

# The Father and the Philosopher

Saving the Husserl Archives

Toon Horsten

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## Chapter 5

Where should the manuscripts go? And how would they get there? Malvine<sup>1</sup> had more questions than answers. One thing was certain: the situation was urgent. She asked Van Breda<sup>2</sup> whether he would be prepared to take on the difficult task of finding a safe haven for the manuscripts. ‘I answered that I was deeply touched by the trust implicit in that proposal, and that it was my duty to accept,’ Van Breda commented in 1956. ‘I immediately added that if the manuscripts were to be moved it would be better not to house them elsewhere in Germany, but to take them abroad straight away. If it came to a war, Freiburg, near the French border, would be a dangerous location, but if the unpublished work remained in Nazi Germany, it would be at constant risk. It would only take a decree from whoever was in power, or even the slightest whim of some local official, to destroy everything that Husserl’s widow had striven so hard to preserve.’

Malvine agreed entirely with his reasoning, but wondered how he imagined this could be done. Van Breda’s thoughts first turned to the Belgian diplomatic service. Didn’t embassies and consulates count as foreign territory, and couldn’t the staff of such foreign missions correspond freely with their home country, immune from inspection, by sending post in a diplomatic bag? The idea seemed promising, and Van Breda proposed that he at least look into it. After consulting with Eugen Fink, Malvine gave the plan her blessing, and Van Breda immediately caught the train to Frankfurt-am-Main where, on the next morning, Saturday 17 September, he went to the Belgian consulate. The official on duty, a German, received him with distant correctness, but answered his questions very readily. Van Breda discovered that the principle of the diplomatic bag didn’t apply to consulates, only to embassies. This meant that the nearest mission with an immunity agreement was in Berlin. Van Breda returned to Freiburg the same day to inform Fink and Malvine of how matters stood.

Van Breda now wanted to travel to Berlin as soon as possible to discuss the issue there, which left the question of what should happen to the manuscripts in the meantime. Van Breda thought of concealing them at a nearby monastery, but when he approached some of the senior monks, they balked at the notion of hiding the vast literary estate of a Jewish philosopher, especially one drawn up in a shorthand almost no one could decipher. It was thought to be too dangerous.

That evening, Malvine received a visit from Aldegundis Jaegerschmid. Born in Berlin and christened Amélie Jaegerschmid, she came from a German family with a proud military tradition. Brought up in the Protestant faith, she later converted to Catholicism and joined the Benedictine order. Jaegerschmid first came into contact with the Husserls as a student, and grew very attached to the

<sup>1</sup> Husserl’s widow

<sup>2</sup> Herman van Breda, a Belgian philosopher and Franciscan monk

philosopher and his family. As a philosophy student, she also knew Edith Stein, Husserl's former assistant, who taught an introductory philosophy course that she called her 'Philosophical Kindergarten'. In 1922, Stein, Jewish by birth, also converted to Catholicism. Initially, her role within the Catholic church was educational, which meant that she travelled the length and breadth of Germany, giving lectures and presentations. From 1931, she was based in the Lioba Sisters convent in Freiburg, which Aldegundis had already joined. The two women were allocated the same abbot as spiritual adviser, and became good friends. They remained in close contact with the Husserls, even after the Nazis came to power and many of their friends dropped them. Jaegerschmid even went on holiday with them, and provided psychological support. She had long conversations with the old philosopher that often touched on religion. As their isolation grew, Jaegerschmid became more and more important to the Husserls. When, in 1937, Husserl was invited to chair the prestigious Descartes Conference in Paris, and Bernhard Rust, the Minister of Science, Education and National Culture, refused him an exit visa on the grounds that as a 'non-Aryan' he was deemed unsuitable to represent German culture and philosophy abroad, he turned to the nun for consolation. 'You see, Sister Aldegundis, even my ashes won't be deemed worthy to rest in German soil,' he sighed. In the last months and years of Husserl's life, when Stein was in Cologne, having joined a Carmelite order after the Nazis took power, Jaegerschmid kept her informed of the welfare of their friend and teacher, whom she helped care for and would regularly watch over during the night.

Even after Husserl's death, Jaegerschmid continued to be concerned about Malvine. When Malvine told her of the plans to save her husband's literary estate and the problems they encountered, she immediately thought of a solution. The Lioba nuns owned a small house on the shore of Lake Constance, near the Swiss border, where the manuscripts would be safe for a while. The nuns regularly crossed the border, and she thought they could perhaps smuggle the manuscripts across bit by bit, taking them to the Bellevue sanatorium in the nearby town of Kreuzlingen, in Switzerland. The sanatorium was headed by the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger, a former student of Edmund Husserl's, who remained in close touch with the philosopher and had developed a form of psychology based on phenomenology. He was also a close friend of Sigmund Freud, whom he had met through his doctoral adviser, Carl Gustav Jung. In his writings, Binswanger essentially linked the thinking of Husserl with that of Freud, using this as a basis for his own theories.

If the documents could be placed in Binswanger's keeping, in Switzerland, a neutral country, they would be safe. And he would certainly be prepared to help, the nun thought. Jaegerschmid hurried to the convent straight away to ask the abbess whether she could approve the plan. The abbess agreed on condition that the nuns who smuggled the manuscripts across the border from the house in Constance did so of their own free will – they were not to be forced. Van Breda expressed doubts. His main worry was that it would take too long for all the manuscripts to be carried to safety. International tensions were rising, and there was a considerable risk that the borders, even those between Germany and Switzerland, would soon close. However, he was at a loss for an alternative, so in the end, Sister Aldegundis' plan was set in motion. On Sunday 18 September, nearly all 40,000 pages of Husserl's handwritten manuscripts were packed into three large suitcases that Jaegerschmid was to take to Constance, over 150 kilometres away.

On Monday morning, Van Breda accompanied the Benedictines to the station. The three heavy suitcases were pushed to the train on a porter's cart and loaded on board: Sister Aldegundis and her luggage took up a whole compartment. The journey to Constance passed without incident, and a few hours later, the three suitcases were carried into the nuns' house. When Jaegerschmid told the sisters what was in her luggage, they immediately volunteered to hide the suitcases. But the prospect of smuggling such a vast quantity of manuscripts, especially written in incomprehensible shorthand, across the Swiss border, struck them as much too dangerous under the circumstances – indeed, impossible. If border officers stopped and searched them, they would very likely assume that the nuns were carrying messages in secret code.

Undaunted, Jaegerschmid immediately began to explore other ways of getting the three suitcases to Kreuzlingen. Leaving the manuscripts with the sisters, she herself crossed the border to visit Ludwig Binswanger, in the hope that he would be prepared to look after Husserl's papers and could think of a way to get them to the sanatorium. When she rang the bell, Mrs Binswanger opened the door. Her husband wasn't at home. Sister Aldegundis briefly explained her mission, at which Mrs Binswanger ordered her to go away. 'Leave us alone!' she snarled, 'We're loyal to Hitler!'

Thus ended the Swiss route.

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