

# Malines

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*A memoir from the European conflict 1914-1918*

*Malines*

*House of the sacred heart of Mary*

*Rue Saint Jean*

“Le XXIeme Siecle” announced, in its edition of **Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> August**, that Germany had declared war on France and that the Belgian army was to be mobilised. It said, in its article on this: “the mobilisation of our army, in addition to the natural emotions roused, must increase the feeling of general security in the Belgian public spirit. The hour is extremely grave, we must take care. This is a sign that the political powers must recognise the serious nature of our resolution, they must be certain that we want to remain neutral”

That same day we were told that we would have to lodge 300 soldiers, that first great trouble, though what was that in comparison with those which we would feel later? Our great hall, the courtyard and many classrooms in the free school were put at the disposition of 125 men who, during the afternoon, arrived here with rucksacks tired from a long forced march. A cart followed with bales of straw. Having quenched their thirst and refreshed themselves, they were quick to arrange their improvised barracks. Some men came into Malines to be equipped; they left us on Sunday about 10.30am, warmly thanking us for the services we had done them: hot drinks, meals, care of their blistered feet, etc.

The newspaper on **2nd August** carried in banner headlines “**Germany has given an ultimatum to Belgium. Germany has summoned Belgium to join Germany in the war against France. Belgium refuses this and declares that she has decided to defend energetically her neutrality.**”

On **Monday 3rd August** two of our sisters returned from Mouscron, they shared with us the emotion which reigned at the border; already it was difficult to travel. At Malines, much was done to prepare for the reception of ambulances. On the advice of our chaplain, the archbishop’s secretary, we prepared 25 beds. We used the Great Hall for this and our helpful neighbours also lent us things.

That same day, the brother of one of our young sisters, accompanied by his friend, two brave volunteers, came to ask us whether they could sleep here – they inaugurated our new installation. At 10.30 pm, a third came to join them, presenting as a recommendation, a letter from his aunt– a former pupil from our Brussels school in the Rue de Marais.

Over the next several days soldiers, individually or in groups of two or three, arrived here at all hours to rest: we knew some; friends, nephews, brothers of the religious in the community. Each ring of the doorbell brought something new. Once it was a priest accompanied by a young man, 17 years old at most. He came in a hurry to ask access to the Tabernacle, he gave Holy Communion to his young companion who then went as quickly as possible to re-join his regiment with, still beating in his young heart, the God who would give him the strength to live and to die valiantly. Then it was a soldier who wanted to be confessed, he then approached the Holy Altar with a most moving respect and deportment and, before leaving the chapel, he knelt down and prayed at the Lady Chapel

**On Saturday 8th August** we received the first patient in our ambulance station, a volunteer, a cold spell had given him pulmonary congestion, and after the military doctor’s visit, he was transferred to hospital. Three other volunteers, miners from Liege, followed him; they were completely exhausted; 48 hours of rest and of good care enabled them to follow their regiment which was leaving the town.

**From Monday 10th to 18th**, we gave food and lodging to a brigade of 42 volunteers. Our neighbours – workers and small tradesmen – wanted to take part in our patriotic charitable work and brought us, for our guests, bread, potatoes and even meat; they themselves gave them sugar, cigarettes, etc. These soldiers’ time was occupied by shooting practise, training, tiring marches and alerts!

One evening at 10.30pm, the alarm bell went – everyone was shaken, *quickly, quickly they had to leave* – our good sisters hastily wrapped up the bread and butter prepared for the following day's breakfast. The departure for Gent, started off by a song from Brabanconne! Half an hour later they were back – it was a false alarm, with the goal of preparing them for nocturnal surprises.

**On 14th August** during the evening, reverend mother received – for the Holy Virgin – a magnificent bouquet, and a symbolic card on which was written, in a flowery hand, this thought more naive than sentimental no doubt “far from the eyes, close to the heart”

**On 15th August** they came to mass in our chapel and said their last goodbyes on 18<sup>th</sup> August, loaded with scapulars and medals and promising to give us their news after the war! Alas, how many would survive it?

**On Wednesday 19th** at 7pm, our courtyard presented a most moving sight; about 130 fugitives from the neighbouring villages – Betecom, Aestret, Tremmeloo – old people, men and women, families with 7 or 8 or 12 children, came here seeking refuge. These unfortunates, terrified by the noise of the cannons, had escaped carrying what they could: donkeys and dogs pulling little carts full of rags and tattered bedding; one ragamuffin was there, trembling, a goat in his arms. All these poor people sat in a mournful silence; one heard only the cries of babies a few weeks old. After something to eat, they rested on the soldiers' straw and remained here till the Friday, 21<sup>st</sup>. Before leaving us they asked for Reverend Mother and the men uncovered their heads respectfully, nearly all with tears in their eyes, while a venerable old man spoke and in a voice trembling with emotion, he expressed the eternal gratitude of everyone.

At the same time as this group was here, a commandant came with his regiment asking to rest for three hours, they had walked 40km and must then continue to flee from the enemy who was heading towards Malines. Seeing the sad scene already described, they decided to shelter in a military circle, opposite the Convent. The officers rested on the beds in our ambulance station and, during the three hours, we washed the ruined feet of these valiant defenders of our country, bandaging wounds, piercing blisters, applying tincture of iodine to the sore places. These were the last soldiers we met and all, without exception, had been pleasant, not a bad word between them or with us; they showed themselves to be grateful for all the material care – which had been prodigious – and for the spiritual support which had been promised for the duration of the war. If God would grant them life and ... memory, they would return to show us their wives and their kids. Oh! Their wife, their old mother and their little ones ... these thoughts brought a tender light into their eyes but they did not stop them from being impatient to fight for the defence of their native soil; the sacred love for the fatherland, oh no, it is not a vain word...

What a night was that of 19<sup>th</sup>. It seemed that all of Malines was on foot. There were heavy carts shaking the buildings, cars being driven at breakneck speed and sounding their horns, it never stopped. What was happening? ... It was the approach of the German army and the Belgian army left Malines to concentrate on the nearest forts where they had stockpiled munitions.

**On Sunday 23rd August** at 5.30pm we hosted 18 fugitives from Tirlemont for a day, including a little old lady of 83. We took great care of her and when someone washed her feet she said with a sigh of relief “Oh! May you have a good seat in paradise!”

**On Monday 24th August** it was a poor terrified mother with two infants, she had left her man and little boys in Louvain, and her anxiety about them made her pitiable to see ... She left us at the first rumble of cannon. The first rumble of cannon! How it resounded in our ears and even more, perhaps, within our hearts.

**It was on Tuesday 25th** at 4.30am that they were first heard in the distance. By 5.30, during prayer, the cannon fire was obviously getting closer to us and the whistling of the shells was heart-stopping. While most of the community fled to the cellars; several, together with a priest/ambulance driver who had come, providentially to say mass, looked to see the direction of the cannon-fire. St Rombaut's cathedral was their target. The heavy shelling lasted about half an hour and we heard Holy Mass in thanksgiving for the Divine Protection we were accorded us. We learnt from the priest who said a second mass for at 7am that the windows of St Rombaut's and many nearby houses had been badly damaged. At midday there was a great hubbub in the road. There had been an exchange of fire between the German Cavalry and the Belgian Guards near Coloma; two Germans had drowned in the canal, three others were wounded and taken

prisoner; it was the passing of these three which caused the tumult. Half an hour later, a valiant soldier, whose courage had been charged by the Marie-José medal which he had just been awarded, hurriedly embraced Sr. Athanase and, trusting in his own patriotic fervour, announced that in a few hours the Germans would be far from Malines

**Wednesday 26th.** The greatest privations began to make themselves felt – no Mass. The parish priest came to give us Holy Communion and Jesus shared His divine strength to enable us to drink the chalice which he has prepared for us. Until Sunday we did not have the Holy Sacraments to support us. No signs of life from any of our other houses for eight days, not even from even from our dear Coloma, so close to us...

In the afternoon, a sister risking going into the town for necessities heard a policeman cry out in the streets “Flee, or hide in your cellars, there is great danger!” He told her too, exaggerating, that everyone was leaving the town; our neighbouring religious, the Apostolines, the Poor Clares and the Carmelites had left. Some of us were terrified, but nearly everyone continued to trust fully in Divine Providence. Our Reverend Mother had written, over the last eight days, a letter to our Mother General, which she added to after every alert. How could it be sent to her?

At last, towards 5pm, a red Cross ambulance driver, dripping with sweat from the efforts he had made to reach us, brought us an envelope from Coloma and took with him Reverend Mother’s letter. He had hardly left the house when the thunder of cannon and the rattle of machine-gun-fire were heard. We ran quickly to the cellars, and it was just in time! A formidable cracking terrified us. Everything seemed to be collapsing around us, our house had certainly been hit; we prayed, many cried, the whole world shook. The bombardment continued for an hour, less strong in our direction. We lit a blessed candle and continued to pray, pressed one against another. What prayer, my Lord, as with such a test we felt, more than ever, the need of divine help. At last, we began to breathe again and, by the glow of the blessed flame, we read the following lines from our dear Mother General:

*“My Dear Mother,*

*At last I have found someone I could commission to ask you for your news and to give you ours! I cannot describe to you the life which we have been leading since Monday and the anxiety I have felt for your house. They say it is worse in the country than in town. On Sunday evening we started by taking care of three Germans; on Monday this didn’t stop, more than 100 wounded Belgians; Tuesday again, then in the evening all of them were evacuated. Some rifle fire sent a bullet into the kitchen wall and grazed Sr. Gudule... the following day there was shellfire which did great damage in the town and made our whole house shake, but by Divine protection we have been preserved. In the morning, on Wednesday, they built a bridge right in front of our gate and another a little bit further away. In the afternoon towards 4.30, someone told us that they were going to blow up both bridges and we should take refuge in the cellar. The blast was terrible! Nearly 300 window-panes at the front of the house were broken, and that is not all. Underneath the main bridge they have placed 100kg of dynamite; they will blow it up at the approach of the enemy; but will wait until the last moment. That blast will be even more formidable and I do not know how our house will react, but in the cellars we are safe, and every time there is an alert ( and we have had quite a few) we all rush to the cellar. Two days ago our neighbours and our workmen came to stay with their families of 6 or 7 children. There is even an abandoned cow which has come to take refuge with us and has already given two buckets of milk. All the cellars are full, and most of the religious spend their nights there. War is such a curse! One does not live any more, but one prays; these hundreds of people never ceasing to implore God, it reminds us of the first Christians in the catacombs. Tomorrow we will say a mass that the main bridge will not have to be blown up, and on Saturday in thanksgiving I hope. A small team of Prussians came this morning on the road as far as the church, yesterday too, but on the other side of the canal. What was most striking was yesterday evening, (when we were waiting for the enemy) was a mournful silence on the road after two days of extraordinary din, ambulances, soldiers, horses, cannons etc.. and yesterday not a soul... everyone in the neighbourhood has run away apart from those who are staying with us. There is no news of our houses, neither trains nor post... and my letters are not getting through to them either, that is what gives me the most heartache. It was the week of our retreat!*

*Only one wounded man died here. For the moment there is nobody else. We almost had to throw the last one underneath the stretcher in the ambulance... we were afraid of the enemy.... My daughters are at the end of their strength and anguished. Don’t delay in giving me your news.*

*Good bye my good mother, my dear daughters, I bless you most maternally and I remain yours  
D.E.M.G.”*

Ignorance of what had been happening at Coloma had been difficult for us; the anxiety which replaced it was no less. We could only pray and abandon all to Divine Providence who alone could relieve us.

Towards 6.30pm all noise stopped, Malines seemed like a dead town; some took the risk of leaving the cellar. What a sight! Our cloister wall, fronting the street, was mostly broken-through by a bomb. Shrapnel had devastated the flowerbeds, made holes in the walls. The courtyard was strewn with bits of bricks and broken glass. Inside, there were holes in the ceilings and the stairs and corridors were carpeted with broken glass.

The doorbell rang, it was the Police Commissioner, he was stupefied by the state of our building; we showed him our refuge in the cellar, but he found it dangerous, looking at how shallow it was and the four large windows. After examining everywhere, he concluded that our coal cellar was the only really safe place; and it was there, between three heaps of combustibles leaking stifling smells, that we would take refuge at every disquieting noise... and how could we do that? A slamming door, anything that fell, sounded like cannon fire and made the heart stop. Many people did not leave this unhealthy place from Wednesday to Saturday.

**Friday 28th.** Bombardment all day which redoubled in intensity around 3pm; someone said that our house was a target for the gunners, that they were aiming at St. Rombaut, and our side facade is on the same horizontal plane as the cathedral, so all the badly-aimed shells come and land on our property. Two shells exploding with a terrible cracking as the casings burst, came to fill us with fresh terror, knocking down a door in the cellar and completely breaking the tiles. At each blow, the house seemed about to collapse. What ardent prayers to God, what tender filial calls on the Holy Virgin, Mother of Divine Providence, to the Heart of Mary, to Notre Dame of Hanswyck, what pious calls to the holy patron saints of Belgium, to all the saints we had relics of around us. Throughout this whole day, our valiant cook, strengthened by the assurance of doing her duty, tried very hard, despite heavily damaged kitchen, to prepare some food for us, which each could take where she felt safest.

Towards 6pm it calmed down. The whole day we had not seen anyone. The electricity supply had been cut by the blasts and so no one could ring the doorbell. An ingenious cord attached to the big bell was passed through the peep hole of the door onto the street, with the invitation to pull it. Two of our brave sisters dared to go and see the parish priest – nobody there; to the major seminary – no-one! At last Providence put in their way three individuals who let them know that the flag was on display at the tower, because the enemy had been pushed back that far, but they were taking their revenge by throwing petrol bombs which caused fires. This caused a new panic; but also another chance to pray even more urgently to God and all our holy Patrons. Despite the trust that one wants to place in them, what a night could we have in this contaminated dormitory! And when, and how, would we be able to get out of this? It was a most propitious time to pray “If it should come to me this day, O my Lord...”

**Saturday 29.** Saturday! This day gave us fresh hope which was not in vain; we were given some relief. About 8am the chaplain from Coloma arrived, and looking at the state of our buildings and their position on the front line, he advised us to take ourselves to Coloma at once, by whichever route was the most accessible, in groups of 3 or 4. Some did not need to hear this twice, no sooner said than done. Others made some preparations and took everything that could serve as food.

The chaplain carried the consecrated hosts and, with Jesus, our most precious treasure, we left the house, trusting in the heart of Mary and in the Sacred Heart of Jesus – whose beautiful statue rested miraculously intact in the middle of a mass of rubble and just a few centimetres away from a deep bomb crater.

On the doorstep we met our devoted builder who had already gone to much trouble to provide provisions for us; he was happy to undertake to come and feed our little farm-yard. En route to Coloma, we saw hardly anybody; cats and abandoned dogs roamed the streets. Some cavalry soldiers seemed to be watching over the town. A group of women looked at us with astonishment and sadness. “You are going to abandon us too”; said one of them, “all the rich people and the religious are going.” We re-assured them, saying that we were not going further than Coloma. Near there, we encountered sentries, swaggering with rifles. It wasn't without fright that we saw the bridge, mined with dynamite. Some mistook their way and were obliged to cross the canal using a poor plank, held on one side by an old man and on the other by an awkward 10-year-old boy. But the hour of God had not yet arrived and they “landed” safe and sound, though not without trembling.

Our good mothers of Coloma opened their house and their arms with a most maternal emotion; our dear sisters welcomed us with cries of relief; from now on we would now live, tremble and pray together. Tremble, did I say? No, our mothers were so calm, so full of trust in Divine Providence, that this state transmitted itself to everyone and, without neglecting any prudent precautions we could, in the reception of

the sacraments and in the communal prayer, find all the strength needed to live day to day, hour to hour. At 3.30pm we had a half-hour of Adoration before the Jesus exposed on the Blessed Sacrament. The beautiful statue of the Sacred Heart which was over the tabernacle with its open arms seemed to tell us: "I, too, welcome you with tenderness."

**On Sunday 30th** we had the consolation of three masses attended by all the people of Coloma, the elderly, men, women and children; these last prayed so simply, communicating such innocence, that we were moved and reassured by the sight.

The threat that the bridge would be blown up gave us palpitations, but after a mass said for this intention, our worries were dispelled and we felt almost certain that blowing up the bridge would not be necessary. Our contractor's son came to bring us our keys and to warn us that he was going to leave town with his parents. The mayor had announced that several trains were available for those who wanted to go somewhere safer. So, would our poultry starve?... Having talked with the chaplain, three Dames and two Sisters risked the journey back to the rue St Jean, and having taken care of everything that might perish, whether animal or vegetable, they brought back the last of the food.

No sooner had they returned when there was a hail of bullets that sounded as though it was hitting our roof – it was a fire fight between Uhlans (Polish Cavalry) and the Belgian sentries. We took refuge in the cellars again which reminded us of catacombs, and there we prayed.

**Monday 31st.** We are always on the alert; there is more shelling of the town, another attempt on the arsenal – which is close to Coloma; the roar of cannon shakes the house and made us very afraid. Our dear Mother General told us, without evident anxiety, "In your prayer, you must ask for something with your daily bread". ... because our stock of food is running out. There are more than 100 people to feed; but with the devoted bursar we entrust ourselves to Divine Providence and it did not fail us. A neighbour came to ask shelter for three cows, which gave us their milk, the Dames and Sisters made a journey into the town and managed to buy eggs, sugar, chocolate, rice, several Dutch cheeses and even half a pig! There was enough flour; our good lay sisters became improvised bakers and baked the necessary bread.

**Tuesday 1st September.** Towards evening there was another cause for alarm. A Belgian officer came to put telephone lines up on the tower of St Joseph's Church; these wires crossed the vegetable garden. Obviously this is another new and great danger for the Coloma house: if the enemy sees it, they will do their best to damage or destroy it, using cannon-fire perhaps, the chaplain, so reassuring so far, is worried wonders if there may still be a way we could flee.

Our dear Mother General has always hidden her anxieties seems preoccupied; her night of anxious insomnia may have made the treasure of her merits great. As a precaution, the Blessed Sacrament was taken down to the cellars, and groups of three religious prayed there in turns. Once more, turning to God in prayer calmed our cruel terrors without making them disappear completely, and Wednesday and Thursday were the most peaceful days we had had up till then.

Three Dames and four Sisters went to the rue St Jean. Belgian soldiers, guarding the canal banks vigilantly, were stopping civilians crossing the canal, but they let the sisters cross – it was a raft which took them to the other side.

**4th September**, first Friday of the month, and we take refuge today in the Heart of Jesus asking that he would always shelter us from the Germans and their destructive machines. The sun is radiant, and it was also in our hearts as we had three masses, the first at 5am celebrated by a military chaplain, who had spent the night sleeping in the open air with his regiment. All day long we hear distant artillery fire; it upsets us, because we think of those who suffer its terrible effects.

Around 5pm, an aeroplane appeared. Since the beginning of the war we have seen them each day. Sometimes their noise is accompanied by that of the guns which hunt them. They fly so high that we cannot see enough to know to which nation they belong to.

**Saturday 5th September.** Everything is calm for now, and our sisters set out and did their best to buy food for us; one solitary baker cooked for the whole town, just two or three shops were open. The poorest people could, with authorisation, present themselves and be served free. A little cart brought back all their shopping to Coloma.

The chaplain, for his part, is admirable in his devotion. Despite all the dangers, he continually tries to find food for us and brings us any reassuring news.

**Sunday 6th September.** We hoped for a calm day, so the chaplain gave us the consolation of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in our chapel. At 8am cannons roared and a bomb whistled just over the chapel. As a precaution, we took the Blessed Sacrament down to the cellar where the adoration continued. There was persistent cannon fire from here and there up till midday; we thought it might be Belgian manoeuvres at the fort at Waelhem.

**Monday 7th.** It was not a crowing cock which woke us up at 2.40am but a loud burst of rifle fire, untimely and far too early in the morning, very close to us in our courtyard, you would say. The more impressionable were out of bed and afoot in the most varied of costumes! The braver people turned over in bed and tried to get back to their interrupted slumber.

At midday, the chaplain told us that there was great hope that the enemy would go further away.

**Tuesday 8th.** Our sisters returned from the town. They had seen the roads black with soldiers. It was said that there was a battle at Elewyt - half an hour away from here – they wanted to sweep the enemy away from positions they have been occupying for the last fortnight. Between 3am and 8pm the thunder of cannons never stopped. At bed time a commander of 200 lancers asked for shelter where they could eat and rest. We offered the domestic science classroom to the officers. They hadn't been there five minutes when a bomb exploded just 200m away. For our security they thought it prudent to go elsewhere and advised us to spend the night underground, in view of the missiles which might reach us.

**Thursday 10th, Friday 11th, Saturday 12th.** Every hour of these three days brought us a new emotion. Above all, there were the great explosions of big guns from 7am to 8pm! Then the incessant goings and comings of armed soldiers – both infantry and cavalry – of cyclists, cars, ambulances and lorries so heavy that their passing made the whole house shake. Some were going to the battle field, others were returning from it and all this sinister disturbance continued throughout the night despite torrential rain. These fights and the shooting from the fort at Waelhem have had the result of dislodging the enemy from numerous areas and have made them lose a lot of men, but they still occupy Elewyt where they have skilfully dug trenches.

Mr Woeste, minister for public information, accompanied by the son of the president of the United States and a Spanish prince, came to visit our establishment in Coloma. Generals and officers asked for rooms where they can rest a little and have meetings. Whole regiments with an order to remain for a few hours at Coloma arrive here even in the middle of the night. Everyone is delighted at the great hospitality offered, congratulates us on the courage we show in remain peacefully at our post in a house exposed to such danger. It was because we have as our head a valiant General who has such smiling trust in God that she can communicate this to her battalion of religious. During the whole of the most dangerous time, she herself acted as portress, ready to show herself first to the redoubtable enemy.

**From 12th - 24th** the house at Coloma remained a refuge for all the unfortunates of the area but also became an outpost for the army which was concentrated at Malines. The whole free school building, including the kitchen of the domestic science school, was occupied by soldiers. The pavilion served as the officers' bedroom and staff headquarters; they ate in the parlour beside the kitchen. The engineers were installed in the orangery and had set up telephone and telegraph there which allowed them to communicate with Anvers and the nearby forts. Their military machines, cannons, machine guns, ambulances, etc were all parked in the courtyard and on the quay in front of the house.

**Thursday 24th September.** We tasted a whole range of emotions that day. In the morning, after the two masses and while most of the religious were making the Way of the Cross, a young soldier entered the chapel accompanied by a military chaplain and followed by two armed policemen. These stayed at the entrance to the chapel while the chaplain gave communion to the soldier. After the ten minutes thanksgiving, one of the policemen gave a signal and all four left. A few minutes later we heard rifle shots and realised with horror that the unfortunate man we had just seen at the Lord's Altar had been shot because of some breaking of the laws of war. We hoped he would find grace before Divine Justice.

**On the 25th,** the day which had been fixed for the return of our students, and during one of our work periods, a Colonel asked to see Mother General. Twenty minutes later she returned and told us that Providence had sent us two boarders. She was still moved by the sad picture that had she had just seen.

An octogenarian couple, the last two inhabitants of Hofstade, who did not want to be dislodged from their poor tumble down old cottage, resolute that they wanted to die there, where they had lived, had been brought here by force by the officers who wanted to save them from the certain danger they were facing. The sick old lady had not left her bed for four months, and they carried her on a stretcher on a little cart. The old man was completely bent and a shadow of himself, barely managing to walk with the help of two crutches. We made them comfortable in the two huge beds in the infirmary for the religious. We pampered them and the innocent old lady said "you will not leave and we will stay here with you forever!" While waiting for better times, Modeste spent part of his day in an armchair crammed in close to his Therese's bed. In this shared trial their conjugal love consoled them and their accents touched us as they thanked those who were intermediaries of the Good Lord in helping them with such angelic solicitude.

His excellence, Cardinal Mercier, came to tell us of his admiration for the courage which we have shown by remaining at our perilous post throughout this testing time. He thanked us for having been providence in the village. He had a kind word for each of the refugees, especially for the old people, he stroked and blessed the little children, and gave them all medals. He shook hands cordially with both soldiers and officers. He sent us, several times, meat and vegetables for distribution.

Our return to Malines had been decided upon three times, and three times we had been given alarming news of the situation – a sixth bombardment was foreseen!

Indeed, **on Sunday 27th**, there was cannon-fire already starting during the 6am mass. After the second mass, at 8am, the shocks were no longer bearable in the chapel and the Blessed Sacrament was taken to the cellars. Then a great artillery duel began which we had to endure the whole day; the whistle of shells, the explosions as shrapnel hit our buildings – making holes in them and breaking them in some places – these made us shiver. During the afternoon some terrified runaways came to look for shelter in our cellars; we were brought a mortally wounded Belgian soldier, he died soon afterwards. A tearful mother begged for relief for her poor little daughter, hit by a piece of shrapnel on the way. The military doctor reported that she had a fractured skull and her condition was desperate. All this was taking place during the infernal din of exploding shells as they were aiming at the station and the arsenal and Coloma was in the line of fire. Some religious could no longer bear it. Mother General said that they could try to depart for England, but with communications with Anvers interrupted they would have to get there on foot with all the noise and the risk from these terrible cannons. Seven religious went, led by the father of a respectable family who was also looking for a refuge for himself and his family. After this emotional departure, what a night, my God, or rather what a terrible vigil!

**Monday 28th.** Towards 6a.m. our heroic chaplain arrived through the shell-fire, to give us the bread that strengthens us, in the cellars. Hardly had he left us when an alarmed religious rushed in to tell us that he had been taken by the Germans. At the same moment we heard a burst of rifle fire in the courtyard. We all groaned in unison with pain which was relieved when ten minutes later we heard the voice of our courageous and holy friend. This is what had happened: since daybreak our chaplain been doing his duty of digging a grave for the poor Belgian soldier whose mortal remains had been entrusted to us; two religious were helping him in this difficult task. Suddenly two Cavalry men (Uhlans) were there before them. After questioning the religious were allowed to leave but the chaplain was forced to walk in front of these armed soldiers. At that moment some Belgian guards appeared and there was a fire fight between the two groups – this was the gun fire which we had heard – during which our valiant chaplain escaped and came to tell us of his tragic adventure. Tragic! That was the right word to describe the next hour. We could hear guns shooting all round us, coming from everywhere. Then we heard rifle butts smashing through the doors and windows, forcing them. We heard furious soldiers running up and down the house from the bell tower to the cellars where they found us. Several sisters went out, with their hands up, and in response to questioning assured the soldiers that there were neither soldiers nor men in the house. Some officers explored the cellars and told us to stay there, assuring us that we had nothing to fear from them. During this time, the fort at Waelhem sent, towards them, more shells which damaged the house further, particularly the oratory and the free school building which had sheltered Belgian soldiers for several weeks. Two lakes some 5m in diameter were made in the grounds, which were strewn with broken branches. During the next hour we could hear the soldiers running through the corridors over our heads; they were hurrying towards Malines and to avoid the bombs from Waelhem which were targeting them they crossed the pond by the iron railings, cutting through the grounds and the house. They had three wounded men, who they asked us to help. We bandaged them. They agreed to bury the dead Belgian soldier whose corpse was still here.

They covered him with a wooden cross on which was written "Here lies a brave man who died for his country".

Throughout the day, monstrous German cannons which had taken the place of our own, close to our house, directed their infernal fire towards the fort at Waelhem. Soldiers on patrol arrived for new searches. We heard with anguish that our devoted chaplain had again been taken and led as a hostage with some thirty people – women and children – who had stayed in the village. We were absolutely in the hands of the Germans, or, rather, we were in God's hands who was still with us and was hidden in many ways to better test our faith; it remained unbreakable and we did not want to ask when or how our martyrdom might end.

What would the night be like? This was the question every evening. Seeing that the enemy was advancing and all the other events of the day, it was evident that the siege of Anvers had begun and that we could not long manage to remain sheltered from the bombs. Some had not slept for several days. We proceeded to prepare "bunks" – straw mattresses were taken into the cellars and placed two by two along the underground corridor. Towards 10.30pm we heard heavy footsteps over our heads. Some religious went out to see what was happening, not without trembling, and spoke with two soldiers – a conversation most of us could not understand –but our sisters translated the gist of it "They are going to visit the cellars and forbid us to move or speak." One of the two stayed at the cellar entrance, the other, armed with a lantern and his rifle, began his inspection. Our straw mattresses occupied the whole width of the corridor and he had to stride over them, right over our bodies... Many of us had teeth chattering with fear, and others with contempt and disgust. He repeated too often that he was only doing his duty for us to believe it. At every side entrance he forced the sister accompanying him to go ahead of him. At last he met ... bottles! We heard his exclamations and understood that the goal of his visit had been achieved! He raised his voice, repeating several times " Oh wein (wine)! Oh, wein(wine)!" This was, no doubt, a signal to his accomplice who came at once to join him, gun at the ready. He climbed over us like the first and after five minutes deliberation they emerged from the cellar, arms full of bottles, and climbed back to the ground floor, still warning us not to move. Some of us could not have, they were rooted to the spot, stupefied. We waited with great impatience to see the end of this night, the worst of all.

In the morning, some officers arrived and we recounted this horrible event, but they excused it. They said that these were isolated cases. In every army there were some bad apples who could get out of hand sometimes. They wrote a notice, in German, over our porch, forbidding soldiers to cross it, and placed a guard. They agreed to provide what we needed in the critical situation in which we found ourselves... we lacked food. They brought us three cows, three pigs and a calf. Under their guard the sisters could collect a few spices etc which were left in the nearby local shops (we took notes so that the poor fugitives could be repaid later).

**Tuesday 29th** For three days we had great anxiety as to the fate of four of our lay sisters who had stayed at the rue St Jean with our carpenter. How had our house, so badly damaged already, got through the last bombardment which had been even more terrible than the preceding ones? At last, on Tuesday towards 3pm our brave sisters returned, overcome and exhausted, and what news they brought us. ...A day earlier, our vast and magnificent establishment with its school building so neat, so perfect, so modern, our wonderful sanctuary so beautiful, so prayerful, so restful – all of it had gone up in flames! A bomb had caused a fire in one house, this fire had spread to the Apostolines' convent which was now in ruins, and then it had blown towards our outbuildings, then the main building – the chapel, the great hall, the music academy, the Holy Mountain. Our good sisters, panic-stricken, believed that they could do nothing better than save everything that was in the chapel. So they did this. From the smallest little chair, which had no value at all, up to heavy statues which must have taken extraordinary strength to move. They took all this into the free school building which had been saved, as well as the two tenants' houses. What a pity that they did not think of removing the filing cabinets in Reverend Mother's Office and other precious things which would not have taken even a twentieth of the time which they had used to carry out 250 useless chairs! Our brave Sisters must not know the bitterness of our regret, because, with our carpenter, they had shown heroic courage.

Our holy Mother General received this terrible news with a calm which nothing could shake and with the spirit of faith with which she saw in everything, even the most painful events, an expression of the paternal will of God. Our good Mother Louise also edified us with her courageous resignation. Now we were truly poor, we had only what we could carry with us, and in our turn we had become refugees. But our refuge



was with our mothers and our sisters and we knew that we had much less to complain about than all the unlucky fugitives who had, so often since the beginning of the war, received a little relief here.

**On the 2nd of October** the Germans gained possession of the fort at Waelhem and invaded Malines, which had been completely evacuated by the army. They only living beings they found there were cats and dogs which had been abandoned. A governor took over the Town Hall, officers occupied the grand hotels and big houses, and marines cleared all the dangerous ruins and acted as firemen in the parts of the town that were still burning. A great number of others set themselves to empty every shop, filling enormous lorries with the fruit of their looting. They found the wine cellars in the main houses, and empty bottles littered the pavements. The town offered a distressing spectacle; the station, the cathedral, the beautiful churches, appeared like vast ruins and many parts of the town had been completely destroyed by the bombs or by fire. During the first days of the invasion there were no Belgians to be seen. Then soldiers, as they searched, made the poor workers come out of the cellars where they hidden with their little children and their old people. They gave them bread and potatoes at the Town Hall. We were witness to all these emotional scenes because we were authorized by the Town Governor to go each day to our property in the Rue St Jean. Soldiers accompanied us and helped us to carry anything that we wanted to take back safely to Coloma. Our chaplain was still in custody and we made many trips to try and obtain his liberty or at least to get a German Catholic priest.

**On Saturday 3rd October** Divine Providence sent a chaplain to us around 6pm. He was accompanied by a young marine who was at the same time his armed guard and his choir boy. The Blessed Sacrament, which we had adored in the cellar since last Sunday, was taken back to the chapel.

**The following day** during the Mass (said by this German priest), we had a wonderful surprise, seeing our poor chaplain enter followed by an armed policeman. After repeated attempts he had obtained three hours of freedom to celebrate Mass. He told us that he had spent the week in a military prison in Malines together with 30 women and workmen's children with nothing to lie down on for the night except the place for wine barrels and, for food, only bread with vegetable stew. The German priest, moved by this situation, promised to intervene with "His Excellency". Our heroic prisoner was taken back at 10am. Towards 11am the German priest brought him back by car bearing an official paper from the governor which allowed him to move between his house and the convent at Coloma.

**During this week**, Coloma had become a real farmyard. We had 6 cows, one calf, five pigs, fourteen goats, a sheep, some 50 rabbits, the hen run had been enriched by 40 fowl, and cats and dogs ran around the grounds. These animals had been brought to us by German soldiers, or we went to gather them from abandoned houses and in the middle of carcasses of their kind that had died of hunger. Each day some religious went into the surrounding fields to glean the food necessary to feed our beasts which gave to the community, the old people, and the sick, their milk and when necessary their flesh. German soldiers had already killed three pigs, a cow and a goat for us. They butchered the largest pieces and even made sausages, puddings and a certain, very successful, paté. As thanks, they accepted only a hot meal. This quality made the smallest bit of food a really royal treat for a soldier on campaign.

We did not have much coal left, and there were not many potatoes. This was worrying because there was neither gas nor electricity, and our only lighting was by means of candle-ends stuck into bottles. The stoves were moved to different places where we could use only them without lighting the boiler and soeconomise on coal.

**Friday 9th.** Using the Spanish Ambassador to Brussels as an intermediary, Mother General obtained from the Governor a travel permit for Brussels for twelve religious from the community of Rue St Jean. Six were destined to go to St. Josse and six to Uccle. It was not without emotion that they left dear Coloma, having known more than ever the joys of a union made stronger by bearing the same trials and sanctified by common hopes in the recourse to God. And would our Nazareth on the Rue St Jean be rebuilt? There were many questions resounding in our hearts and making the separation more painful.

Our courageous Mother General went with us to the train station where we waited for an hour before climbing onto a German train. An old man was the only other traveller. He told us furtively that he was a Brother of Mercy, and that he had stayed behind alone to guard his house in Malines, dressed as a domestic servant. He had invented some need to obtain, with a lot of difficulty, a permit to allow him a

return ticket to Brussels where his brothers had taken refuge. He was alone in a compartment; German soldiers occupied ten others. They were not used to our railways and it took us 1 ½ hours to get there, shunting backwards and forwards constantly. At last, at Schaerbeek, after a 10 second stop, they warned us that the train would go no further. Some soldiers agreed, pleasantly, to carry our two trunks as far as the outside of the station. This was full of military; we saw them line up to receive half a loaf and a lump of sausage as big as a fist, they looked satisfied with their rations.

We were received at our house on chaussée d'Haecht with real affection, showing us that our trials were understood and shared. We learnt there, sadly, that our house at Alost had also suffered the disastrous effects of bombardment and that the community had taken refuge at Lede near the Canonesses of St Augustine, and then at Mouscron.

In the afternoon those destined for Uccle continued their journey and were received with open arms. Mother Adrienne had organised, with precision, a mixture of clothes for the refugees, and told us that we should have first choice.

In the capital, they had lived in peace up till now, but how long would it last? The people of Brussels began to feel anxious as rumours circulated. It was said that German families were leaving the town – was this to avoid an expected bombardment? No-one was reassured, supplies became both rare and expensive, flour was particularly short, but we had to cut down on everything, firewood, light, food. We put our whole trust in God and counted on his paternal protection for our souls, for our bodies, and also for all our goods, always submitting as daughters to his divine and adorable will.

Correspondence with Malines was difficult and we rarely had news from Coloma; it was only travellers who went partly by tram, partly in old carts or on foot, who brought us news.

**On 15th September** they wrote *“Nothing in particular has happened here for several weeks except that the number of visitors increases every day. Amongst them there are some refugees who are returning to their homes and who ask hospitality for the night. Often they have walked for several days with little children who are falling down with fatigue. Then we have people who we know, who come to pay us a visit; or curious people who ask to see the effects of the bombardment in the house and garden; these are happy to take away a bit of shrapnel as a souvenir of the war – there are plenty of these at our place.*

*Since the beginning of the war Coloma has welcomed 5,260 valiant defenders of the country. All the villagers who looked for a shelter from the bombing found a place in our cellars and at our table; and still our mother house remains, as we wait for better times, a daily refuge for the needy; 70 families go there every day for soup; every day too there are people asking for potatoes, coal, clothes, blankets, etc...*

*Since the hostilities began, the motto of our good mothers has been “refuse nothing”. Pray that we can have the good fortune to apply this until the end of this terrible calamity.*

*Religious authorities have asked for a re-organisation of schools for Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> November. Mother General has told us that Reverend Mother and some religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary will begin some classes at the Boulevard des Arbalétriers, in the house occupied until now by the Dames of St Julienne and before that by the Jesuit Fathers. The Ursuline sisters at Wavre (whose lovely house was first pillaged then burnt) will teach poor children in the primary school building, the only part of our house left standing. Classes will open on 30<sup>th</sup> November, for just 30 pupils, the pupils from Malines from wealthier families have taken refuge, mostly, in England and Holland. We will teach only in the mornings for a time, and the teachers will return daily to their family at Coloma.*

*It is a small return to our apostolate with young Christians.*

**Till the New Year** the religious who taught in the school shuttled back and forth each day between the boulevard and Coloma. In the meantime, together with the sisters, they managed as best as they could to restore the house which had been so badly damaged by the bombs and cluttered with furniture left by ex-occupants who had not had the capacity to do any clearing.

**On the 6th January** (1915 was added in pencil) Mother General came to move Mother Louise and ten religious – 6 Dames and four sisters – back to Malines permanently. The chaplain of Coloma went in front of us with the Blessed Sacrament. We all processed directly to the chapel to receive the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

The sisters lived in two rooms. A cellar kitchen served at the same time as refectory and as community room. In our pretty undulating garden we raised our beautiful Sacred Heart statue. A lovely little grotto for Our Lady of Lourdes adorns the corner of the wall which separates our garden from the boulevard. We had two greenhouses and some good fruit trees – cherries and pears. Thanks to the courage and devotion of our sisters when our rue St Jean house had been on fire, we lacked nothing for the chapel which is very beautiful and gothic in style. Monsignor Mierts, our confessor, offered to be our chaplain.

Our classrooms were furnished with the best we could find in our adoptive school. We had managed to acquire twelve new double desks. By dint of economy and numerous acts of Poverty we have made, and thanks to the generosity of our dear Mother house and of all the other houses of the Institute, our libraries, our linen, and our furnishings were restored little by little, without luxuries, without abundance, but also without imposing too much privation on us. Every day and every moment, we blessed Providence which was such a visible help to us. We did not have any furniture for the guest room or the infirmary but when Madam Mertens died we inherited, through her grand-daughter who was part of the community, mahogany bedroom furniture, a well-decorated chimney-piece, a clock, candelabra, and a quantity of other things which were exactly what we needed.

We had re-started classes with 29 pupils on the 30<sup>th</sup> November, but we ended the academic year with 72. Many of the richer families in Malines were still in England or in Holland. The Ursulines had now established in Malines both primary and middle schools and this probably reduced the numbers that we would receive at the Rue St Jean. We worked harder than ever AMDG and we counted upon the assistance of Mary, Mother of Divine Providence to whom we confided all our spiritual and material needs.