

The Cenacle during the Second World War (1939-1945)

1) The events:

The Second World War, caused by the fascists dictatorships and by Hitlerian Germany, breaks out in September 1939 with the invasion of Poland by the Wehrmacht troops. A few days after France and Great-Britain declare war to Germany, but France locks herself in what has been later called the “drôle de guerre” (“phony war”). On May 10, Germany invades the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg and the French and British troops give help to the Belgian army but do not manage to stop Hitler’s soldiers who from then on occupy Belgium until September 1944. On May 13, they enter France during the breakthrough of Sedan. On June 14, they are in Paris and their move in the territory leads to the splitting of the French army and the spreading of a huge panic movement in the population. Ten million people throw themselves on the road with a few personal belongings, facing the bombings and the lack of supplies and trying to meet up the government in Bordeaux. On June 22, the armistice requested by marshal Pétain, vice-president of the Council and regarded as the “winner of Verdun” during the First World War, is signed in Rethondes. Amongst other dispositions, the text establishes a boundary line between northern France under German occupation and southern France called the “free zone” until her invasion by the Germans in November 1942. Great-Britain finds herself alone against Germany until the entrance in the war of the United States on the allies’ side after the Japanese attack on their military base of Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

In 1943, the German troops start to suffer defeats which able the allies to gradually free the French territory. On June 6, 1944, the allied troops land in Normandy. A second landing takes place in Provence on August 16 and Paris is liberated on August 25. The final assault on the Germans occurs at the beginning of 1945 when the country is besieged and bombed. It surrenders without condition in the night from May 8 to 9 1945 in Berlin, taken by Staline’s Red Army. Japan then surrenders on September 2, closing definitively the conflict.

2) The French houses in the dead of the war:

Like the whole of the French population, the French Cenacle follows with an increasing anxiety the Germans’ move on the territory and also decides to flee the enemy, even if the situation greatly varies depending on the houses’ geographic situation.

- *The communities under German occupation:*

The houses in the North of France have suffered a lot from the beginning of the conflict and have powerlessly witnessed the enemy’s progress under the fires of the bombardments.

The letters from the Sisters living in Amiens and Lille relate the atmosphere from May 1940. Rumours increase and the inhabitants seriously start to panic at a time when newspapers are no longer published and schools and factories are closed. The fear is heightened by the arrival of Belgian wounded telling everyone of the enemy’s dazzling progress. From this time on there are several arrests in Amiens where the “hunt for parachutists” is in full swing. The city suffers some violent bombardments during which the Cenacle house is not spared: many windowpanes are broken and the religious objects are hidden in the cellar. The hospital lacks everything and comes to the house for sheets, mattresses and even books for the wounded. Mother Mainguet is in charge of filling the holes made by the pieces of shrapnel in the linen left in the clothes airer. These bombardments from before the armistice destroy 80% of the city houses and many inhabitants come to seek a refuge

in the Cenacle which is relatively spared. One of the Sisters describes the tasks following the bombardments during which no one spends her time idly: “we listen, we comfort, we relocate the pieces of furniture that have moved and we put them back to their original location, then we mostly sweep glass... we do the best we can to fill the windowpanes with oiled paper... the roofs are covered with canvas paper containing tar”. However, these activities don’t prevent the continuation of apostolic work, since between 3000 and 3500 communions take place every month between March and August 1941. The house and the refectory are also sometimes requisitioned for the meals of several hundreds of soldiers and officers. But even without a requisition order some surviving men from the rout are accommodated for one night or just a meal. The Sisters’ letters from this time also contain precious information on the inhabitants’ state of mind towards the French government and especially towards Pétain, named in July 1940 head of the State with the full powers. There is a striking difference of opinion coexisting then between the population and the zones: some people “admire the Marshall [Pétain] and don’t expect much from the British”, whereas others “entirely trust [the British] and, ignoring all that Pétain does and says, don’t believe him capable of anything good”.

But it is quickly decided for some of the Sisters to travel to Monrepos. On May 19, twelve of them leave the burning Amiens and travel by car and train to Rouen, Lisieux, Alençon and Rennes and arrive at Monrepos on May 30. The journey of the Sisters from Lille is a somewhat more epic adventure. Several groups leave in May. The one supervised by Mothers Larthe and Battet first travel in a cattle train packed with refugees before continuing their journey on foot and then in a hay chariot in the middle of bombardments. They are quickly exhausted, but it’s hardly surprising because according to their notes they have walked 37 km on May 20. Three days later, Mothers Larthe and Battet go to Abbeville to try to have news from the other Sisters who also left Amiens. They stop at the general hospital where the situation is hopeless: 600 wounded are crammed in it without a single doctor or surgeon to treat them and the superior of the Augustine Sisters is reduced to carry out the amputations by herself... After several attempts to go towards Paris, they give up and go back to Lille which falls to the Germans a few days later.

The East communities are as much affected by the conflict as the North ones. In Paray-le-Monial, two groups leave by train towards the end of June 1940 for Moulins and Bordeaux. The travel atmosphere is rather agreeable because the Sisters are surrounded by soldiers who show them pictures of their family and give them some chocolate. The train often stops in the countryside, sometimes for a long time, but the travellers seize the occasion to pick cherries and strawberries. But they are immobilized in Moulins because no train runs to Bordeaux, and the Sisters are accommodated by the Franciscan Sisters. They wait in Moulins with the idea of going back to Paray-le-Monial but the rumour of the Germans’ arrival prevents them to leave. Despite the increasing number of rumours that “pour, good or bad, true or false”, they make every step to return to their community, especially by going to see the Bishop of Autun who has also taken refuge in Moulins. On July 3, they finally manage to go back to the start.

In Nancy and Mulhouse, the authorities don’t encourage inhabitants to flee, even if the government had planned that in case of war the people living near the German border would be evacuated to a safe place. A wave of refugees rapidly goes off to the south or the west of France, but the two communities don’t leave for Monrepos. From September 1939, some Sisters from Mulhouse flee to Saint-Amarin in the Thur valley and others leave for Paray-le-Monial. Therefore they escape the bombardment of the city in May 1940. After the armistice that results in the annexation of Alsace by Hitler’s Germany, the Sisters have a difficult time living under German domination. Like the rest of the Alsatian population, they have to “gloat in Hitlerian colour at every feast; to say “Heil Hitler” when entering a public place [and] to put Hitler’s portrait in the pride of place”. Once a month, they are obliged to make a “sacrifice” for the soldiers at the front by having only one pan in the stove. Compelled to pray in German after someone denounced them as still praying in Latin, they live in a constant fear of being arrested and exiled: “a French word can bring you to exile and a French book can be a death condemnation. Therefore we have to hide and every sound of the doorbell represents

an awful moment”. In such conditions, one can easily imagine how joyful the Liberation was for them.

In Paris, the situation corresponds to the one in Mulhouse, because the city lives under German occupation from June 1940. In September 1939, most of the Sisters leave for Pescheré, in the Sarthe department, and only twelve stay in the house avenue de Breteuil. The apostolic works slowly start again, and individual retreats, children catechism and meetings of the Agricultural Christian Youth and the Student Christian Youth come to liven up the house. In June 1940, a new departure for the south is organized and from then on only seven Sisters remain in Paris. The neighbours of the Cenacle leave one after the other, like many of the Parisians who dash off before the enemies, which makes one of the Mothers write that “this pathetic exodus gives to the capital city a view of anguish which disturbs even the most courageous people”. Being patriotic, they are outraged by the arrival of the Germans but write that they “have to accept [their] situation and swallow [their] humiliation”. However, the last remaining Sisters don’t think about leaving the house to join the others in Monrepos, and besides their friends advise them to stay because the roads are overloaded. But after the armistice, they are also affected by the shortage of food and by the rationing cards. Mother Hélène Saglio deplors the situation that increases the poverty and weakens the most modest people, and writes that “the misery of Paris [is] alarming! No job to be found. Everything not affordable and having to stand in such big queues that many people can’t face them, so that the poor, because they have no money, and the sick, because it is too much for them, die of hunger”. The situation doesn’t get any better, and supplies become a daily problem. After the lack of food, the Sisters also come to want for electricity in Spring 1944, which also affects the general treasurer and the Third Year back in the house in Autumn 1942.

Sisters living in Paris, Versailles and Tigery flee at the beginning of the hostilities in a property owned by a friend of the Cenacle, at Pescheré in the Sarthe department. But even in this remote place, the progress of the Germans in the French territory is feared and several Sisters leave Pescheré for the château du Gazon in June 1940. Three groups dash off on June 13 but are blocked in La Flèche where no communication means runs due to the bombardment of the area. The Sisters leave the day after for Tours where the situation is as hopeless and where the refugees hurry up to the station to get some information. After a stop in Poitiers and Angoulême they finally reach their destination between June 18 and 22. Unfortunately, they are obliged to evacuate the château at the end of the month so that French headquarters can settle in it. Obviously always on the roads, they take refuge in the Charente department at Mottes-Mouzon.



The château du Gazon

- *The houses in the “free zone”:*

The whole of France is affected by the shortages, and for the Cenacle the difficulties go beyond the Parisian community. Even in the free zone, the living conditions are hard. The souvenirs of Mother Collinet de la Salles on the war years in Voiron tell about the difficulties from May 1940 because many Sisters are sick and the monthly sum sent by the general treasurer is hardly enough to cover the medical expenses. Concerning food, they lack everything and make do with nettles, beet leaves and above all with swedes and Jerusalem artichokes. Supplies are often offered by family members of Sisters on a visit, but the quantity of food available is hardly enough for everyone, especially given that the community hides several Jewesses and an Italian priest tracked down by the Germans. The Sisters also come to want heating and are therefore condemned to attend Mass in a chapel in which the temperature doesn't exceed 4°C in winter... Moreover, Mother de la Salle insists on the Germans' good behaviour towards the inhabitants but adds that "everyone is on the watch because we never know if we couldn't be denounced by someone claiming to be our friend". So as well as material difficulties, they have to face an atmosphere of fear and suspicion which only increases as the war goes on. In La Louvesc, situated in a rural zone, supply difficulties also have to be dealt with: "we often lack a lot of things" writes Mother Aline Richard to the general superior in April 1942. Eight months later, the winter is hard and they eat chestnuts twice a day for lack of butter, fruits or vegetables. Then they are also short of coal and heating becomes a serious problem.

At the beginning of the hostilities, the general government chooses to flee to Monrepos near Bordeaux in order to stand away from the military operations. On September 2, 1939, the general secretary and treasurer move and Mothers d'Eudeville, Roy Viard, Irene Maranzana, Reynier, de Banneville, de Bast, Collin, Chardon and Burnham jump on a train. In Monrepos, they are welcomed with great surprise by the Sisters watching over the house who didn't expect them. On September 25, they are joined by the general superior Mother Corneau, directly arriving from her visit in the United States. A very detailed journal has been kept during these years of war, thus enabling us to have almost a daily account of their activities.



The house of Monrepos

The country life of the generalate is hardly peaceful. The general superior multiplies her trips and she puts Mother Billardon in charge of the house. Moreover, from May 1940 the refugee Sisters flock: on May 14 the ones from Pescheré arrive, followed three days later by the ones from Brussels and Amiens. On June 12, some Sisters from Paris and Montmartre come to join the group. But here as well the apostolic work continues since children's catechism and religious lessons for girls are organized. Some of the Sisters even start to give private French, English, German, sowing and stenographer lessons to make ends meet. Nevertheless, their isolation doesn't prevent them from

keeping up with the news and commenting on them. But the lack of news is cruelly felt by everyone and makes them say that “the newspapers and broadcast news don’t tell everything that happens: it’s the law of secret, a very wise one because it’s better not to give too much information to the enemy!” In January 1940, they bitterly comment on the “phony war”: “All the French would like an open conflict to finally start; this “war of nerves” is exhausting, and we only acknowledge too well the enemy’s tactic...” Until June 1940, an account of the military operations is read every day in the refectory. On June 17, the news of the armistice request is welcomed with despair and fear, because the Sisters fear to soon find themselves in the middle of a battle where the Dordogne river would be a strategic position between Paris and Bordeaux, and they all start to pack in case of a hasty departure. But no one leaves after all and the house is from then on greatly isolated because it is forbidden to write between the zones. This situation makes them write that they have “returned to slow means of communication in this century of trepidation”. Months go by and the living conditions don’t get any better. In December 1940, the house journal points out that there are no more potatoes and often no more milk as well. Furthermore, they have to sign a paper staking not to ring the outside bells between sunset and eight hours in the morning. In July 1941, there are contradictory news spreading and they notice that they live in “lies and clouds”.

Relations with the Germans are sometimes difficult, even if some Sisters manage to go through the boundary line with false papers given by an aggregate. But on October 23 1940, policemen come to arrest the three English Sisters. They are fortunately freed two days later, before being taken again, this time to the detention camp in Besançon on December 2. The general superior takes every step to obtain their freedom and even approaches the papal nuncio but they are only freed in 1942. Besides, the Sisters who reach the phony zone don’t feel very safe since they write in November 1940 that “the armistice commission is on the watch and that “there are Germans in Toulouse... and elsewhere”. Fear is therefore experienced by everyone, in spite of the speeches of the authorities, especially Pétain’s, who are reassuring.



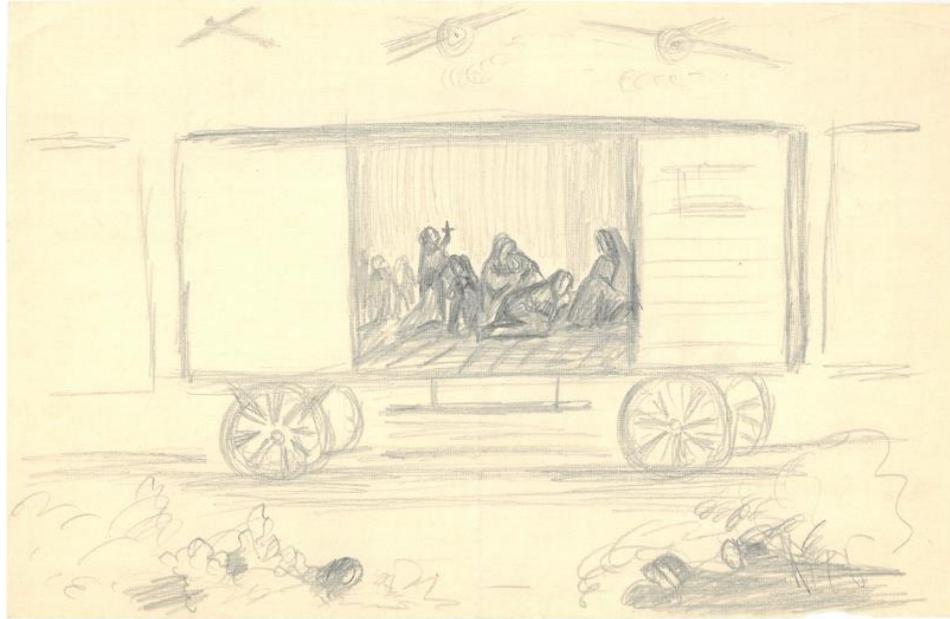
The Tertians in Monrepos in may 1940

3) The saga of the Belgian Cenacle:

The Brussels Cenacle is directly affected by the conflict since the country is invaded by the Germans from May 10, 1940. The French embassy immediately offers to repatriate a few French, and, the general superior asking the community to return to France, the superior Marie Cornudet decides to organize the departure of three groups including most of her Sisters. Each journey faces lateness and difficulties interesting to relate.

The first group with French Sisters leaves Brussels on May 12. After having had to cope with a crowd at the station before the departure and then with several stops notably a two-hour one due to alerts to bombardments, they are quickly disappointed not to arrive directly to Paris as they hoped.

The supply during the journey is difficult but nevertheless secured by the Red Cross. After a momentary immobilization in Abbeville, the small group arrives safe and sound in Paris at the end of a two-day journey.



Drawing of the travelers praying during an aerial bombardment alert

The second group's journey is more tiring and has been narrated by Mother Léonie de Beer. Because of the intensification of bombardments in the region of Brussels, Mother Corneau decides to hasten the departure of four Belgian Sisters. Leaving on May 13, they travel all night without water or food and greatly frightened every time the train stops deep in the countryside. They arrive the next day in Lille and leave straightaway for Dieppe where they arrive at night without being allowed to leave the train. Supplied with bread and coffee, they arrive on May 15 near Rouen where they get down from the immobilized train in the middle of a field with their entire luggage. Two of them go to look for a car and a policeman brings them to the Charity Sisters where they are able to rest a while before going on with their journey in a car and heading for Rouen. At the station, they buy tickets for Paris but an alert obliges them to hide in a shelter. They reach their destination on May 16 and leave for Monrepos where they arrive on the following day.

The journey of the third group is the most epic one because the Sisters don't manage to reach Paris and end up turning back towards Brussels. The account written of the trip is very detailed and shows that the travellers lived exhausting days.

On May 15, twelve religious divided in two groups leave Brussels. The first one gets on a train driving at 2 km/h. After a stop shortly after the departure due to soldiers hunting spies, they arrive in the evening in the village of Chapelle-à-Wattines whose 800 stupefied inhabitants see some 2000 travellers alight. Finding a place to stay is hardly an easy business in such conditions, but the Cenacle Sisters are lodged at the presbytery thanks to the inquiries of Mothers Lerolle and de Lhoneux. The next day is almost entirely spent in the cellar, because the neighbouring station of Leuze-en-Hainaut suffers the bombardments of 26 planes. On May 12, they leave early in the morning for the station, hoping to be able to catch a train with evacuated people or soldiers since according to the station-master they sometimes allow civilians to get on. Endless convoys go by, crammed with French soldiers, before one of them accepts to take the group. The religious run in the pebbles along the convoy to catch the train and the last ones are pulled up by the soldiers as the train starts. At the station of Saint-Ghislain, they leave the military train for an evacuated people one and get on a cattle truck. But shortly after the departure, a bombardment compels everyone to get off and

hide in slopes because 27 bombing planes “fly around in circles like mosquitoes”. The bombardment cuts the railway lines and the travellers are once again immobilized with only rotten potatoes found by a worker for food.



Drawing by one of the travelers: the train evacuation during a bombing in the countryside

The next day, the convoy leaves again and arrives in Valenciennes under bombardments where the atmosphere is chaotic because the city is being evacuated. The population flees to too small shelters and the Sisters have no choice but to leave their luggage on the platform and hide in the basement of a café where they arrive exhausted. Unfortunately, one of them stayed at the station in the confusion and they have to look for her, thus missing their train. Nevertheless, they manage to get on a train going to Amiens. Sitting a few meters from four gun-machines constantly firing at planes, they go through Lille and reach Dover where the train stops to allow troops to pass with an “awful” sight of wounded men lying in stretchers. A member of the Paris hospital care service offers to lodge some of the Sisters and the others spend the night at the Franciscan Sisters’ orphanage. But on May 19 with learn with consternation that the station is closed without any train leaving before a week. Determined to leave the city, Mother Lerolle goes to look for a car that would take them to Rouen, but the shortage of petrol makes her task difficult. Nevertheless the group manages to get on a car for Boulogne two days later. The ride enables them to realize the confusion on the French roads, because they see “military cars, fugitives on foot, young people on bicycles while the French and British officers and soldiers instructed to give directions seem totally distraught and incapable of giving any information whatsoever”. In Boulogne the station is evacuated and no one knows whether a train will be put in place for not. The Sisters have to start looking for lodging in a religious house again but walking in streets full of a “human sea of soldiers and refugees” proves to be arduous. They are finally welcomed at the Visitation convent where they spend the next days still ignoring when they are going to be able to leave. Peaceful moments follow diurnal and nocturnal alerts which oblige everyone to hide and spend long hours in the cellar. To keep themselves busy the Cenacle Sisters help to make coffee for the 200 or 300 civilian refugees also hiding and whose number constantly increases to create a “flood-tide of human grief”. On May 24, they are interrupted in their work by the arrival of Germans who search the cellar for British soldiers. They order the Sisters to go out who leave their shelter observed by soldiers armed with guns, and they are convinced that they are going to be executed. Panic-stricken, they are nevertheless quickly reassured because the soldiers leave the convent soon after. Determined to leave the city, they join on May 31 the Belgian evacuated group formed by the Belgian comity. Un June 9, a bill stipulates that all the Belgian

evacuated must go back to their country by their own means, but the Sisters are puzzled because they have to find a way to go home without relying on the Belgian committee. Fortunately a representative of the general superior, sent to bring the small group home arrives on June 16 and they all travel in a truck plying between Lille and Paris. But their troubles are far from over because the ride is punctuated by bursting of tyres and shortages of petrol. The strongest travellers end up walking for seven or eight km to lighten the truck's weight. They go through ravaged regions and watch with exhausted eyes "the awful spectacle of burned cars, abandoned luggage, and ravaged villages and of military and civilian tombs" which "tells a lot about the tragedies that took place in the area". Reaching Lille on June 20, they get on a train the next day driven by Germans, although its departure time is unknown. However, they arrive in the evening in Brussels after an exhausting five week journey which takes them back to the very place they wanted to run away from.

The second group's journey, told by Mother Romary, is not as long but as hard. The troubles start before their arrival at the Brussels station, because they are mistook for parachutists during an identity control and taken to the police station, where they are kept until the mistake is revealed. At the train station, they are told that the only leaving train is composed of coal wagons and the superior refuses to let them leave in such conditions. Back at the Cenacle, they finally leave in two Red Cross ambulances but are stopped shortly after their departure at 30 km from Brussels because of tanks and motor bikes. They manage to get to Dunkirk and lodge at the Augustine Sisters' house before getting on a train for Paris on May 17. After numerous stops, they arrive in Paris eight hours behind schedule. But they don't have time to rest at the Cenacle because they leave the next day for Monrepos where they arrive after a rather peaceful journey despite a dispute between Mother Romary and a traveller.

A last journey of British and American Sisters takes place on May 16, 1941 in a special train from the American Embassy. There are many alerts that oblige the travellers to find shelter under the benches. At Braine-le-Comte, the train can't go on because the tracks have been bombarded a few hours before, and the Sisters have no choice but to go back to Brussels.

The Tilburg community is also affected by the war but it doesn't prevent her from organizing retreats. However, the Sisters are cut from the generalate for a long time and the general superior is obliged to appeal to the Red Cross to have news in 1940. The house is quickly turned into a hospital during the phony war which is able to care for 45 wounded between May and July 1940 and therefore to fully participate in the war effort.

4) The Liberation:

Welcomed with a joy corresponding without doubt to the "wild joy" of the Mulhouse inhabitants during the visit of Generals de Gaulle and de Lattre in February 1945, the Liberation is nevertheless a difficult moment for the Cenacle given that several communities are directly affected by the military operations.

The bombardments preceding the liberation of the cities by the allied forces hit several Cenacle houses. In Lyon, Mother Bastien narrates that in the first days of August 1944 the bombardments can be heard around Fourvière. Isolated on "their hill", the Sisters only learn what happens by hearsay and welcome about fifty refugees whose homes are under the bombs. The city is liberated on September 3, notably by General Brosset, brother of Mother Germaine Brosset. In Marseille, violent nocturnal bombardments force the Sisters to find shelter in the cellar and to stay there for several days after August 15. But unlike the house in Montmartre also shaken but from April 1944, the damage is not too great and is restricted to a few broken windowpanes. The Versailles house is also affected by the canon firings because the Resistance fighters are massed on the avenue de Paris, a few meters away from the Cenacle. The atmosphere preceding the liberation of

Nancy is more tense. The rumour of the liberation of Paris is spreading from August 24 but the inhabitants can hardly believe it. The Sisters try to go out as little as possible because the pillage of the houses abandoned by the Germans creates an atmosphere of insecurity. Yet the next days are relatively calm despite a few denotations and a violent bombardment in the night of September 4. But the German troops' invasion of the city two days later while the radio announces its liberation complicates the situation. The supply problems increase because all the shops are closed. Besides, the shells that keep on whistling get on the Sisters' nerves because they hardly sleep at all and spend days in the cellar. Around September 10, there is another rumour concerning the arrival of the Americans but Germans blow up electricity, gas, trains, points, bridges, mills and factories and threaten to burn the city if someone prevents them from destroying everything. Nancy is finally liberated on September 15 to the high relief of all its inhabitants. The Tilburg community is also in a cold sweat because the bombardments escalate in October 1944 and one of them destroys the chapel's stained glass windows and causes other serious damage especially in the Sisters' rooms. Fortunately no one gets hurt, but the cellar where they have taken refuge is riddled with holes.

The community most affected by the operations of the Liberation is undoubtedly Tigery. Mother Le Jeune's notes relate the last weeks of the German occupation and are a precious source on information.

After the American landing on June 6 in Normandy, the German soldiers search the Cenacle property for parachutists. In the next weeks, several troops settle in the park but are quiet and spend their time fishing and swimming in the pond. They obviously have had enough of the war. But their successive departures force the superior, Mother Claire Cordonnier, to requisition the whole household for long cleaning sessions during which bicycles, guns, swords, cartridges, uniforms, kedis, boxer shorts, nails, matches, razor blades and empty bottles are picked up... On August 18, a truck drops off ten big aviation torpedoes in front of the angry superior who tries in vain to negotiate their stocking elsewhere. Three days later, the canon booms the whole day and the community's cows, rabbits, chickens and ducks are taken to the cloister, thus turning the house into a genuine "Noah's Ark" in which very foul smells circulate... On June 23, the library also undertakes a transformation in order to become an ambulance and a surgery room. Wounded men arrive who are "all [...] depressed and say that they are more than fed up [with the war]". Refugees also arrive in-crowd and the Sisters cook soup for about 200 of them. The situation is not made any easier by the power and water cuts. But the city goes back to a festive atmosphere as soon as the first Americans arrive on August 26. In the next days and months, they frequently visit the Cenacle, glad to have found people with whom they can speak English. Mother Le Jeune finds them to be "big children with a charming unpretentiousness". They attend Mass and when they leave offer the Sisters small gifts of soap, coffee and sweets.

The French and Belgian Cenacle are exposed to the military operations and to the Germans occupation during all of the war. The Sisters trying to get away from the battle-fields have to face the violence endured by the civilians and travel in often extremely painful conditions.

The Italian and English houses are also affected by the bombardments but they do not seem to have caused much damage. For all the foreign houses, the greatest suffering is to have only a few news or none at all from the generalate and the other communities. English, American, Italian and Brazilian Sisters clutch hold on newspapers and radios even if the information given is not always true.

At the Liberation, the congregation must more or less rebuild itself because the six years of war have weakened it, even if this horrible period has contributed to join the Sisters together and to bring them together to face misfortune.

Source: General Archives of the Cenacle, 11 G 15-20