

THE RELIEF

In the newspapers they read: "Workers, depart for Germany. If you have not had to experience prison camp captivity for yourself, it is your duty to go and relieve those who have spent months behind the barbed wire, anxiously awaiting their release . . ."¹

1. "L'arelève," the story's French title, is the euphemism used by the Vichy media campaign in early 1942 to pressure French workers to volunteer to go to Germany to replace German workers who had been mobilized and sent to the Russian front. Posters and front-page headlines publicized that for every three French workers (men or women) who went to work in Germany, one French prisoner of war would be returned to France. By September 1942, when it was clear the campaign had failed, the Vichy government legislated the *relève forcée* (forced relief), which designated male workers aged eighteen to fifty and female workers aged twenty-one to thirty-five as "volunteers." In February 1943, the Vichy government enforced the infamous *service du travail obligatoire* (compulsory work service; STO), applicable to all men born between 1 January 1920 and 31 December 1922. (Thomas's story, which doesn't mention the STO, was probably written before the policy was implemented.) Huge numbers of young French men headed for the *maquis* as a way of evading the STO. *Maquis* is a French word for terrain that is difficult to access (i.e., mountainous or heavily wooded), and it became synonymous with the Resistance because Resistance fighters—often called *maquisards*—hid in such places, where they strategized their attacks on the Nazis and on Nazi sympathizers and planned, above all, for the liberation of France.

On the clandestine radio they heard a voice, as mysterious as it was intent, chanting: "Do-not-go-to-Ger-ma-ny. Do-not-go-to-Ger-ma-ny."

As soon as the factories let out, they would be in the bistros talking about it, bistros where they knew the owner was not with the police and where they could talk without having to be afraid. They felt free. Still free to choose between going and refusing to go. Free to act according to what their conscience alone told them to do. As free as they had been back in the day, when they would have decided to go on strike, pitting their power against the power of the oppressor who had learned over time to see them as a force to be reckoned with.

This was the first time since the armistice that the choice to act was theirs,² even if that choice meant no action or refusal.

"You know," one of them said, "if I could go replace my cousin who is more like a brother to me, if I could say, I'm more than willing to go as long as you release my cousin Merlin (first name Marcel) who is like a brother to me, in that case, I would go."

"Absolutely," they agreed.

2. The armistice of June 1940. Hitler insisted on signing it in the same railway car that the November 1918 armistice of World War I had been signed in.

Another said: "Yes, but being able to get someone else rehased would be worth it, even if it couldn't be somebody you knew."

Everyone took the guy who said that for a good kid. He was not a police informer or a scab, for sure. But he had drive. During the strikes of '36, the most he would say was: "If that's how you all see it." Then he would join them on the march. His brother was a gardener for the Maréchal of Lochtudy, as his father was, as it had always been their family, the job passed down from father to son. He believed that he must carry out God's will and that the will of men is not always God's will, the proof being that God had created the poor and the rich—the people who work and the people they worked for, as it was the beginning and ever shall be. Rich and powerful people retain the power of God, insofar as they are rich and powerful, which they would not be without God's will. With his wife dying of tuberculosis in the Laennec Hospital and his children all dead at a very young age, the only thing he, Le Guirrec, had to do was obey the rich and powerful, since, as all evidence showed, misery and dwilness were God's will for him. And now the only thing he had to do was obey the Maréchal.³

3. Referring to Pétain. Though Pétain's title, *maréchal*, is often translated as "marshel," this term does not have an equivalent in English. In France, *maréchal* is a military honor, not a military rank. Pétain was granted the

"But you're obeying German orders," the others objected, knowing Le Guirrec was at least as French and as Breton as he was Catholic.

"I believe in obeying the Maréchal," he obstinately replied; "the Maréchal knows what he's doing."

Nevertheless, Le Guirrec did not go: he could not leave his wife to die alone in the hospital. He could not leave his home. By that, did he mean his shambles of a room—too small to be orderly—with its view of the smokestacks, the tin roofs, and the train tracks? Or did he mean that plot of land his family had lived on and worked for centuries now but still did not own? Or was it his language, which they did not speak here either.⁴ Still, this was his home.

And Le Guirrec was not leaving.

There were those two who had signed up for Germany, both very young and full of ideas. They had no convictions; they were not out to "save Europe from Bolshevism." Bolshevism meant nothing to them. What they

distinction for his military performance in World War I. Tried and sentenced to death for treason after World War II, he was stripped of all military ranks and honors, except for that of *maréchal*. Because of Pétain's age (nearly at the time of his trial), President Charles de Gaulle commuted Pétain's sentence to life in prison.

4. The Jules Ferry laws of 1881 and 1882, lauded for making elementary education in France compulsory, free, and nonreligious, also banned all languages but French from the classroom, at a time when millions of children in France spoke only the language of their region. For decades after, children were humiliated and punished for speaking the only language they knew (e.g., Breton or Basque) when at school.

saw was an opportunity for adventure, a free ride they could not refuse. Freeloaders were not the type of people to be trusted. On top of that, they were mediocre workers, more like handymen in fact. Better off without them. Guys like that would hardly be contributing to Germany's victory.

The newspapers, however, kept touting the great success of the relief program, saying that trains were departing for Germany every day. But here they knew for a fact that only two workers had signed up on their own initiative. And that out of more than a thousand of them, only twenty-five had gone to the conference organized by management, and even then, only after they had agreed with all the others to come back with a precise account of what had been said there. With that being the case here, there was no reason to believe the program had made a different impression anywhere else, or that their buddies at the Renault factory or at Gnome and Rhône were any more inclined to go to Germany than they were.⁵

In fact, they soon noticed that the appeals were getting more insistent, that "volunteers" were being assigned and called mandatory volunteers (in the same way Europe now meant Germany; socialism, the dictatorship of corporate interests; and food provision, organized starvation:

5. Gnome et Rhône was a major aircraft engine manufacturer in France.

it did not take a scholar to know that the meanings of words had changed and had to be taken as the reverse of what you once thought they meant).

"So what will you do if you get the order?" they asked each other for the umpteenth time.

"I won't leave."

"Easy to say, but where will you go?"

And that was the real question. Maybe they would go meet up with de Gaulle?⁶ There was talk of travelers leaving the ports with a certain number of men and returning with the same number, only the faces were different. The exchange took place with British ships out at sea. What about heading for the free zone and enrolling in the armistice army? The armistice army, what a joke, run by all those generals who had never before received anything close to the attention they got once they had been defeated: the bourgeoisie's triumphant, defeated armistice army. Anyway, that army had been disbanded, and now the "free" zone was occupied. The only thing left to do

6. Virtually unheard of in France when he was stationed in London and recognized by Britain as leader of the *Forces Françaises Libres* (Free French Forces) in 1940, General Charles de Gaulle first became familiar to the French as a voice on the BBC's Radio London (Radio London) exhorting the French to resist Nazi occupation. Besides boosting French morale and countering the onslaught of Nazi propaganda on Radio Paris and Radio Vichy, Radio London transmitted hundreds of coded messages that aided de Gaulle in coordinating the Free French and Allied interventions from outside France with the growing Resistance within France.

was hide out here in the countryside, and wait for weapons. But you needed to know people in the countryside.

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Robert Basin was wondering yet again: So what am I going to do now?

He had been asking himself that question all day long, as he stood before a lathe that did not sound good. Here or over there, what did it matter, you were working for the Germans just the same.

Now that the factory had let out for the day, his thoughts returned to the question as he rested his elbows on the bridge railing, the Seine crawling along beneath him. At Renault, smokestacks stood prow-like despite last year's bombing, full steam ahead on a voyage to nowhere. Across the river, the Sèvres hills led up to a man-made forest that no one could hide in.

What am I going to do now?

He felt around in his pocket for the order to report to the Gare de l'Est.⁷ The folded piece of paper was still there. He wanted to chuck it into the river. That would be that, and he would see what happened next. He spat into the water.

The reasons for staying that the workers had been tossing around for days on end did not convince him, because

⁷ Gare de l'Est is the main station in Paris for trains going eastward.

none of them truly believed he would be the one to get the departure order. As in the thought process where you believed you would win the lottery because you had bought a ticket, they never really thought anything bad would happen to them personally. That was how people managed to go on living despite the evidence. He would have to go over all of it again, applying it directly to himself this time.

At first, he had no doubts about choosing not to go. I am working for them here too, that much is obvious: all of Europe is working for them. But I do no more than what it takes not to get fired. Not to mention all those parts with their practically undetectable defects. Now that was a job well done. Besides, if they want to send us to Germany, it's because they believe it is in their best interest: either they believe they can get more work out of us over there, and then use us as soldiers, or they want to round out the haul they made in 1940 to rid France of anyone capable of pointing a weapon in their direction. Whatever the reason, and maybe all are valid, if it is in their interest, then we have to do the exact opposite. Therefore, I must not go. I must not go.

But he kept hearing that question: "What will you do if you're called up?"

He saw Le Guirrec coming his way, Le Guirrec who had also received his departure order that morning.

Wanting to avoid him, Robert went on across the bridge. Not that Le Guirec had noticed him anyway: the man often walked as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"So what will you do if you're called up?"

Simone was supposed to be home by now, though they made her work extra hours virtually every day.

As soon as she opened the door to let him in, she knew:

"You're leaving," she said.

Below her eyes her face was drawn, like it always was in the evening after a long day of work had exhausted her.

"I got my orders," he responded in a neutral voice.

"You mustn't leave," she said.

But he did not know if he was supposed to refuse so as not to assist in Hitler's subjugation of Europe or because he loved her: she made everything even more confusing. He did know that since he had met her, he had become a better person. And if he had to explain what he meant by "better," he would say he felt more aware, more personally responsible for things.

She got undressed and stretched out naked on the bed. And now he was going to join her. Just a man and a naked woman, for all eternity.

"Don't leave," she repeated.

She wrapped her arms around his neck the way women do. He let her do it.

"Don't leave," she said for the third time.

She curled up next to him, nestled between the hollow of his shoulder and his hip.

"How can I avoid it?" he asked.

"I'll hide you," she answered.

And true enough, Simone was his home.

"But where?" he asked.

There was only the one room with a toilet next to it.

"Who will know you're here?" she persisted. "I'll say we had a fight and you left me."

She smuggled up to him even closer, trying to ward off the destiny her very words might bring about.

"What about my provisions card?"

"I'll take care of that. I'll try to hide you in the countryside. I'll tell my aunt you're my fiancé."—Immediately she wished she hadn't said that: he must not feel tied down by her. "She has a little farm in the middle of the woods, three structures out there in the woods."

He would entrust himself to this woman, his woman, to her words that wrapped around him, calm and confident in the steadfast complicity of home.

"Some men have to stay here," she went on, as if trying to respond to an objection he had not raised, an objection to softness and cowardice, to taking the easy way out. "When the time comes for rifles and machine guns, that's when you will go, and I will not stop you."