



It was in the first days, when the Nazis were about to march into Paris. Rywka fled Paris along with hundreds of other Jews. Meanwhile, her sister Terca and her husband Vladimir remained, at their shop. Vladimir was a Russian - the son of a tsarist general. "Maybe the Nazis will leave us alone", thought Terca. But Terca was [also] forced to escape. The Nazis captured her and sent her back to Poland. Rywka subsequently discovered that Terca perished in Oświęcim [Auschwitz], along with thousands of other Jews.

Rywka, [however,] was saved. She made it to a village somewhere in France. She spent the night and, on the following day, made a tour of the village. She put on the finest dress she had taken with her, put on makeup and combed her hair according to the latest fashion. Rywka made efforts to look like a true Frenchwoman. She looked everyone boldly in the face, smiled and, indeed, the villagers took her for a real Frenchwoman, already from generation upon generation.

On that day, she made the acquaintance of an elderly woman. The old lady, babbling, introduced herself. Her name was Mathilde Manson. Was she, Rywka, perhaps looking for a room? She was all alone. The children had all left. Her husband had already died years before. The old lady would be happy to have one such as Rywka as her neighbour.

The old woman, it seemed, had understood that Rywka had come from Paris and that she was Jewish. She was looking to remain here until the War was over. No Germans had been seen in this village. All the Frenchmen in the village – even including the police – helped hide the escaping Jews, who streamed here *en masse* from Paris, and then continued onwards on their way.

Rywka moved over to the old woman Mathilde and stayed there until leaving the village.

Rywka sighed. She remained seated in sorrow. Josef also kept his silence for a while. Then he said, "Well, the important thing is that you survived everything. Now, a new life starts in a new country!"

* * *

Rywka did not respond to Josef. Before her eyes was looming the figure of her French friend Léopold, whose dark eyes she had met then for the first time.

She remembered. There she had been, looking out the window and contemplating the beautiful garden, which was clearly well kept and organised. Looking out, Rywka noticed a middle-aged man, who was walking about the trees and plucking out the wild plants and grasses, and tidying and sweeping the narrow footpaths. From time to time, he cast a glance at the window - at Rywka. Their gazes met. It was not long before they became acquainted.

The neighbour, Monsieur Léopold, became a frequent visitor at the old lady's home. He would seek all kinds of pretexts to catch a glimpse of Rywka. She captivated him with her Jewish charm. It emerged that this Monsieur was a worker in a large factory. He devoted his little free time to the garden.

Rywka was also fond of him, with his fine speech, tall stature and manners. Now, during the unhappiest days of her life, alone in a strange country, mourning over her sister and other relatives in Poland, this Monsieur Léopold brought her a little joy. In her thoughts, she often compared him to Josef, with his cold attitude towards her, even in the good times. Gradually, Léopold's love impressed itself upon Rywka. Rywka would forget her suffering for a while, in the minutes when they would be together. She was unable to render an account to herself. Thus, the War years passed in the village.

The elderly Mathilde Manson did not involve herself too much in Rywka's private life, as long as Rywka paid her the monthly rent on time. She saw how Monsieur Léopold came every evening, after finishing with his garden, and took Rywka out somewhere. During the daytime, Rywka would work at the sewing machine, sewing clothes for the neighbours and repairing old garments for the poor women of the village. She had barely enough for her expenses. Her sister had given her some money to take with her upon leaving Paris. She would also receive a little money from Josef, through the Red Cross. Now this Monsieur Léopold endeavoured to do everything to aid her.

She did not remember how it happened - whether it was the estrangement she constantly felt towards Josef, or whether Léopold's genuine friendliness towards her - [but] she was drawn to him.

Over the course of time, Rywka received letters from Josef. Yes, she was prepared to come to America, albeit without enthusiasm. She told Léopold about her decision. Rywka saw Léopold's sad face. The nearer the days of the liberation approached, the more uneasy Rywka became. Léopold even more so. The Germans were retreating in haste. Half of Poland was already in the hands of the Red Army. France, too, had already almost been taken by the American and Canadian soldiers. Soon Paris would be liberated. The day of victory was imminent!

Rywka was in a rush to travel back to Paris. She ultimately wished to find, out as quickly as possible, who had survived from her family - maybe the news of Terca's demise were lies, after all. Maybe she was alive somewhere, hiding in a French home.

She awaited the day the Germans would be driven out of Paris. Indeed, the utter defeat of the Nazis was near. Léopold and Rywka sat by the radio and listened to the shouts of joy of the French people in the streets of Paris, and the news of how the underground fighters, the "Maquis", had encircled the city of Paris and captured the Nazis in the street. The French now wrought revenge upon them!

Saying goodbye to Léopold was difficult for Rywka. She promised him she was not travelling to America for a lengthy period. Something in her heart told her that also the journey to America, if she succeeded in making it, would not be for long. America has to be seen! Yes, she needed to try her luck one more time first. And she told Léopold to write to her frequently. He would see that she would keep her word.

Following the liberation of Paris, once the gunfire had ceased, Rywka went to the train, accompanied by Léopold. He kept his silence the whole time, as if the spring of all his clever and beautiful words had dried up. She understood him. He was too noble, and did not wish to impose anything on her - "Remember Rywka, my house and my garden will always be open to you. Let destiny decide the rest!" These were Léopold's last words before Rywka boarded the train that brought her to Paris.

