

1942

The Year of Silence

Herman Van Goethem

An extract pp 4-28

Original title 1942. Het jaar van de stilte
Publisher Pelckmans, 2023

Translation
Translator

Dutch into English
Ian Connerty and Liz Waters

© Herman Van Goethem/Ian Connerty and Liz Waters/Pelckmans/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

p 4-28

Contents

1. The New Covenant
2. The sources

Part I: Grey and cloudy

3. Antwerp notables, Jewish nobodies
4. Sonia's friends
5. Waiting for peace
6. Greater Antwerp
7. Violence and misery
8. Wilfried Depret
9. The New Order
10. Trapped
11. Siberia
12. Between powerlessness and resistance
13. The dance of death
14. Justice and injustice
15. The Antwerp police academy
16. The dance of death with names
17. A restless spring
18. Increasing violence
19. Forced labourers with a Star of David
20. Natan Ramet
21. Tzom Tammoez
22. Citadel

Part II: Black

23. The first razzia
24. Sarah and Aron
25. The Dossin Barracks

26. Flight?
27. Torremolinos
28. A second razzia
29. The third razzia
30. Naming names
31. A divided police force
32. Suspicions
33. Sabotage
34. The fourth razzia, terror by night
35. Genocidal language
36. The fourth razzia, a 'messy' morning
37. Memories
38. Aftershock
39. Deurne, 75 years later

Part III: Whiteness that hurts the eyes

40. Red alert!
41. The fifth razzia
42. The old man
43. The sixth razzia: the hunting ground of the SS
44. A German letter
45. The broken hour
46. Our own people first
47. The Verstockt children
48. The Great Transformation
49. Zurenborg, 75 years later
50. New brooms

Epilogue: Secrets and stories

51. War and peace
52. The New Covenant
53. Collective responsibility: Belgium and the Allies
54. 1942, twenty propositions

Notes

Bibliography and sources

Index of names

1. The New Covenant

This is a book about war and peace. I install myself in 1942 in Antwerp, an occupied city in Belgium, and from there observe the city and the world.

When the Dutch edition was published, in 2019, nobody suspected that in February 2022 Europe would once again become the setting for a protracted war. Nobody knows how the Russia-

Ukraine conflict will end. We wait and watch uneasily, ready to be surprised by unexpected developments. Meanwhile we look over our shoulders in other directions, towards the Middle East and the United States, for instance. What else is bearing down on us?

The deadlock between Ukraine and Russia since 2022 bears some resemblance to the situation in 1942, the year of silence. Kharkiv, Kyiv, the Crimea... From the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 onwards, diaries and other contemporary sources make many references to the war in that same region. This prompted me to consider the publication in English of a revised edition. I also took into account, among other things, the unpublished war diaries of Hubert Pierlot, the Belgian premier at the time who resided in London from October 1940 onwards, which were recently released. The international composition of the Belgian government in exile is intriguing. Furthermore, Pierlot had interesting contacts in London, the Polish government in exile for example, which give him first-hand information about Stalin and the 'Bolshevik threat'.

In the current Ukraine-Russia war, possible scenarios are doing the rounds concerning peace negotiations that include territorial concessions. What about repairing war damage? And what about heads of state or government who have already burned their boats? In 1940-42 you could likewise hear echoes in the corridors of world politics about ending the war through a negotiated peace treaty. At the time, people called such a thing a 'compromise peace', a peace treaty that involved give and take.

Just as we now sometimes look back to the Second World War as we speculate about a possible outcome of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, from June 1941 onwards many people sought in-depth knowledge about European history under Napoleon Bonaparte. A military putsch, a European peace treaty, a devastating Russian war winter... In 1941-42 these once again looked like ingredients for gaining a grip on the future.

Of course prominent figures, businesspeople and aristocrats made concerted efforts to get peace talks under way, and neutral countries such as Sweden and Switzerland did not remain inactive. But what was going on with the Allies themselves, at the level of their governments and diplomats?

London in particular was an important biotope. On the one hand there was the British War Cabinet led by Winston Churchill that directed the European war effort, while on the other hand governments in exile from occupied Europe were staying in the city too. In those governments the uncertainty of the outcome resulted in a combination of engagement and an attitude of wait-and-see. The latter was accompanied by circumspection, such that each country, mindful of its history, estimated its own strengths and weaknesses in possible future negotiations. Ministers and ambassadors sometimes chose to air their doubts and hesitations verbally and in confidence, but they rarely put them down on paper. Anyone who was thinking about negotiations, after all, ran the risk of being pilloried.

Churchill and Roosevelt were wholeheartedly opposed to negotiating with the Nazis, but what if that regime was to fall? The most favourable hypothesis for the Allies presumed a sudden collapse of the Reich, after a putsch by generals who would sweep the Nazis aside and then offer a ceasefire and peace talks. Alluding to the place of exile where Napoleon died in 1821, in a confidential conversation with his staff in July 1941 Churchill contemplated that 'though he would not so desecrate Saint Helena', Hitler could be banished to an island. In December 1941 a rumour mill started up about an approaching military putsch in Germany against the Nazis that might pave the way to peace talks. On 1 January 1942 in Washington, the United Nations Declaration was made known. We now attribute a significance to it that is very different from the main concern of the declaration itself, namely possible peace negotiations after the fall of the Nazis. In those weeks Churchill mentioned in messages to Roosevelt a possible 'German collapse' and the scenario of an internal revolt in Germany, 'with consequences to the Nazi regime, both military and internal, which cannot be measured.'

In how strong a position would the German military then have been to make certain demands? What price would the Allied countries have been willing to pay in such a context? We do not know.

We can be certain that from 1942 onwards Churchill feared too great a weakening of Germany, given the military strength of the Soviet Union. That was a new element in the big war gamble. In the winter of 1941-42, the political leaders in the United States and Britain had been surprised that the Soviet Union held out against the German Army; with that, a new world power had stepped forward. As an excellent historian and a good diplomat, in 1942 Churchill recognized the threat posed by a Soviet Union as a military superpower, in combination with the ancient Russian determination to expand its territory.

In short, geopolitical negotiations in 1942 with a view to ending the war in Europe were far from unthinkable. Recognizing this allows us, firstly, to understand supposedly incoherent passages in certain historical documents. They are like those stars that move in the direction of a black hole; there's nothing to see, until you realize that a coherent interpretation and frame of reference exist for sibylline notes in diaries, intriguing meetings and enigmatic sentences in personal letters or in journal entries. But there is more. The never-realized scenario of a negotiated and relatively quick end to the war is relevant above all because then, in 1940-42, it occupied a place in the thinking and doings of observers and actors – all the way from the top politicians, through local administrators to the ordinary man in the street.

1942 *The Year of Silence* is mainly about the latter. One of the basic questions around which this book is written is: how was Nazi Germany able so easily to bend occupied territories to its will? In the early years of the war especially, until late 1942, its perverse regime prompted little resistance, while everywhere the occupier could count on willing cooperation on the part of the local authorities. In his standard work on the German occupation of Europe, Mark Mazower writes, 'Europeans fell into line and contributed what they [the Germans] demanded anyway. After 1945, this was conveniently forgotten. Those who had endured the German occupation hailed the heroic *résistants* and passed in silence over the fact that German officials in most of Europe had not been overly troubled by resistance until late in the day.'

This finding, about the paucity and tardiness of resistance, obtrudes even more forcefully when set aside the conclusion that as the war went on, Allied diplomats, ministers and other highly placed members of government were given, en masse, a great deal of information about the criminal nature of the regime of occupation. In this book, however, the main focus is on local authorities, which, unlike many of those higher up, could not limit themselves to reports and meetings, and lacked a great deal of information, but bore immediate responsibility for everyday life in their cities, towns and villages. From the frames of reference of 1940-42, away from the main stories that we all know, it is possible to determine that there was an immense amount of ignorance at a local level. From the perspective of those days, we can better understand people's behaviour, at every level. They do not know when or how the war will end. They hesitate, they watch, they keep many routes open; sometimes they stumble, sometimes they deliberately make choices that could later be taken amiss.

I study the year 1942 starting from the microcosm that is Antwerp, a Flemish port city in Belgium with close economic and cultural ties to Germany. It unfolds like a seismograph for evolution in international politics, because shifts at the level of international diplomacy and politics have a clear impact at a local level. As a cosmopolitan metropolis, Antwerp was home to many Jewish immigrants, including Jews who had fled the Nazi regime. Did the Jews allow themselves to be led like lambs to the slaughter? It is a question to which this book attempts to give an answer. From the start of the occupation, most Jews waited anxiously to see what would happen, in the vain hope that the tide would turn. This is the slippery slope of increasing acceptance. The Antwerp local authorities were on that slope too, but they looked at the New Order with confidence. As we shall see, in the summer of 1942 the mayor and the city council were full of self-assurance as they collaborated with the razzias, the rounding up of Jews. But when in November 1942 everything changed, Antwerp took the lead in a national movement of administrative resistance to the occupier. In the weeks and months that followed, magistrates, government officials, mayors and dignitaries altered course.

From November 1942 onwards, everything did indeed change fundamentally. The Allies defeated Rommel's Africa Corps at El Alamein, following which they rolled up the North Africa coast, re-establishing their grip on the Mediterranean. And in December it became increasingly clear that the Germans were also heading for disaster at Stalingrad. For the first time, the fact was starting to emerge that the Third Reich could perhaps be defeated. As such a scenario began to take shape, Britain, the United States and their many allies dedicated themselves fully to it. The last of the thought experiments that had been doing the rounds in the corridors of world politics since 1940, concerning negotiations with Germany, definitively lost their relevance and gave way to a strategy that was stamped and sealed in January 1943 in Casablanca. Spurred on by Roosevelt, the United States and Britain henceforth demanded unconditional surrender. That meant agreeing to fight to the bitter end.

But did the Casablanca Conference not mean implicitly that the period that had gone before had been one of *conditional* surrender, of an ending of hostilities by parties that were still capable of asserting themselves? So leading to some form of negotiated peace? From January 1943 onwards, diplomats and politicians had to reassess their conceptual framework. The war was entering a new phase, the outcome of which was a total defeat of Germany in Berlin in May 1945.

Two camps were now far more sharply defined than in the early years of the war. On one side were the followers of Hitler and Mussolini, on the other the supporters of Churchill and Roosevelt. In countries like Belgium, they were known as the 'blacks' and the 'whites'. In 1940-42 many people were still 'grey' and unsure which direction to go. Some therefore did things that later, from 1943 onwards, were altogether wrong in the eyes of many: attending a display of German culture, making friends with German soldiers, selling supplies to the occupier, reporting illegal resistance activities or collaborating with the exclusion of Jews.

In countries including Belgium, the Netherlands and France you could now no longer really mistake one party for another. It was either democracy, justice and freedom or the dictatorship of *Blut und Boden*. Between those two extremes lay a deep ravine, with armaments and anti-aircraft guns on both sides. Switching camps, waiting and steering a middle course, having it both ways: all of that was practically impossible from now on. So what about the foregoing period, with its many mistakes? It was best glossed over.

The change of course in Antwerp of November 1942 has a European, rather than merely Belgian, dimension. We also turn our eyes to the Belgian government in exile, in London, at the centre of international politics. No less interesting in 1942 was the presence of 'inactive' Belgian ministers in Vichy France. In the autumn of 1940 they had opted out of moving to Britain, because they distrusted British war politics and believed a compromise peace was possible.

Until 1940 Belgium was a neutral country, and in that context the various options for war and peace crystallized out more clearly than in the belligerent powers. Sooner than their British colleagues, in 1940-42 Belgian ministers sometimes ventured to put down on paper the diplomatic noises in favour of peace. There is more. When we chart the activity, or inactivity, of the Belgian government in London chronologically, it becomes clear that its policy reflects the international evolution, with first an attitude of reticence, of wait and see, until December 1942, and then a new pro-Allied engagement, beginning at the time of the great victory at El Alamein (5-8 November). From 14 November onwards the Belgian government, precise and meticulous, affiliated itself with the new consensus, aiming for the total defeat of Germany. That too is what this book is about.

In short, in 1942 Antwerp and Belgium were a microcosm in which we can analyse the perspective of the European compromise peace.

Since the 1960s, historians have set themselves to dissect collaboration in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and elsewhere. Looking back on the war, it was at first not difficult to draw a distinction between compatriots who were 'right' and those who were 'wrong'. From the 1980s onwards the dichotomy was increasingly nuanced, in the Netherlands as a result of work by historians including Chris van der Heijden, with his book *Grijs verleden* ('Grey Past', 2001). In line with Mazower, Van der Heijden writes in his opening sentence, 'First there was the war, then the story of that war.' He also observes that for anyone who wants to make an analysis of the doubt and uncertainty that prevailed during the war, the early years of the conflict are considerably more interesting than the later years.

So finally a fire took hold, with incisive questions about the early years of the war. Just as France still has difficulty understanding the good post-war relations between François Mitterrand and René Bousquet – as chief of police under the Vichy regime, in 1942-43 Bousquet was partly responsible for the mass deportation of Jews – so questions arise in Belgium that seem to have a strong bearing on Europe as a whole. Police officers who were in the resistance yet rounded up Jews? A wartime mayor who gave his support to the razzias but after the war established excellent relations with the Jewish community? In Belgian historiography, 'the strange summer of 1940' is an established concept. It is a brief period, at the start of the German occupation, in which almost all Belgians adapted their behaviour to German victory, including even the Belgian ministers who had fled the country. In this book, I intend to show that the episode of miscalculation and uncertainty lasted far longer, until November 1942. Until then, after all, the possibility of a negotiated peace and a quick end to the war was kept in mind as a possibility.

This book is therefore a search for the black hole of 1942, the year of silence. So let us leave behind us the well-known stories about the war and go straight to the sources.

2. THE SOURCES

In 1998 I published the 1940-43 war diaries of August De Schryver, a Flemish Catholic politician who was a member of the Pierlot government but who spent the first part of the war in Vichy France. The diaries clearly exhibit the perspective of the compromise peace. Far more important still was the question of the attitude adopted by the Belgian ministers in London. For an answer it was a matter of waiting for the release of the personal archives of wartime premier Hubert Pierlot. In 2010 historian Pierre Van den Dungen was able to publish a pioneering biography of Pierlot with the aid of that private archive, but years went by before Pierlot's descendants donated the documents to the National Archives of Belgium and made them available to researchers. I was recently able to consult this archival collection. Relations between Belgium and the Allies in 1940-42 still need to be studied in detail, but what we now know reveals at the very least clear outlines of a cautious position that, all things considered, is thoroughly understandable.

My most important archival sources are the local Antwerp City archives, the 'Felix Archives'. My research in this haven of peace and quiet began in 2005. I first wanted to familiarize myself with the extensive police records of the war years, especially for the city's sixth and seventh districts, the districts with 'Jewish' streets. I also hoped to glean useful information from the case files of the post-war prosecutions for collaboration. Working my way through the documents of the Antwerp City Police Corps, I soon began to recognize the rogues, the back-coverers, the fellow travellers and the unsung heroes.

I also went in search of witnesses, but the policemen who could tell me what had really happened were no longer to be found. In 1942, the Antwerp Police Corps had a strength of some 1,600 officers. They were born between the years 1880 and 1920. How many of those 1,600 were still alive in 2005? How many of them would be prepared to talk? The 'rookies' among them – the youngest officers with the least experience – were recruited during the early years of the war in an attempt to inject the spirit of the New Order into the mentality of the corps. 'Full of courage and without pity,' as one Police Commissioner of the sixth district described this young rabble, with their machismo dreams of power and authority.

In 2008 I was appointed as curator of the Dossin Barracks in Mechelen, a city that lies between Antwerp and Brussels. I was instrumental in its transformation into the Memorial, Museum and Documentation Centre for the Holocaust and Human Rights. In the course of this project, I got to know more about the victims of Nazi violence in occupied Belgium. From the Dossin Barracks, an SS-*Sammellager* (collection depot) halfway between Antwerp and Brussels, more 25,500 Jews and 354 Roma were 'transferred' by train to Auschwitz- Birkenau between August 1942 and July 1944. They included 10,000 Jews from Antwerp. Only 5% of those deported survived to return home after 1945, most of them men between 20 and 50 years of age. For Antwerp, this grim statistic converted into something like 500 survivors. I managed to find three of them: Natan Ramet (born 1925), Israel Rosengarten (born 1926) and Nicolas Roth (born 1927).

Fortunately, the children who had escaped the clutches of the Nazis by going into hiding in Belgium during the war were more numerous. They included Michel Goldberg, Anna Grunfeld, Regina Sluszný, Sonia Blumenstein, Herman Jeger, Hirsch Grunstein, and Malvine and Esther Löwenwirth. In 2010 they were all between 75 and 85 years old, but they still had much to tell about their childhood years in Antwerp. I was privileged to be able to get close to them, and it is on the basis of their testimonies that this book will be an *Alltagsgeschichte*, a story of day-to-day life that illuminates the past from the bottom up, told from the perspective of ordinary people who were torn out of their ordinary lives by extraordinary events.

Another important source were the diaries written by people living in Antwerp in 1942. During the 1914-18 war, many people in Belgium had faithfully kept a daily chronicle of their doings, but this

was less common during the Second World War. What's more, many of the diaries that do exist stop after the summer of 1940. For all my searching, I found just two usable war diaries from Antwerp: those of Max Gevers and Arthur Cornette. These men were both important figures in the local community: the former was a leading stockbroker, the latter was director of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. In particular, the writings of Gevers were a goldmine.

The diary genre makes heavy demands on the patience of its readers, who must be prepared to plough their way through day after day of slow-moving and often irrelevant anecdotal material, while still attempting to empathize with the writer. Sometimes you drift away on the lethargy and sheer ordinariness of everyday life; but sometimes you feel the author's excitement, doubt and anxiety when something unusual happens or things go wrong. It is precisely this latter aspect that makes wartime diaries so interesting. They offer a glimpse into the perspective of the time. How will the war end? What will the future bring? No one knows. In the period 1940-42, Auschwitz and D-Day both were beyond imagining for the people in occupied Belgium.

The diaries helped to confirm an impression that had already been made on me by the other sources: if I want to write this book from the perspective of 1942, then I need to write it in the present tense. I want to take my readers back to a period when nobody knows what is going to happen tomorrow. It is a debatable choice that raises methodological questions about the boundary between history and literature. However that may be, it allows me to immerse the reader in a period when nobody knew what tomorrow would bring.

This book therefore starts in the today of Antwerp in 1942. There is only the now. Life in an occupied city. The days are all the same and the pace of the world seems to slow. Occasionally, some serious incident breaks through the tedium of the diurnal routine. There is not enough to eat. The general atmosphere becomes grimmer and grimmer.

On the one hand we have the police, who are becoming increasingly heavy handed, happy to rub shoulders with the occupiers and willing to carry out their orders, often with increasing violence. A group of National Socialists and paramilitary street fighters within their ranks take the lead. Many of the others – the majority – have no idea what they should do. Should they follow or should they protest? Mayor Leo Delwaide and chief of police Jozef De Potter rule the corps with an iron hand. With their German 'colleagues' in the background, they develop a new framework for the reorganization of the police force along fascist lines. In August 1942 there is a first test of the new system: razzias to round up Jews. But things do not all go according to plan.

On the other hand there is the Jewish population. In December 1940, at the request of the occupier, 24,342 Jews are registered in Greater Antwerp, out of a total population of around 528,000. A daily chronicle of events in the houses and streets where the Jews live suggests that the majority do not understand – or do not want to understand – what is really happening. As a result, they make fatal errors of judgement. In August-September 1942, numerous Jews report to the Dossin Barracks to comply with the German demand that they must undertake 'compulsory labour' at some unknown destination. Only those with money can go into hiding or flee. But most of the Jews in Antwerp, like those in the rest of Belgium, are desperately poor. Suicide? Yes, that is at least one way to avoid the unbearable uncertainty of the future, but few Jews take this option: they do not yet know that it is a preferable alternative to a terrible death in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

The most important source for my research is the judicial archives, especially those of the police. Statements, reports, notebooks: it is a world of inflexible logic and sterile language, the meaning of which is often difficult to discern. From these words, sentences and texts, I try to make out what happened on this day and at that hour. But what can you actually read in these documents?

Nowadays, we can film what happens and what is said in real time. But what exactly is it that we see? Documents from 1942 give us this same impression of immediacy and nearness, while the reality they show us remains as difficult to comprehend as ever.

In the Felix Archive you are allowed to photograph everything, which is a blessing for the enthusiastic devotee of 'in depth' reading. Working my way through this huge mountain of words, I gradually discovered different levels of meaning, layer after layer, just like an archaeologist. The police documents suddenly offer you moments of insight, small fragments of clarity from a specific day. By piecing all these fragments together, as if reconstructing a pane of broken glass – the window to the past – you slowly begin to see a picture emerge.

But, as for an archaeologist, just exposing the pieces and digging them up is not enough; you must also be able to look at them, to read them. And you can read them only once you know what is there. For example, in the documentation the police often refer to 'the interested party', even when they are referring to a Jew who has been reminded of the need to collect his Star of David or is told to report to the Dossin Barracks. For the police, the Jew is an 'interested party', because it is in the interests of everyone – even Jews – to abide by official rules and regulations. If they do not, they will be punished. In this sense, this seemingly curious choice of words is appropriate to the logic of submissiveness that prevailed in a world in which neither the Jews nor the police knew exactly what was happening behind the scenes in Eastern Europe.

This makes the researcher's task a long and difficult one. It is a question of searching for the right context, testing frames of reference, reading and re-reading, looking and absorbing, going over the same ground time and again, until finally you see. Only to then look once more, right from the beginning, perhaps from a fresh perspective... As I work, I can smell the paper, feel its smoothness, admire its shades of colour, from yellow to soft ochre, but seldom white or grey. Delicate and fragile, transitory. In another hundred years this paper will be no more.

Historical research demands patience. It is a craft. In the Felix Archives, I seldom see colleagues, because in Belgian universities 'publish as fast as you can' is now the new mantra. It almost seems as if our historians have been chased away from the archives, bowing to the time pressures of our modern world. Behold the fall from grace.

For fourteen long years, I was able to search and research, to write and re-write, to expand and exhaust my knowledge, to give all that I know and suspect. As a parting gift, I offer this book to my university, the University of Antwerp, grateful that it allowed me the space to follow my own path. And now I let this subject go. No more war.

Part I GREY AND CLOUDY

This book is illustrated with portraits of victims who were living in Antwerp in 1942.

In the index of names at the back of the book, the ultimate fate of each of them is given: deported and murdered; deported and returned; went into hiding; fled...

The photographs were made available by the Dossin Barracks Museum (Kazerne Dossin) in Mechelen, which, as part of the project 'Give them a face', is systematically scanning photos of people deported from Mechelen.

In the Dossin Barracks Museum, 21,000 of the almost 26,000 deported look us in the eye once again.

3. ANTWERP NOTABLES, JEWISH NOBODIES

Sunday 21 December 1941

Being rich and staying rich: that seems to be the destiny of some people from birth. The notables, the noble ones. They buy up cheap pieces of ground just outside the city and manage them wisely generation after generation, for hundreds of years if necessary. Because one day the city will need to expand, and then their land will be worth a fortune. At that point, their descendants, their inheritors, in keeping with the family tradition, will be able to convert fields and forests into hard cash – and they will be able to live in luxury for the rest of their days. It was in this way that Augustin Moretus made a killing – a financial one, of course – with the selling off of the family's land close to the Antwerp-Brussels railway line and the City Park, in what is now the Jewish district. With the resulting fortune, Moretus built a flamboyant neo-Gothic palazzo with a view over the park. Nearby, legions of industrious workers were busy throwing up street after street of new houses.

It is almost 1942 and Europe is at war. By now, the houses built in Moretus' time have seen better days, but in the circumstances of wartime Antwerp there is no real opportunity to renovate or rebuild them. Even so, there is still quick money to be earned, in the short term, by trading in silver and gold, in antiques and paintings, in obligations and bonds...

As a stockbroker and native of Antwerp born and bred, Max Gevers knows the markets like the back of his hand. He also follows the politics of Europe, reads all the history books he can lay his hands on and listens to foreign radio stations, before weighing up all the many rumours in the world around him and committing his impressions to his diary. Today, 21 December 1941, is the first day of winter.

What will it bring this year? Will it be mild or hard? Everyone is talking about the latest radio broadcast by Goebbels, who appealed to his listeners to send warm clothing to the German troops fighting on the Eastern Front. The German Army at Stalingrad seems to be in trouble. Pro-Allied locals walk the streets with a big smile on their faces, while the collaborators reaffirm their faith in Hitler. The war is not over yet... Listening to a speech by the new British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Gevers concludes that the British would be willing to negotiate peace with Germany, provided the Nazis can first be pushed aside. Is that still the case?

Arthur Cornette, the director of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, is also keeping a diary, but unlike Gevers, he is living in a cocooned world. For him, art and culture constitute a way to escape from an increasingly unpleasant reality. Cornette likes to take his mind off things by fine dining with his friends, preferably in the Criterium Restaurant on the Keyserlei.

With its bell-ringing trams and its plush limousines, the stately and metropolitan Keyserlei ends at the Central Station, an eclectic architectural masterpiece dating from 1905. To the north of the boulevard, and left of the station, stands the notorious 'station district' with its dance bars, gaming halls and brothels. The police of this district – the sixth district – keep a watchful eye on establishments such as Dancing Capri, Cabaret Gâté, Club de Paris, Bar Chandos, Club Luniel, Cabaret Femina and the Hacienda. To the right side of the Keyserlei, the south side, the row of elegant facades and stylish shop windows does little to suggest that behind it lies a much more modest part of town. This is where the Jewish quarter begins, close to the Brussels railway, with a warren of streets and alleys leading away from it like the tail of a wayward comet.

The police of the sixth district have their hands full with the Jewish quarter, with its always lively trade in diamonds. This is also the place where the local police station is located: Vestingstraat 49. The word 'Police' is even shown in Yiddish next to the entrance. The Lange Kievitstraat, with its many Jewish shops selling kosher products, is the central axis of this Yiddischland. In December 1941 it is full to overflowing with Jewish immigrants and refugees. On the orders of the Germans, the walls and

windows of all the shops and businesses bear posters warning that 'This is a Jewish establishment'. Further on along the railway lies the seventh district, where many Jewish foreigners also live. The police station in the Florisstraat has a sub-station at the start of the Grote Hondstraat, just behind the railway line. The sixth and seventh districts are home mainly to Jews: some 15,000 to 20,000; who can say how many there are in total? Further on still, in the direction of Berchem, many Jews live in the Groene Hoek district, and in neighbouring Deurne, although their numbers are fewer. These are mainly well-to-do people, quite a few of them from the Netherlands.

In contrast, the Jewish quarter in the sixth district is characterized by its poverty. Behind the railway line, in the Leeuwerikstraat, the Somersstraat and the Lentestraat, the buildings are narrow and often six storeys high. It is always busy in and around the many Jewish shops and emporiums that sell their wares in Yiddish or Hebrew to those who can afford to buy them. Not everyone can. The poverty is visible. Slum landlords are making a fortune from the exploitation of the poor. But not every street is like this. Those closer to the City Park are slightly more prosperous, or at least less poor. These are the streets, like the Terliststraat, that were built in Moretus' time. You can see that from the 52 once-elegant town houses there, although most of them now look grey and shabby, as though they have been lived in for too long. In the suburbs of Antwerp you can find lots of houses like this, all built to more or less the same design: a stately front room, a more shadowy and sober middle room, and a pleasant living room at the back, with a courtyard or garden behind; while on the first floor there are bedrooms and a study for the master of the house, with a bathroom on the landing. During the day, the maid works in the kitchen in the cellar; at night she sleeps in a wooden attic, just beneath the tiles of the roof. By 1942, the Terliststraat is no longer the desirable place to live it once was. Almost half of the residents are now of Polish origin, with a good sprinkling of Russians and Czechoslovakians. The German and Austrian Jews are more recent arrivals; the others have often been living in Belgium for ten years or more. In fact, roughly a quarter of the street's residents were actually born in Belgium. The houses are now divided up into apartments and single rooms for rent. Sometimes there is a rickety old piano on the communal landing, where a destitute Jewish refugee will play Schubert, Brahms and Beethoven, little imagining what German 'culture' has in store for him in the years ahead. But at this juncture in time, the piano is a positive sign, a sign of an evolution. The violin is the instrument of choice for the 'wandering' Jew, for the refugee who is constantly on the move. Once settled, they buy a piano. And very occasionally, if things turn out well for them, they might even buy their own home. A permanent home - or so they hope.

Monday 22 December 1941

Sensation. Hitler has dismissed General von Brauchitsch and has taken over personal command of German forces in the Soviet Union. There seems to be a breach between the Nazis and the army. Could this perhaps be a turning point in Germany?

In the sixth district lives Chaim Blumenstein, together with his wife and two small children, Sonia and Alex. This family of four shares the house in the Teriststraat with an uncle and aunt, their grandmother or 'Babbe' and a sickly great aunt. They all come from the Soviet Union.

Sonia Blumenstein presses her nose against the cold window and stares with her brother, Alex, at the brightly lit Christmas tree on the other side of the street. That is the home of a Catholic family, one of the few that live in this largely Jewish neighbourhood.

Christmas! But not for the Jews. They have just celebrated Hanukah, the Festival of Lights. Elsewhere in Antwerp, in the seventh district, Karola Jolowiec is given a poetry album as a present by her twelve-year-old brother, Jacob. In 1938, both children, together with their parents Israel Jolowiec and Chaja Schonwetter, fled from Dusseldorf after the horrors of Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken

Glass. But in May 1940 the Germans arrive in Antwerp. In December of that year, father Jalowiec is deported first to Limburg and then to Brussels. Since then, his chair in the Lange Altaarstraat has remained empty.

During the Festival of Lights, sombre thoughts flit through Jacob's head. On the first page of the poetry album he writes:

בה

Liebste Karola

*Nie mögen dunkle Wolken trüben Dein lachend frohes Kinderglück,
Nur über lichte Bahnen gleite Dein Blick erinnernd sich zurück, Dass
nie vom hellen Kinderauge Dir herb des Schmerzes Träne fließt, Bis G"tt
am fernen Lebensende Dich selbst in seine Arme schliesst.*

*Dein Bruder Jakob Antwerp,
14 December 1941*

The Hebrew 'בה' – *Beizrat Hashem* – means 'with God's help'. The young but devout Jacob writes G"tt and not Gott, because writing the name of the Almighty is forbidden. But who is the real author of this poem? Jacob's mother? The great and good God in heaven seems rather Christian...

*May no clouds darken the brightness of your joy. May
your ways be easy, with no tears to cloy.
May sadness never dampen your sweet little eyes.
May all this be so, till God – at last – calls you to the skies.*

Every child thinks that it will live to grow old.

Like Sonia and Alex Blumenstein, Jacob and Karola Jalowiec sometimes invite their non-Jewish friends to visit their home. But the two worlds remain separated from each other. The ruling mentality in Antwerp is one of 'us' and 'them'. There is a Jewish swimming pool and a Jewish theatre. The Cercle Musical Juif (Jewish Musical Circle) is very active. The Jewish Centre coordinates and subsidizes help and support for the needy. Before the German invasion in 1940, more than a dozen Jewish weeklies are published in Antwerp, often printed in Yiddish, the language that most of the Jewish immigrants and refugees from the diaspora use to interact with each other.

Local Antwerp people often say that they know 'the Jews', but that is not really true. The diaspora is just too diverse to make this possible. At this time, Antwerp has three different Jewish religious communities, each one recognized by the city authorities. The largely liberal Shomre Hadas has three synagogues as well as a ritual bathhouse. The more strictly orthodox Machsike Hadas has a synagogue and a ritual bathhouse. Also important, but much smaller, is the Portuguese Rite with its synagogue. These buildings are practically all in the sixth and seventh districts. In addition, there are numerous private prayer houses and study rooms spread across the city. In fact, the Jewish world has almost as many tendencies and opinions as there are Jews. The Zionists dream of a Jewish state in Palestine, but are unable to sell this dream to the internationalists, who believe in the value of cross-border political movements. There are Jewish communists, anarchists, Trotskyites... Similarly, the highly devout Belzer and other Hasidim have a very different vision of the Promised Land, Eretz Israel, from the Zionists. All these different fault lines within the Jewish community are reflected in a wide

variety of different cultural associations, sports clubs and youth movements. At the same time, the Jews also organize themselves according to their country and region of origin. There are further divisions between the Ashkenazi Jews, who mostly come from Eastern Europe, and the Sephardic Jews, mostly from Spain and Portugal.

The Belgian state security service keeps a close eye on those with extreme left-wing sympathies.

Sonia and Alex Blumenstein have a number of dissident communists in their family. In the 1930s, one of their Trotskyite uncles is even forced to leave Belgium and return to the Soviet Union, where he disappears without trace during the Stalinist purges.

This enormous diversity within their community does not prevent the Jews from presenting a united front to the outside world. During the occupation, they know that they are more dependent on each other than ever before. Whipped up by the militants of the antisemitic League for the Defence of the People, on Easter Monday in April 1941 hundreds of ordinary men and women from Antwerp, many still dressed in their best Easter clothes, storm through the Jewish quarter, leaving behind them a trail of destruction. The pogrom continues until deep into the night. To make matters worse, the mayor of Antwerp then imposes a curfew on the Jews, from seven at night to seven in the morning. The occupying Germans later reduce this by an hour, but the situation is still a difficult one for the Jews. For seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, they are confined to their homes every night. And they don't even have the comfort of a radio to distract them. Jews were forced to hand in their sets to the authorities in June 1941.

It is quiet in the Jewish households.

4. SONIA'S FRIENDS

A beautiful spring day in 2007. In my letter box I find a letter from an elderly lady.

Dear Sir,

After reading the recent article in the newspaper in which you asked for witnesses to the razzias and deportation of the Jews, I thought you might be interested to see my book *The Broken Hour*.

I was only 12 years old at the time, but everything is still fresh in my memory, so I will never forget.

Yours sincerely,

Sonia Blumenstein

I ring the front doorbell. Sonia is seventy-seven years old and her legs are not as good as they once were. Her husband, Aron alias Jules Koganovitch, is doing better. They found each other after the war. Aron worked for many years before his retirement as a docker in Antwerp harbour. A Jewish dockworker! That would be unimaginable after the war. And he loves Bach!

Sonia tells me about the summer of 1942. Five of her friends disappear during the razzias. And on 13 October the Gestapo call at her home. The group includes a single Belgian, Felix Lauterbom, known locally as 'The Beard'. Sonia opens the door. It is the beginning of a tragedy. The men take her grandmother, her Babbe, with them. In *The Broken Hour*, written in 1979, Sonia describes the scene:

My mother clung desperately to the side of the lorry, crying all the time. 'Just sign here!' said the Gestapo man. 'Then you and your children can go with her. You can all stay together.' I saw my mother's hand reaching for the pen. Suddenly, my Babbe stood up in the back of the lorry. She looked like a proud statue with flashing eyes. With outstretched hand she ordered my mother not to sign. 'Think of the children,' she cried.

Fascinated, I stood staring at Babbe, my gaze locked on hers. I knew that in just a few moments she would be gone and I would never see her again. I felt it with my whole body and I still had so much I wanted to say: how much I loved her, how lonely I would be without her, that I was the thief who always stole her sugar lumps, that I was the one who licked her jam jars clean. That at night it would be unbearable without her lying in bed beside me. That she had still not finished teaching me the evening prayer. Who would teach me now if Babbe was no longer there? ... But not a single sound passed my frozen lips.

Sonia sees how the lorry starts its engine and drives off. She hears how her Babbe weeps and wails in the back.

Sonia Blumenstein's book grips you by the throat. But why was only her grandmother taken? Why were the others allowed to go with her only if the mother signed her consent? It all sounds odd. What could it possibly mean? I want to look more deeply into this family tragedy and I'm already considering republishing Sonia's book. With this in mind, I go in search of Sonia's five lost friends and trace their stories.

Sadly, Sonia was not able to enjoy the reappearance in print of *The Broken Hour* in 2010. A few months earlier, she fell victim to acute dementia. 'For the rest of my days I will be followed by those brown eyes of hers, which looked at me so strangely ... After all, I was the one who opened the door. I realized that I would experience and re-experience those images a thousand times, for as long as I live, for as long as I live...' These are the words that Sonia wrote in *The Broken Hour*. In the care home where she spent her final months, she cried out every day for her Babbe, her face sweating, her voice filled with anxiety. And she suddenly started speaking Yiddish again. Something she had never done

during the past sixty years.

Tuesday 23 December 1941

The Belgian government in exile, in London, is made up of four ministers. Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot finds himself in the company of Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul-Henri Spaak, Minister for the Colonies Albert De Vleeschauwer and Minister of Finance Camille Gutt. These four, with their authority, amount to the strict minimum needed for the government to survive internationally.

Ever since it was created as a nation in 1830, little Belgium has had a tradition of non-alignment and neutrality. After all, were the country to depend too much on one of its large neighbours – France, Germany or Britain – it would run the risk of being swallowed up by whichever it had chosen. The international mindset of Belgium is comparable to those of Sweden and Switzerland, which are no less tried and tested in their neutrality.

The Belgian government has set up a Belgian Army once more in Britain, but it is none too viable. It languishes through a relative surfeit of senior officers – there are several thousand of them – and a lack of ordinary ranks. The result for this inactive army is dissatisfaction and even a lack of discipline. Churchill has little interest in Belgian soldiers in Britain. The Belgian colonial army in Congo is important, however. The Pierlot government has agreed to deploy it in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa in battles between Allied forces and the German and Italian armies, but it wants to stress firmly the Belgian character of its own troops. Today a disgruntled Pierlot notes in his diary that the British ambassador has asked Spaak to send a Congolese brigade to British Nigeria immediately; Pierlot complains about the method, which leaves no room for negotiations or for the working out of details. ‘Agreed to send the brigade, starting now, on the understanding that it can be deployed in military operations only after a decision by the Belgian government.’

Prime Minister Pierlot has plenty of reasons to distrust the British when it comes to Congo. On 6 June 1940 Churchill solemnly declared in the House of Commons, on behalf of the British government, that Britain would fight for the effective restoration of a free and independent Belgium, but in that official statement no mention at all was made of the Belgian Congo. In the Belgian political and diplomatic milieu, this naturally creates suspicion. The British have long regretted that the Berlin Conference of 1885 apportioned the vast central part of Africa to Leopold II, a place that was to become the Congo Free State. The Pierlot government therefore also has difficulty with the enthusiasm with which the Belgians in Congo want to engage their colony wholly in the Allied struggle. The Belgian government in London naturally sees the German and Italian troops in Africa as enemies, but it wants to steer its own Belgian course, remaining as independent as possible from the Allies. So it is extremely reticent regarding a British and American military presence in Congo.

Yesterday the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, landed in Washington! It is sensational news. This is only his second trip to the United States since the war began, and his first meeting with the Americans since they entered the war three weeks ago, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. At the same time, Anthony Eden, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, is travelling to Moscow. What is going on? Hubert Pierlot describes this puzzling and spectacular news as a ‘coup de théâtre’. Over the past few days, Minister Spaak has received information from the Belgian embassy in Sweden about the despair in Germany after its setbacks in the Soviet Union (diplomats still often

call it 'Russia', as if the 1917 revolution had never happened). According to the ambassador, there are plans afoot in the German Army to push Hitler aside and take power. As a neutral country, Sweden has a special position as a possible mediator between warring nations. The country also has privileged connections with Belgian diplomats, since the beautiful and charming Queen Astrid, wife of King Leopold III, who tragically died in London in 1935 at the age of twenty-nine, was Swedish. For the Belgian government in London, contact with Sweden is a valuable source of information.

Is it time for negotiations? The Polish ambassador to the United States, Jan Ciechanowski, has just engaged in 'a very private conversation' with Harry Hopkins, liaison to President Roosevelt. Ciechanowski now wonders whether the extraordinary meeting in Washington should perhaps be seized upon, because of the prestige of Churchill and Roosevelt, 'but especially in view of the German reverse in Russia, and the internal crisis in Germany', as an opportunity to put together a solemn and powerful declaration. He writes a letter to Hopkins to this effect. And so diplomatic negotiations begin about a declaration by the countries that are at war with Germany. It can be published in the coming days or week.