

# SHELTER

*She took the boy into her home to keep him out of the Gestapo's clutches. But her husband. . . . A short story about Paris under the swastika by Anna Seghers.*

IT WAS a morning in September 1940. On Place de la Concorde in Paris the largest swastika flag in any of the German-occupied countries flapped in the wind. The lines on the sidewalks before the shops extended as far as the eye could see. A woman named Louise Meunier, a machinist's wife and mother of three children, had just learned that there were eggs for sale in a store in the Fourteenth District. She quickly got ready, stayed in line an hour, and received five eggs, one for each member of her family. Then she suddenly realized that a school chum, Annette Villard, worked as a chambermaid in a hotel on the same street. She visited Annette and found that usually calm and orderly person in a strangely excited state.

Annette was washing windows and wash basins. Louise lent a helping hand and listened as her friend told how yesterday at noon the Gestapo had arrested a guest who had registered at the hotel as an Alsatian but who, it later turned out, had escaped from a German concentration camp several years before. The guest (Annette continued to scour the window pane as she talked) had been taken to Sante Prison. From there he would be shipped to Germany and probably put up against a wall and shot. But after all, war was war, wasn't it? Something else concerned her much more deeply: the guest's son. The German had a child, a twelve-year-old boy who shared the room with him. The lad attended school and spoke French like a native. His mother was dead. There was something mysterious in the family relationship, as was often the case with foreigners.

The child, returning from school, learned of his father's arrest. He remained mute, without a tear. But when the Gestapo agent ordered him to pack his things and get ready to leave the next day for Germany where he would rejoin his relatives, he cried out passionately in a loud voice that he would throw himself under a passing truck rather than go back to that family. The Gestapo agent retorted curtly that it was not a question of going back or not going back—either he went back to his relatives or into a reform school.

The boy trusted Annette. That night he had sought her help. Early in the morning she had taken him to a small cafe, the proprietor of which was her friend. Now he was sitting there and waiting. She had thought that it would be easy to find shelter for the boy. But so far she had received only "no" for an answer. People were too frightened. The wife of the cafe owner feared the Germans and was annoyed at the youngster's presence.

Louise listened in silence to Annette's story. When it was finished, she said: "I'd like to see a boy like that." Annette named the cafe

and added: "Perhaps you wouldn't be afraid to bring the kid some clean clothing?"

Louise presented herself to the cafe proprietor with a note from Annette. He led her into a billiard room which he kept locked during morning hours. The boy was sitting there, looking into the court yard. He was the same size as her eldest son, dressed in the same way. He had grey eyes. There was nothing in his manner which stamped him as the son of a foreigner. Mrs. Meunier explained that she was bringing him clean clothes. He did not thank her, but suddenly looked sharply into her eyes. Louise had always been a mother like every other mother: she had taken for granted that she had to stand in line, that she had to make a little go a long way, that she had to do factory home work in addition to her regular housework. Now, under the boy's gaze, her capacity for work multiplied. With it rose the measure of her strength. She said: "To-night at seven, be at the Cafe Biard near the Municipal Market."

She returned home quickly. To prepare anything like a presentable meal required a long time in the kitchen. Her husband was already at home. For a year he had lain in the Maginot Line. Three weeks ago he had been demobilized, a week ago he had resumed his trade. He worked half days and spent most of his free time in bars. Then he would return home furious with himself for having left most of the few pennies he had at the bar.

Today, his wife, too excited to observe his face, began to tell him the story as she beat some eggs. When she reached the point at which the refugee boy had run away from the hotel in order to escape from the Germans, he interrupted her irately: "Your friend Annette was stupid to get mixed up in such nonsense. If I had been she, I would have locked the boy up. Let the German deal with his countrymen himself. . . . Anyhow, he probably never did take care of his child. And the officer's right, too, in sending the kid home. Hitler has occupied the whole world. What good are phrases against that?"

His wife was clever enough to change the subject quickly. For the first time she saw clearly in her heart what had become of her husband. Formerly he had participated in every strike, in every demonstration; on July 14 he had always marched as if all alone he were ready to storm the Bastille again. But like so many others, he reminded her of that giant in the fairytale, who always went over to the one who seemed stronger and proved stronger than his former master; so that finally he ended with the devil. But Mrs. Meunier had neither time nor inclination for mourning. After all, he was her husband and

she was his wife; and after all, the refugee youth was waiting for her.

That evening she ran over to the cafe near the Municipal Market and told the boy: "I can't take you to my house before tomorrow."

Again the twelve-year-old looked sharply at her and answered: "You don't have to take me if you're afraid." The woman replied dryly that it was only a question of waiting a day more. She asked the proprietor's wife to keep the child overnight, explaining that he was related to her. There was nothing unusual in this request, for all Paris was swarming with refugees.

The next day she informed her husband: "I met my cousin Alice. Her husband is in Pithiviers, in the prison hospital. She wants to visit him for a couple of days. So she asked me to take her child in." Her husband, who could not stand strangers in his own house, retorted: "Just see that it doesn't become a permanent thing!"

Mrs. Meunier prepared a mattress for the child. On the way home she asked him: "Why don't you want to go back?" He answered: "You can still leave me here if you're afraid. But I'll never go back to my relatives. My mother and father were both arrested by Hitler. They wrote and printed and distributed leaflets. My mother died. Do you see where I have a front tooth missing. They knocked it out in school there, because I wouldn't sing their song. My relatives were Nazis too. They used to torture me. They cursed my father and mother." The woman asked him only to keep silent before her husband, her children, and the neighbors.

The children neither liked nor disliked the strange boy. He kept himself to one side and did not laugh. But the husband could not stand the youngster—he said that he mistrusted his look. He scolded his wife for giving the boy some of her own rations; he said she had a nerve taking in her cousin's child. His complaints generally developed into lectures: after all, the war was lost, the Germans had occupied France, they had discipline, they understood order.

Once, when the lad upset the milk can, he jumped up and struck him. Later the woman tried to console the boy. He replied: "It doesn't matter—it's better here than there."

"I'd like," Meunier began once, "to have a real piece of Gruyere again, just once, for dessert." That evening he returned quite excited: "Imagine what I saw! A big German truck full of cheeses. They buy whatever they feel like. They print bank notes by the million and hand them out."

Two or three weeks later Mrs. Meunier called on her friend Annette. The latter was not pleased at her visit and told her not to

show herself again in that part of town. The Gestapo was cursing and threatening. They had even found out in what cafe the child had waited. They knew that a woman had visited him there and that the two had left the place at different times. On her way home, Mrs. Meunier considered the danger into which she had plunged herself and her family. She pondered long on what she had done so thoughtlessly, on the spur of the moment. But everything on her homeward journey confirmed her decision: the lines before the open shops, the shutters on the closed shops, the German cars careening wildly over the boulevards, tooting their horns, the swastikas fluttering from the buildings. When she reentered her kitchen she patted the refugee boy's head in a kind of second welcome.

Her husband reproached her that she doted too much on the lad. Now that his own children tolerated the stranger, Meunier made him the butt of his ill temper. He felt that all his hopes had suddenly been transformed into a troubled, dismal, and fettered future. Since the boy was too prudent and taciturn to give him any pretext, he hit him without reason, asserting that the lad had a saucy look in his eyes. Besides, he was now deprived of his last pleasure. He still spent most of his free time in the bar, which was some consolation. But the machine shop at the end of the street where he had worked was forcibly taken over by the Germans.

The street, hitherto tranquil and free of swastikas, began all at once to swarm with German mechanics. German trucks sputtered and snorted, waiting to be repaired. Nazi soldiers took possession of the bar and made themselves at home there. Meunier the machinist could not stand the sight. His wife now found him often sitting mutely at the kitchen table. Once when he had remained motionless for almost an hour, his head in his hands and his eyes wide open, his wife asked him what he was thinking of. He replied: Oh, about nothing—and about everything. About something quite far away. Imagine, I just thought about that German. Remember? The one your friend Annette told you about. I don't know if you remember—the German who was against Hitler, the German the Germans arrested. I'd like to know what became of him. Of him and of his son. . . ."

Mrs. Meunier answered: "I met Annette a little while ago. They put that German in Sante prison. He's probably been murdered since. The child disappeared. Paris is a big place. I suppose he found some shelter or other."

Since none of the Frenchmen liked to drink with the Nazi soldiers, they often came to the Meunier's kitchen with a few bottles. That had previously been unheard of and would have been considered almost insulting. Most of them were Meunier's former shopmates. They spoke their minds freely. The boss of the factory had yielded his office to a German director, who came and went as he pleased. German experts tested, weighed, and carted things away. They no longer even took the

trouble in the main office to keep secret for whom they were working. The manufactured parts of plundered metal were sent to the East, to slit the throats of other peoples. The honeymoon was over—now wages were cut, strikes were forbidden, work fell off.

Mrs. Meunier lowered her shutters; the men in the kitchen dropped their voices. The strange boy lowered his eyes as if he himself feared that his sharp eyes would betray his heart. He became so pale and thin that Meunier observed him sullenly and expressed the fear that he was victim of an illness which he might give to the other children. Mrs. Meunier wrote a letter to herself in which her "cousin" asked them to keep the boy a little longer—her husband was very sick and she preferred to remain near him for a while. "She certainly doesn't fuss much about her own kid," Meunier said.

Mrs. Meunier was quick to praise the lad. He was very resourceful: "Every morning at four he goes to the market; for instance this morning he got a nice piece of beef without a food card."

There were two sisters living in the same courtyard as the Meunier family. They had always had a bad reputation. Now they often went to the bar across the street and sat on the knees of the German technicians. A policeman noticed them and took both of them to headquarters. They yelled and fought but he had them put on the list of suspicious characters. The whole street rejoiced. But unfortunately the sisters grew much worse. German technicians came in and out of their apartment. The noise could be heard dis-

tinctly from Meunier's kitchen. It was no longer a laughing matter to Meunier and his friends. Meunier no longer praised German order. His whole life had been shattered by this disciplined order—his life in the shop and his life at home, his little pleasures and his great joys, his well-being, his honor, his peace of mind, his very air and existence.

One day Meunier was alone with his wife. After a long silence, he could not control himself. "They have the power. What can we do about it? How strong they are, the devils! If only there was somebody in the world stronger than they! But we're helpless. If we just open our mouths, they murder us. Like that German your friend Annette once told you about. Maybe you've forgotten about him; I haven't. After all, he did risk something. And his son, there's a kid for you! Let your cousin shift for herself with her brat. He leaves me cold. But that German's son, there's a boy I'd take in, he'd be somebody. I'd treat him better and feed him better than my own son. To shelter a boy like him in our house while those bandits pass by the door and have no idea what I'm doing and what kind of a person I am and whom I have hidden in my house. Why, I'd take in a boy like that with open arms!"

His wife turned away and spoke softly: "You've already taken him in."

I HEARD this story in the hotel where I lived in the 16th District in Paris. It was told to me by Annette who took a job in the hotel because she no longer felt safe in her old place.

ANNA SEGHERS.

## Throg's Neck

Sky; and a line of land; and a vast arm of the sea.  
Complement sea and sky blowing to change with the hour.  
O momentarily-change, here is your source, depth of your power,  
In wind-shaken living sky and skittering sea alike.

Land is set, brown and jugged, between two floodings.  
Place for the foot to hold, arm cling, whereon to cleave.  
Wind spins from sky, light flares, skelter waters heave:  
All change above and below; stark permanence between.

The metaphors of sight fail on test; they need delving.  
It was another spit of ground when the Algonquins came  
For clams; for them wind and water were utterly the same.  
So ho, reverse is true. Land is the all of change.

What changes most, turns permanent, in identical dance.  
The hard line slowly shapes, where men have hold to build.  
Land, the rock, most fully inhabited and willed,  
The vast above, below, open to weathering sweep.

Feeling, so seeming the essence of change, so fluid, so blown,  
Most like sky and sea is,—the vast of unchange.  
Thought, fact-hard, non-static, hazardous and iron-strange,  
Glows, is forged again and again in daily clang upon an anvil.

GENEVIEVE TAGGARD.