

THE BRIEFCASE

BY EDITH RECHTER LEVY

More than 50 years have passed, yet I can still sense the fear. I can still see it all before my eyes as if it were yesterday. I remember leaning my head against the cool brick wall, closing my eyes and allowing myself, for a brief instant, to listen to the pounding of my heart. I had safely turned the corner and was now out of vision of the Gestapo. But, was I out of danger? Still too close, I told myself, and standing there, I felt terribly vulnerable. A few steps ahead I caught a glimpse of some stairs leading to a recessed doorway. I took refuge, seating myself high on the steps, out of sight, the briefcase beside me.

Once, I had been a sheltered child, but that seemed a very long time ago. Living beneath the shadow of the death camps, aware of what awaited me if caught, with hunger and fear my steady companions, I had learned to draw on unknown resources and had developed street smarts and cunning far beyond my age. On my ability to keep a cool head depended the fates of my mother and brothers and, at this moment, possibly the lives of others whom I did not even know.

We were in Brussels, having fled Vienna with nothing but the clothes on our backs. My father had already been deported; he died in Auschwitz. When he was taken, my mother was left with three children, one only three months old. My older brother was still with us before being hidden by the Belgian Resistance

Movement, but he was over 15, and needed identity papers to leave the house. I, a child of 12, did not.

To support us, my mother decided we should knit sweaters. Both she and I were proficient knitters. But wool yarn was nearly unavailable in stores, and the black market variety was out of our budget. My mother hit upon the idea of buying used sweaters at the open-air flea market held daily on a square in the old section of the city. The square, surrounded by narrow winding streets and alleys, was frequented by members of the underground, the small passageways providing quick cover and easy getaways.

I would have the best chances in the outside world. Small for my age, with my dark blond hair in long braids, blue eyes and a high forehead, all considered typical "Aryan" features, I did not look at all Jewish. Moreover, I could distinguish between handknit sweaters, which could be unravelled and the wool reused, and machine-made sweaters, which could not. Machine-made sweaters were wasted money. As an extra measure of protection, I ventured out only during the hours when children would be walking to and from school. This is how

I became the lifeline of my family.

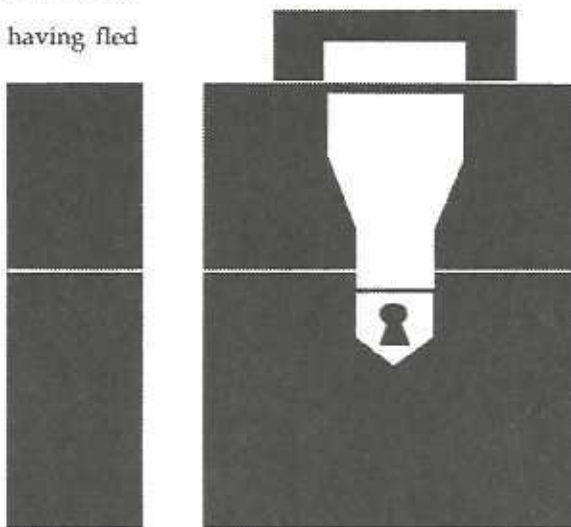
From my point of view, it actually was not so bad. The freedom to move about in the fresh air was a welcome change from our hiding place. And, in spite of frequent Gestapo raids, it was easy to get away. The flea market was a hub of resistance support; most vendors were covert sympathizers of the *brigade blanche*. At the approach of German uniforms, a whispered alarm was passed, allowing partisans a hasty retreat into the multitude of alleys. I quickly would look for other children, pretend to be one of them, and walk off in the direction they were going.

On this particular day, however, the choice of merchandise was exceptionally poor and the Germans quicker than ever. Hardly anything I found would yield a decent amount of wool, and the prices were high. Desperately trying to make the best deal possible, I continued to haggle even though the murmur was spreading. With this added pressure, I thought I could make a better deal. When I realized that the flea market was surrounded, it was too late. Soldiers had sealed off all exits.

There was nothing to do but fall in line with the others waiting to be checked by the Gestapo. As I stood there, amid much taller adults herded closely together, I felt a hand reach for mine. Then my fingers were curved firmly and urgently around some sort of handle. For a split second I froze, then my heart leaped. I dared not look or call out. The queue in which I found myself was flanked by sol-

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diers. Being questioned could mean disaster. What to do?

Thoughts raced through my mind. First, I had to know what I was holding. Pretending to stretch and shift my weight from leg to leg, I looked down and saw that I was holding a briefcase, not unlike the type in which children carried their school-books. Was this what the Nazis were after? Was there an informer on the square who would recognize the briefcase? What did it contain? Obviously incriminating material of some sort. Could it possibly contain a list of names, of contacts? How many lives were in jeopardy should this material fall into the wrong hands? And why, of all people, was I given this briefcase? As a Jew, was I not vulnerable enough? Fear and anger were mixing in my brain, a dangerous combination. I forced myself to think rationally.

If the briefcase were entrusted to me, there had to be a reason. Most likely the owner felt that a child had the best chance of passing the checkpoint undetected. Knowing how the underground worked, I felt sure no one would have endangered my life for his or her own safety. The contents of the briefcase *had* to be of prime importance, and it was up to me to keep it safe. Despite the danger, I decided to bluff my way through. Luckily for me, the swiftness of the raid had caught a good many people and the line was long. I had time to compose myself. I convinced myself that I had been near Gestapo raids before (although never in one) and that I could get out of this one, as well. All I had to do was remain calm and look like any other child on the way home from school. Since I looked too young to require identification, I would just walk by without saying anything.

As I neared the end of the line, and saw the Gestapo officer in his infamous boots checking I.D.'s, my heart leaped. I smiled at a soldier next to me, and gave him a friendly *bonjour*. The soldier returned my smile and waved me on, admonishing me in German to "go straight home in the future and not dilly-dally in places like these." I pretended not to understand, keeping a bland look and frozen smile on my face. Was this man human? Did he have children of

his own? Relieved, I walked past, and even looked back and waved. The Gestapo officers ahead, however, had no patience for such niceties. One grabbed me and pushed me forward. Quickly and silently, I walked the rest of the gauntlet, now with the Gestapo, not mere soldiers, on either side.

My legs trembled when I finally stepped off the curb and into the street where there was no more Gestapo. It took a nearly superhuman effort not to run. My feet weighed like lead and I had difficulty lifting them onto the sidewalk once I crossed the street. I forced myself to walk. Any moment I expected a tap on the shoulder and a voice asking, "Wait up! What's in this briefcase?" The block, an ordinary city block, seemed miles long. Finally, I reached the corner and turned. Finally, I was out of sight.

As I was sitting in the recessed doorway, the incriminating briefcase past the enemy, I reviewed my options. I wanted no part of the briefcase. And, suddenly, I wanted no part of the rest of that day, of the freedom of the outdoors. Leaning back, I pushed the briefcase with my body as far away as possible.

Then, I looked around. In front of me there was a narrow street, and at the end of that street I saw Boulevard Poincaré with its streetcars. I never rode the streetcars. They were a luxury we could ill afford, and more over, even the streetcars were raided by the Germans. This day, however, instinct took over. I literally flew down the street onto the Boulevard, and onto the tram stop. A streetcar was just leaving; people would think I was racing to catch it. The desire to leave the area overshadowed any fear of danger from the ride. I had to get away.

What would happen to the briefcase? What was in it? How many lives had been in danger? I would never know.

By the time I reached home, I had calmed down. To my mother's question as to what I had bought, I replied: "Nothing."

"Why?" my mother asked.

"There was a Gestapo raid," I replied as a matter of fact. Mother asked no further questions.

Never once did I mention the briefcase, nor that I had been caught in the raid. I knew I would have to return to the flea market, and there was no need to alarm my mother unnecessarily. □