

Town Twinning Uncovers Family History

Dominique could feel his stomach tighten as his friend began to translate from German into French a twenty-page document he had found while clearing out his parent's attic. As his friend spoke he remembered something his mother once said, "*Il y a eu cette juive qu'on a renvoyée*" [There was this Jewess who was sent back].

Dominique is Swiss and his father was a watchmaker, but because of unemployment, worked for the Swiss Border Guard Corp during the War at the Chancy customs office. His father had good German, so he may have been asked to read or translate it. Dominique almost threw the document away when he found it, but it was different from the other old papers, a tightly typed account with narrow margins, single spacing and dated May 1942. Dominique's father died in 1969, and we will never know why he had kept the document, or whether he had taken part in the decision to deny the woman entry.

Dominique wants me to understand his parents' situation in Switzerland. He tells me that in 1942 they did not even have a radio and did not know what was going on in Germany, nor did they know about the Jewish genocide. Things changed around 1943-45 and his mother was really upset about the Nazi crimes. In 1944 she actively participated in welcoming refugees from France, particularly when the Germans burned villages and killed people just over the border in Vallery France.

The woman in the story, 'the Jewess', was Kaete Hildegard Fleischer (called Hilla), born in 1906 in Reichenbach, Germany, now the town of Dzierzoniow, Poland. Her family were well-off German Jews (her father was a textile mill owner). She is said to have been a beautiful woman, and in 1929 married a Catholic Count, Baron von Gumppenberg. They had two children and lived in Dusseldorf. Until 1940 she felt relatively safe; however, by late 1941 she decided that she was in danger and needed to leave Germany. By March 1942, with the help of people-smugglers, she managed to escape Germany, crossing the border by night on foot, travelling through Belgium, then on to Lille, Paris and Dijon and then in the trunk of a car over the demarcation line into Macon. She was heading for Switzerland, where she had a first cousin, but was caught by the police near Macon. Fearing that she would be sent back into occupied France and handed over to the Germans, she told her story to the police. It is the document of this interview, written by the French police, in German, that Dominique found in the attic.

The document had helped get her out of trouble in Macon. While the police interrogation was gruelling, they had believed her story and allowed her to live freely in Macon, requiring her to report to them regularly and live where they instructed. For some time this was in the Hotel de l'Europe in Macon, but later in small towns around Macon.

On 11th November 1942 the Germans crossed the demarcation line, and by December of 1942 she no longer felt safe and decided to try to escape to Switzerland. She took the document with her in the hope that it would help. There must have been some danger that she might be caught by the Germans with the document in her possession. While this did not happen, unfortunately, the document was not effective on the Swiss border as she was denied entry into Switzerland.

When Dominique first read the document, he was very upset, "*I was scared that maybe she was send back directly to the German troops, or worse*". He found the Swiss deportation papers, researched and discovered that only 8% of Jews illegally

crossing the border into Switzerland were sent back, she being one of them. Dominique eventually tracked her down on the Internet at the Centre for Jewish History (CJH) archive in New York. She had deposited a 30-page memoir in German of her life in France during the War in 1970 and therefore he knew she had survived the War, and reading the document he learned about her 'journey'. The memoir details what happened in Chancy on the Swiss border:

"All my arguments to stay in Switzerland, were of no avail to the Swiss officials. They ... led me to the French side of the border in the middle of the night, they rang at a farmer's house who allowed me to stay until the next morning. The farmer did everything necessary for my comfort. Early in the morning his son took me to Vulbens in a horse and cart where I could rest. In the afternoon I arrived by bus in Seyssel, where I had to stay overnight before continuing to Lyon."

Once Dominique knew Hilla had survived, his initial anxiety was eased, but he still felt the responsibility of having the document. He felt he should:

- a) try to return it to the woman's family, and
- b) document, with information and photographs, her journey from her capture near Chancy to the farmhouse where she was taken into France by the Swiss border guard or, quite possibly, by his father.

It was not easy to find her family as her papers in the CJH gave little clue as to their names. In April 2017, however, Dominique found a copy of her memoir, translated into English, on the Crewe and Nantwich Twinning Assoc. website www.canta.org.uk. He guessed correctly that it must have been translated by one of her relatives. That relative was me: Hilla was my great-aunt. I had given a talk during a Crewe and Nantwich twinning event to a group from their Polish 'twin' Dzierzoniow, the town where Hilla was born and my father grew up. I was struck by the fact that their French twinning partner was Macon, and that through Hilla's wartime experiences the towns of Dzierzoniow and Macon were linked. I sent a copy of the translation of her memoir to Crewe and it was put on their twinning website.

I have phoned both of Hilla's children, now in their eighties, and they were delighted by Dominique's story and the 'found' document. Her daughter said to me on the phone: *"It is only now I know what my parents were like"*. I have a scanned copy of the document that I will get translated, and I am hoping that it will add to the known story of her life. Dominique thinks that Hilla's family must decide where the original document should be stored.

Dominique has walked the border areas, but needs to go back as he has now located the farmhouse where she was taken by the border guard, and he has been told that someone who lived there in 1942 is still alive, so he hopes he may be able to interview her in the next few weeks. Dominique writes, *"I can not stop thinking about Hilla, but I had to stand down my Hilla work as I MUST file my tax return, nasty job!"* The story will continue.

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