Ninette's War

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A Jewish Story of Survival in 1940s France

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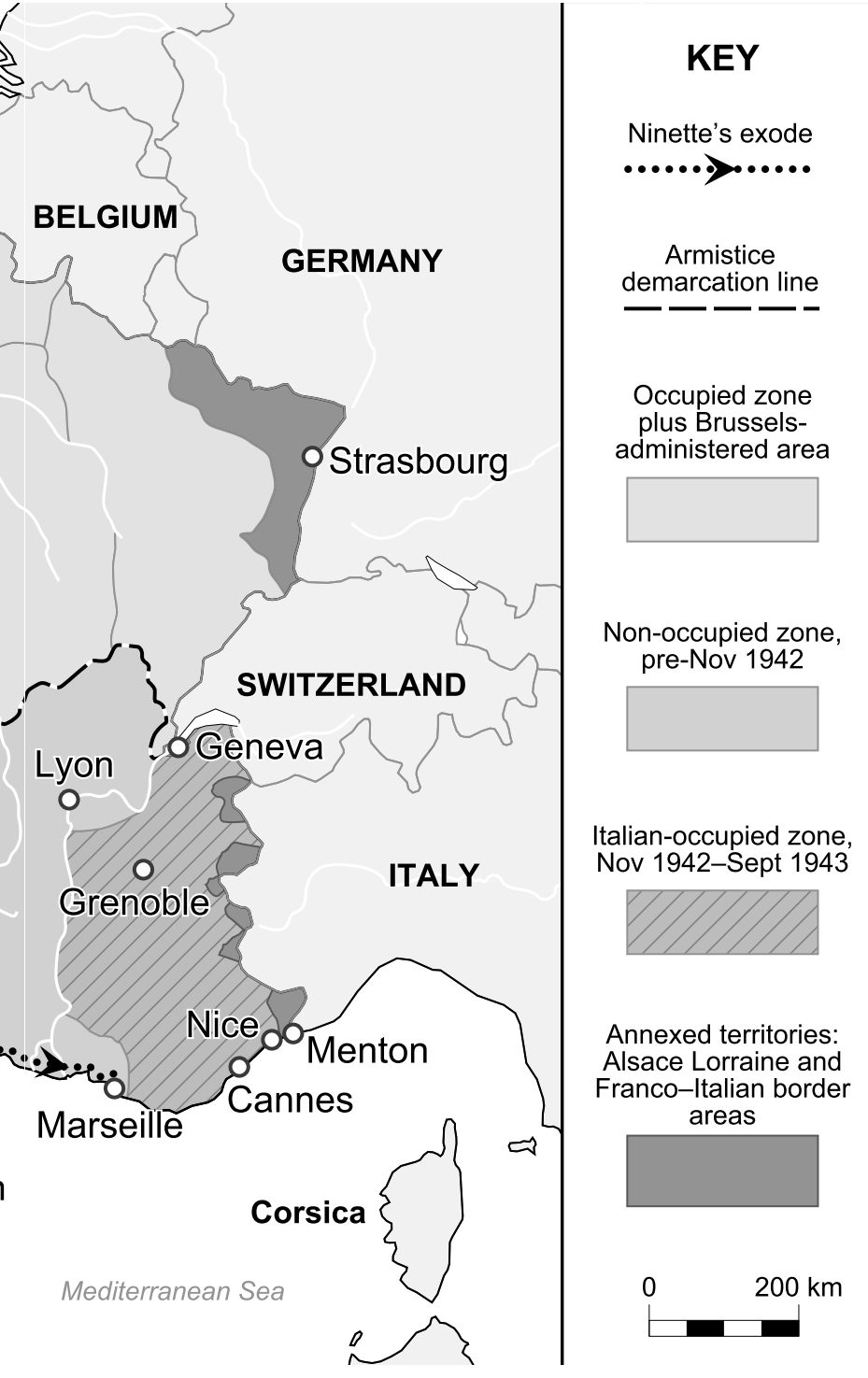
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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first met Ninette at a charity luncheon. Though north of eighty, she was *une grande dame* from central casting, chic personified, standing tall and straight in her cream trouser suit, her hair and make-up immaculate. Her place card said her name was Lady Swaythling, widow of the fourth Lord Swaythling, but, in an accent betraying her Parisian origins, she said, 'Call me Ninette.' I said I was writing a book about my father's wartime experiences as a British Jewish 'involuntary guest' of Hitler's Third Reich and she recounted her own story of survival and loss as a teenager in wartime France, how her family had gone into hiding to avoid deportation to Auschwitz and fled over the Pyrénées to Spain.

The contrast between the sixteen-year-old Ninette Dreyfus, dirty, dishevelled, hair in tangles, soaking and in bare feet, and the dowager beside me was extreme. I pressed for more information and learned of her *haute juiverie* – Jewish upper crust – upbringing in Paris's 16th arrondissement as the younger daughter of a banker and his heiress wife. I learned of their grand townhouse, previously Claude Debussy's, off avenue Foch, nicknamed avenue Boche during the Occupation after the Germans requisitioned its residences. I learned of the private schooling, piano, ballet and riding lessons and chauffeur-driven car journeys into France *profonde* as her

parents introduced her to cathedrals, châteaux and haute cuisine. This was the world of Marcel Proust and Colette, Henri Bergson and Léon Blum, the world of the *Annuaire des châteaux*, listing the addresses of 'tout Paris'. It was 'the world of yesterday', the title of the posthumously published memoir of Stefan Zweig, whose books the Nazis burned. Then came Hitler's invasion, followed by exile on the Riviera, punctuated by the step-by-step advance of the Holocaust in France. Finally, there was Ninette's six months as a fugitive, pursued by the SS and the Vichy Milice. Hers was a story of survival, loss and fighting back. As Ninette declared that day, 'I am a survivor.'

Yet decades later, she was struggling to reconcile the France of her childhood with wartime France, where French politicians drove Jews from public life and pauperised them, where gentiles denounced their neighbours for German cash, where French policemen herded children into cattle trucks and dispatched them to death camps. In adult life, Ninette worked to gain recognition for French gentiles who had saved Jews during the war, helping them to be named in Israel as 'Righteous Among the Nations'. Yet her disdain for her countrymen was even greater than her abhorrence of German Nazis. The Germans were foreigners; the French were her people yet they had turned their backs on her and worse during the years in which she came of age.

And she was not alone in such feelings. French Jews, in particular the old, settled families for whom France had been home for generations, felt betrayed. They believed they would be safe in the first European country to emancipate its Jews, where a Jew could aim for the summits of public life, whether in politics, commerce, the arts, academia, the law or medicine, insulated from persecution. They had done their bit in the Great War, when Frenchmen united to defeat German militarism. Yet a generation later, the gentile elite

who had fought alongside Jewish soldiers turned on them, facilitating genocide.

Facing Fearful Odds – My Father's Story of Captivity, Escape & Resistance 1940–1945 was published on the ninety-fifth anniversary of my father's birth. Ninette and I then resumed our conversations about the war. We both recognised the frailty of memory, a frailty often exacerbated by viewing the past through the prism of subsequent events. This is a particular problem in reconstructing the Holocaust in France, a gradual, uneven process beginning with the exclusion of Jews from public life, with most measures both in the German-occupied zone and the so-called Free Zone aimed at immigrants. Only later did it become an extermination programme and even then most early deportees to Auschwitz were foreign-born. Some French-born Jews were arrested in early round-ups, including one of Ninette's cousins, yet many old French families continued to live semi-normal lives. Only in 1943 was the full weight of the Nazi death machine turned on them; only then, when it was too late, did many recognise that the warning signs were there from the start.

When I discussed our conversations with Ninette's daughter, Nicole, she directed me towards *The Table*, a play by the Polish-Israeli writer, Ida Fink. The eponymous table sits in a town square, where Gestapo officers selecting Jews to kill gather round. In Fink's play, a lawyer interviews witnesses as he prepares to prosecute these men for war crimes. He needs testimony that will stand up in court about events that took place years before. Was the table oblong or square? Which officers were sitting or standing? The witnesses cannot agree on details although their combined testimony makes it indisputable that many Jews were killed on the orders of the accused men on a specific day. Yet the frustrated lawyer realises the evidence is insufficient for a conviction.

Fink's message is that cold, hard corroboration is critical

in the pursuit of justice and in countering Holocaust denial. I have, therefore, attempted to support Ninette's reminiscences with all the corroboration I could muster. Her family papers were a good starting point for our journey. The most precious were her journals from 1939 to 1951. In autumn 1939, Edgar and Yvonne Dreyfus gave their eleven-year-old daughter a diary bound in red leather with the initials 'ND' embossed on the cover. On the first page, in red ink, she wrote 'Ninette Dreyfus' and 'Journal' and drew an eight-pointed star. The first entry was for Sunday, 3 September. Containing contemporaneous evidence about what the teenage Ninette did and felt, with the most sensitive items – about Nazi and Vichy persecution – written obliquely or in code, they trace the story of Ninette's wartime life. The other documents included family papers deposited in London's Wiener Holocaust Library, photograph albums, newspaper cuttings, government notices, testimony from relatives and correspondence from friends. The most chilling item was a family tree showing relatives whose lives had ended between 1943 and 1945 in Auschwitz and Belsen. Then there were the secondary sources, histories of wartime France and Jewish persecution. I have included a note on sources at the end of the book.

I am indebted to Ninette, her family and friends for the hours they devoted to my quest. I also acknowledge the archivists of the Archives Nationales and Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, the Cannes municipal archive and the Alpes-Maritimes departmental archive. In London, I am indebted to the National Archives in Kew and the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College. At Profile Books, I thank Andrew Franklin for showing sufficient confidence in me to sanction publication. One reason for that was the sterling work of Emma Bowers and Shan Vahidy in reducing my original text to a manageable length. I also thank my editor at

Profile, Zara Sehr Ashraf, and my copy editor, Rhian McKay, for their care and attention in reviewing and improving the text. I thank John Duffield, my senior partner at Brompton Asset Management, whose patience must have been tested during my discourses on Jewish persecution in Vichy France. Lastly, and most importantly, I acknowledge the support shown by my wife, Judi, who helped me with the challenges posed by the book, joined me on research journeys through France and Spain and counselled me on content and structure. Writing this book has resembled restoring a mosaic. Stone by stone, I have tried to reconstruct Ninette's war. Some pieces may be in the wrong places or missing, but if there are mistakes, they are mine entirely.

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THE PHONEY WAR AND BLITZKRIEG

It was a sunny day, at odds with the unfolding crisis. 'At eleven o'clock, the newscaster announced war between England and Germany,' Ninette wrote. 'At five o'clock, France was at war, which gave me a strange feeling, it was very stirring.' As Europe's diplomatic crisis deepened, Yvonne had brought her girls – fair-haired Ninette and her older, darker-haired sister, Viviane – to the château of her brother-in-law, Jacques Lovenbach, at Grèges outside Dieppe. Joined by 'Juju' Philippson, fiancée of Jacques' eldest son, Jan, on Sunday, 3 September 1939, they made the journey as part of a mini-exode as 500,000 Parisians fled the capital. In a foretaste of events to come, the war had had an immediate impact on family life. That day, Ninette received a letter from her nanny. Nounou – French for nanny – had been stopped at the border on returning from holiday as spy hysteria gripped France, although she hoped to return in time for Viviane's fourteenth birthday on 29 September.

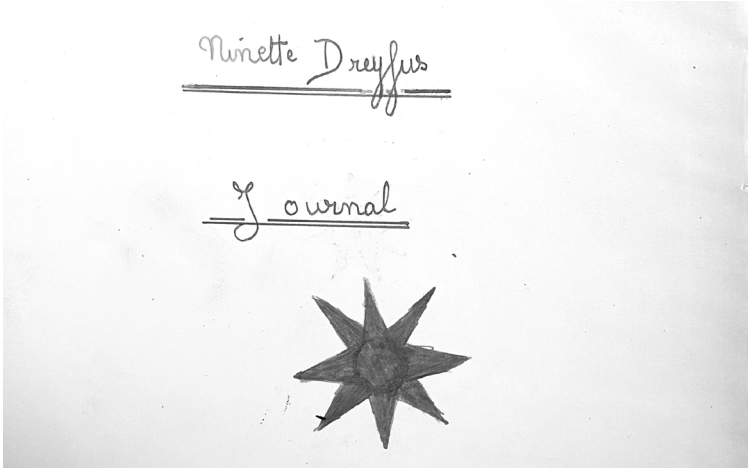
Two days previously, following Germany's invasion of Poland, Jan and his cousin, Françis Raoul-Lévy, had been called up. Juju was distraught. She tried to discover where Jan was through 'official' channels, but military security dictated that all she could learn was her air force sergeant fiancé was 'somewhere in France'. So, the girls joined Yvonne and Juju in writing letters and assembling parcels for Jan and Françis, sending them via military intermediaries to '*quelque part en*

France'. Known within the family as *la brune et la blonde* as much for their personalities as their hair, Viviane, an introvert, would curl up in an armchair with a book, becoming so absorbed she would chew the edges of its pages, while Ninette was a *garçon manqué* who loved being outdoors.

The English called the war's early weeks the 'Bore War' or 'Phoney War'; Germans on France's border called it a Sitzkrieg – a sit-down war. The French called it *la drôle de guerre* – a funny sort of a war. For privileged teenagers in Paris's western suburbs, life seemed almost normal, partly because censorship masked the scale of German victories in Poland.

When the Dreyfus family subsequently returned to Paris, they found the streets around their *hôtel particulier* – grand townhouse – off the avenue Foch exhibited a strange blend of wartime panic and autumnal calm, with barrage balloons floating above. Paris's 16th arrondissement was denuded of young men but smart women promenaded with their gas masks past the sandbags protecting buildings and statues and signs on lampposts saying 'ABRI' in capital letters, pointing to air-raid shelters. Some accessorised their gas-mask cases by covering them in fabric; the couturier Jeanne Lanvin created a cylindrical container and strap to satisfy fashion-conscious Parisiennes. Air-raid sirens sounded first at 3.45 a.m. on 4 September – France had been at war for ten hours – and over subsequent days 'practice alerts' went off so regularly people would go to bed early to get some sleep before dragging themselves down into their shelters. In her diary, Ninette described the fluctuating sound as 'horrible and sinister', but they were as yet false alarms.

After gas attack fears failed to turn into reality, people abandoned their masks. From mid-September, restaurants reopened but xenophobia was rife as people looked around for fifth columnists. On the outbreak of war, Édouard Daladier, the prime minister, interned all Germans, including Jews.



Ninette's diary: the first entry, for 3 September 1939, marks the outbreak of war, the day her childhood idyll ends.

Retailers emphasised their patriotic credentials – Uniprix shops posted notices saying: 'French firm; French directors; French capital' – while newspaper crossword puzzles were removed for fear that German spies had planted code in the clues. In a censorship-induced information vacuum, many people blended optimism with the pacifism that dominated interwar politics. Perhaps the Germans were too weak; surely the Allied armies, most recently on display during the Bastille Day parade down the Champs-Élysées, were superior; perhaps, said pacifists, France and Britain would seek an armistice, permitting Hitler to dismember Poland as he had Czechoslovakia.

Each weekday, Ninette's mother reminded her to take her gas mask to her school, a fifteen-minute walk away in avenue Henri-Martin. This was the Collège des Abeilles, a private school whose headmistress, Mme Amans, was a leading light of France's Education Nouvelle movement. It was housed

in a nineteenth-century mansion surrounded by grounds designed by Achille Duchêne, 'the Napoleon of the garden'. On Thursdays, a siren would sound and Mme Amans would lead her pupils to the cellar. '*Défense passive*' classes had been obligatory since May; now air-raid rehearsals took on a new seriousness, with the children given a booklet, the cover of which stated: 'Read and keep this brochure safely. It could save your life one day.' This did not, however, prevent Ninette giggling at the sight of classmates in masks.

Mme Amans, though gentile, was fascinated by Zionism and believed some pupils might 'make *aliyah*', emigrating to Palestine to escape the German threat, so she organised lessons from a rabbi. 'I will not teach you biblical Hebrew or Yiddish,' he told Ninette. 'I'm going to teach you Ivrit so you can go to Palestine.'

Lacking any religious feelings, Ninette's parents had taught her nothing. Her experience of Jewish ritual had been limited to the bat mitzvahs of female relatives. Decades later, she recalled envying their white outfits resembling the garb Catholic girls donned for their first communions. Ironically, only the devoutly Catholic Nounou tried to educate the girls. 'If they are anything,' she declared, 'they are Israelites.' She had learned the *Shema*, Judaism's most important prayer, when looking after children of previous employers and decided Viviane and Ninette should be taught it too. It was a shock for Ninette, at eleven, to have it impressed on her that she differed from her gentile classmates: 'I knew I was not a Catholic but I didn't know until then what being a Jew meant.'

Despite suffering 'playground' antisemitism, '"Jew", "Israelite", these terms signified almost nothing to me until the war,' Viviane recalled later in her semi-fictionalised memoir, *Ce soir, après la guerre*. During a game in the Bois de Boulogne, a stranger asked to join in. The girl's parents had told

her to ask, before playing with another girl, that girl's name, where she lived, what her father did and her religion. When Viviane said she was Jewish, the child's nanny stopped her playing with Viviane because the little Jewess was going to go to hell. The girl told her nanny that Viviane said she had done nothing wrong, but then returned to declare triumphantly that Viviane had not done 'nothing' because Viviane had killed Jesus. Following such incidents, the Dreyfus daughters thought 'Jewishness' a 'negative' attribute – they were *not* gentiles and did not wear the same fine outfits their gentile classmates wore on Christian feast days.

In the war's early weeks, Yvonne and her girls lived mostly in the Lovenbach château, where the air-raid threat seemed less severe. When they did return to their *hôtel particulier* at 24 square du Bois de Boulogne on 29 September, Viviane's fourteenth birthday, an air-raid siren greeted them so they abandoned her birthday cake and took refuge in a neighbour's converted garage. In her diary, Ninette drew its icebox stocked with biscuits, foie gras, caviar and champagne, its lavatory, armchairs, beds, cushions and first aid kit.

Three weeks later, the family travelled to Grèges for the wedding of Juju and Jan, granted a few days' leave from the front, hosted by Jan's father, a director of the industrial combine, Saint-Gobain. Little did Ninette suspect – so confident were her parents that France would repeat the triumph of 1918 – that the wedding would be a last hurrah for the world of her childhood. The celebrations were tinged with sadness owing to the death twenty months previously of her aunt Marguerite, Yvonne's adored older sister, after swallowing a chicken bone at Maxim's. Yvonne thought her death avoidable because Marguerite had been too embarrassed to spit out the bone and had swallowed it, tearing her lung, and it affected her profoundly. Decades later, Ninette described her mother taking to her bed and weeping constantly. Viviane,

then eleven, attempted to jolly her up by acting out sketches she had written. Yvonne would laugh momentarily but the weeping would resume. Until Marguerite's death, she wore colourful outfits designed by her friend Jeanne Lanvin, as well as clothes by Coco Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet. After it, she mainly wore black and refused to co-host when Edgar held business dinners as chief executive of banque Louis Dreyfus, handing that duty to Marguerite's daughter, Manon.

Ninette began the day of the wedding playing valet to Jan, running his bath and checking his wedding clothes – the detachable collar was missing, necessitating a dash into Dieppe to buy one – before changing into her outfit, a pink organdie dress. The wedding breakfast was in the château dining room, decorated with white flowers in tulle netting. Then the wedding party planned to walk to Grèges for the civil ceremony but the skies opened so they proceeded by car. Despite the rain, most villagers turned out to see the wedding couple walk between two columns of cheering children into the *mairie* for the ceremony.

This was conducted by Ernest Dumont, Grèges's seventy-five-year-old mayor resplendent in *tricolore* sash. Dumont spoke movingly about Marguerite, reducing Yvonne to tears. Then the local school's head girl recited a poem in honour of the newlyweds, curtseying each time she read 'Madame' or 'Monsieur' and reducing Ninette to giggles. Finally, the children presented bouquets of flowers and called out, 'Long live the bride.' The religious ceremony was conducted by Juju's father, Jules, acting as celebrant in the absence of a rabbi. 'It was very moving,' wrote Ninette, 'everyone cried.' A buffet followed after which Juju and Jan left in a car trailing an old shoe tied to the back bumper on their way to a brief honeymoon in Rouen. In Dieppe, British soldiers saw the trailing shoe and hailed them with cries of 'Long live the bride and groom!'

Nine days later, Ninette was at Grèges to be wished *'bonne fête'* for her twelfth birthday. As so often there, she woke to the sound of mice. After present-giving and a birthday lunch – ham, steamed potatoes, spinach, cheese and 'best of all, my birthday cake', Ninette donned her waterproofs and headed for Dieppe, where she and Viviane sold home-made chocolate caramels to buy books for patients in a British field hospital.

Their father, Edgar, brushed aside Hitler's Polish advance, thinking France invincible. Paris propaganda suggested the dictator was ill, the Germans were starving, their planes did not work and military morale had plummeted.

In the run-up to Christmas, Paris seemed relatively normal, blackouts notwithstanding. The shops were full of food, the restaurants crowded, the theatres full, and Ninette's parents felt safe enough to fly to London for a five-day trip to indulge their fondness for British musicals. Yet on their return, reality began to intrude even for Paris's wealthiest. Just before Christmas, Edgar received two petrol ration books initially limiting him to 600 litres per month for each of his cars, later dropping to 360 litres for his Hispano-Suiza and 300 for his Chrysler. He also needed separate travel permits for business and leisure; this was a new development. At nights, blackout controls gave the streets an eerie feel and some pedestrians wore white gloves for visibility.

In February 1940, a snowstorm hit Paris but labour was in such short supply that the streets remained un-swept, so Ninette struggled to school through snowdrifts and slush. On such journeys, she could see shops were running short of staples such as soap and coffee. Under government restrictions, alcohol, cake, chocolate, biscuits and sweets were banned on 12 March, and Paul Reynaud, Daladier's replacement, introduced full-scale rationing in April. In the blackout, crime increased, with the family returning from one trip to Grèges to

discover they had been victims of an attempted break-in. This was not the first time – they had suffered a similar break-in four years previously in which thieves had stolen jewellery worth 200,000 francs. This time the thieves were challenged and fled but Edgar's eldest sister, Louise Lang, a seventy-seven-year-old widow, was not so lucky. Childless, she lived alone in a vast 16th arrondissement apartment in rue Dumont d'Urville, her only companion her lapdog. This made her home an attractive target and burglars broke in on 6 May.

By then, Yvonne was intending to keep her girls in Paris on a more permanent basis. Russia waged its Winter War against Finland and Germany invaded Denmark and Norway but the Western Front phoney war continued. Having turned twelve, Ninette moved school, enrolling at École Chauvot, a private school her mother liked because it was outward-looking, counting diplomats' children among its ranks, and had a reputation for breeding writers. Ninette wrote that her work was 'not bad, in fact very good' but she was more interested in her tap-dancing lessons from Jacques Sée, an Alsatian Jew who had brought Hollywood-style dance to France. His rigour was a shock for a pampered adolescent; 'I did not have that *feu sacré* – that burning desire to succeed,' she recalled. 'Jacques danced like a god and he and his wife were very strict. They treated me as if I was a professional and I appreciated that – it made me try harder.'

After describing the Lovenbach wedding, Ninette abandoned her diary for six months. She wrote her next entry on 10 May 1940, the day Hitler launched his blitzkrieg. 'Today,' she wrote, 'everyone is deeply upset.' The day began early when sirens sounded at 4.55 a.m., just as the sky was brightening. The family headed for the shelter but paused in pyjamas to watch the display overhead. First, Ninette heard the throbbing 'ou-ou-ou-ou' drone of aircraft engines followed by the 'tac-a-tac-a-tac' of fighter plane cannon fire and ack-ack

Prewar peace: Ninette in her father's study at
24 square du Bois de Boulogne, once home to Debussy.

anti-aircraft fire. She was transfixed, oblivious to danger: 'The dogfight was beautiful. The tracer fire of various colours was like a firework display. The planes' gracefulness made it seem like a ballet, with exhaust plumes tracing patterns in the sky, or a duel, horrible yet beautiful; I could not move despite my parents' urging me to hurry to the shelter.' Once inside, Ninette, by now more fearful, cuddled up to her mother until the all-clear sounded three hours later. Shortly afterwards, the family listened to an official broadcast saying 'the real war' had begun. Then came the morning papers. 'This morning in the early hours,' according to one, 'Germany invaded Holland and attacked Belgium and Luxembourg. French and

British forces have crossed the Belgian frontier.' The sirens went off at 6 a.m. the next day and Ninette heard an aircraft engine but saw nothing as she dashed to the shelter. Later, Yvonne took her children shopping, buying a coat for Viviane at Jones, a fashionable avenue Victor-Hugo store. She was, however, sufficiently alarmed by the air-raid that she told her daughters she would take them to Grèges, only to change her mind again when Sunday was siren-free.

Reports of French 'victories' were mainly lies constructed to maintain morale. On 12 May, Ninette wrote that the French had 'counter-attacked in Germany to the bombs they dropped on Lyon, Nancy, etc.' That morning, German troops reached the Meuse river but Parisians knew nothing of this. Some recognised the dangers of misinformation. Alexander Werth, a Russian-born *Guardian* reporter, wrote: 'The censorship has caused dreadful harm to France. It has cultivated a smug complacent frame of mind, with victory taken for granted; and I doubt whether, after all this soft soap, French morale will be able to stand up to a terrific blitzkrieg. The papers have told us a hundred times the Maginot Line and its "extension" are impregnable. Never has the slightest query been allowed to appear in the Press.'

There was a sufficient sense of crisis at Louis Dreyfus & Cie, parent company of Edgar's bank, for him to spend the weekend at his 2nd arrondissement office in place des Petits-Pères working on contingency plans should the executives have to leave Paris. The key matters to consider were a head office shift to Marseille and the fleet and overseas operations, but if Edgar had concerns he concealed them, encouraging his family to live as if it were peacetime. For Sunday lunch, Yvonne hosted her nephew, Gilles Lovenbach, whose unit had been tasked with watching the skies for parachutists. She then entertained her mother and her sister, Suzanne, before taking her girls for tea.

Early on Monday, the sirens went off twice but Edgar stayed behind to look after the family cat, Cric, who was traumatised by the noise. That same evening, Yvonne took her daughters to the Opéra-Comique to see *Carmen* but the performance was halted just after the start when the house manager announced an air-raid alert and people began pushing to reach the exit in a frenzy. In a bid to restore calm, the orchestra struck up the Marseillaise and the opera resumed once the all-clear sounded. Yvonne and Ninette got the giggles when they noticed the heaving breast of the supposedly dead Carmen at the opera's end, but Ninette was sufficiently entranced to sing the tunes throughout the journey home as Joseph, the family chauffeur, drove past traffic lights felled like trees on the pavements, the edges of which were painted white. Though only twelve, Ninette felt the power of Carmen's opening aria, and when she wrote up her diary in bed she transcribed the words: 'Love is a Gypsy's child, it has never, ever, known a law; love me not, then I love you; if I love you, you'd best beware!'

The next day, the papers said the position in Holland had 'greatly improved', with the Germans contained in a 'pocket', and home life continued apparently as normal. The weather, wrote Ninette, was 'very beautiful' so she read an English edition of *The Arabian Nights* in the garden, then accompanied Viviane to the hairdressers. Reality intruded, however, on 15 May, when the Dutch surrendered, provoking fresh family debate about evacuation. The situation was hard to interpret as rumours circulated as facts. Pessimists claimed parachutists dressed as 'nuns' had descended over Paris, the Luftwaffe were dropping poisoned sweets to kill children, French soldiers had abandoned their weapons and British soldiers were so desperate to retreat they were shooting French colleagues if they blocked their way. Yet optimists claimed America and Russia had declared war, Soviet troops

had landed at Hamburg, Russian planes had bombed Berlin and Hitler had been captured.

On 16 May Ninette thought that times were 'terrible'. The day before, Reynaud had phoned Winston Churchill exclaiming that 'We have been defeated,' and, for Ninette, life was about to take a drastic turn. Her father called as Yvonne and the girls returned from a shopping trip intended 'to cheer us up a little', insisting they flee immediately from 'our dear Paris' beyond the range of German planes. Providing Yvonne with a list of inns, he said they should stop in Nantes before continuing to La Baule-Escoublac in Brittany. His daughters knew La Baule from holidays, making it a suitably familiar refuge while, so he hoped, French troops regrouped to counter-attack as they had in 1914. Yvonne had been more sanguine than Edgar about the German advance and had not prepared for a flight to the countryside, so the household was thrown into chaos as she and her staff packed suitcases. 'Everyone is in a panic,' Ninette wrote. 'We forget half our things.'

Suddenly, Ninette's childhood innocence was thrown into question, and she declared the 400-kilometre journey from Paris to Nantes as 'not funny'. Her mother was petrified, weeping non-stop, and in Nantes there were no guest rooms at the inns Edgar mentioned. One innkeeper, however, offered Yvonne his son's bedroom so they slept surrounded by shelves on which stood glass jars containing preserved reptiles – Ninette concluded he must have been an explorer. The next morning she awoke to bells and went to the window to see convent schoolgirls singing on their way to chapel. Ninette was transfixed – their lives seemed so different to hers. Later that day, Joseph drove Yvonne and her girls to La Baule. It was the day Reynaud finally admitted in a broadcast that France had suffered serious defeats. When they arrived at the town, it was clear they were not the only

Parisian Jews who had taken refuge there. They included the art dealer Jos Hessel and his wife, Lucy. The Hessels had brought with them Édouard Vuillard, whose paintings had documented the lives of many of Yvonne's Jewish friends. Lucy had been Vuillard's mistress but the painter, now seventy-one, had serious lung problems. She thought he would benefit from seaside air but his illness was terminal.

Edgar had asked some Spanish friends who had settled in La Baule during Spain's Civil War to book rooms for Yvonne at the Castel Marie-Louise, a *Belle-Époque* building whose gardens led down to a curving esplanade. Ninette thought it 'a real palace' and drew a picture in her diary. Her mother, however, decided she needed cheaper lodgings. This was an ugly experience, giving Ninette a taste of French provincial antisemitism. When they phoned one villa owner, the woman seemed thrilled because the war had reduced demand for holiday homes. Yet when Yvonne arrived and introduced herself as Mme Dreyfus the woman slammed the door in her face. Eventually, she found a cheap hotel.

Worse followed when Yvonne placed her daughters in a local school. Before the war, Ninette had absorbed something of her ethnicity. At the Collège des Abeilles, she had befriended an Austrian refugee classmate. 'He was very Orthodox and was bullied by the other children,' she recalled. 'I wanted to help him.' She had also experienced, albeit at a distance, pre-war antisemitic hatred, hearing from her bed cries of *'À bas les juifs'* as Jew-haters from extremist organisations such as Action Française paraded with torch lights through the Bois de Boulogne. Yet she had not experienced hatred directed at her personally. The behaviour of the children – and even the teachers – at La Baule was, therefore, profoundly scarring. In Paris, her teachers lectured pupils about tolerance. Now, far from the 16th arrondissement's cosmopolitan atmosphere, she found herself among

provincial people who distrusted outsiders in general and Jews in particular. Ninette was the quintessential outsider, the only Jewess in her class, a banker's daughter and carrying the same name as Alfred Dreyfus, the soldier whose unjust treatment fifty years previously had split France in two.

By this time, civilians were well aware of the military collapse. On 20 May, the Germans reached the Channel near Abbeville. The next day, Edgar's cousin and head of the family firm, Louis Louis-Dreyfus, sat in the Senate to hear Reynaud declare, '*Messieurs, la patrie est en danger*' and admit Amiens had fallen. 'France cannot die!' he broadcast. 'If a miracle is needed to save France, I believe in miracles because I believe in France!' Many listeners concluded the worst. That same day, a counter-attack petered out and the German advance towards the Channel ports resumed. A week after Reynaud's speech, the Dunkirk evacuation was in full swing and Belgium capitulated. With French roads clogged with refugees and rumours rife of fifth columnists posing as Allied soldiers, right-wingers searched for those to blame. The usual suspects included communists, socialists and freemasons, but Jews were top of the list as the whiff of impending defeat revived the venom of the Dreyfus Affair.

Ninette was ostracised as '*une youpine*', the equivalent of 'yid' or 'kike'. 'They knew I was Jewish because of my name,' she recalled. 'What more Jewish name could there be than Dreyfus?' In her innocence, she concluded the teacher had forbidden her classmates to talk to her. What other explanation could there be? Worse was to come. The headmaster blamed Léon Blum, the socialist who in 1936 became France's first Jewish prime minister, for the country's military failures. Ninette heard he had beaten a Jewish boy in another class and an older Jewish girl had been assaulted by fellow pupils. Then the headmaster removed books by Jewish authors from the library and burned them in the playground. At the

end of one school day, when Ninette mounted her bicycle to ride home, some children shoved her down the hill with such violence she fell off and tore her dress. The worst incident, however, occurred during one break-time, when some classmates pounced on her and tied her to a tree with some skipping ropes, then took it in turns to march past, shouting abuse and spitting in her face. The teacher did not intervene and it seemed to Ninette, in her traumatised state, that he might even have approved of her treatment.

Ninette did not initially show her mother the tear in her dress or reveal she had been tied to a tree and spat upon. 'I was not going to show the headmaster I was upset,' she recalled. 'That was the last thing I was going to do.' It was only after Joseph arrived on 10 June for the journey back to Paris ahead of a more permanent evacuation that she revealed the horrors of the previous days. Despite Ninette's desire that she avoid a scene, Yvonne marched into the school to protest. 'She gave herself the pleasure of telling the headmaster off,' said Ninette, 'but I thought the reverse – that because he was antisemitic my mother's protests would give him pleasure.' Later that day, as they headed towards Paris, Ninette revealed how one boy had whispered to her, 'What is a Jew?' yet she did not know how to reply. Yvonne was horrified, belatedly realising she needed to educate her daughter about who she was and how she might respond to taunts. Jews were not always popular but Ninette should respond confidently to antisemites. The Bible, Yvonne said, described Jews as 'the chosen people', chosen by God for a purpose, but Ninette should not regard herself as superior. Instead, she should be proud of her people's traditions and achievements in the face of ill-treatment, and any success a Jew, such as her father, might have involved additional responsibilities towards those in need. 'It was the first time my mother and I had a serious conversation,' she recalled. 'She said I must never again let

something like that happen to me and I must always come to her and she would explain everything.'

During his family's temporary exile in La Baule, Edgar debated with colleagues over whether to stay in Paris at La Maison, their name for the family firm, as they attempted to read the political runes. On 16 May, the day Edgar dispatched his family to La Baule, the government debated evacuation but Reynaud, wishing to prevent panic, insisted he would not leave Paris. The day after Hitler invaded Poland, Louis Louis-Dreyfus had written to Daladier, to say, 'We will put our House in Paris and its many branches abroad at the disposal of our country,' a message echoing his father Léopold's commitment in 1914. Now, as an Alpes-Maritimes senator, he had to stay in Paris as long as the government remained and Edgar allowed himself to be guided by his cousin. During the phoney war, Louis' wife, Emmy, daughter of an Italian-Jewish baron, used her car for the war effort, becoming an officer's driver. This embarrassed Louis when he attended an evening reception with this officer. Wishing to avoid seeing his wife hand the officer his coat, Louis waited until the man had left. When the Battle of France broke out, Emmy put herself in harm's way as she had done as a nurse in the Great War, volunteering as an ambulance driver during the initial fighting in the Ardennes.

The day after the departure of his womenfolk, Edgar breathed a little easier as news suggested the Germans were not initially heading for the capital. His morale was also boosted by news that Reynaud had recalled his Madrid ambassador, the aged Maréchal Philippe Pétain, then viewed by many as the greatest of Great War heroes, and made him deputy prime minister. Little did Edgar know that Pétain was a defeatist, fearing Britain would withdraw from the war, and had as early as 22 May been lobbying for an armistice. Three days later, he told a colleague he thought France should not 'fight to the death'.

In reality, Reynaud's determination to remain in Paris was waning. Smoke from fires as foreign office officials burned papers in the grounds of the Quai d'Orsay to prevent them falling into German hands could be seen in the 16th arrondissement. Meanwhile Paris's streets and railway stations were clogging up with refugees. The Belgian bourgeoisie came first, reaching the capital's boulevards in mid-May. Then came demoralised soldiers grousing about their officers' incompetence or betrayal. The message from the skies was even more disturbing. On 3 June, Edgar heard sirens sound again. Shortly afterwards, Stuka dive-bombers swooped down, their 'Jericho-Trompete' sirens wailing, to bomb air force bases, stations and factories. Next day, *Le Figaro* played down the raid's significance but it later emerged that 254 people had been killed including some in Auteuil, a few hundred metres from Ninette's home.

Edgar learned that the Germans had launched an offensive on the Somme on 5 June, the day Reynaud announced his final reshuffle, recruiting Charles de Gaulle, then a little-known brigadier-general but one of few 1940 commanders to win a battle, as junior war minister and liaison man with Britain. The Somme offensive kicked off phase two of Germany's blitzkrieg. Resistance on the Weygand Line – Maxime Weygand's new defence line after he became supreme commander – collapsed after two days and German tanks headed for Rouen. On 8 June, Parisians heard artillery for the first time and the following day, the day before Yvonne and the children returned from La Baule, Edgar learned that the enemy had crossed the Seine.

Weygand advised Reynaud to evacuate Parisian children while Georges Mandel, the interior minister, lobbied his premier to abandon Paris for Touraine. Mandel, born Louis Jeroboam Rothschild, was France's most senior Jewish politician after Blum. In the 1930s, he had warned of Nazism's

dangers but antisemitic journalists claimed a forceful response to Hitler was intended solely to benefit Jews, penning headlines such as 'KICK OUT THE JEWS!' When Germany invaded Poland, Mandel said France should attack, provoking further antisemitic vitriol. Now, he wanted to remove the body-politic beyond the enemy's reach to provide breathing space for a major counter-attack.

On 10 June, General Erwin Rommel reached Dieppe, Norway surrendered and Mussolini entered the conflict. Reynaud told Roosevelt he would 'fight in front of Paris, in Paris and behind Paris' yet friends of the writer André Maurois, an '*haute juiverie*' friend of Ninette's parents, told him the government was about to flee and advised him to follow suit. A *New York Times* correspondent wrote of 'persons carrying cases and boxes of all kinds out of offices and loading them onto army or private trucks'.

Finally, with his family back in Paris for just a few hours, Edgar heard the radio announcement that Reynaud was 'obliged to leave' the capital for 'compelling military reasons'. Louis Louis-Dreyfus suggested Edgar join the cars taking his cousins and La Maison's files, part of a convoy of politicians leaving Paris. Louis would take Emmy, his daughter Lina, and her sons, while Jean Rheims, Lina's officer husband, would ride with Edgar because an officer's presence might be useful should he encounter trouble. Yvonne told Ninette she could take only essentials because a rapid departure was critical. 'My mother would not let me take my favourite doll or a pencil,' she recalled. 'I was not allowed to take much more than a handkerchief.'

2

EXODUS AND EXILE

'Somewhere in the north of France a boot had scattered an anthill and the ants were on the march. Laboriously. Without panic. Without hope. Without despair. On the march as if duty bound.' This is how Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *Le Petit Prince* and friend of Ninette's cousin Pierre Louis-Dreyfus, described the exode. At the time, 'Saint-Ex' was flying in his MB170, a reconnaissance plane designed by Marcel Bloch, the Jewish aviation industrialist known after the war as Marcel Dassault. He was staring down at the largest movement of people in history as 6 million took to the roads fleeing from the Germans. Among them were 100,000 to 200,000 Jews – politicians, bankers, industrialists, traders, rabbis, writers, old-established families and immigrants.

The 'exodians' had been brought up on tales of German Great War atrocities. More recently, events in Poland suggested Germans were behaving even worse in the current conflict. Stories circulated about Poles being starved to death in concentration camps or gassed in sealed trains. Parisians wished to avoid a similar fate so mostly headed for the Loire, thinking it could be defended like the Marne in the Great War.

Pierre Mendès-France, a Sephardi Jewish radical-socialist, had in 1932 been the youngest member of the Chamber of Deputies. Eight years later, he observed the exode as a wounded airman. 'During the early days we saw sumptuous,

fast American cars driven by chauffeurs in livery; inside were elegant ladies holding their jewellery boxes and men poring over directories or road maps,' he recalled. Then 'came older, less smart cars driven by petit-bourgeois … One or two days later, it was the turn of the most incredible contraptions.'

Viviane remembered Joseph, looking grand in his uniform, staring uncomprehendingly from the Chrysler at the crowds, with Jean Rheims seated alongside, while Edgar, Yvonne, the children, Nounou and Cric the cat were in the back. Paris's streets were close to gridlock and progress was nail-bitingly slow although policemen did intervene to help the government convoy through blocked junctions. Parisians woke that day to an 'apocalyptic sky' as smoke 'blocked out the sun' and when they ventured outside they were soon covered in soot. Some thought this might be a new means of warfare designed to forestall air-raids; others thought the Germans had launched gas attacks. Only later did Ninette learn the smoke came from oil storage tanks set ablaze to stop fuel falling into German hands.

Even after leaving Paris, Joseph stayed in a low gear, advancing, wrote Viviane, like 'an exhausted cow' as country roads filled up with a bizarre array of vehicles, many of them horse-drawn carts. For Ninette, an overprotected twelve-year-old daughter of wealthy elderly parents, the sudden eviction from home and the exode, revealing the disintegration of French society, was an uprooting as much psychological as physical. 'The exode was the worst nightmare of the war for me,' she recalled. 'There we were, moving forward a few metres an hour, surrounded by French people, Belgians and Dutch, peasants with their carts, starting with their cows, sheep and geese but progressively forced to abandon them. Some people had furniture piled on their cars; others were on foot pushing carts containing their possessions. I felt a mixture of horror at leaving the home I so loved, fear of

what might become of it when the Germans arrived but also excitement at the prospect of an adventure.'

Ninette had an as-yet undiagnosed case of housemaid's knee and so sitting squeezed into the slow-moving Chrysler with knees bent was torture. Before long, her parents let her join the pedestrians and she kept up without difficulty as the convoy edged forward. Amid the chaos, she saw soldiers separated from their officers begging for food and water. She was shocked and she was not alone. Major-General Sir Edward Spears, a French-born Jewish MP with connections to Ninette's family, was Churchill's representative in France. As he followed the government convoy south, he saw 'gaping, idle soldiers … not in formations, just individuals in uniform, hanging about'.

The sight of fleeing conscripts provoked arguments in the car. Jean Rheims was appalled by their untidiness and indiscipline. At one point, an unshaven private with crooked beret and open battledress collar spotted Jean's uniform and asked for orders. Jean responded by slapping him and telling him he was 'scruffy and an insult to France'. Yvonne uttered some comforting words but Jean turned on her, saying, 'What were you thinking, Yvonne? I wanted to note down their names and service numbers. I want to report them.' Yvonne replied, 'I ought to give you a slap.'

Edgar's plan was to divert from the convoy as it headed for Tours, temporarily the seat of government as it had been in 1870, and head for Brittany. At times, the traffic eased and Joseph picked up speed. Amid fine weather, Ninette took in fields punctuated by cottages and gardens; it almost seemed like a summer holiday yet pleasant feelings did not last long. As warplanes flew overhead, Ninette learned to distinguish friend from foe. British planes made a tenor sound while German planes had a deeper throb. At one point, German pilots swooped down over the columns, dive-bombing and

strafing, unable or unwilling to distinguish between soldiers and civilians. Some exodians thought soldiers might protect them so clustered around them. In reality, they were exposing themselves to risk and hampering efforts to organise an orderly retreat.

During the raids, soldiers would run from car to car, urging people to flee into the fields. 'The minute a throbbing airplane engine was heard, we would run for the side of the road and dive into the ditches, which were mostly dry,' Ninette recalled. 'Then we would see planes flying low along the column.' Next, she would hear machine-gun fire and see dust rise as bullets raked the ground. Ninette's family escaped injury but she saw people killed a few metres away, including the sister of a school friend. 'The strange thing is that although I was frightened as I lay there curled up in a ditch and heard people screaming around me I was more excited than frightened,' she recalled.

Chartres was the first major town, followed by Le Mans, at the time full of British troops bolstering French units south of the Seine. When the family arrived at Nantes, also full of Britons, petrol was the priority but long queues had formed outside the few garages open. By then, drivers were limited to 20 litres per ration book coupon but Joseph managed to fill up at a Shell garage on the route de Paris as they arrived. Once again, the kind innkeeper found space and Ninette spent a second night surrounded by jars of preserved reptiles. They then continued to La Baule, where they stayed one night at the Castel Marie-Louise, and Joseph refilled the car three times, being limited to 20 litres each time.

The military situation deteriorated further. On 13 June, Weygand declared Paris an 'open city' not to be contested, German units reached Troyes, 160 kilometres south-east, and the government fled to Bordeaux. This was the signal to Edgar to return to the columns of cars streaming south,

with the aim of reaching Bordeaux and talking to Louis about how they should respond to the threats to the family as prominent Jews and to La Maison as a business.

As they drove south, the family learned from the radio that, on 14 June, Hitler's military had begun the day with a victory parade designed to cow the population. Tanks, armoured cars, artillery and motorised infantry thundered down an eerily empty Champs-Élysées as planes flew overhead. This had been the route of the French victory parade in 1918, lending the event an awful significance for older Parisians. Later that day, a general on horseback a few metres from Ninette's home reviewed troops marching down avenue Foch. Later, a photo of this and photos of swastika flags on the Eiffel Tower and outside the Hôtel de Ville became iconic images of Paris's humiliation.

Finally, after five days on the road, of begging for shelter, sleeping on floors and bargaining for food as shopkeepers raised prices, the family reached Bordeaux, then overflowing with parliamentarians, officials, soldiers and refugees, causing its population to double to 600,000. This meant hotel bedrooms were all taken, but the manager of a hotel in which Louis Louis-Dreyfus had been placed as a senator allowed Edgar's family to sleep on the marble floor of its lobby. During the heat of the day, the situation was, thought Ninette, 'chaos, chaos, chaos'. Her family wandered the streets as officials unpacked files outside hotels and the departmental préfecture, encountering friends separated from relatives in the exode. 'I read messages on notice boards outside public buildings,' she recalled, 'saying things like "If you are looking for so-and-so, we are at such-and-such a place."'

The atmosphere was poisonous as politicians jockeyed for position and people hunted for 'guilty parties' to blame for France's involvement in the war, then its defeat – foreigners, Jews, capitalists, socialists, communists, pre-war ministers

Swastikas over Paris: the Wehrmacht flag defiles the Eiffel Tower in June 1940, when Hitler paid his only visit to the City of Light.

or freemasons. In his memoir, *La France sans étoile*, Philippe Erlanger, an arts bureaucrat distantly related to Ninette, described how Jew-hatred spread. 'Antisemitism, this indestructible monster that ravages countries in the east and had already poisoned some sectors of French public opinion … had … caught up with me!' he wrote. 'I was astonished …

since the advent of Hitler this problem had preoccupied me but I did not think I personally would be affected. As with car accidents, this type of calamity always affects others.'

The crisis evolved rapidly. On 12 June, Weygand had been rebuffed when he told colleagues assembled near Tours there should be an armistice because the fighting had become 'meaningless'. Then, in his push for a surrender, he presented as fact a rumour that communists had stormed the Élysée presidential palace. He believed the Germans' victories made them unbeatable and Britain would concede defeat. So, he asked, what was the point of France fighting on? Securing an armistice would preserve the army's honour so people might blame politicians, not soldiers for defeat. Leftists, he thought, were more threatening than Hitler, hence his giving credence to a Bolshevik takeover.

After the move to Bordeaux, the intrigue intensified between '*durs*' – 'hard ones' – and '*mous*' – 'soft ones'. In cabinet, Mandel poured scorn on Weygand, saying military incompetence was responsible for the defeats before adding, 'I believe in the superiority of the democracies' forces.' Reynaud also wanted to fight on, hoping America would join the war on but Roosevelt vetoed this. Then he took a call from de Gaulle in Downing Street, there discussing a government move to French North Africa to continue the fight. De Gaulle read Reynaud a document describing a plan to elevate the Anglo-French alliance into a political union that would defend freedom against 'a system that reduces mankind to a life of robots and slaves'. The two legislatures would link, the two countries would merge their defence, foreign and economic policies and a single cabinet would run the war.

Spears thought Reynaud 'transfigured with joy' but the *mous* thought Britain wanted to seize France's colonies. Pétain asked why France would wish to 'fuse with a corpse'.

Prophetically, Mandel responded, 'By surrendering, you fancy you will win rest and quiet. Instead, you will only reap the contempt of the world.' The meeting adjourned without a decision but Reynaud resigned, thinking himself outmanoeuvred by Pétain, who insisted on an armistice, saying he would remain in France even if colleagues fled. Mandel did not throw his hat in the ring, thinking his ethnicity was problematic, so Albert Lebrun, the president, invited Pétain, then eighty-four, to form a government with a remit to seek an armistice.

Newly returned from London, de Gaulle was excluded. As he contemplated his future, Reynaud was still considering shifting to Africa to continue the war. During a meeting in Reynaud's office after his resignation, de Gaulle said Weygand intended to arrest him. Spears then proposed an alternative to arrest or Africa: de Gaulle should return to London – even if some would regard that as treason. After some hesitation, he said he would meet Spears at his hotel at 7 a.m. the next day. Two hours later, Spears ushered the future Free French leader onto a plane, his luggage limited to a pair of trousers, four shirts and one family photo.

At midday, exodians gathered round radios to listen to Pétain make his first broadcast as leader. Speaking, according to one, 'in the cold, quivering tones of a tired old man', he said he was certain of the affection of soldiers who had fought heroically 'against an enemy superior in numbers and arms', he was certain of the support of war veterans 'whom I had the honour to command' and certain of the confidence of 'the entire French people'. He was offering France 'the gift of my person to alleviate her suffering'. Referring to 'the unfortunate refugees who, in an extreme penury, are furrowing our roads', he concluded ambiguously, 'It is with a heavy heart I say to you today we must cease hostilities. I have this evening approached the enemy to ask if he is ready to try to

find between soldiers, with the struggle over and in honour, the means to put an end to the hostilities.'

Listeners were stunned. Edward Ward, a BBC correspondent, was sitting in a restaurant. 'The effect of his words was terrible,' he reported. 'A Frenchman lunching at the next table broke down.' The phrase 'we must cease hostilities' led many to think Hitler had agreed a ceasefire, and not that Pétain had merely asked for one. The message was amended in the newspapers to 'we must try to cease hostilities' but by then the damage was already done. In one throwaway line, the victor of Verdun had reduced the French will to resist at a time when Frenchmen were mounting counter-attacks against exhausted German units with overextended supply lines. In the thirty-six hours after his speech, before Hitler said he would negotiate, hundreds of thousands of troops surrendered. By the time of the Armistice itself, almost 1 million soldiers were captives, half the total taken during the entire campaign.

The day after Pétain's broadcast, towns with more than 20,000 people were declared 'open cities' like Paris. This halted the air-raids that had continued after Pétain's armistice plea but also encouraged civilians to attack soldiers refusing to give up. 'What are you waiting for, you soldiers, to stop this war?' cried one woman. 'It's got to stop. Do you want them to massacre us all with our children?'

In Bordeaux, it became fashionable to be pro-German. People's vocabulary changed – the enemy were no longer pejoratively labelled *les Boches* but were instead simply *les Allemands* and one officer was heard proposing a toast: 'To the Germans! I respect the Germans. But as for those English pigs …' The search for scapegoats intensified as generals stoked an intensifying 'antiparliamentarian tendency' to escape responsibility for the debacle.

The queues outside Bordeaux's consulates lengthened as

Jews and other anti-Nazis pleaded for visas. Some hoped the British would take them to England; others queued outside neutral consulates for transit visas to help them reach the Americas. The longest line was outside the Portuguese consulate after news spread that the consul-general was defying his government by handing papers to thousands, including politicians such as Maurice de Rothschild.

As events unfolded, Edgar and Yvonne pondered their future. HMS *Berkeley*, which Churchill had offered to Reynaud as a venue for discussions, was moored alongside other British vessels and Edgar thought his family might hitch a lift. La Maison had UK interests and they would be welcomed by their English friends. For Ninette, this seemed like one further episode in the adventure: 'The only country I had visited was Belgium and only for a day and I had never been on a boat. I spoke English and we had English governesses and going to England had been my dream.' Edgar secured places but was asked to surrender his tickets to a politician. Most likely, this was Władysław Raczkiewicz, president of Poland's government-in-exile. Edgar accepted the inevitable and began discussing alternatives with his cousin, Louis Louis-Dreyfus. 'We were disappointed,' Ninette recalled, 'but my father had no hesitation. We had no idea how events might turn out.'

Amid the confusion, Louis, now seventy-two, debated whether he had to remain in France. Pétain was all over the place, agreeing one day that, although he would remain, other ministers should decamp to Africa, yet the next day deciding that his entire government should remain 'on French soil'. Then, after the Luftwaffe bombed Bordeaux, he decided Weygand and two other ministers would remain with him in France but the other cabinet members and Lebrun, as president, would sail to Africa from Perpignan. At this point, the centre-left Chamber of Deputies president,

Édouard Herriot, whose doctor was Edgar's brother-in-law, Henri Bloc, believed Pétain would not accept Hitler's terms so France would fight on. 'This is the fight we're preparing for,' he declared. 'We are organising a departure for North Africa.'

Louis opted to head for Perpignan but first he needed to decide how La Maison would be managed if he went into exile. He had already transferred his headquarters to Marseille, injected his ships into a new bank-owned company run by his former staff and created a trust enabling his US managers to run his American business. Now he needed to address leadership. He had already delegated powers to his two sons, Jean and François, and his nephew, Pierre, and might in normal circumstances have made one of them head of La Maison. But this was impractical amid the chaos. At thirty-two, Pierre was the natural candidate, a forward thinker who had replaced old vessels with larger and faster diesel-powered ships. Pierre was, however, then in uniform fighting in rearguard actions on the Somme.

Louis, therefore, decided Edgar, at fifty-five *'un homme très sérieux'*, should take charge and the pair hurriedly constructed a power of attorney comprising six paragraphs on one sheet of paper. This gave Edgar authority to manage without restriction 'all the grain, banking and shipping interests' with one restriction: casinos were forbidden territory. Louis had two reasons. As a deputy, he had sponsored the legalisation of casinos so did not want a conflict of interest and he was nervous about François's fondness for the gaming tables.

Louis and Edgar spent their final minutes in Bordeaux having the power of attorney typed and stamped. Joseph, meanwhile, hunted for petrol. The Stop-Garage in the La Bastide district would sell him only 20 litres but a garage in Cenon on the Garonne sold him 60 litres in exchange

for two ration coupons. This meant Edgar could join the Louis-Dreyfus convoy heading towards Perpignan, 30 kilometres shy of the Spanish border. It was clear the loss of social cohesion was now even greater, partly because the Germans had released prison and asylum inmates to join the exode. As they drove along, Ninette saw dead horses on the roadside and un-milked cows lowing in agony.

On the approach to Toulouse, Raoul Lévy, husband of Yvonne's sister Suzanne, whose Great War wounds had left him mentally troubled, threw a tantrum. Yvonne recalled an earlier incident when Edgar and Raoul had come to blows: 'Just like in Paris,' she told her daughters. 'Last time your father got a black eye, the one on the monocle side, but Raoul had two black eyes.' Raoul had told Joseph to turn right but Edgar suggested Suzanne turn her car left, to which Raoul responded: 'I forbid you to give orders to my wife.' Only after Yvonne said she was terrified they would be overrun by Germans did the pair resolve their differences. By this time, Raoul's relatives had become so frustrated, they had abandoned their chauffeur and proceeded into Toulouse on foot. The others spent the night sleeping in their cars and drove into town the next morning, when they discovered that Toulouse, like Bordeaux, was full of refugees. As in Bordeaux, people hunted for information about lost relatives, besieging the town hall. 'The entire façade,' Viviane recalled, 'from the ground to the roof was hidden beneath notes hardly bigger than a Métro ticket giving news about thousands of people.'

From Toulouse, the caravan headed south-east to Perpignan, the end point of a journey during which Ninette's family had lived in fear of being strafed by planes or overtaken by tanks yet had benefited from the kindness of strangers as people shared food even as scarcities grew. On arrival, the Louis-Dreyfus clan took over a run-down *pension* in the old town. Louis took the first floor; Edgar and Yvonne were on

the second floor and the children occupied the third floor and attic. The public rooms were shabby but Louis' butler insisted on keeping up appearances so, when the manageress told him her *cassoulet* was ready, Ferdinand, dressed in black and wearing white gloves, declared, '*Madame est servie*.' Viviane claimed his announcement was so loud plaster fell off the wall – it was, she thought, a surreal blend of Hollywood and *The Arabian Nights*.

In the morning, the family learned that an armistice had been signed the previous evening in Compiègne in the railway carriage in which Ferdinand Foch had dictated the terms of the Great War Armistice in 1918. Not since Waterloo had France suffered such humiliation. Edgar collapsed on the stairs, coughing and struggling to breathe. 'My father had an asthma attack,' Ninette recalled. 'He could not even mount one step of the staircase. Was it a nervous reaction to what had happened and what might happen? My father was a proud man and perhaps the attack was his way of showing emotion. I had never seen him show weakness before. For a moment I feared he was going to die. I was so young and naïve but I realised in some childish way how important the Armistice was. Later, I realised something in my father died that day. It was as if he had decided his life, as he had known it, was finished. He had never been light-hearted or playful but what gaiety he had was knocked out of him that day and he was never the same after that. The whole world of my childhood was falling apart.'

Edgar could not believe France could sink so low, abandoning Britain after Reynaud had said neither country would make peace without the other's sanction. A few days earlier he had argued with Viviane after she wrote a poem casting France in the first person and talking about the need for rest, silence and reflection. Yvonne choked back tears as she read it but Edgar had insisted France was not tired, nor was

England. His political friends had told him the Allies would defeat Germany because the French were better prepared than in 1914, with more and better tanks than Germany. Yet it was Viviane who was right. The pact with Stalin meant Hitler did not face a war on two fronts; his air force was superior; he had the element of surprise because French strategists such as Pétain thought the Ardennes forests through which he advanced were 'impenetrable'; and his soldiers, hardened by Nazi rhetoric and buoyed by Polish victories, fought with a fervour France's conscripts lacked.

Edgar was not alone in his disbelief. Raymond-Raoul Lambert, Herriot's deputy and a key figure in helping German-Jewish asylum-seekers in the 1930s, kept a diary he would maintain until 1943, when he was deported and gassed at Auschwitz. In one entry he said people had been 'put to sleep by censorship; we couldn't understand it'. France had second-rate leaders who had declared war without enthusiasm, had contemplated defeat early and had lost sight of the importance of freedom, with Pétain's surrender showing his spinelessness.

Edgar found the Armistice terms were equally shocking. France was divided in two, with the Germans controlling three-fifths of its territory, 29 million of its 42 million people, its capital, his ancestral homeland, Alsace, and the coast from Dunkirk to Hendaye, leaving only a shrunken rump as a Free Zone. Hitler's diktat did not mention the separation of the zones but German troops were soon laying barbed wire along a Demarcation Line. France would pay in artificially inflated Reichsmarks for the upkeep of 300,000 occupation troops, it would be limited to 100,000 lightly armed soldiers and its navy would either be neutralised in Axis-controlled ports or dispatched to the colonies. France's 1.85 million prisoners of war would be bargaining chips in talks over a final peace treaty. In addition, under article XIX, France had to surrender

from the Free Zone any Reich subjects the Germans wanted. Pétain was, therefore, knowingly abandoning Jews who had fled Nazi Germany.

Edgar and Yvonne were now cut off from relatives still in Paris, including Edgar's sisters, Louise and Alice, Alice's daughter, Maryse, her disabled husband, André Schoenfeld, and their daughter, Denise. Yet, Parisian officials would have to implement Hitler's racist legislation. Edgar's family were also cut off from their home while La Maison would now be split in two, with the Paris office under German rule.

The family stayed in the *pension* while they waited for the situation to clarify. Ninette 'was so shocked I nearly died' when she entered Louis' room and saw her senatorial cousin sitting on his bed, wearing only a vest and long woollen underpants. Her parents had been 'so prudish' she had only ever seen her father fully clothed. Ninette was also surprised when Louis gave her money to buy cigarettes for him but this did enable her to explore old Perpignan's picturesque streets.

Confusion reigned despite the Armistice. Before Reynaud resigned, he requisitioned the *Massilia* to transport the government to Algiers. On 21 June, with the Armistice not yet signed, forty-odd parliamentarians, including Daladier and Mandel, sailed for Morocco. These '*durs*' thought that if Hitler's terms were not accepted, a government could be reconstituted in Algiers to seek better terms or fight on. At the time, Pétain gave no indication he disapproved and Admiral François Darlan, the new navy minister, masterminded arrangements. In a sign of the times, however, the crew refused to load baggage so Darlan sent in marines to quell the mutineers. The numbers planning to leave had been higher but Pétain was playing a double game. He told some politicians their departure had his blessing, then congratulated '*mous*' for remaining.

While at sea, the ship's radio broadcast the Armistice and the forty asked to return to Bordeaux but the captain refused. The same day, Pierre Laval, a leading '*mou*', became one of Pétain's deputies and lodged an indictment charging Mandel with plotting with Britain against France. Pétain followed that with a broadcast saying a government in Africa was 'the silly dream of a sprinkling of Frenchmen who are ill informed' and Mandel was arrested when the boat reached Casablanca. Back in France, criticism of the forty evacuees, now cast as deserters, was tinged with antisemitism even though Jews had been joined on the *Massilia* by antisemites.

Louis Louis-Dreyfus could easily have crossed the Spanish border, knowing Franco would welcome his family, not least because Ninette's father had recently been organising reconstruction loans following the Nationalists' Civil War victory. Louis and Edgar decided, however, they would let no one accuse them of cutting 'themselves off from the French community'. Louis would take his wife, Emmy, and their daughter, Lina, to their Cannes home, the villa Eldée, on the Croisette, next door to the Hôtel Martinez. Later, Lina's newly demobilised husband, Jean, rented villa Santa-Anita on boulevard Eugène Gazagnaire on the far side of the cap de la Croisette.

Based in Cannes with his family around him, Louis could fulfil his senatorial duties and travel to wherever Pétain might select for his seat of government. With the Atlantic coast surrendered, this had to be inland. Pétain ruled out various towns as too socialist in favour of Vichy, a spa town 20 kilometres from Laval's birthplace with the infrastructure to support a government-in-exile. On 2 July, therefore, Louis was summoned to Vichy's Grand Casino to vote on replacing la République française with l'État français.

Edgar, meanwhile, would work from the Louis Dreyfus office in Marseille so that became the destination for Ninette

at the end of a three-week exode in which Joseph had driven her family, Nounou and Cric 1,700 kilometres. First, they needed accommodation. As in Bordeaux, antisemitism was on display, with 'The Jews are our curse' chalked on walls. Edgar tried the Hôtel de Noailles, where the crème of Marseille society would gather, but was turned away. Viviane witnessed her parents' confrontation with the manager. 'They tried to believe in the excuses given them because they were so used to being welcomed,' she recalled. 'They could not believe they were not welcome.' Edgar did, however, receive a less racist response from the Hôtel Louvre et Paix and this became home for the next few months, though not for Cric the cat, whom Nounou placed with her family, nor for Joseph, who drove back to Paris to collect some family items.

The Louvre et Paix had its charms for Ninette, who marvelled at the caryatids either side of its entrance. The family's first-floor rooms, one for Edgar and Yvonne, one for their daughters and one for Nounou, were linked by a balcony from which they could look out over the Canebière, the Champs-Élysées of Marseille, to the Vieux-Port and the nineteenth-century Église Saint-Vincent de Paul, built to imitate Reims Cathedral. The hotel was full of exodians, including the actors attracted to France's Los Angeles thanks to films made there by Marcel Pagnol and Jean Renoir. Ninette was fascinated by the louche, sinister looks of Jules Berry, whose room was along the corridor. Sometimes Berry, who played the villain in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, Renoir's homage to Blum's Popular Front government, would step onto his balcony for a smoke, causing admirers to gawp from the pavement. Once, when Viviane was on the balcony, the crowd concluded she too was a film star so she waved, receiving an ovation. The Jews included the Austrian novelist Franz Werfel and his wife, Alma, widow of Gustav Mahler. The