

# Smuggling

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*By Flora Singer*

By 1941, Jewish people in Belgium no longer received food ration stamps. The only way to obtain food was to buy it on the black market. Mama started to smuggle food across the border from northern France, where food was still more easily obtained and less expensive. Part of the food Mama bought was sold and some of it kept for the four of us—Mama, my two younger sisters, and me. Also, with the proceeds, we were able to buy perishables like milk and eggs, as well as some vegetables and fruit. During Mama's trips, I stayed home to care for my two younger sisters, Charlotte and Betty, which was quite a responsibility for one not quite 11 years old.

Occasionally, when one of our neighbors, Magda, a single woman, was able to watch my two sisters, I would miss school and accompany Mama to France and help with the smuggling. According to Mama, children were not as easily suspected, or as carefully scrutinized, as were adults. Also, having me along enabled her to bring back more merchandise than when she went alone. When there was no school, I accompanied Mama more often while Magda, who looked forward to receiving her payment in food from Mama, would watch my younger sisters.

We usually took the train to the last stop before the Belgian-French border where we had to cross into France. We left the train on the Belgian side and stayed there until night fell. As soon as it was dark, we crossed the border into France; we usually chose a part of the border that was not heavily guarded on the Belgian side. Once on the French side, we rested behind some bushes and waited for daylight. After the sun

made its appearance, we walked nonchalantly to the nearest bus stop and boarded the bus to the center of the city of Lille.

As soon as we arrived in Lille, we made our way to a small café where we were acquainted with the owner, Josef. Here we were able to meet some local people who sold food supplies. Also, Josef had a few rooms available where travelers could spend the night for a modest fee. On this particular trip, we bought five kilos of sugar, planning to sell four and a half and keep the remaining half for our personal use. I had also taken along an empty box which had held the new doll Mama had bought me just prior to the German invasion of Belgium. We filled this box with the sugar. Mama also bought a few meters of wool fabric, which she wrapped around her body under her clothes. We were ready for our return trip home.

Most of the time we were able to obtain the help of a kind German soldier—after Mama explained that her husband, a Belgian soldier, was a prisoner of war and she was the sole caretaker of her three children—to take our groceries across the border (soldiers' luggage was not checked). However, this time we were unable to find anyone to help us, so we had to risk crossing the border and pass customs ourselves.

As we were attempting to go through the open gate of the border, a customs agent approached us. I was the one carrying the box of sugar. Mama was carrying a bag filled with several breads, which were promptly confiscated. But the breads were a ploy. After they took them away from Mama, they did not search her any further. The customs agent turned to me and his hands reached for the doll's box. I started to scream: "Mama, Mama, the man wants to take away my box! He wants to take my doll!" I held the box close to my chest, trying to turn away from the customs agent just as he was reaching for the box. "Mama, don't let him take my doll, he'll break it, he'll break my new doll!" He tried again, being surprisingly gentle. "I only want to look at her, little one," he said. "I won't hurt her, I promise." I did not cease screaming until he finally said, in a voice that sounded more tired than annoyed, "Okay, okay. Don't be afraid. Keep your doll, I won't touch it." And with that, he waved us on.

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