

### Edith Goldapper describes her flight from Belgium to France in May 1940<sup>1</sup>

Handwritten diary by Edith Goldapper,<sup>2</sup> entries for the period 10 May 1940 to mid June 1940

That's right, it's 10 May 1940, and the war in Belgium has started. However terrible it may sound, it's a fact! We're all panicking here.<sup>3</sup> Every time a siren is heard from Ruisbroek or Brussels, we rush into the cellar. In every moment of free time, we work on making a trench. It is successful, too, and we use it. In the meantime, Mrs Frank<sup>4</sup> is trying her utmost to find some way for us to escape. *It is 14 May*. Our things have to be packed quickly, because we will soon have to be at the railway station in Schaerbeek. Unfortunately, we won't be able to take along more than two briefcases. Only the most essential items go inside, and we wear as much clothing as possible. I put my two remaining suitcases, partially packed, back into the attic. By now it is 4 p.m. We all stand at the front door, armed with our meagre luggage. Including Mrs Frank and Miss Lea,<sup>5</sup> there are approximately thirty-five of us. Oh, it's a sad sight, all of us marching off to the tram and having to bid farewell to our beloved Général Bernheim Home.<sup>6</sup> After reaching Anderlecht, we first go to the home for boys and fetch the boys, whose headmaster is Monsieur Gaspard Deway.<sup>7</sup> Together with them, we head towards Schaerbeek. We can't board the train until 11 p.m., so we have to hold out for five more hours in the railway station, which is crammed to bursting. Finally, we get a place, and it is in a splendid livestock wagon. One railway wagon for the boys, another for us. Slowly the train begins to move. We are going somewhere or other, into the unknown, no idea to what country! We have brought along enough food supplies from home, so that we have nothing to fear in this respect. In addition, everywhere, in every town where we stop, there are good people who bring us something to eat. So, we have been travelling for one and a half

1 The original is privately owned. The diary was written from 1943 to 1944 in France and Switzerland. The entry is from Book I, pp. 22–26. Excerpts published in Sebastian Steiger, *The Children of Château de la Hille*, trans. Joyce Hoy (Chicago: Lexographic Press, 2017 [French edn, 1992]). This document has been newly translated from German.

2 Edith Goldapper Rosenthal, née Goldapper (b. 1924); grew up in Vienna; reached Belgium on a Kindertransport in Dec. 1938; lived in children's homes and with foster families until her evacuation to France in May 1940; lived in the children's colony at Château de la Hille in the south of France, 1940–1943; fled to Switzerland in Dec. 1943; emigrated to the USA after the war.

3 At the time, Edith Goldapper was living in the Général Bernheim Children's Home in Zuun, now part of the municipality of Sint-Pieters-Leeuw (French: Leeuw-Saint-Pierre), south of Brussels.

4 Elka Frank (b. 1915); fled from Germany to Palestine, where she married the Belgian Alexandre Frank; returned to Brussels in 1936; ran the Général Bernheim Children's Home from 1939; after the German invasion she accompanied her wards to the south of France and looked after children at Château de la Hille; escaped to Spain in 1941.

5 Léa Gillis; teacher.

6 The children's home was opened in early 1939 on the initiative of the Committee for Assistance to Jewish Refugee Children (CAER), and it housed around thirty-five girls. It was named after the inspector general of the infantry of the Belgian army Louis Bernheim (1861–1931).

7 Correctly: Gaspard Dewaay (1910–1989), sport teacher and tram conductor; from Jan. 1939 head of the Herbert Speyer Children's Home in the Brussels district of Anderlecht; together with his wife, Lucienne, accompanied the children from the home to the south of France in May 1940 and looked after them until his return to Belgium in Sept. 1940.

days now, but have just learned that we are going to France. There are no toilets in our splendid railway wagon, so that is one of the hardest problems to solve. It is hard to get off the train, because it stops at very strange intervals. At night I scarcely close my eyes. Especially last night, when we were in *Abeville*,<sup>8</sup> near Dieppe, and there was a big air raid. Now we are in Dieppe. We have a long stop here. It turns out that a train behind us was damaged. This causes much alarm, but we manage to get through that, too.

We have been travelling for four days and four nights now, but now we're at our destination. We have reached Toulouse. But we are not getting off here. A bit further, in Villefranche-Louraguais.<sup>9</sup> From there a bus takes us on to Seyre par Nailloux.<sup>10</sup> We are going to be housed in a chateau, we are told.<sup>11</sup> But how great is our disappointment when we catch sight of a dilapidated old house. The chateau is actually ten minutes away, but it is not destined for us. We enter the house: no table, no chair, no bed. A real wasteland. We put our things in a corner, and then we try to get some wood from the farmer across the way. Soon our boys have built a few tables and benches, and we can eat the supper brought to us by the farmers. Straw is placed in various other rooms. Later we will sleep there. We stay this way for around three weeks. Then we are given boards, and the boys make them into beds. It is all quite primitive, but we are immensely happy. [...]<sup>12</sup>

8 Correctly: Abbeville (Somme département).

9 Correctly: Villefranche-de-Lauragais (Haute-Garonne département).

10 The town of Seyre is situated in the Haute-Garonne département.

11 See Doc. 153.

12 In the next part of the diary, Edith Goldapper writes about the transfer of the children to Château de la Hille and their life there, and about her escape to Switzerland.