

# 8, rue Mérentié

A narrative by Jean Contrucci,  
with the collaboration of Jacques Virbel

English translation by



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**Celebrating Marseille-Provence 2013**

In memory of Eliane Sophie Plewman  
Marseille 9 December 1917 – Dachau 13 September 1944



Nobody seemed to see you French by choice  
People went by all day without seeing you  
But at the hour of curfew wandering fingers  
Had written under your photos "Fallen for France"  
And it made the dismal mornings different.  
Louis Aragon, *The Red Poster*

The story of an English network  
in the French Resistance in Marseille  
1943 – 1944

For Margaret, Patrick and Brigitte Browne

A furtive silhouette shoots out of the dark stomach of a four-engined Halifax B Mark II Special bomber. It is 2am on the night of 13/14 August 1943. The aeroplane flies over the Jura *département*, not far from Lons-le-Saulnier, before continuing on its route towards the North East, where it will cast out another member of its human cargo above the Montbéliard region (Haute-Saône). This Royal Air Force equipment has been – as it has for every mission – put at the disposal of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), created by Churchill in 1940 to 'set Europe ablaze' by parachuting specially trained agents into occupied France, to help the maquis, equip them with arms and instruct their sabotage teams.

The bomber, unarmed this time and prepared only to transport parachutists and their equipment, took off a few hours earlier at the discreet Tempsford aerodrome in Bedfordshire, north of London. Each month, with the full moon, secret agents depart from this RAF aerodrome, their arrival details sent by coded messages to the leaders of networks, or to resistants liaising with SOE's F Section<sup>1</sup>.

After two failed attempts on preceding nights, when the pilot had to turn back due to bad weather, this is the night.<sup>2</sup>

At an altitude of little over 1,000 feet, keeping low to evade the German radar, the parachute descent can't have lasted more than 20 seconds. It's the speed which guarantees the secrecy of the manoeuvre, as delicate as it is dangerous.

The human form which has just jumped feet first into the void, wearing a padded helmet with chinstrap and goggles, squeezed into a thick fabric suit and leather boots, is at first dropped like a stone for a dozen metres, before being brutally reined in by a white flower which seems to be blooming just overhead. A suitcase is attached to the parachute cords, containing a set of civilian clothes and a bag with one million francs. This should cover the costs involved in the network's clandestine lifestyle and meet any material needs which may present themselves during the secret agent's mission.

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<sup>1</sup> In charge of operations in France.

<sup>2</sup> Agents were parachuted by moonlight, which made it easier to find the dropping ground. When the weather was too bad, the drop was postponed for a few days or weeks later.

The parachute drop has been made 'blind', that is, without a 'welcome committee' made up of members of the resistance, alerted by London, watching out for the SOE agent's landing. It's up to the agent to get sorted out and make contact either at the addresses of reliable people or safe houses checked out in advance, before reaching the *chef de réseau* (head of network).

The agent can see railway tracks, shining in the moonlight. Not far off is a little wood. The wind, blowing from the west, has taken the parachute towards a farm. A dog, alerted by the noise of the aeroplane, is barking like mad. The agent can pick out every hedge, every parcel of cultivated land, even the smallest brook under this pale, clear light which gives the countryside its unreality, and the ground seems to be rushing upwards at top speed.

Luckily, the animal must be tied up, as the barks don't seem to be getting closer and the farmers are either fast asleep – or not determined enough to risk going outside at this time of night.

The contact with French soil was brutal, despite the training, where they taught you to deaden the impact by landing in a folded position, your legs in front of you to absorb the shock. This landing was so violent that an ankle has given way. A searing pain spreads all along the agent's right calf.

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The mission started badly for Eliane Plewman, 26 years old, British subject, agent F/23, codename *Gaby*, to be known from now on as *Eliane Jacqueline Prunier*, born in Marseille – as her false papers show.

But it would take more than a sprained ankle to discourage her. This injury may well delay her arrival in Marseille where she is to join the *Monk* network as courier<sup>3</sup>, but she is not going to miss it for the world. She has returned to the country where she had grown up, the land that she loves, and she will never forgive the Nazis for having come and sullied it with their presence. She has sworn to herself that she will fight them by any means necessary, prepared even to sacrifice her life.

It's to carry out this promise that she is here, on this clear night, all alone, swiftly folding up her parachute facing the wind. This is what she was taught at SOE Group B training, first at Wanborough Manor, in Sussex, where she took her preliminary training, then again during the final training phase, at the security school located on Lord Montagu of Beaulieu's immense estate near Southampton, as well as on the ground at Ringway where she did her parachute training.

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<sup>3</sup> Liaising between the network and the resistance.

Despite her sylph-like figure and tiny frame – just over five foot - she took the same training course near Inverness as the boys did, showing fierce determination in every exercise. She learnt weapons handling, hand-to-hand combat, techniques for sabotage, clandestine survival, security, orientation, radio communications. She knows how to kill with - or without - an arm, how to handle explosives and detonators, sabotage railway lines, blow up trains, take on a new identity, improvise answers to any question, invent a plausible past and cover story, including a likely occupation, without ever giving herself away or contradicting herself. It was with flying colours that she passed the psychological tests set for future agents by the various officers in charge of evaluating candidates, tests which would assess their determination and mental fortitude.

To the question, 'Why do you want to go and fight the Nazis?' she would answer in a clear voice, 'Because I hate them!'

This young woman's resolve did not detract from the youthful enthusiasm noticed by all her comrades-in-arms. She was the life and soul of the group and during any moments of leisure which they managed to cram into an intensive and exhausting programme, she was always heading up the festivities. At the end of her training the various examiners and instructors of Section F judged Eliane Sophie Plewman, alias *Gaby*, alias *Dean*, to be 'Calm, efficient and conscientious, and with admirable composure.'

This parachute jump, over France which has now been occupied for three years, has proven that agent *Eliane Prunier* née Browne Bartroli, married name Plewman, born in Marseille on 6 December 1917, has made her bosses happy. She was aware of the risks she was running. Before leaving for her mission she calmly dictated her will, as the rules required, leaving all her belongings and any money in her bank account (£272) to her husband, her jewels to her mother.

From this moment onwards, she has no past.

She knows that entire SOE networks have been betrayed, sold to the Germans, decimated by the Gestapo. That the life expectancy of an agent in the field is rarely longer than six to eight months on average, and that if she is arrested, nobody – above all the SOE – would recognise her as one of their agents, that the Nazis would class her as a terrorist and would liquidate her without further thought, having tortured her first, treating her as no better than an animal.

That is why, in addition to the famous regulation F5 fighting knife, the tiny compass, the map of the countryside into which she had just plummeted, and the single-shot Liberator pistol allocated to each agent, Eliane has with her a small, white pill which she can use to escape her tormentors: cyanide. It guarantees you a quick, but painful, death. *Gaby*, aware of the danger she

faces, does not have time to be distracted by these thoughts. Having made her decision, nothing will make her turn back. Not even the fears of her husband, Thomas Langford Plewman, artillery officer of His Majesty King George VI. Tom had quickly understood that their future together as a couple would have been compromised if he had even considered opposing the decision of his young wife. Eliane would accomplish the mission she had given herself, even if it meant sacrificing her life.

After having limped over to the woods to bury the parachute and her all-in-one suit, changed her boots for a pair of civilian shoes, hidden her bag with one million francs (which she would later find empty...) she sets out, despite her painful ankle, into a region she doesn't know, towards an address she has learnt by heart, where some trustworthy people are waiting for her.

Unfortunately, there is nobody at the address she has been given. The blinds are closed, the area deserted. Have the occupants been denounced, arrested, without London finding out? Were there shadows hidden in the hedges, waiting for her arrival, ready to capture her and take her to the nearest *feldgendarmerie*?

From this moment, *Eliane Plewman* disappears without trace for almost a month.

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What was secret agent F/23 alias *Gaby* doing during all this time, until her reappearance in Marseille, the first (and only) destination of her official mission, when she at last makes contact, towards the middle of September 1943, with the *Monk* network?

Today, there is no way of finding out.

No official document can tell us, and even the SOE historian M.R.D Foot<sup>4</sup> only says that 'she (Eliane Plewman, described as the "the *Monk* network's conspicuously attractive courier") took some time to get in contact with her circuit'. A pithy sentence which leaves it clear that the War Office archives are unable to answer the question.

At this point, *Monk* was the only SOE network established in a French city (other than Paris), the others being spread through villages and small towns where it is easier to escape and find shelter, or make contact with the maquis out in the countryside.

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<sup>4</sup> *SOE in France. An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations in France 1940-1944* (1966) published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Marseille in 1943 is a particularly dangerous place, because it is a frontier town, directly opposite North Africa, where the Allies have been in control since 1942. The town is swarming with German spies, the Todt organisation has surrounded it with fortifications, riddled it with blockhouses, dotted it with canons. The Gestapo is formidable and particularly active. The local underworld, in choosing to side with Collaboration, has reinforced the efficiency of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (the German secret services), working for the Occupier and for itself at the same time... What was Eliane Plewman to do in this hellhole?

Let us take advantage of this 'blank' in the timetable of the 'conspicuously attractive courier' to go back and take a look at her life, which, though short, was so full.

Her childhood and youth were spent in Marseille, in a family whose English father, Eugene Browne, a businessman, was married to Elisa Francesca Bartroli, a Spanish woman. Eliane, the couple's third child<sup>5</sup> (after Henry and Albert) is completely bilingual, even speaking French with the slight Marseille accent considered 'distinguished'. It's an accent picked up on the Rue Paradis<sup>6</sup>, but not to be mistaken for the accent of the lower class. Above all when you attend the very exclusive Notre-Dame de Sion school, where the Marseille bourgeoisie have been sending their daughters since 1843, to be educated by the nuns of this venerable establishment.

There, Eliane forms a deep and lasting friendship with a fellow pupil, Madeleine Reis, who she would meet again in September 1943<sup>7</sup> when her secret mission took her back to her home town.

Eliane Browne Bartroli's skin tone – from her mother's Spanish blood – and her dark hair give her a real Mediterranean allure, tempered – and made even more seductive – by her blue eyes. Her two brothers, Henry and Albert, who go to school at the Périer *lycée*, are also completely bilingual, but physically they have inherited their father's more British characteristics (his general look as well as his hair colour).

The life of this English family, so well integrated into the Marseille way of living, would have carried on peacefully, with Eliane fulfilling her role as a typical Southern girl by marrying a son of the local bourgeoisie, if family events had not pushed her in a completely different direction.

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<sup>5</sup> She was born in 1917, after Henry (born 1913) and Albert (born 1915).

<sup>6</sup> The family's apartment was at number 360 rue Paradis, near Rue Daumier.

<sup>7</sup> The young woman, with whom Eliane never stopped corresponding, later married and became Madeleine Chaix-Bryan.

Eugene Browne is someone who lives without keeping track of his spending, as long as the money is going on the pleasures of life. One day, tired of her husband's escapades, Elisa, who blames him for squandering her dowry, asks for a separation and, accompanied by her three children, leaves for England, a country she has always admired. She would surely have chosen Spain if, in 1936, the most terrible of civil wars had not just broken out...

In 1937, Eliane is 20 years old and we find her renting a small house on a cul-de-sac (the English using the French word without really knowing what it means), at 30 Parkland Drive in Oadby, in the eastern suburbs of Leicester. She is working as a translator for a firm exporting clothing and fabric, George Odom Ltd, based in Albion Street. It is a good company, with a congenial atmosphere. They are even talking of opening a branch in Aden.

That year, the family goes into mourning after the sudden death at 24 of the oldest boy, Henry, while Albert, after finishing his studies in chemical engineering, finds work with a firm of paint manufacturers in Newcastle.

Elisa Bartroli would live in Leicester until war broke out, where she worked as a seamstress, supported – materially and emotionally – by a cousin, Manolo Bartroli, who has a factory in Spain. In 1939 he would come to fetch her, so that she can spend the rest of her life with him in her home country, now at peace, but ravaged by three years of fratricidal war.

In turn, Albert applies for a job in the Spanish branch of the Newcastle paint manufacturers and leaves in 1939 to join his mother in Madrid, leaving Eliane 'all on her lonesome' – as she writes to her best friend Mané (Madeleine Chaix-Bryan) in Marseille. Did she mind this solitude? Did Elisa want her daughter to follow in her elder brother's footsteps? However it happened, by October 1939 Eliane too is in Madrid. 'It's good to be at home with the family,' she writes to Mané.

So the tribe has regrouped in Spain. Life is good. But the family atmosphere does not remain lighthearted for long for the Browne Bartroli children. The authority of cousin Manolo – who asks them to call him 'father' – is beginning to wear them down. Perhaps that is one of the things which would soon encourage the brother and sister to turn around and make the journey back again, to reach England and throw themselves heart and soul into the clash of the titans which is just beginning. Since the surrender of France during the German offensive of May 1940, the United Kingdom is the last line of defense against Nazi barbarism.

But for the moment, Eliane Browne Bartroli is looking for a job in Madrid. Her passion for languages<sup>8</sup> – as well as the lack of personnel at the British Embassy – make it easy for her to find a job, and she is soon employed as a volunteer with

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<sup>8</sup> She spoke English, French and Spanish fluently and would soon learn Portuguese.

the press office. She would later take on a similar role at the British Embassy in Lisbon, before her return to England (which we can date to the beginning of 1942) and her active engagement in the SOE.

By this time, she was already thinking about ways to resist Nazism. In her memoirs<sup>9</sup>, another SOE heroine, Pearl Cornioley-Witherington (*Pauline*)<sup>10</sup>, mentions that she has never forgotten the 'young colleague' (Pearl was 29) who she met at the end of 1941/beginning of 1942 at the Press Office of the British Embassy in Lisbon. This girl handled – right under the noses of the Germans - the mail *Pauline* sent from London, via Portugal and the diplomatic bag, to her fiancé Henri who was living in the Unoccupied Zone in France. This 'colleague' was Eliane Browne Bartroli, who had already begun, in her own way, to resist.

At the end of 1941, at the moment when the German threat reaches its most grave, Albion needs all its children. Albert is called back from Madrid to join the Royal Air Force. This would be an additional reason for his young sister to leave Spain, where family life was suffocating her, and follow in the footsteps of the brother to whom she was so devoted.

At the beginning of 1942, there she is once again in England. We find her at the heart of the Ministry of Information<sup>11</sup>, which suits her with her gift for languages. She then undergoes some training with the FANYs<sup>12</sup>, a women only corps providing administrative and technical services to the military. It's probably there that she was noticed, because the SOE draws heavily from this pool of women - generally middle class girls feeling patriotic and deciding to give the Army a hand.

Eliane's total ease in the French language, her appearance and her manners *à la française* must have soon drawn the attention of the 'sergeant recruiters' of Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, the boss of Section F. She was the ideal candidate to go unnoticed in Occupied France and would get past any security checks she may have to face once 'in the field'.

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<sup>9</sup> Gathered by Hervé Larroque : *Pauline* (Éditions Par Exemple, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Pearl Witherington was parachuted into the Indre region in September 1943, and before the landings led a maquis of 1,500 men.

<sup>11</sup> This government department had been created only recently and dealt with espionage and the secret service. Eliane was employed in the overseas press digest division.

<sup>12</sup> Created during the First World War, the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry was a corps of motorised nurses, working near the front line. During the Second World War, it became more multifunctional, training not only medical personnel but secretaries, radio operators and cipher clerks. The SOE would enlist their 'pupils' so that they would be given a military rank which would protect them (in theory) from being labelled as spies. It goes without saying that the Nazis never paid attention to this. Eliane Plewman was given the rank of Ensign.





Thomas L. Plewman

Whilst waiting to begin her life as a clandestine combatant and her accelerated training as one of Churchill's secret agents, which would start on 10 February 1943 and finish four months later, Eliane Browne Bartroli became Eliane Sophie Plewman. She was married on 28 July 1942 in Kensington, to a young artillery soldier Captain Thomas Langford Plewman, 27 years old (three years older than her), born in Lutterworth, Leicestershire. She had met him in Leicester when she was working for George Odom Ltd.

From the love letters he wrote to her while she was at the British Embassy in Madrid, we can see that he had been courting her for years, discretely but with determination.

Perhaps it was a strange decision to link her life to a man's at the very moment she began a life of clandestine action, running who knew what dangers. All the more so when her husband was also risking his life every day, who knows where, on which front, in which dangerous battle.

Only the two protagonists know their reasons for taking this profound step, and we cannot judge them. It is, however, clear that the married life of this young couple – living at 14 Queen's Gate Terrace in Kensington – had not only been brief, but lived day by day, at the whim of a World War which had engulfed the planet and thrown the lives of millions of people into turmoil.

News that the Nazis had occupied the whole of France from November 1942 - and in particular her hometown – pushed Eliane, whose strong character we already know, to go from passive to active resistance. She could not simply sit at home, waiting for the end of the war and her husband's return. Her fate, her life, her reason for living are from now onwards linked to her decision to tie herself to England, the only country to stand firm against the Hilterian monster while the rest of Europe is on its knees. She would go on to become one of Churchill's secret agents who did so much to help the French resistance.

Her older brother Albert (codename *Tiburce*) after undergoing identical training, would himself become head of the SOE network *Ditcher*, active in Bourgogne from October 1943 to September 1944, which he would lead until the Allies' final victory. *Tiburce* would, on 14 July 1944, receive the biggest parachute drop of arms ever made to the maquis in broad daylight.

So patriotism was not a word spoken in vain by the Browne Bartroli children. But we may well ask who, of the brother and sister, persuaded the other to enlist in the ranks of SOE's F Section. We cannot be certain that it was Albert...

Bob Maloubier, one of the French agents trained by SOE<sup>13</sup>, author of a book of memoirs published in 2011, trained with Eliane. He describes the young woman's firm, determined character. This account is precious, as it's the only one we have which describes Eliane alive and active, this 'fiery brunette with a pretty, dusky face with hair the colour of burnished chestnut' who is the live wire of the team, always ready for anything thrown at her by the pitiless SOE instructors who don't do their 'students' any favours. She knows how to stand up to them when necessary. She seems to be preparing, enthusiastically, for some mortal challenge she is going to throw down 'to the Huns' who are making a martyr of France, but from which she is sure to emerge the victor. 'Nobody can break Eliane', the French agent is sure of this.

Four of them are inseparable, the four 'Frenchies', a team knitted together of adventurers set on making life difficult for the enemy: as well as Maloubier and Eliane, there is a young Russian woman with green eyes, who looks typically British, called Diana Rowden. She grew up in Cannes, where her parents moored their yacht, and she did her studies there. She too is completely bilingual. The fourth member of the quartet is a bearded colossus with a dark complexion. A British subject, born in Syros, Greece, who travelled the Mediterranean with his father and for this reason speaks better French than English. His name is Eric Cauchi. He is a producer and exporter of tobacco. Whenever they are given leave, allowing them to breathe a bit and relax, Diana Rowden – who lives in Chelsea – generously has her friends for tea, while Eliane puts the two men up at Queen's Gate.

What does Maloubier have to say about it?<sup>14</sup> 'I stay in the guest room (...) Eric shares with the lady of the house... They were crazy about each other, those two, when they weren't chucking grenades around!'

And what about Tom? He must have been somewhere on one of the Second World War fronts, he too was doing his duty as a soldier...

Whatever happened, one year and sixty days after their marriage, his wife was dropped over Occupied France. Thomas Langford Plewman would never see her alive again.

As to the lovers, according to Maloubier, the SOE bosses signed them up, alongside Maloubier, to go out with the full moon of August 1943. Eliane and Eric were bold enough to ask to go together, to the same network. The answer was a resounding 'no': 'two agents linked by something more than friendship or respect will never be sent to the same network nor parachuted into the same

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<sup>13</sup> Without having belonged to the BCRA (*Bureau central de renseignements et d'action*) – the Free French Forces' Central Bureau of Intelligence and Operations.

<sup>14</sup> *Agent secret de Churchill*, ed. Tallandier.

place. In case one got into trouble, the other could be led to betray the cause in order to save their companion.'

However, they still left for their missions on the same night, 13/14 August 1943. The evidence is there in black and white in the SOE archives. One was 'chucked out' near Lons-le-Saunier, the other near Montbéliard<sup>15</sup>. 90 kilometres as the crow flies. It would have been extraordinary for the RAF to put two 30 ton Halifax planes in danger to drop two agents so close to each other. It seems likely that Eliane Plewman and Eric Cauchi were together for most of the flight. And that each knew – despite the strict instructions of the SOE – where the other could be found.

That is why we have to ask ourselves: where did secret agent *Eliane Prunier* hide herself during the month before she joined the *Monk* network in Marseille? What contacts did she make? Could she have joined Eric Cauchi (*Pedro*) and worked with him for a while?

Or could it be that she took refuge with her friend Diana Rowden (*Paulette*) and the radio operator John Young (*Gabriel*)? Since June, *Paulette* had been working as courier for the *Acrobat* network, in the Dijon-Saint-Etienne region. That's not too far from the place where Eliane made such brutal contact with French soil.

Whatever happened, *Eliane Prunier* did not spend the months following her painful parachute jump lying on a bed and waiting for her sprained ankle to heal. Although she was separated from her network, she made contacts and travelled around, described in her SOE file as undergoing 'liaison missions, travelling as far as Paris and Switzerland'. In short, this source shows that *Eliane Prunier* moved about during her unexplained 'absence'.

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In any case, it must have seemed like a long time in Marseille, notably for secret agent *Henri Truchot*. The head of the *Monk* network had been joined by his radio operator Arthur Steele, alias *Arthur Saulnier*, known as *Laurent*, who arrived in June 1943 at practically the same time as he did, but he had still not received the courier he had been promised.

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Cauchi (*Pedro*) was in charge of the *Stockbroker* network, working in Franche-Comté, near the Swiss border. He was killed by the Gestapo during an ambush at the Café Grangier, on the road between Sochaux and Montbéliard, on 6 February 1944.

*Monk* network was established gradually in Marseille. It began with a contact made by Captain Sydney Jones, of the War Office, who had disembarked from a submarine on the coast of Provence on 20 October 1942. He made contact with Pierre Massenet, a 43 year old aeronautical engineer whose factory – *Les Chantiers aéronautiques de Normandie* – had been moved to Marseille in 1941 (when it was still in the Unoccupied Zone), on an industrial site at 3 Boulevard Michelet. Pierre Massenet<sup>16</sup> and his wife Marthe had been resistants from the start. They didn't yet take part in any active resistance, but began to multiply their contacts with the clandestine groups which had begun to spring up in Marseille and the surrounding area. They set up in a country house in one of the southern *quartiers*, Valfontaine, near Bonneveine, a part of which had been rented to them by a man who bred racehorses, farmed pork and made money from his market garden – highly prized by his clientele during this time of rationing. Pierre and Marthe Massenet provided a 'safe house' (a crucial resource for the SOE), an address which could be entrusted to agents arriving in an unknown land.

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This is how Captain Sydney Jones (codename *Sylvain*) knows how to find Valfontaine on 20 October 1942. To Massenet's surprise, he speaks French like a partisan! Not surprising when we discover that before the war he was the French director for Elizabeth Arden cosmetics<sup>17</sup>. His mission is twofold: find out about the state of mind of the local population, and start setting up sabotage groups. Massenet puts Captain Jones in touch with all his friends and contacts.

The British agent's stay in Marseille was longer than planned due to the unexpected invasion of the Germans, who took control of the Southern Zone on 12 November 1942. Before making the return journey via Spain (there was no question of a British submarine approaching the coast any more), Jones promised that soon a 'messiah' would arrive, who would take control of the *Monk* network based in Marseille itself. A coded message '*la petite Sylvie a été confiée à grand-mère*'<sup>18</sup> confirmed that Sydney Jones had safely made his way back to 64 Baker Street, SOE's headquarters. Now they must wait. In London, Pierre Massenet is now known as *Napoléon*.

They had to wait for another six months before an unknown man of 5 foot 10, speaking excellent French but unmistakably British (the effect underlined by his clothing – grey flannel trousers, blue shirt – as well as by his neatly trimmed moustache and round tortoiseshell glasses which give him a slight air of Aldous

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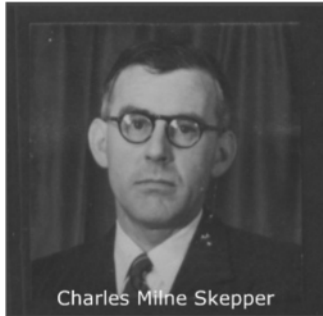
<sup>16</sup> After the Liberation he would become the first prefect of the Bouches-du-Rhône department, in charge of administrative reorganisation.

<sup>17</sup> During a later mission, for the *Inventor* network, Jones was arrested on 14 March 1943. He was executed on 6 September 1944 at Mauthausen.

<sup>18</sup> 'Little Sylvie has been left with Grandmother'.

Huxley<sup>19</sup>), knocks on the door at Valfontaine and says to Pierre Massenet: 'Sylvain sent me.'

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It's Captain Charles Milne Skepper<sup>20</sup>, alias *Henri Truchot*, 38 years old, ex-professor of sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences. He is also an expert in Chinese antiquities. He has fought on the front in the Far East, notably in China, where he was imprisoned and tortured by the Japanese for four months and where he contracted Beriberi, an illness of the nervous system caused by a deficiency in Vitamin B1, due to malnourishment, which causes the sufferer to have permanent fatigue. That did not stop Captain Skepper, as soon as he had returned to England via an exchange of prisoners, from joining SOE and volunteering for a mission to France!

The state of his health saved him from being parachuted from a Halifax. It was a small Lysander which, during the night of 16/17 June 1943, left him at a discreet landing spot in the Loire valley, at the same time as Diana Rowden. Receiving him was a very effective French secret agent, head of the *Farrier* network, based in Paris. The bosses in Baker Street had complete confidence in this man as he had received and sent back around 70 members of SOE<sup>21</sup> during more than a year (from January 1943 to February 1944).

They would find out too late – after ignoring the suspicions reported to the British secret services by certain agents – that though Henri Déricourt worked for London, he was also on the payroll of the *Abwehr* and the *Sicherheitsdienst*! This was only confirmed after the war. Can this duplicity be blamed for the disastrous collapse of several SOE networks implanted in France, and notably for the tragic ending of the *Monk* network?

It is worth asking the question.

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<sup>19</sup> As well as his leather shoes, which had become very rare in Marseille.

<sup>20</sup> In certain texts he is given the rank of Major. None of the archives from the War Office are able to confirm this – all of them refer to him as Captain.

<sup>21</sup> Two nights later, on 19 June, he would receive Arthur Steele, the radio operator for the *Monk* network.

While waiting for the 'attractive courier' promised for the network he had taken control of, Skepper/*Truchot* did not remain idle.

He rented a small apartment at 8, rue Mérentié, in a traditional building, in the style known as '*trois fenêtres marseillais*'<sup>22</sup>. He would live here and the apartment would double as the network's Command Post ('CP'). This short artery, which leads off the Cours Devilliers<sup>23</sup>, to the right, has the advantage of being quiet and pleasant, with its double row of plane trees, but there are also disadvantages: the road is easy to watch and any kind of activity will be noticed. Unlike Valfontaine, where the Massenets live, where amongst the many clients of the market gardener, as well as the comings and goings of the people looking after the racehorse stables, the occasional arrival (or departure) of a discreet visitor claiming to be from the SOE or the resistance would go unnoticed. During the whole war, right up to the final victory, the Massenets would act as a letter box for the courier or agents recruiting French members of the *Monk* network, as well as acting as contact with the other resistance troops (notably the *Franco-tireurs partisans* (FTP), which was near the Command Post). And Marthe Massenet would act as 'mother' to the network, offering food and lodging to the agents passing through, ignoring the obstacles placed in her way by the restrictions which were enforced even more strictly in Marseille than elsewhere.

The apartment on Rue Mérentié would only be contacted if there was an urgent message or crucial reason, and would be approached via a code signaled through curtains being open or closed. Officially it was the home of a certain *Henri Truchot*, perfect lodger, discreet and affable man, little given to conversation (as he himself doubted his accent) who by profession was a seller and expert in antiquities. But as the passage of time does not render this business particularly profitable – Marseille being cut off from the Far East – the residents begin to think that, due to his having no other visible means of income, this man must be trading on the black market! Some, apparently better informed than others, thought they knew that he was providing the *Kriegsmarine* with coffee...

This view is reinforced by the regular visits to the building of a certain Henri Schwab, 30 years old, born in Alexandria, known in Marseille as *Henri du Marché noir*, or *Henri jambe-de-bois*<sup>24</sup>, as he limps, without realising that if the English Captain needs the services of this trafficker, it's to obtain certain products which he can no longer find in the ordinary shops. The living organism worn out by Beriberi known as *Henri Truchot* can only get by on certain foodstuffs which have become rare, and which can only be bought on the black market, such as meat, jam, figs and rice.

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<sup>22</sup> This was a style of architecture which became popular from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, where the facades of townhouses became wider, with three windows per floor.

<sup>23</sup> Today Cours Franklin-Roosevelt.

<sup>24</sup> Black-Market Henry, or Peg-Leg Henry

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Little by little, the network begins to expand. All the faithful relations and friends which Pierre Massenet introduced to Captain Jones had signed up without hesitation: his aeronautical friends: Jean Hellet, Maryse Hilsz, Suzanne Goute, but also his engineering colleagues who obtained false papers and false ration cards, while the head of the *Monk* network provided the war chest: a wealth of false French banknotes, perfect forgeries 'Made in England'.



The members of the network based in the Var region, Jean Hellet and Suzanne Goute, live in such seclusion in the middle of the countryside south of Roquebrune sur Argens (where Sydney Jones first did his recce when he arrived in October 1942) that *Truchot* is persuaded it would be the ideal place to keep his Radio Operator Arthur Steele<sup>25</sup>. *Villa La Cavalière*, belonging to Suzanne Goute, is isolated enough to conceal the twenty metres of antenna needed by the radio set operated by *Saulnier* (code name *Waiter*) so that he can send and receive, in absolute discretion, coded messages to and from London.

Marseille is an untenable location from which to operate a clandestine radio. At its first transmission it would be instantly discovered by the German secret services' detectors. Regardless of its location, which would be perfect for making radio transmissions, Rue Mérentié is too close at hand for patrols made by the many vehicles equipped with radiogoniometers<sup>26</sup> which bisect the town. In spite of the difficulties caused by the radio operator being so far away from his head of network, which makes communication difficult, it was a good idea. In seven months of activities, and despite a few close calls, the radio transmitter was never discovered by the Germans sent up from Antheor, and around 400 messages were sent to or received from London by *Saulnier*.

The main mission of courier *Eliane Prunier* will therefore be to provide, at all times and in all situations, a link between Marseille and Roquebrune, in order to maintain contact with the SOE services, receive their instructions, send back accounts of completed missions (sabotage missions, assassinations) and ask for material aid by way of requesting parachute drops of arms or money.

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<sup>25</sup> This young Englishman (25 years old) had a French mother and was born in Noeux-les-Mines (not far from Lille and the Belgian Border).

<sup>26</sup> Radio detecting equipment.

We are in mid-September. It's been one month since the Halifax B Mark II Special bomber parachuted *Gaby* over Lons-le-Saulnier. They thought, for a while, that like so many others she had been picked up as soon as her feet touched French soil by an enemy welcome committee disguised as members of the Maquis. Or perhaps she had been handed in by the local *gendarmerie*...



But here she is at last! With her smile and her blue eyes, her slim figure framed in the doorway at Valfontaine, where Pierre and Marthe Massenet welcome her with open arms. The wife of the future prefect describes her as 'beautiful and darker than the Marseille girls: only her magnificent eyes betray her origin... Irish (sic). I don't know her real name, just like I don't know the real names of *Henri Truchot* or *Arthur Saulnier* (...) a big, lanky, blond boy... young, very young...'

It was only after the war that the Massenets would learn the real name of *Eliane Prunier* and that this English girl already knew Marseille like the back of her hand. Surely better than them, having come from Paris and only becoming *Marseillais* due to circumstance.

Marseille, the young woman's childhood home, where her first comfort in coming out of the Saint-Charles station would have been to run to 168, rue Paradis to see Madeleine, her dear Mané, with whom she studied. Madeleine Reis has become Madame Maurice Chaix-Bryan<sup>27</sup>, but blood will out and the Chaix-Bryans are a family of resistance and Madeleine and Maurice are in contact with the Massenets.

It was simple for the Massenets to give her the address of her new boss: 8, rue Mérentié, as the future prefect had visited the apartment when *Henri Truchot* was moving in!

We don't know what kind of welcome the boss of *Monk* network gave her, if he scolded his deputy for her inexcusable lateness, or if she found the right words, the arguments, the reasons to justify herself. At the Beaulieu training school, the beauty was renowned for having a quick wit, even when facing the impressive Vera Atkins, assistant to Section F's Colonel Buckmaster.

The important thing is that *Monk* should be in working order, and from now on it is.

[...]

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<sup>27</sup> Arrested in May 1940, Maurice Chaix-Bryan returned from his captivity and entered the *Service de la Jeunesse*, a resistance organisation.



Through contacts with other resistance organisations, *Monk* was able to bolster its supplies. The network's main mission was to sabotage factories and railway lines, in order to hinder the production of any businesses working (mostly by coercion) for the Wehrmacht and the transport of troops and materials destined for the occupation forces.

The information provided by the network to London on the deployment and distribution of the German forces, as well as the fortification works along the coastline by the Todt organisation, would be equally precious on the day of the Allied invasion, to work out a priority for the line of attack.

[...]

The network also successfully oversaw the reception of three important parachute drops of arms and ammunition for the local Maquis in February/March 1944.

All this activity makes it necessary for Eliane to move incessantly back and forth between Marseille and Roquebrune, travelling in a van which had been specially installed with a false gas converter (complete with red lamps to simulate the heat source, so as not to attract attention), even though the van ran on petrol (bought on the black market!). Petrol had become very rare, reserved for certain transport businesses or priority vehicles (doctors, Vichy officials) but above all for the occupation troops and the Gestapo.

The courier would take *Saulnier* the messages which he would then have to code before sending them to London: the coordinates (latitude and longitude) of dropping zones chosen for parachute drops, which would be given to the pilots, as well as those seemingly far-fetched phrases which would be used in London (via the BBC airwaves) to warn about an imminent parachute drop. For *Monk* it was Marthe Massenet and her daughter Paula who were in charge of listening each evening, noting down these strange instructions and giving the alert the day they heard 'Aristide does not like spinach' or 'The rabbit has drunk an aperitif'.

Often the young woman has to spend several days at '*La Cavalière*' (the home of Suzanne Goute) with radio operator Arthur Steele-*Saulnier* waiting for a response from London to take to *Truchot*. This large house set in a pine grove, looking over the blue water of the Mediterranean, must have been a haven of peace among the dangers they were facing. That is where Eliane would spend the 24 December 1943 – in the company of the ex-aviatrice Suzanne, her friend Maryse Hilsz, Jean Hellet and their friends – her last Christmas Eve.

Many times, although this went further than her role as courier demanded, Eliane would help with the reception of containers weighing 150 to 200 kilos, stuffed with arms, explosives, ammunition... and bank notes – sometimes a few foodstuffs which had become unattainable in France (chocolate, cigarettes) – which had to be buried with speed, hidden or distributed to safe hiding places spread throughout the region surrounding the drop zone, before a patrol of *feldgendarmes* or Gestapo henchman turned up. And that's when it wasn't some 'good Frenchmen', rushing to turn them in when they had been alerted by the noise of the aeroplanes or the movement of furtive shadows, perched on harnessed wagons or spluttering gas-powered vehicles.

In terms of sabotage, the performance of *Monk* network over such a short period of time is remarkable. The Kuhlmann factory in l'Estaque paid the price, as did a cement factory in Fos-sur-Mer which was working for the Todt organisation to help fortify the coastal defences. The saboteurs caused a spectacular derailment in the railway tunnel between Cassis and Aubagne, on the Marseille-Toulon line. They even managed to blow up the repair train which had come to clear the tracks. The railway traffic was interrupted for four days.

78 locomotives were put out of service by saboteurs linked to the *Monk* network in several of the region's warehouses. The record was set during the night of 1 January 1944 with 32 locomotives blown up in the depot at Aubagne.

These fireworks, it is true to say, were celebrating a family occasion.

Albert Browne Bartroli<sup>28</sup> - *Tiburce* - Eliane's much loved elder brother, abandoned for a few days his duties as head of the *Ditcher* network, which he runs from Cluny, in the Saône et Loire region, to come to Marseille and spend New Year with his sister at the home of Madeleine and Maurice Chaix-Bryan. In order to do this, he has broken the SOE's strict instructions which forbid its agents any kind of personal relationship. In London, nobody knows Eliane and Albert Browne Bartroli. They only want to deal with *Eliane Prunier* and *Lucien Vernanchet*. Who must not meet, given that they do not know each other. They do not belong to the same network and were parachuted 200 kilometres apart.

Nonetheless, here they both are in Marseille, on the day before New Year's Eve. It might be the last of the war...

Who is going to tell London? Not the resistants, in any case. But what if the German secret services hear about it? The bars of Marseille have ears, very interested to find out what gifts the Gestapo might make to informers.

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<sup>28</sup> He was dropped by Lysander and welcomed by Henri Déricourt during the night of 23 October 1943.

Meanwhile, brother and sister, caught up in the joy of their reunion, do not want to think about the consequences of their actions. They went to eat lunch in a black market restaurant (the SOE will foot the bill), on Rue de l'Arbre, where they serve meat 'just like before the war'. They sat next to traffickers, henchman of the provisional victors, and German officers in uniform, who have come from the *Wehrmacht* CP, not far away at the *Grand-Hôtel*. Everyone was smoking Players cigarettes from England. A Red Cross boat moored at the Quai de la Joliette had unloaded them that morning, intended for prisoners of war. They hardly got a look in, but at least the cigarettes were not wasted for everybody. The clandestine dealers knew how to make them 'fall off the back of a boat'.

In any case, the New Year's celebrations planned by the head of the *Monk* network are not cancelled. On the contrary, thanks to *Tiburce's* presence in Marseille, the fireworks will have one additional guest. With *Truchot's* agreement, Eliane and Albert, before the curfew, went to Aubagne in the number 40 tram and met the sabotage team in charge of setting the explosives under the locomotives.

It was purely a formality. In between two patrols, just after two in the morning, silent shadows set the charges, broke the detonation sticks (set to go off after a delay), and went to take refuge in a nearby house, to lie in the hay and wait for the final blaze of glory. It took a little longer than expected, as the detonation sticks had been made for a certain air temperature and it was a bitterly cold night in Marseille.

Then, whilst waiting for the curfew to be lifted, they counted the bangs: thirty two.

At dawn, near the tram terminus on the way to Marseille, *Henri*, Albert, Eliane and their French brothers-in-arms took cover in a bistro to warm themselves up with a cup of ersatz coffee. Toasted barley. It tasted like victory, anyway.

'Did you hear the racket last night?' the barman asked them.

'Yes, it was us!' replied Eliane, all excited.

The man didn't believe a word of it. He thought that these youngsters had drunk a bit too much to celebrate the New Year.

In spite of the joy felt during this interlude which put the war and all its horrors into a kind of parenthesis, Albert is worried about his dear little sister. He knows how dangerous Marseille can be and he is horrified to hear her laughing as she tells him how, so many times, she has come within a hair's breadth of disaster, by taking risks which are not within the remit of a courier, like transporting

explosives on the tram to l'Estaque, carrying a 15 kilo clandestine radio transmitter in a suitcase, just waiting to fall foul of an unexpected security check. The young woman tells her brother how she has escaped the French police or the Germans themselves, whom she seems to take pleasure in defying.

Albert trembles when he learns that Eliane frequents the establishments of the Vieux-Port where the Gestapo permanently keeps agents on the look-out. We will soon see how right the elder brother was to worry about his rebellious sister.

When the time comes to say goodbye, on the platform at Saint-Charles station, did he have the premonition that they were seeing each other for the last time? In his journal, which has remained unpublished, Albert Browne Bartroli wrote: 'As the train slowly pulled away, leaving her alone on the station platform, it wrung my heart to see her looking so small, yet knowing her so brave: look after yourself, my love.'

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On 24 March 1944 – it was a Friday – when night had fallen, a discreet but important meeting takes place at 8, rue Mérentié. *Henri Truchot* has a meeting with Julien Villevielle, who has come to give him a breakdown of the recent parachute drop which took place near Meyrargues. Twenty four containers (nearly 800 tons) were dropped by a four-engined *Stirling*, from Algiers, stuffed full of arms and ammunition. Everything was received and distributed according to the agreements made with the local resistance.

The two men, who are discussing quietly, are joined by Henri Schwab – *Henri du marché noir* – in charge of the personal supplies of the English Captain and for whom he occasionally transports things. The man is an ambiguity. He claims to be a resistant, from the ORA<sup>29</sup> network, but some have seen him trafficking with the Germans. In these troubled times, it's hard to know who is who, and you can't ask your acquaintances for a certificate of good character. Life is hard, every man does what he can.

Suddenly, violent blows rain down on the front door of the building. Villevielle hurries to the window overlooking the road. At the crossroads with Rue Rougier are two front-wheel drives whose black bodywork gleams under the rising moon, their chauffeurs still at the wheel. Villevielle knows all too well what this means:

'German police! Open up!' a voice cries out in French.

*Truchot* forces himself to keep calm, but he is not under any illusions. If he doesn't open the door, they will just make the other lodgers open it. They may

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<sup>29</sup> *Organisation Résistance Armée*, mainly made up of French officers at odds with Vichy.

even break down the door. It may be better to try to negotiate; perhaps it's only a random security check. So he opens the door by pulling the cord tied to the wall of the landing, which, by a system of iron pulleys, moves the bolt in the lock of the ground floor. As soon as he does so, several men – there were four or six, according to witnesses – wearing felt hats and dark overcoats, carrying arms, rush up the flight of stairs, their feet clattering on the hexagonal terracotta tiles. The man at the front carries an MP40, the German sub-machine gun used by the *Wehrmacht*. He has a strong Marseille accent. It is a French Gestapo agent, a henchman. *Truchot* has never seen him before. The others are Germans. They each brandish the pointed muzzle of a *Lüger* pistol.

'We've got you now, you bastard!' cries the head of the pack. 'You're *Truchot*. We know you're an agent from London. Put your hands up!'

A neighbour in Rue Mérentié, the hairdresser Renault Casseri, whose shop is at the corner of Boulevard Devilliers, believes he heard a gunshot. "It was carnage!" he told Suzanne Goute and the English historian Elizabeth Nicholas years later, when they came to make investigations. In fact, it seems that the witness may have added a little drama to the reality which was already tragic enough as it was. If there was a gunshot, it did not kill anyone, as shortly afterwards Captain Skepper, handcuffed, would be escorted by the Gestapo men out of the building before being brutally pushed into the car.

In any case, Julien Villevielle, who is still in the room leading onto the road, and who has not moved, made no mention of a gunfight when he was interviewed in 1945 by the Marseille Courts of Justice, on his return from Dachau. On the contrary, he noted the extreme state of excitement of the French Gestapo agent, who, with his submachine gun still in his hand, rushed into the room and threatened him with his finger poised on the trigger of an arm which goes off at the smallest provocation. One of the Germans, whom the resistant thought might be called Willy, tries to calm the man's excitement, while he carries on searching the prisoners and personally handcuffing them, hoping to start the interrogation at the very scene of the arrest. The German, raising his voice, reminds the *gestapiste* that it is not his job to do so and that the interrogation will take place at Rue Paradis, at the headquarters of the German SIPO-SD<sup>30</sup>.

The man reluctantly obeys, first saying clearly to Henri Schwab, 'You're the last person I would expect to find here'. This proves that *Henri du marché noir*, if he was 'in' with the Germans, did not know about the network's ambush that night. Or perhaps he thought that his 'contacts' would protect him. The Gestapo certainly took him away with the other men<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Acronym for **S**icherheits**P**olizei-**S**icherheits**D**ienst, the secret services of the German secret police.

<sup>31</sup> In spite of (or perhaps because of) his various relations and trafficking, Henri Schwab would stay in prison and be deported to Germany where he would die at Dachau on 13 February 1945. This explains why his son, after the war, tried to claim the status 'Resistant – deported' for his father.

Julien Villevielle thought he remembered later that during the afternoon preceding the triple arrest, Arthur Steele (*Saulnier*, the radio operator) had come to see his head of network, but that he had left when the French *résistant* arrived, as the content of their meeting did not concern him. This means that he managed to avoid the trap and fled before the front-wheel drives arrived in Rue Mérentié.

Did Arthur warn Eliane about the disaster which had just befallen the *Monk* network?

We can say nothing for sure, without proof, but what happened the next day could lead us to think so.

Two witnesses are able give us an idea of what happened that day.

The first is Antoine Pierangeli. He is a haulier by profession, but since the end of 1943 he works for the network. On this same day, 25 March 1944, around midday, he has a meeting with *Truchot*. But, seeing the blinds of his chief's apartment closed, and worrying that he cannot see whether the curtains are open or closed, in accordance with the agreed system, he hesitates before wheeling his handcart up to 8, rue Mérentié. He waits cautiously at the corner of Cours Devilliers, watching for a sign of life. He sees two men dressed as employees of the gas company who ring the bell of *Truchot's* apartment and are let in.

A moment later, he sees Eliane and Arthur charging from the other end of the road, breathless as if they had been running. The radio operator carries a suitcase containing a radio transmitter. Pierangeli approaches them and tells them of his concerns.

The young woman takes out a revolver and makes her way towards the building. The radio operator seems to hesitate. Pierangeli is sure he heard the woman he called *Eliane Prunier* say to them, "If you're not coming, I'll go up alone".

The two young people ring the bell, the door is opened and a German voice asks them to enter... Eliane, who rushes into the hallway, with Arthur on her heels, is seized by the two men disguised as employees of the gas company, while the radio operator tries to intervene. Pierangeli takes hold of the suitcase and runs as fast as he can to Rue Rougier, with gunshots ringing in his ears. He makes it to the end of the road before they can catch him.

The statement of the fleeing *résistant* is corroborated, for the most part, by two other witnesses. At the time, Monsieur and Madame Cauquiéremont were renting the ground floor apartment at 8, rue Mérentié. They heard gunshots, a

large car stopped, some people got out 'among them was a German in civilian clothing. They went up straight away before coming down just as quickly, bringing the young woman we called Eliane'.

The couple do not mention Arthur, but perhaps they did not see everything, we can imagine they did not want to be reckless and waited for the drama to play out while watching from behind their windows.

What they are sure about, is that from that day onwards, a trap was laid in the apartment in case any other people asked to see '*Monsieur Truchot*'. But nobody ever came.

On the contrary, the Cauquiéremonts had a visit from the Gestapo and from a French Gestapo man, 'who called himself Monsieur Bonnefoy', who came to tell them off for having known about what was going on above their heads and 'not denouncing the bastards'. Monsieur Cauquiéremont even had the honour of being tailed, though nothing came of it, as the only thing the brave man would have resisted was his urge to run away like Pierangeli.

The results: it's a disaster. Four arrests made within the highest ranks of the network. In 24 hours *Monk* has been decapitated.

[...]

The French members of the network, who become gradually informed about what has happened, are on full alert. During the following weeks, Marthe and Pierre Massenet were constantly expecting the German police to arrive at Valfontaine. *Truchot* had imprudently given their address to the letting agents as a guarantee when he rented the apartment on Rue Mérentié.

[...]

How could such a disaster have happened? And so suddenly?

In fact, thought it was a very nasty surprise for our heroes, it was not for the Gestapo, who had probably had their eye on them for some time. Perhaps even from the beginning, since Captain Skepper's arrival in the Loire valley on board a Lysander in June 1943. Let us not forget that the welcome committee was led by Henri Déricourt, double agent (or triple even, as he was also working for the Americans).

If that was the case, then why did the henchmen of the German secret police wait seven months before setting their trap? Perhaps, as was suggested to the judge by the very person who betrayed Eliane, Charles and Arthur, 'because they had other files to deal with which were higher priority.'

The traitor, the man who sold the *Monk* network to the Gestapo, is a Frenchman of 36 years old, born in Marseille, married since 1934 to Andrée Baudringhin, father of an 8 year old child. This man is called Emmanuel Bousquet: of average height (1.68m), brown hair and eyes, oval face, light skin. A gold tooth in his upper right jaw. He's Mr. 'Jack of all trades'. Before the war he had a bit of trouble for receiving stolen cars, which got him 10 months in prison. For a while he was the manager of the Le Rialto cinema on Rue Saint-Ferréol, then he was representative of an American company which sold cleaning products – Quick Polish – which had a subsidiary in the South of France. Later he worked for a petrol company, but he was fired, for some obscure reason. He has done 36 jobs without ever managing to settle. In ordinary times, he would have been an insignificant lout, the *quartier's* resident cheat, a bit of a marital pimp, a pathetic wheeler-dealer, perhaps even a failure. He is a failure, in fact. But the times are not ordinary. To survive, Bousquet threw himself into the black market, and into all the dodgy connections which went with it. He went from bar to bar meeting the disreputable people with whom he was '*en affaires*' as they say in Marseille. He would call them by their first names, pretending not to know their real identity: Serge, Paul, Max...

Max is a Gestapo agent. He asks Bousquet to become his 'intelligence agent'. He jumps at the opportunity. Even more avidly when a salary of 5,000 francs is on offer. Five times what the average person would be earning at that time. With all kinds of extra advantages. You can not only 'sell' people to the Gestapo, denounce people dodging work to the STO<sup>32</sup>, track down resisters, hunt Jews, but you can also be pay yourself for the privilege by taking their belongings and stealing their money. And on top of it all, you can do it with complete impunity thanks to your friends at 425, rue Paradis, headquarters of the German secret services.

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<sup>32</sup> The *Service du Travail Obligatoire* was responsible for requisitioning French workers and transferring them to Germany to replace the German workforce which had been decimated by the war.



The new assistant to the persecutors, far from being discreet, parades himself in the bistros, unashamedly shows off the card stamped with an eagle which designates him officially as a member of the Gestapo, displays his arm (a 7.65) and his handcuffs at the smallest pretext. If he has any problems, he knows what number to call: PRADO 39 00. The number of Gestapo headquarters.

In his eyes, Emmanuel Bousquet has at last become 'someone'.

Take a man without honour, without morals, give him a little power, equip a louse who has not the least scruple about harming defenceless people, suggest that he be a terror at little expense, shut your eyes to any abuse and you create a formidable predator. Bousquet took to his new work with terrifying zeal. Not only did he give intelligence to the Gestapo, but he took part in hunting down men, surrounded by henchmen of the same ilk.

So how did he manage to find his way back along the thread which leads to the drama at Rue Mérentié. It is really rather simple.

In fact, if the courage, the faith in their mission and the commitment of our heroes cannot be questioned, they did commit a certain number of incredibly rash acts which turned out to be fatal. Despite the strict rules of the SOE instructors, they lacked discretion, they forgot the rules of secrecy, they frequented people whom they should have mistrusted. They defied danger as if it were all a great game where all those who had 'died' would come back at the end. In fact, they gave their mission a certain romance, which, though admirable in itself, in this context could only lead them to disaster.

Captain Skepper, as we have heard, relied on a certain shady character named Henri Schwab, *Henri du marché noir*, to procure his provisions<sup>33</sup>. Henri (who runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds) has a mistress, a certain Alberte Levet, 28 years old, a vulgar and provocative blonde, a sometime prostitute who Jean Hellet, after the war, described soberly as 'some kind of whore'. She likes to frequent the bars on the Vieux-Port, like the Brasserie New York on Quai des Belges<sup>34</sup>, the places on Rue Haxo, or Bar Pierre on Rue Pythéas, near the Opéra where the clientele is diverse: you are as likely to see secret agents from London or Algiers as agents of the Gestapo or criminals. That means that you must be wary of even your most throwaway comments, your most innocent secrets. As Emmanuel Bousquet also goes to these places. And Emmanuel Bousquet has a mistress... a certain Alberte Levet who he shares with Henri Schwab! It's not difficult to unravel the thread which led the French Gestapo agent to the apartment of *Henri Truchot* on 23 March 1944. The same *Truchot* who, in spite

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<sup>33</sup> As unlikely as it might seem, it was Eliane Plewman who put her head of network in touch with *Henri du marché noir*. Schwab boasted of having earned 600,000 francs in profit from the provisions he procured for the network. (Statement of Julien Villevielle.)

<sup>34</sup> Between 1940 and 1944 it was called Quai Maréchal-Pétain.

of Pierre Massenet's insistence and the advice of the SOE instructors - who required their future agents to change addresses to shake off any informers - never moved from Rue Mérentié!

If only the Captain were the only person to pay for his imprudence! But what did Alberte Levet have to say, when the time came for the traitor Bousquet to pay his dues, and the judge interrogated his mistress? Some unbelievable things! She told her story in staggering detail:

Yes, she knew Bousquet - she saw him daily at the New York - she met him at the end of December 1943 through Schwab. But at that time she had also seen a certain 'Mr. Brown' who called himself *Lucien Vernanchet*, and she had also seen his sister, who was called Eliane, and both of them were English!

That is what the Gestapo 'whore' Alberte Levet said. And she could not have invented it! She even added, as if to be more convincing, 'I was aware of the resistance activities of my friend Schwab and the Browns (sic)'.

As if that wasn't enough to highlight the insane risks, the foolhardiness of members of the *Monk* network, Alberte Levet adds that during March 1944 her friend Schwab went to *Henri Truchot's* apartment on Rue Mérentié, 'to invite Mademoiselle Eliane Brown (sic) to come and lunch with us.'

But Henri never came back...

And with just cause. He had already been handed to the Gestapo. And 'Mademoiselle Brown' as well!

And yet she wanted them to believe her, when she stated in 1946 that she had no idea that Bousquet worked for the Gestapo, when it was surely she who passed him information?

Hadn't Monsieur Casseri, who witnessed the arrest, indicated that Bousquet was accompanied that day by 'a young blonde woman'?

One mystery remains, which we are not able to solve today: How did a low class 'whore', nothing like a Mata-Hari, manage to find out all these details? Who told her the real identities of the SOE agents, when the *Monk* network members spoke at the time of *Eliane Prunier* and *Henri Truchot*, rather than Eliane Plewman (or Browne) and Charles Skepper<sup>35</sup>? How could she know that *Lucien Vernanchet* was the false identity of Albert Browne Bartroli, head of an SOE network almost 500km from Marseille? Through her lover, of course. But Bousquet was not the head of the Gestapo, he was nothing but a common

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<sup>35</sup> Even during the post-war trials! Julien Villevielle, in 1946, when creating a list of the members of the network, indicated that he did not know the true identity of Eliane Plewman.

subordinate, an lowly executor of menial tasks. How was he in the know, if the information did not come from 'on high'? Should we – for once – believe him when he claims that he acted 'because the Gestapo had been on to it for more than three months' and he didn't want the 'business' (and any financial consequences) to slip through his fingers?

Where did the treason which sent three English SOE agents to the abattoir start? By the Vieux-Port, or further north, in the Loire valley in June 1943? Who committed it? Who profited from it? Who ordered the destruction of the network?

The trial which took place immediately after the war, while witnesses were still alive and traitors were still able to be punished, did not shed any light on this dramatic and shady affair. How can we pretend to do so today when nobody is left to tell the truth about what happened?



425 rue Paradis, Gestapo headquarters in 1944

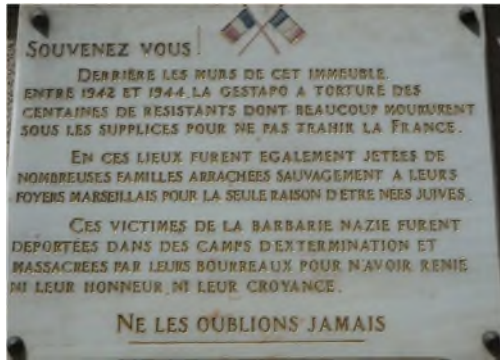
But meanwhile, what has happened to our heroes?

After their arrest, all four were immediately transferred to the headquarters of the Gestapo in Marseille and, for almost three weeks, kept in isolation, they were taken back and forth between the Baumettes prison and 425, rue Paradis. This ancient Belle Époque house, large and plush, with wrought ironwork and a sweeping external staircase, was situated on the corner with Boulevard Rodocanachi.

The Occupier had requisitioned it and the Gestapo had turned it into a gateway to hell.

A place of horror. Cells had been installed in the attics and cellars, bathtubs turned into torture instruments... All the 'terrorists' are interrogated slowly, beaten, burned, suffocated, martyred. Every evening the local residents hear the cries of the victims, imploring pity, begging their torturers, submitted to the bathtub ordeal, tortured with electricity, beaten and left for dead. The team of sadistic executioners is sometimes joined by two prostitutes known by their war names *Maguy* and *Blanche* (the mistress of the head of the Gestapo in Marseille – Ernst Dunker). These women are not averse to joining in with the physical interrogations. Some people, who can take no more pain, after hours of beatings and torments, admit what is asked of them, 'sell' their comrades in arms, denounce the network... What would we have done in their place?

[...]



During their training the SOE agents were taught how to withstand interrogations but they could not go past certain limits. Those limits were passed every day by the tormentors of the Gestapo. The advice was: try to withstand for at least 48 hours. Tell believable lies, which need a long time to verify, and then, if you can't hold out any longer, well, talk...

Why 48 hours? To give the other members of the network, still at liberty, the time to disappear, to change identity and lodgings. To go underground.

Did the prisoners of *Monk* network talk once they had fallen into the Gestapo's hands? We have to believe they did not, as despite all the traps set by Bousquet and his German friends, despite the surveillance carried out by Alberte Levet in the bars which were frequented by people from both sides, during the following weeks none of the other members of the circuit were arrested. Not in Marseille or in the surrounding area. None of the four revealed anything which could have put their comrades in arms in danger. But according to Julien Villevielle, it was not through want of trying on the part of Ernst Dunker and the Gestapo.

When Villevielle met Captain Skepper during an interview in Dunker's office, two weeks after their arrest, the French resister did not recognise his friend *Truchot*, massacred by the torturers, but who had said nothing, his heroism saving his contacts. He had faced his Japanese torturers in the same way.

Henri Schwab himself knew 425, rue Paradis. He was not tortured. But though he asked 'his friend' Bousquet to get him out of there, it was not to be. They kept him and soon sent him to Germany, with a one-way ticket.

Alberte Levet also spent two weeks in the cells of Section IV for having foolishly turned up asking about 'her friend Henri'<sup>36</sup>.

For more than a year nobody would hear anything about the four prisoners. Were they still of this world?

London had been warned of the disaster thanks to messages sent from Marseille and the surrounding area from the surviving members of the network who had gone to ground.

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<sup>36</sup> After the war she would be punished by five years in prison.

The SOE has more important things to do than look for them: they have to find replacements<sup>37</sup> and manage the networks active across the whole of France. More than 200 agents are in the field, asking for parachute drops, arms and ammunition. Also, how can you find people who no longer have an identity, save for a German matriculation number, who are not protected by any kind of international convention, who the Red Cross cannot visit and who the Nazis are free to treat as cattle after having saddled them with the label 'terrorists'?

It was only after the war that it was possible to reconstruct the climb to Calvary and the end of Eliane Plewman, Charles Skepper, Arthur Steele and so many of their unfortunate companions. And that in itself was difficult.

Charles Milne Skepper – seen for the last time at Compiègne – died of exhaustion at Buchenwald around the 4 April 1944, as a result of the abuse he had suffered. As for Arthur Steele, still at Buchenwald, he was hung by his feet until he died on 14 September 1944.

Churchill, drawing himself up as the last defence against Nazi barbarity, saved Europe from disaster, he went to war and won it, but he never had any qualms. Barely was the conflict over, he liquidated the Special Operations Executive and – to the great displeasure of future historians – many of the archives were neglected or destroyed.

It needed a woman obstinate in both head and heart, Vera Atkins, right hand of Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, head of SOE's F Section, to find out what had happened to Eliane. She travelled across Germany, now in ruins, right to the Polish border, she tirelessly interrogated the old torturers, people in the camps, the survivors, to find out what had happened to the 13 of 'her girls' who had disappeared out of the 39 who were sent to France.

From their side, Tom Plewman, Albert Browne and Elisa Bartroli pestered the English services with anguished demands which were met with vague and imprecise answers.

But, little by little, the journey towards death of our three heroes of Rue Mérentié began to become clearer.

From Marseille, they were transferred to prison in Fresnes, near Paris. Then to the Gare de l'Est, which the Nazis used to dispatch their human cargo to the death camps. That is where, at the beginning of May 1944, a convoy was sent to Germany, its destination unknown.

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<sup>37</sup> The *Gardener* network, run by Robert Boiteux (*Firmin*), would be active until June 1944.

Thanks to one of the witness statements (among others) of a political prisoner, Hedwig Müller, incarcerated at Karlsruhe between June and September, we know that seven or eight English women arrived there on 12 May 1944. Among them was a young brunette, noticeable for her morale, trying to comfort her companions. This resembles the attitude of Eliane, who in the worst moments never lost her thirst for life and who defied her torturers at every opportunity<sup>38</sup>.

These English women stayed at Karlsruhe 'until around 20 July'<sup>39</sup>. At the time they thought they had been sent 'towards Poland'. Which would mean that they were in the hands of the Russian occupation troops. At least, that is what Vera Atkins wrote, in September 1945 to Eliane's mother, Elisa Bartroli and to her husband, Tom Plewman.

In reality, it had been almost a year since Eliane Plewman and her unlucky companions had been killed.

The women were in prison at Karlsruhe, but the prison at Karlsruhe was at that time managed by a woman who liked order and rules: Fraulein Becker. A good Nazi official, she would not stand for people who broke the rules. These English women who she has been asked to guard are secret agents, terrorists, spies. Yet Fraulein Becker runs a prison for political and apolitical detainees. They should not be here. And to make it clear that she will not tolerate this chaos any longer she writes letters in protest to her superiors. By the middle of July the director has managed to get rid of five of these troublesome women, who have been sent to the camps. But there are three left. The business reaches are far up the ranks as Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Himmler's right hand man. The pithy sentence comes back: 'to be classed N+N'<sup>40</sup>. In other words: 'liquidate them without leaving any trace.' Despite their fanaticism the Nazis have realised that soon they will be called to account. It would be best to get rid of these compromising prisoners, and in any case nobody will ever look for them. Fraulein Becker had been right, it was just a question of neglecting the classification system. From now on: *Alles in Ordnung!* – Everything is in order.

During the night of 11/12 September 1944 – at around 1:30am – the three prisoners are taken out of their cells. Their belongings are given back to them and, accompanied by their wardens, they are taken on board a train with ordinary compartments headed for Munich. The convoy will pick up a fourth detainee who the other three do not know. If they knew their destination, they would not have had such high morale. The comfortable journey makes them

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<sup>38</sup> Odette Sansom, another SOE agent to have been in prison at Karlsruhe in summer 1944, and who came back alive from the camps, bore witness to the living conditions of her companions.

<sup>39</sup> As we shall see, this is inaccurate. A first group of five left the prison in July, the second group in September.

<sup>40</sup> A delirious example of Nazi nomenclature, 'N+N' stands for *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog), terms borrowed from Richard Wagner's opera *The Rhine Gold*. This classification ordered that prisoners be executed and their bodies burned so as to leave no trace.

hopeful, when other deportees have been transported in cattle wagons to the abattoir. Vera Atkins found and interrogated several of the Gestapo 'accompanying officers', one of whom was Christian Ott, who revealed that the second was called Wassmer. This is how we know the details of the journey these young women took towards the end of their lives on earth. They arrived at the station in Munich in the middle of the night, and were taken on foot to Dachau concentration camp.

On 13 September 1944 at 8:20am the prisoners were taken out of their cells, led to a courtyard in front of the crematorium furnace wall. Apart from the 'accompanying officers', the only people present were the commander of the camp, Eduard Weiter, and two SS officers. Christian Ott read the prisoners their death sentence. Then they made them kneel down. Spontaneously, the young women took each others' hands, making a human chain facing their executioners. The kind of humane gesture which had long been forgotten in Dachau, the doyen of the *Konzentrationslager*s. Then, with their pistols in their hands, the two SS officers approached the four young women, who were all in tears. They calmly put a bullet in the back of each of their necks. For the eldest they had to shoot twice. After the execution the *Lagerkommandant*, interested in the jewellery the dead young women were wearing, ordered the two SS officers to bring it to him in his office.

The victims' bodies were then burnt.

They were Eliane Plewman, 26 years old, *Monk* network; Madeleine Damerment, 26 years old, *Bricklayer* network; Yolade Beeckman, 33 years old, *Musician* network; and Noor Inayat Khan, 30 years old, *Physician* network. Noor's mother died of grief when she learnt that the body of her daughter, under the boots of the butcher who had thrown himself upon her, was no more than 'a heap of bloody flesh'.

Today, a plaque on the wall of the crematorium commemorates their martyrdom.

They had just given their answer to the question asked 61 years previously by Paul Verlaine:

« Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà  
De ta jeunesse ? »<sup>41</sup>

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## Epilogue

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<sup>41</sup> 'Say, you, what have you done, with your youth?'



Though many managed to slip through the fingers of justice, at last the time came for at least two major actors in this story to be called to account.

In January 1945, a certain Emmanuel Bousquet was questioned at his home in the 15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris. The *tricolore* band he wore on his left arm and the membership card he showed (the photo of him with a dashing moustache à *la Errol Flynn*) showed that he was a member of two resistance organisations: the *Comité Local de Libération* and the *Milices Patriotiques*. This meant he was authorised to carry an arm and had a pass from the *Comité de Libération de Lyon*. However, he had just been turned down when he tried to enrol at the *Mission de Sécurité Intérieure*...

For good measure, the inspectors of the French intelligence services, who had been tracking the runaway all the way from Angoulême, were astonished to discover a membership card for the *Parti Communiste Français*, the ink still wet, which had been issued in Paris on 18 October 1944, in the name of Emmanuel Bousquet, known as Jean de Boissière.

As soon as he learnt of the traitor's arrest, Prefect Massenet wrote to the judge to request Bousquet's transfer to Marseille, outlining his role in 'the destruction of the Franco-British network lead by Henri Truchot'.

So the case was heard in Marseille - after a summons issued on 18 September 1945 - where the surviving members of *Monk* and notably Julien Villevieille, who had had the Gestapo agent's machine gun pushed into his chest, but also the neighbours in Rue Mérentié, formally identified Emmanuel Bousquet despite his denials and declarations of innocence.

He was tried in section B of the *Cour Spéciale de Justice*, where the public heard that before displaying his talents in Marseille the traitor had begun his military career with the Gestapo in Toulouse. On 19 July 1946 the three judges unanimously condemned 39-year-old Emmanuel Bousquet to death for 'sharing intelligence with the enemy in order to promote the activities of Germany above the interests of France'. He was shot at the Malmousque military ground on 15 November 1946 at 9am.

It remained for them to catch another runaway who, since the Provence landings, had put the greatest possible distance between himself and Marseille: Ernst Dunker.

The French secret services found him as he was trying - as so many other Nazis - to make contact with the American troops based near Paris. They took him back to the town where he had committed his despicable acts. He was imprisoned at Baumettes to await his trial before the *Tribunal Militaire* on 21

January 1947. He paid for his crimes on 6 June 1950 in the same way as the servant he used to carry out his dirty work, Bousquet.

Justice had been done. At long last...

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Lest we forget

On 7 May 1998 the Mayor of Marseille unveiled a commemorative plaque on the wall of 8 rue Mérentié: 'In memory of three British SOE officers parachuted into France to organise resistance in Provence by creating the Bernard Monk network'.

Despite the errors strewn throughout this textual homage, we can see the names of Captain Charles Milne Skepper, Ensign Eliane Plewman and Captain Arthur Steele. This memorial plaque, which recalls the sacrifice of the 'French by choice' that Louis Aragon spoke of, was erected thanks to the initiative of Roger Lafont, an old member of the network. He had not forgotten his comrades in arms and insisted that Marseille too remember them.

