

Chapter 6

To Brussels and Paris

Early in the morning, we started for the tram which would take us to the train for Brussels. We broke into two groups and began following our guides for a walk of about one mile to the train station. It went without a hitch, as the girls knew exactly what they were doing and behaved as if they had gone through this before with fewer people.

The ride on the tram and train went without incident, and we arrived at the railroad station in Brussels about noon. The difference between German control in Belgium and the Netherlands was evident. People moved freely in the Brussels station. We were even approached by individuals selling silk stockings on the black market. (This item was difficult to find even in the United States at the time.) Our guides acknowledged that almost anything one wanted could be bought in Brussels. I got the feeling that German officials were responding to the cooperative way in which the king had surrendered the country to Hitler.

We left the railroad station and walked a few blocks to a café, where we went upstairs to eat as if we were regular customers, but our dining room was isolated from the common dining room. The man who was to be our next guide met us at this café, and after a time the girls left us. We spent most of the afternoon there, and for the first time I was exposed to the unisex restroom. It made a lasting impression on this modest young man, and even today I have not become totally comfortable with many of the European restrooms. In that café I had observed both men and women entering and leaving through a door which bore the initials W.C., for water closet. When it became necessary for me to visit that room, it was with some

hesitation that I entered and found regular urinals for men along the wall and toward the back of this room two stalls that had doors on them. One was marked WC Messieurs and the other WC Mesdames. I quickly used a urinal and exited with a sigh of relief that no females passed my backside to use the stall while I was in there.

After dark our new guide led us out of the café to catch a streetcar. His timing was good and there was no waiting, but the crowd on the streetcar led to some anxious moments for us six fliers. When the street car stopped, there was only limited standing room on the rear platform. When our guide shoved us onto the platform, the conductor began asking for money or tickets. Our guide, unable to get on the platform, was actually standing on the step along with other men. His posterior projected out some distance as he hung on to a hand rail. From this precarious position he handed the conductor money and in clear English said, "Give me seven of the best." The conductor returned his change without apparent regard for the English expression. If he understood our guide's remark he showed no surprise. He had collected our fare: that was his job, and he had performed it.

To add to the exciting start, we had gone only about one block when our guide's posterior knocked the globe off a chest-high street light used to designate the standing area for pedestrian waiting to board a streetcar. Uninjured, he laughed as enough people got off so he could pull himself onto the platform. The ride took us to another part of Brussels where we were taken into a large three-story home to remain for several days.

The lady of this house seemed to be functioning under considerable stress. I am not sure she approved of housing so many people at one time. In addition to the six of us, she had two other American fliers and some Dutch resistance personnel in her home. Two of the Dutchmen said they had been involved in blowing up a government building in Den

Haag and destroying records to make it more difficult for the Germans to detect faked Dutch identification papers. Such false identification papers were essential to many people under German occupation.

I do not know everything that went on in that house in Brussels, but I had the feeling it was a very active point in resistance. The house was well maintained as if to provide for businessmen on an extended visit. The lady of the house had a limited amount of food but did her best to meet our needs with the salads she made – and they were tasty. Among those in the resistance who were going and coming were individuals who could make identification papers we could use to pass the customs officers as we went from Belgium into France.

Although I had an I.D. card from Holland that contained a picture from my escape kit, they wanted something better. For taking pictures of fliers at our base in England, the same civilian clothes had been used over and over since essentially all the clothing we had was our uniforms. The Germans had captured enough airmen with escape kits so that they could recognize those same clothes from the pictures that had been made for many airmen.

Without cameras and film for making pictures in private, the resistance personnel turned to their best alternative. To get our pictures in the clothes we were then wearing, they took us to a public photo booth. A young man took two of us to downtown Brussels on a streetcar during the morning after the stores had opened, escorted us into a photo booth in one of the department stores for a quick picture, and returned us by streetcar to our hiding place. The next day I had new identification papers!

While we were in hiding in Brussels, General Rommel returned from North Africa and paraded through the streets of Brussels in a show of strength. Although it made good conversation, we were content to stay hidden and not observe the parade.

In a few days it was time for us to be moving on to Paris. The guide who had moved six of us across Brussels on a streetcar now found himself with eight fliers – seven Americans and one British – to transport to Paris. They decided it was safer to move us in two groups of four each. I went in the second group a few days after the first four evaders had reached Paris.

The method of moving us was the same for both groups, but the first group had the more exciting trip. When they went to the train station in the evening to catch the Berlin-Brussels-Paris train, there was considerable delay. American planes had bombed the railroad in Germany that day. When the train did arrive, it was overcrowded as well as late. The three Americans and the British flier found themselves jammed in with people who might discover their identity. Therefore, when they reached the Belgium-France border and had to get off the train to pass through customs before the train could proceed, the guide made a quick surveillance of the entire train. He found what he decided was a safer place for these fliers to ride. His decision shows the kind of man he was and explains why I consider him the most unforgettable character I have ever met even though I have never learned his name.

This guide was about six feet tall, had dark hair, and spoke fluent English, American style. The story was that he had been born and brought up in the Netherlands and so spoke Dutch. He had lived in Germany and spoke German like a native. He had gone to school in Oklahoma, and it was here that his English took on the American accent. He spoke proper French and Flemish. In addition, he claimed to speak Spanish, but like a foreigner and not like a Spaniard. Not knowing the other languages, I can only attest to his ability with English. The stories about this man were that he was in the Dutch Army and was taken prisoner by the Germans. He escaped from the German prison camp and worked his way into Spain where he asked the Dutch

Consul's office to send him to England to join the Dutch military there. Because of his languages and personal background, they asked him to return to Holland and become a part of the resistance and escape activities. This is why he was there helping us.

He wore black German boots that he was said to have removed from a German soldier he had killed while performing his duties. He carried himself like a German officer and reportedly used his command of the German language to associate with German officers when he traveled alone. I am sure that it would have been easy to take him for a Gestapo agent in civilian clothes. To do his job it helped to be very versatile and part actor. Acting or not, his behavior convinced me that the stories about this individual could be true. There were many talents and a lot of finesse among those who worked behind enemy lines. I learned to respect them for the work they did and the way they did it, whether assigned or voluntary.

What this guide had found on the train while at the border was a car full of German soldiers. It had not been necessary for them to get off and go through customs. Their car was not crowded, and many of them were taking up two seats to stretch out and sleep. Into this car the guide took the four fliers after they had passed through customs. In German he chastised the soldiers for taking up so much space on an overcrowded train and proceeded to seat the fliers among the German soldiers for the remainder of their night ride to Paris.

While this tactic was a hair-raising experience for the fliers, the successful results demonstrate that it was a good move on the part of the guide. German soldiers were discouraged from talking, especially to strangers, when on any kind of a troop movement for fear they might divulge some military secret. Therefore, the soldiers made no attempt at conversation though civilians in the crowded cars certainly would have.

When it came time for my group of four to go to Paris a few nights later, the train was on time and the trip went smoothly. I was carrying a small suitcase containing a pair of work shoes, shirt, trousers, and my shaving equipment – which would be the bare minimum for a worker on leave. My identity papers said I was a deaf and dumb baker working in France. It was easy for customs to check my suitcase, and there were no questions. There was still an odd feeling, though, about being taken through customs and displaying my forged papers.

As I look back I see some factors were in my favor. The able-bodied men had been conscripted for the army or put into forced labor camps. An unusually large percentage of the men traveling may indeed have had some type of physical impairment. Also, some of the people who worked in the customs office sympathized with the resistance movement and actively supported it when they could. In addition, experience had shown our guide and others that this was one way to move quickly across the border from Belgium to France. However, my discussion with other evaders convinces me that my trip through customs when passing from Belgium to France was a rare experience. Most men were passed over the border at a place and time where they were not seen.

It was about 7:00 a.m. and daylight when we arrived in the railroad station at Paris. As we walked out through the station to a subway entrance, I felt very uncomfortable. At the station, I could see a number places that I would consider excellent observation points for someone wanting to look down on the travelers in hopes of spotting groups like ours, but apparently, we were not as obvious as I felt because we were not stopped and proceeded to the subway without a problem. At least we had arrived in Paris, an expected stop on our way to Spain.