9 May 1921 - Forchtenberg, DE

Sophie Scholl

22 February 1943 - München, DE

Dear Sophie,

Like Marianne Baum, you were born in 1921—the same year Einstein received the Nobel Prize in Physics and Hitler was elected chair of the NSDAP. When you were eleven, your family moved to Ulm, where you and your siblings, like so many children, became members of the Hitler Youth.

Hans, your brother, soon grew disillusioned. When he decided to join the banned German Youth Movement, he and his friends—and even you and two of your siblings—were arrested. You were released the same day, but Werner and Inge remained imprisoned for a week, and Hans for three.

Only a year later, on 9 November 1938, you witnessed the Reichskristallnacht in Ulm. That night, fifty-nine Jews were arrested and the next day deported to Dachau. The violence and injustice you saw deepened your anti-Nazi convictions. To avoid compulsory service in the Reichsarbeitsdienst, you worked as a kindergarten teacher at the Fröbel Institute. Yet by spring 1941, you were forced into six months of auxiliary war service before finally entering the University of Munich to study biology and philosophy.

While your father served four months in prison for criticizing Hitler, Hans—then a medical student at the same University—introduced you to his circle of friends and one professor. Together, you founded the White Rose, a non-violent resistance group that chose words over weapons.

From June 1942, you and your companions spread leaflets across Munich, denouncing the Nazi regime. On 18 February 1943, while distributing the sixth leaflet at LMU Munich, you and Hans were seen by Jakob Schmid, a university maintenance man. He reported you to the rector. After hours of interrogation, you were handed over to the Gestapo. Four days later, you were sentenced to death and executed by guillotine—still only twenty-one years old.

Your courage revealed the failure of institutions that should have defended their students. Today, universities must learn from your example: they must protect, challenge, and nurture their students—not only then, but now and tomorrow.

28 November 1919, Lenin, PL/BY

Faye Schulman

nee Faigel Lazebnik

24 April 2021, Toronto, CA

Dear Faigel,

You first learned photography assisting your oldest brother, Moishe, who ran a studio in Lenin and nearby towns after the Soviets annexed the region in 1939 and required every inhabitant to carry a valid photo identification card.

In June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded Belarus and occupied Lenin. From then on, you were forced into domestic work in Nazi homes, and soon after compelled to take photographs for their administration. In May 1942, they sent all young men—including your brothers Moishe and Kopel—to a nearby labor camp, while women, children, and the elderly were confined to the newly created ghetto of Lenin.

Allowed out by day to work as a photographer, you survived the 14 August 1942 massacre that killed the remaning 1,850 Jews, including your parents, sisters, and younger brother. The Nazis spared only six “essential” workers. A shoemaker, a tailor, a carpenter, a blacksmith, a barber and you. They spared you for your photography skills, their vanity and their obsession with bureaucratic record-keeping. Once, they ordered you to develop their images of the mass graves into which they had machine-gunned Lenin’s last Jews!

During a partisan raid, you managed to escape, carrying copies of those photographs as evidence of atrocity. As a woman and a Jew without a weapon, you were welcomed into a band of Red Army stragglers, escaped prisoners of war, and Jewish and gentile fighters because they needed an assistant to their medic—a veterinarian. Amid the forests and swamps of Belarus, you nursed the wounded, helped liberate prisoners, fought the Germans, and began to photograph the Molotov Brigade itself.

After the Red Army liberated Belarus in July 1944, you were reunited with Moishe and Kopel, who had also joined partisan groups. With your testimony and your photographs, you shattered the false narrative that Jews went passively to their deaths.

3 October 1925, Thivars, FR

Simone Seqouin

21 February 2023, Courville-sur-Eure, FR

Dear Simone,

I love the striking photo of you at the age of seventeen, dressed in denim short, a patterned top, and a military hat, flanked by two young men in makeshift fatigues, you hold a Schmeisser - the German MP-40 submachine gun. The image of you became a symbol of women's active role in resistance. It captured not only youthful defiance but also the determination of a generation unwilling to surrender.

Your actions that summer soon captured the world's attention. On 26 August 1944, the French newspaper L'Indépendant was the first who wrote about you describing you as "one of the purest fighters of heroic French Resistance who prepared the way for the Liberation." A week later, Life Magazine published "The Girl Partisan of Chartres", bringing your courage to international attention.

In that article, the correspondent recalled first seeing you during the fall of Chartres on August 23, 1944. You were guarding twenty-five arrested German soldiers through the streets. The next morning you led a funeral ceremony at the Cathedral, and afterwards you spoke with him about your youth, your schooling, and the long hours of labor on your parents' farm from the age of fourteen until you joined the Resistance at seventeen.

You told the reporter about blowing up a railway bridge, of killing your first Boche - a French slang to describe German soldier - and of marching on to Paris to help liberate the capital. Other sources reveal how you received false identity papers to shield your family should you be captured. Under the name Nicole Minet from Dunkirk, you carried out missions with courage, knowing that the destruction of Dunkirk made such identities difficult for the Germans to verify.

After the war, you became a pediatric nurse in Chartres, where your wartime exploits made you beloved by the community. Yet beyond fame and photographs, your story reminds us that resistance was not only about weapons and sabotage, but about the moral choice of a young woman who refused silence. You showed that liberation was prepared by ordinary people who dared extraordinary acts.

17 April 1917 - Rotterdam, NL

Joukje Smits

17 May 1985 - Rotterdam, NL

Dear Joukje,

I was surprised to learn that you taught at a school around the corner— it's just 300 meters away. I went there and asked if I could donate a bench, a plaque, or a lecture in your name, but they refused. Their silence is a shame, yet through this letter I will tell everyone that you joined the resistance under the alias Clara, serving as one of the first female couriers transporting ration cards, weapons, and explosives.

It grieves me that you and 27 other resistance members were betrayed and arrested in Amsterdam on 13 June 1944, then imprisoned in Herzogenbusch, Ravensbrück, and Dachau. Only seven of you survived. I am deeply saddened.

Antwerp was liberated on 4 September, and I cannot help but imagine—if Operation Market Garden had begun two weeks earlier—you and the other 650 women might never have been transported from Herzogenbusch to Ravensbrück on 6 September 1944 and onward on 12 October with 240 women from across Europe to Dachau where you became 123235. There, in the Agfa-Commando at Munich, you were forced to work on V1 and V2 bombs—yet instead you and the others found ways to sabotage those deadly weapons, meant to kill innocent people in London, Antwerp, and other cities.

When the 'big black Amerikaanse soldier' liberated you on 29 April 1945 you were close to starvation, weighing only 35 kilograms. I can hardly imagine the strength it took to return to Rotterdam after such suffering. And I really hope you were spared the indignity that Jo Schilpzand endured—receiving a writ of execution from the city, demanding "in the name of the Queen" payment of taxes she could not possibly have met while imprisoned.

Erik

ps I also found the sonnet you wrote for Nel Niemantsverdriet's 36th birthday. Your opening line, "Verlang jij ook zoo naar het land waarin wij woonden," breaks my heart.

23 December 1934 - Buchten, NL

Settela Steinbach

31 July 1944 - Auschwitz, PL

Dear Settela,

The world knew your face long before it learned your name. For half a century you were remembered as *the girl with the headscarf* — a fleeting image of a terrified child in the doorway of a cattle wagon, filmed as the train pulled away from Westerbork to Auschwitz.

After the war, that seven-second fragment appeared in many documentaries. The anonymous girl staring out in fear became an icon of the Holocaust. People assumed you were Jewish, until the Dutch journalist Aad Wagenaar found your identity. By tracing the wagon number, its description, and a suitcase in the shot, he discovered that the specific wagon carried only Dutch Roma and Sinti. Two years later, on 7 February 1994 at a trailer park near Rotterdam, he learned from the Sinti woman Crasa Wagner your real name: Settela Steinbach.

Crasa was deported in the same wagon. She survived the Porajmos of at least 220,000 Romani. You, your mother, two brothers, two sisters, your aunt, two nephews, and a niece were murdered in Auschwitz. Your other four siblings perished in other camps. From your family, only your father survived, as he got forced to work at the heavily bombed Philips weapon factory in Eindhoven. He died heartbroken in 1946.

Today I want to address you as you should have been from the beginning — Anna Maria Settela Steinbach, born Sinti in Buchten near Sittard in a large family that travelled, played music, worked, and lived together until the Dutch police arrested you after they received orders to move all “Gypsy families” to Westerbork on 14 May 1944.

The zeal of the Dutch police became painfully clear after the camp authorities had to release 329 from the 574 arrested “gypsies” as they turned out to be either not Roma or Sinti even though they lived in waggons, or they had foreign passports. You and the remaining 245 Sinti and Roma were deported to Auschwitz.

Now your nine-year-old face stands as eternal witness to the Romani genocide.

13 March 1919, ..., UK

Gillian Tanner

24 January 2016 - Aberaeron, UK

Dear Gillian,

Gavin Mortimer called you “London’s most celebrated firewoman” in his book The Longest Night. I believe he understated it. For me, you kept London safe with your boundless courage and steady hand, and that makes you one of London’s Guardian Angels.

Let’s begin at the start. Your grandfather, a colonel in the Blues and Royals, was a close friend of King George V, and your father was a true adventurer, prospecting for gold was his passion. Because of his absence, your mother raised you alone. At twelve you studied in France; at seventeen you attended the Berlin Olympics of 1936, and at eighteen you had your own car—driving became your passion.

Shortly after, on 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. England and France immediately declared war. The Netherlands and Belgium didn’t want to get involved and tried to remain neutral. You, however, leapt into your car, drove 95 miles to London, and joined the Auxiliary Fire Service. Soon after, Dockhead — just west of Tower Bridge—became your station. The docks were Germany’s prime target, and from the very first night of the Blitz you stood in the eye of the storm.

While men fought overseas, your duty was to deliver fuel to fire engines and water pumps with your petrol wagon. It meant steering through craters in the dark, without headlights or power steering, while bombs fell around you. For this courage you were awarded the George Medal, placed in your hands by King George VI himself at Buckingham Palace in February 1941.

All of this makes you, in my eyes—again and again—one of London’s Guardian Angels.

Erik

1 November 1898 - Saint-Étienne-de-Saint-Geoirs, FR

Rose Valland

18 September 1980 - Saint-Étienne-de-Saint-Geoirs, FR

Dear Rose,

You were o-ne of the most decorated women in French history, portrayed by Cate Blanchett in The Monuments Men. Yet only few know the story of the blacksmith's daughter who became a guardian of art.

At 20 you graduated as a teacher, then studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Lyon and Paris, followed by art history at the École du Louvre and the University of Paris—making you one of the world's best-qualified art historians.

While studying in Paris, you began working at the Jeu de Paume and after nine years you became its overseer. Following the occupation of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands they turned your museum into their central depot for looted art.

Herman Göring commanded that the looted art would first be divided between Adolf Hitler and himself. For this reason he traveled twenty times to Paris from the end of 1940 to the end of 1942. The so called degenerate art was legally banned from entering Germany. Those artworks were sold via Switzerland to fund Führermuseum in Linz. Unsold works were burned in a bonfire on 27 July 1942 like Nazi Germany did in 1939 when they burned nearly 4,000 works of German "degenerate" art in Berlin.

It was you, who kept all those years secretly a list of all the stolen artworks. You listened to conversations in German, a language you learned from your partner Joyce, and recorded names, dates, dimensions, destinations—so precisely it became a map for restitution.

To help recover nearly 60,000 stolen artworks, you received a commission as lieutenant and later captain in the French First Army after the war. With those credentials, you entered places in postwar Europe—West and East—closed to most. Yet your work proved unfinished, as shown when the Goldstikker family won their case against the Dutch government, leading to the restitution of 200 artworks from Dutch museums.

13 July 1927, Nice, FR

Simone Veil

née Simone Jacob

30 June 2017, Paris, FR

Dear Simone,

You were born in Nice as the youngest of four in a secular Jewish family. Your father's side came from Lorraine, your mother's from the Rhineland and Belgium. The family had moved from Paris to Nice in 1924, hoping to benefit from construction projects on the Côte d'Azur. There, the Jewish community remained relatively safe, even after Italy occupied Nice in November 1942 as Italy's fascist regime had enacted racial laws but did not deport Jews.

Everything changed when Hitler occupied the Côte d'Azur and northern Italy after Italy lost Rome and the south to advancing American armies between July and September 1943. To avoid further territorial losses, Hitler deported millions from across Europe for forced labor in defense works and the weapons industry

In March 1944, the Gestapo arrested you and your family. Shortly after, you, your mother Yvonne, and sister Madeleine were deported to Auschwitz. Your father André and brother Jean were sent to the Baltics; your sister Denise, then in Lyon, to Ravensbrück.

Upon arrival, you claimed to be eighteen to avoid the gas chambers. After months of hard labor, as the Red Army advanced, you, your mother, and sister were evacuated on a death march, then transferred to Bergen-Belsen, where your mother died of illness shortly before British liberation in April 1945. Only you, Madeleine, and Denise survived. In 2005, I made an 11-hour video about the Auschwitz death march—in which so many perished—to bear witness to that history.

Back in France, you studied law at the Sciences Po where you met and married Antoine Veil. As magistrate and Health Minister, you championed women's rights, securing the 1975 Veil Law legalizing abortion; in 1979, you became the first woman President of the European Parliament—a moment of pride for France and Europe, and inspiration to girls worldwide who saw in you proof that resilience and justice can shape history. Yet you could never share your extraordinary legacy with your parents or brother Jean, lost in the Holocaust.

1 july 1914, Bourell, FR

Orli Wald

née Aurelia Torgau

1 January 1962, Hannover, DE

Dear Orli,

On your gravestone I found only “Orli 1914–1962”, yet behind those few words lies a life of courage and quiet defiance—a life that made others remember you as the “Angel of Auschwitz.”

You were born as Aurelia Torgau near the Belgian border in 1914, the sixth child of a German family caught in the turmoil of war. When the First World War began, your family was interned, your father held until 1919, your mother and siblings forced from France to Luxembourg and finally to Trier in Germany where you all settled.

In Trier, Germany’s oldest city and birthplace of Karl Marx, you joined the Communist Youth League. In 1934, a year after Hitler’s seizure of power, you were arrested for smuggling pamphlets and organising resistance. They released you for lack of evidence.

In 1936, at twenty-two, you and your group were arrested again, this time for high treason. Your ex Fritz Reichert, had likely denounced you. This time you were sentenced to four and a half years of forced labour and sent to the women’s prison in Ziegenhain. When your sentence ended, you were taken into “protective custody,” and sent to Ravensbrück. In 1942 you got deported on one of the first women’s transports to Auschwitz, where you became prisoner 502!

From late 1942 until the end of the war you worked in the prisoners’ hospital. After Josef Mengele arrived in 1943, you witnessed in the Roma and Sinti Family Camp horrors no one should ever see, yet you still found ways to save lives—sharing food, protecting the sick, and giving women a few precious days of rest. That’s why fellow prisoners began to call you the “Angel of Auschwitz.”

On 18 January 1945 you were forced on an evacuation march, eventually toward Ravensbrück and its subcamp Malchow. In 2005. In April 1945, you managed to escape with a group of women, only to be assaulted by Soviet soldiers. The weight of what you had endured brought you into long psychiatric care in Ilten, Hannover, where you died on 1 January 1962, only forty-seven years old.

13 March 1913, Yixing, CN

Siou-Ling Tsien de Perlinghi

née Qian Xiuling

2008, ...

Dear Qian,

Your story is fascinating. You were born in Yixing, near Shanghai, into a family of scholars and generals, and at seventeen crossed continents to study chemistry in Leuven, earning a doctorat around 1935. In Belgium you built a new life, marrying Grégoire de Perlinghi, a Belgian doctor, and settling in Herbeumont. Yet when war came, your life became a bridge between worlds.

In June 1940, when a young Belgian sabotaged a German train in Herbeumont and faced execution, you remembered meeting General Alexander von Falkenhausen, the military governor of Belgium, once adviser to Chiang Kai-shek and colleague of your cousin, General Qian Zhuolun. You appealed to him, and he spared the boy. Four years later, when 97 Belgians were condemned in reprisal for three Gestapo deaths in Écaussinnes, you again pleaded for mercy. Both times he listened, defying orders and saving together nearly one hundred lives.

Von Falkenhausen himself lived a conflicted life. In 1934 he left for China, unsettled by the Nazi regime, soon after his brother was killed during the Night of the Long Knives. In 1938 Hitler forced him back by threatening his family. Recalled to duty, he served on the Western Front until appointed governor of Belgium in May 1940, the same post his uncle had held in the First World War. After the July 20 plot against Hitler, he was arrested as one of the suspect, spent the last year of the war in camps, and later stood trial in Belgium for war crimes.

You stood in his defense, alongside Léon Blum and Belgian Jews who recalled his interventions. Yet on 9 July 1951 he was convicted and sentenced to twelve years. Following his release, he married Belgian resistance fighter and ghost train survivor Cécile Vent, whom he had first met in Verviers prison, where she worked after the war.

After your death, your granddaughter created the documentary Ma grand-mère, une héroïne?, and the renowned Chinese writer Zhang Yawen published Chinese Woman at Gestapo Gunpoint. Thanks to these works, you are now remembered as the “Chinese Oscar Schindler.”

Settela Steinbach

In this book you will find forty personal letters to women in war, carefully written by Erik van Loon, founder of the annual international poetry gathering "*Four Days In May*."

The women and their stories are curated to illuminate the many aspects of World War II through their eyes—its horrors, resilience, and human cost—while honoring the lives they lived and the courage they carried.

HOUSE OF CRAZINESS