

## 26. August 1942. Domme (Dordogne)

by Max Gutmann

The roundup of Jews had begun, in Paris and in all of the occupied zone. Rumors about it had reached us, we heard some details and then people began to talk of the fact that deportations would also begin in the unoccupied zone. Once again we experienced the anxiety, the feeling of being chased, the fear. Again we were frightened by the sight of the *Gendarmes*<sup>1</sup>, the sound of every step approaching our apartment made us nervous. In July/August we heard about deportations from the internment camps and we wrote to the Toodts to find out a little more about the situation. They told us about deportations from camps that had already taken place, and asked some questions, when had we come to France and whether I had been in the Foreign Legion, and they thought that Friedl should make known her condition, *i.e.* her pregnancy. These questions made our situation clearer: we were in immediate danger, since we had already heard from the courts that Jews who had immigrated after 1936 would be deported. And we had already officially declared in February that we had come to France only after January 1, 1936.

The fear of what awaited us was paralyzing. All our thinking about what we should do led to nothing. We had no friends or acquaintances who could help us, we had no way of even getting useful advice. Should we leave? But where? And Friedl was six months pregnant! To Switzerland? Was it still possible to get there? It seemed completely implausible to us that it might be possible to cross the border illegally. Certainly, during the war, it was very carefully guarded. And would the Swiss even admit us?

In our cozy nest we had no clue as to what was going on, and no way of finding out from elsewhere. It was impossible to travel, and in addition we had no acquaintances in any big city where people were likely to be more knowledgeable. Thus we sat in isolation, naïve and helpless in Domme, and waited anxiously for the unavoidable. From time to time we entertained faintly hopeful thoughts. Maybe we would be left in peace. Perhaps they would limit the deportations to camp inmates. Friedl, in any case, wrote to Gretl in Zurich, carefully using cryptic expressions, about our situation, in order to find out whether there was any possibility at all of escaping into Switzerland. That was all we did, and, as far as we knew, all we could do, and thus we lived in fear and trembling until August 26.

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I woke up suddenly in the night, uncertain as to whether it was because of a knock on the door or some other noise. I sat halfway up and listened. Again, someone knocked on our bedroom door. Friedl was startled out of her sleep. A man's voice called softly from the door, "*Monsieur Gutmann!*" I turned on the light, it was five o'clock.

Again came the knocking. "*Ouvrez, c'est la police!*"<sup>2</sup>. I started trembling from fear. "The police", I said to Friedl. "We have to open", she said. Again they called from the door. With my arms flying I put on my pajamas and opened the door. Two *gendarmes* were standing outside. "Close the door", one of them said. "Your wife needn't get excited. You have to come with us!" "But why?", I asked. "Be quiet, you're not the only one! Get dressed quietly, you have an hour to pack your belongings. Since your wife is pregnant she can stay."

I went back to the bedroom, Friedl was just putting on her bathrobe. The police stepped into the room behind me and started explaining the situation to Friedl. "In view of your condition you can remain here. But if you want to, you can come along with your husband. You can lock the apartment and we'll hold on to the keys. Everything will remain where it is, you can be sure that nothing will be lost." "Shall I come with you?", Friedl asked me." "No, no!" Why would she volunteer for deportation? That would have been totally useless. For me, it would have not have meant any relief, whereas her being free might possibly help in getting me released.

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<sup>1</sup> *police*

<sup>2</sup> "*Open up, it's the police*"

I washed and got dressed; in the excitement I could barely find my clothes, I mixed everything up. I discussed with Friedl what I should take, thirty kilos of luggage was permitted. “Don’t take too much, your wife can always send you something more”, one of the policemen said. I got myself ready while Friedl packed my suitcase. She put underwear and some food into it. “You’re not permitted to take a knife or a razor”, the policeman declared. Obviously they were taking every possible precaution. I put on a light cotton summer suit. I decided not to take a second suit along, that didn’t seem exactly the right thing for deportation to Poland.

“So they’re going to hand me over to the Germans”, I asked the *gendarme*. “No, no”, Vincent answered. “No need to be dramatic. You’ll be brought to a camp, it’s happening to many nowadays. Maybe they’ll release you soon.” This was a transparent attempt to calm me. “You were ‘*prestataire*’<sup>3</sup>, weren’t you?”, he continued. I showed him my military identification. He looked through it and asked his colleague Felix whether an exception had not been made for ‘*prestataires*’. Felix did not think so, but in the end they decided to check the regulations back at the *gendarmerie*<sup>4</sup>. Felix left. “I’m truly sorry that we had to come just for you”, Vincent assured me. “There are many others here we’d like to be rid of.” I believed his expression of sympathy, which unfortunately had no practical value for me whatsoever. “When did you come to France?”, he continued. It was clear that they were rounding up those who had immigrated after January 1, 1936. I explained that I had come after that date, and in addition had committed the stupidity of making an official declaration of the fact a few months ago, while others, smarter than I, did not do so.

Felix returned from the *gendarmerie*. Nothing was said about ‘*prestataires*’ in the circular.

“Doesn’t my wife’s condition have anything to do with it”, I inquired? “I’m sorry that I have no medical certificate that might be useful.” Well, they said, Friedl could remain home because of her pregnancy, but one couldn’t possibly wake a doctor at this hour for that purpose. I repeated that I wanted to have with me some confirmation of her pregnancy. They decided that the *gendarmerie* would give me such a certification, it was important to me to be able to prove anything that could possibly weigh in the balance as an extenuating circumstance. In a situation like this, one clings even to a straw. I tried to convince myself that it might not come to deportation after all, and to consider other possibilities. We went to the kitchen where, in the meantime, Friedl had prepared some coffee on the little alcohol burner. I forced myself to drink a cup and to eat a small piece of bread; I didn’t have much of an appetite. Friedl offered the *gendarmes* a cognac which they gladly accepted. They pressed us to leave. Friedl wanted me to take all the money. “All the money” amounted to a few thousands francs. That would have been senseless. She couldn’t be without money, whereas it probably wouldn’t help me, but most likely would be confiscated. I pocketed one thousand francs.<sup>5</sup>

Then came the farewell, which we both knew might be forever. My agitation had in the meantime given way to tension. We kissed once more. “You mustn’t lose your head, even if you go to Poland,” Friedl said to me. “No, I won’t, whatever might happen.” Nothing was final, after all, until the end. In those days deportation, to us, meant Poland, but we hadn’t yet heard about the extermination camps.

I took my little suitcase and with the *gendarmes* went down the stairs in front of our apartment. The front gate was open, and I stared at it for a moment. Who had opened it, how had the *gendarmes* entered in the first place?

I turned around, Friedl stood under the door. I felt terribly sorry for her.

Dawn was breaking, we went along the *Grande Rue* across the *Place de la Halle* to the *Gendarmerie*. Domme was still asleep and our steps echoed in the early morning. At the *Gendarmerie* office I still had to sign my summons. The *gendarme* on duty had confirmed on this document that my wife was six months

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<sup>3</sup> *military volunteer*

<sup>4</sup> *police station*

<sup>5</sup> ~\$10

pregnant. A small van was waiting; along its inside walls were two benches. All this for just one man? I got in, Vincent sat down opposite me, Felix sat next to the driver.

The van started through Domme where not a single soul was yet to be seen, through the gate, *la Porte del Bos*. We went on, and I tried to retain all that I could of this sleepy little town, resting, lost deep inside France, a town which I had come to love and which had become a little bit of home to me. I contemplated the thought that I might be seeing all this for the last time.

On the road to Sarlat I studied the landscape carefully and with new eyes. I tried to memorize every tree, every bush, every turn of a street, every house, so that I might keep it with me in an unknown and threatening future. Never before had I enjoyed this trip as much as I did on this fresh, beautiful summer morning on which I probably was going to lose everything that had become dear to me. From time to time I spoke with Vincent, small meaningless conversation about the country, about the people of Domme, about Domme, but nothing about what was awaiting me.

In Sarlat we stopped at the police station, and two young women got in. Polish. The husband of one of them was there and embraced his wife in farewell, he himself stayed behind. A *gendarme* from Sarlat also got into the van, so there was one official for each prisoner. I exchanged the usual questions with both women - the husband of one was a former member of the Foreign Legion, the other was Gentile, and so they escaped the arrests for which their wives were also roused out of their beds at five o'clock in the morning.

In Salignac three young men were brought by the *gendarmes*. They were Austrians from a "*Compagnie de Travailleurs Etrangers*"<sup>6</sup> who had been working in a coal mine in the region and had been dragged away from work. One of the prisoners was accompanied by his wife who could stay behind, as she was still suffering from a wound which she had gotten during an air raid in 1940. She tried to comfort her husband by telling him not to worry, she would take care of herself. The stop was short, we drove further, we were supposed to get to Tarascon. Everyone's thoughts circled around his personal fate, which had become a common fate to all of us. We spoke about what was awaiting us, somewhat carefully, for fear of "calling the devil". The policemen knew nothing. "*On va vous mettre dans un camp!*"<sup>7</sup> One of the Polish women complained continuously about feeling sick; it was just a little act intended to impress the *gendarmes* who, for their part, took very little notice of it.

The *gendarmes* from Domme (Felix and Vincent) finally got off in Sarlat, and two *gendarmes* from Sarlat got in. Then we continued on to Tarascon where we made a short stop to take on two additional "prisoners". Then on to an internment camp<sup>8</sup> built at the beginning of the war for German prisoners of war who, of course, never materialized. There were several barracks capable of accommodating a few hundred prisoners with sleeping sacks of straw, still unused, and another barracks in the back containing everything else that might be necessary. On our arrival many prisoners were already there, most of them from the Dordogne. They were all Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, Poland and other countries, all of them apparently having arrived in France after January 1, 1936.

The camp seemed to be well-organized, some nurses were already there apparently to show how humane the French authorities could be. There were two military field kitchens busy preparing dinner for us, I would guess there were 120 - 150 people in the camp, men and women, young people and old.

We began talking to each other, naturally mostly about what was going to happen to all of us. Many believed they would keep us in a French internment camp, but others predicted we would be handed over to the German authorities of occupation. After the meal we stood in front of the barracks and I joined a group which included a young employee of the *préfecture*<sup>9</sup>. As I arrived they were talking about the likelihood of

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<sup>6</sup> "*Company of Foreign Workers*"

<sup>7</sup> "*You're going to be put in a camp.*"

<sup>8</sup> *In Saint-Pardoux-La-Riviere, 50 km north of Perigeux*

<sup>9</sup> *Police Department*

release, a possibility about which I had not even thought. One man claimed to know that parents with children under eighteen months would be released, to which the French employee replied, "That shows you know nothing, we're going to release parents of children under *two* years". I joined in and asked, "What about families expecting a child?" The employee: "What do you mean?" "Well, my wife is pregnant." "Is she here?" "No, but in my papers there's a confirmation of the fact by the *Gendarmerie* of Domme." The employee: "Well, if that's true I'll release you tomorrow". I was shaken to the core, shook the man's hand, and almost embraced him. We spoke a little while longer about release and non-release, and finally we had to go into the barracks to lie down on our sacks of straw. It was a long night because I could barely sleep, the thoughts about what might actually happen kept me awake. We had to rise between five and six in the morning, then there was breakfast with coffee and, astonishingly, as much bread as one wanted. Then we had to clean up our sleeping barracks, and we talked continuously about what would happen to us. When I came out of our barracks I saw a long queue of many of my fellow prisoners. I learned that there was "*Commission de Triage*"<sup>10</sup> from the *préfecture* in one of the barracks, which was deciding who was to be released. Naturally, everybody queued up, but the line moved forward only very slowly. Finally an employee came out of the "official" barrack to say that the commission would hear only the following prisoners:

Age: over 65 or under 16

Parents with children under two years

Men who had served in the *Legion Étrangère*<sup>11</sup> and their families

Those with severe illnesses.

Many left the queue, and then the employee with whom I had spoken the evening before saw me and he called out to me to get to the front of the line. Shortly afterwards the door of the barracks opened again and a prisoner, elegantly dressed, came out next to an employee who was yelling at him, "*Get out of here, you think you can keep dealing in the black market? It's over!*" Then I was called. Behind a table there sat an employee with a secretary, he asked my name and then said, "*Ah, c'est le mari enceint!*"<sup>12</sup> And then he added, "*I'm very happy to be able to release you!*" I received a release voucher, and the employee who shortly before had thrown out the other prisoner embraced me, kissed me on both cheeks, and said: "*Good luck! Go back home and make lots of babies, but register them immediately as French citizens!*" I was very much shaken up and incredibly happy. Although the employees were obviously interpreting the regulations fairly generously, only very few were released. We had lunch, and then we, the small group of released prisoners, could go to the railroad station. There we waited for the train that took us to Perigueux. My thoughts were constantly with Friedl, and my problem was how to notify her. Once in Perigueux, naturally I immediately went to our friends the Sachs's. It was around 4 PM and our friends were happily surprised to see me. Friedl had informed them by telephone of my arrest and told them at the same time that she would be coming to Perigueux in order to possibly work for my release at the *préfecture*, or at least to learn what she might do about it. Friedl's train was to arrive in an hour and Alfred Sachs came to the railway station with me. As Friedl got off the train Alfred approached her to first gently break the news of my release, so as to avoid additional shocks. Then I appeared and we were together again. We stayed overnight with our friends and the next day returned to Domme where we had an unexpected reception.

It was towards evening between 4:00 and 5:00 as we passed through the *Porte des Tours*, but from there it was almost an hour and a half before we were able to reach home. Normally the walk would take barely five minutes, but everyone who saw us came to express their joy about my return and indignation about my arrest. People came out of their houses to greet me, and it seemed that the entire little town was outraged at my arrest.

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<sup>10</sup> *Screening Commission*

<sup>11</sup> *Foreign Legion*

<sup>12</sup> "*Ah, it's the pregnant husband!*"