

Malines – 1940

Maison de Sacre Coeur de Marie
Rue St Jean

History of the War of 1940

Friday 10th May 1940

In the middle of lunch there was a phone call – the first of many.

“Do you have classes? The Germans have invaded Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg. The radio advises us to close all schools.”

That morning we had normal school classes with the pupils who were there; we sent the children home with their things at noon.

“Take everything. If the situation improves, you can come back.”

“It does not look like it will, ma mere”.

“ Good bye, God keep you safe and bring you back!”

The atmosphere was heavy and we were very concerned –dear Lord, where are we going? That evening there was nothing unusual except the underlying insecurity and fever of the hasty mobilisation.

9.30 pm -We had barely gone to bed, when there was a strange noise in front of the house and there was an extraordinary light in the boulevard as though the front of our house was on fire. Incendiary bombs were dropping on the city. Fire next door, behind us, in our house! Then one dropped on the terrace, where for lack of other food it consumed a drainpipe from the guttering. Having neither sand nor earth handy we fought the fire with water which despite showers of sparks finally beat the fire, thanks to the stone and cement the terrace was made of. At the same time in the neighbouring area, bought in April and still full of planks and timber, three fires started but our neighbours, jumping over the walls, ran to put them out. In the Claessens workshop, which was also now our property, the same neighbours broke a window and put out a fire that was beginning to burn the machines and the main electrical point. Part of another bomb, fallen near the front of the house, started a fire near the coal cellar, which was extinguished by a passerby. We remained very afraid. People were panicking in the town where some twenty buildings were burning, and the sirens only added to the panic. Those mournful wails of the sirens announced the approach of enemy aircraft and fighting overhead.

Saturday 11th May

A section of the Civil Defence requisitioned our concrete cellars as a public shelter. The first night there were just two families, the second there were several both rich and poor. The Community brought down straw mattresses and blankets and moved into the recreation room. Two nuns slept in the refectory so that they could better monitor the front door. We were all in a make shift camp, made more difficult because it was completely dark – all light was prohibited.

Pentecost

What a feast of the Holy Spirit! This celebration of light and love was full of anxiety and turmoil! The sirens wailed more and more often. Evacuees from Bourg-Leopold came looking for a rest in their tiredness and some food in their hunger. After helping them, we had to make them see that Malines was not safe either, that it would be better to continue to the countryside, because we might have to evacuate the town. These poor unfortunates set off on their adventure.

In the middle of the night the doorbell rang. It was Van de Kerchove, a soldier, brother to Mere Marie-Ghislaine. He was almost overcome by exhaustion, having walked from Diest – his company was on the run. Tomorrow morning they would be re-assembling in the town square. We gave him food and lodging for the night, and told him he would see his sister in the morning. In the morning he mistook the door and went down to the cellar, casting confusion among the sleepers in the shelter. “The Belgian army is retreating; tomorrow the Germans will be here!” Suddenly the cellar was empty!! It was just 4am and many were panicking in the town. The Belgian government had summoned every man between 16 and 35 years old for military service, and in the panic, many families decide to follow the mobilised men. Alas, they ran into the wolf’s mouth - into danger!

Reverend Mother, afraid of further upheavals if we were bombed again and of the difficulty of trying to get everyone down to the shelter in our cellar, decided to send Mere Bathilde and Sr. Athanase, both frail, to Uccle. She phoned for a car and was promised one for an hour later. It came at last at 2pm. The driver, a conscript, who would leave that very evening for the front was conserving his petrol so he would be able to bring the machine back.

Night of Tuesday 13th May

Convoys of vehicles and hoof beats of horses, again and again, without cease. “Hurrah! It is the English Army!” But the troops passing in front of the house were our soldiers retreating. God, have pity on us! Suddenly there was an energetic ringing of the doorbell! Three Belgian soldiers on a quest to find quarters for their company. Both the cellar and the main rooms were in use, so we showed them the upstairs classrooms and they accepted these. Two hours later two other soldiers presented themselves to prepare quarters for the 300 men. Lacking bedding, they would sleep floor -brave men. Hours passed, but we waited in vain, the company did not arrive. The Belgian army passed us all day long without ceasing.

Wednesday 14th May

In the street we saw sad processions of evacuees, like a funeral cortege. As a precaution, each religious had been warned to prepare an evacuation pack so that we would be ready to go at once when the order was given. Towards 10am we heard that the community at Coloma was leaving and that the trains would stop running that afternoon. So we also decided to leave, in three groups. The first would go by train and the other two groups walk towards Brussels. Around noon we emptied the tabernacle; I cannot describe our emotion as we took communion, receiving on our outstretched hands the lovely body of our beloved Jesus – and saw our Mother Clementine empty the ciborium, trembling, so that we could carry it away into exile and save it from desecration by the invaders. Finally, about 1pm, we abandoned our home, hearts torn with anguish, but confident too, because God was with us. If God is for us, who can be against us?

So there we were, on the road to Brussels! Brussels was far away for cloistered religious, loaded with suitcases and packages. But St Joseph, it being his day, put the Denis family in our path, and through them the third group got a ride in a military truck as far as the Schaerbeek Bridge. We were warmly welcomed at the Immaculate Conception convent, where the groups from Coloma and we from the Sacre Coeur de Marie convent arrived at scattered intervals.

Thursday 17th May

Rumour had it that Brussels was going to be bombed. Had we run into the wolf’s mouth? The Blessed Sacrament was taken down to the cellar and every religious had an hour of watching in shifts, while in the corridor and adjacent rooms we tried to stretch out a little and take some rest, more bad than good. Around midnight several of us decided to go back to the dormitory because the night was quiet.

Friday 18th May

Mass was celebrated in the cellar, in an atmosphere like that of the catacombs. The Blessed Sacrament remained exposed there all that day and we continued to pray ardently.

The Belgian Army retreats. Brussels is saved thanks to diplomatic negotiations, they say. Towards evening, the Blessed Sacrament was taken in procession back to the Chapel. The chaplain prudently asked to sleep at the convent for safety and to avoid dangerous encounters. The next day, however, he returned home because he said that the German Army was not like that of 1914.

Sunday 20th May

The fighting around Malines which had been violent on 17-18th May – Thursday and Friday – was now ended. Returning to our home was the order of the day. After dinner there was a “Council of War” between the leaders of both communities as to how to get back to our respective houses as soon as possible. We tried in vain to get information in the city.

Monday 21st May

The question of leaving was precipitated. At the Town Hall we could get a permit for the journey, but there were no vehicles. So we went by tram to Schaerbeek and then on foot. It was 10am. At Schaerbeek Bridge, a van carrying condensed milk picked up reverend Mother Clementine and two poor walkers. The other seven continued on foot. At Vilvorde we halted at a bench in the town square, but a black sister saw us and asked her host to receive us in his house. Installed in the pharmacist’s living room, we had a snack. After an hour’s rest we continued to Malines, by the road as far as the Senne, but then we had to make various detours because bridges had been destroyed. Along the way, two religious were picked up by a diplomatic car carrying the Spanish flag. They arrived at Coloma around 5pm. The five others, not having been lucky enough to get a ride, arrived an hour later at the boulevard, only to find the “Deutsche Feldpost” there.

Mother M Stephanie was fluent in German and used this knowledge of their language to obtain from the senior officer there, after some discussion, permission for us to occupy the domestic science room and sleep there on our ten mattresses for the night. After supper, touched by the frugality of our meal – jacket potatoes and sandwiches – the quartermaster brought us some powdered coffee in an envelope and three bars of chocolate. At the same time he advised us on how to ask the “Ortchef” to have the freedom of the house. In the meantime, he and his men had occupied the whole building.

Tuesday 22nd May

The “Feldpost” evacuated the house completely, leaving us the convent and the marks of their occupation. So began a heroic cleaning and tidying up to do of all the mess. We were sad to find numerous “subtractions” in the way of linen, of blankets, of food, household utensils and even tools. There was not a wardrobe unrifled, not a box that had not been searched, emptied or looted. Mother Marie-Clementine, indomitable and indefatigable leader, directed our work of cleaning and re-organising with such gusto that by Saturday this same week, the house was clean. We still had fifty mattresses in the house, belonging to some unknown person. On the evening of that same day M. Marie Gonzague and Jeanne-Francoise arrived on foot from Brussels and our community was back together again.

Thursday 23rd May

Corpus Christi. We had Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament using the pyx – the monstrance had remained in Brussels.

Friday 24th May

Feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians. We re-opened classes, with eight students. The next day there were 16, then 27, and then the number went up to 50. A good number of families had fled to the South of France and one wondered when, or how, they would get back to their homes.

Tuesday 28th May

The King, left with 500,000 soldiers but without ammunition and without relief from the Allies, has surrendered. What heartbreak! Public opinion is divided, while some – the army and the people – praise the King to the skies; others – France and the Government – would destroy him. We don’t know enough to judge fairly, let us wait for the truth to be revealed by history. But knowing the heroic virtues of our beloved King, we do not hesitate to think he acted wisely.

Wednesday 29th May

We visited the Office of the Police Commissioner about the mattresses. The next day, Mr Devis of Rue Notre Dame came to claim them as his own. While waiting for light to be shed on this case, they served to give rest to refugees broken by fatigue on their long journeys as they returned to their homes.

Thursday 30th May

In the night, the doorbell sounded – it was a German truck looking for the “Feldpost”. A brave man, perhaps a police officer, was making every effort to keep them away from our home. Then, from the first floor windows come the saving words “This is a functioning school; the railway station is nearby”. The soldiers pointed their electric torches at the window where the voice came from.. then warmed their engines up.. and went! Thanks be to God!

Friday 31st May

Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, celebrated very simply. Our students attended the 10am mass at St Rombaut as a group, a Pontifical High Mass reduced to its most simple expression. Instead of using his throne, the Cardinal remained in the choir stalls, wonderfully recollected. At the end of Mass, before leaving the choir, he turned to offer a blessing. In the town square there were German officers sitting at cafe tables, buses filled with grey soldiers heading onwards. In the market there are crowds of poor people in packed queues waiting for their bread.

That same day, with Divine delicacy, the sacred vessels were returned from Brussels where they had been kept safe. The community took turns half-hour by half-hour at the foot of the Tabernacle. It was time to sing a Te Deum to thank Divine Providence for the graces we had received. It never stopped showing us the Father’s Hand in so many ways, small and large, in our community life throughout this turmoil. Our house was well preserved and our Chapel intact, we received advice and help, and someone coming to our aid when we needed assistance. We have never lacked Mass or communion or food. May God be praised, our holy patrons Mary and Joseph too.

Saturday 1st June

Feast of our house, the Sacre Coeur de Marie. We started a chain of rosaries every half-hour, that the Holy Virgin might protect us and obtain for us the graces of sanctification!

Sunday 2nd June

We continued our prayer relay. We must storm heaven to ask for grace to convert a guilty world. Cardinal Van de Roey has written a pastoral letter which was read at Mass. This letter explained the facts of the surrender of the Belgian army and it is a refutation of the false and incriminating accusations made against King Leopold III. This historic letter, marked by prudence and wisdom, dispelled any painful doubts. The Cardinal, whom the occupants have ignored up till now, has suddenly become a great man and "merited" a visit from them. The letter, copied from the original so as not to expose any editor, was then printed and posted on the walls of the city!

Monday 3rd June

More and more of our students were returning. All have lived through lamentable hours of evacuation and of bombing. Several of them who took refuge in Flanders were continually in the line of fire. All, nevertheless, have benefitted from the Divine Providence; many families learnt how to pray again in the turmoil. One former pupil, Yvonne Puttemans, was hit by a bomb on her way home, dying instantly while she was singing a school song.

Beginning of July

The question of exams was resolved: they will take place. We awaited clarification from the church authorities as to the date and the duration of the holidays. We were still missing about a hundred students. The war was far from over! Many sacrifices awaited us, but we walk hand in the great hand of our Father who is in Heaven... and we live with love and in trust.