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EIGHT YEARS AGO, IN AN OLD COPY OF *PARIS-SOIR* DATED 31 December 1941, a heading on page 3 caught my eye: “From Day to Day.”¹ Below this, I read:

PARIS

Missing, a young girl, Dora Bruder, age 15, height 1 m 55, oval-shaped face, gray-brown eyes, gray sports jacket, maroon pullover, navy blue skirt and hat, brown gym shoes. Address all information to M. and Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris.

I had long been familiar with that area of the Boulevard Ornano. As a child, I would accompany my mother to the Saint-Ouen flea markets. We would get off the bus either at the Porte de Clignancourt or, occasionally, outside the 18th arrondissement town hall. It was always a Saturday or Sunday afternoon.

In winter, on the tree-shaded sidewalk outside Clignancourt barracks, the fat photographer with round spectacles and a lumpy nose would set up his tripod camera among the stream of passers-by, offering “souvenir photos.” In summer, he stationed himself on the boardwalk at Deauville, outside the Bar du Soleil. There, he found plenty of customers. But at the Porte de Clignancourt, the passers-by showed little incli-

1. “D’hier à aujourd’hui.”

nation to be photographed. His overcoat was shabby and he had a hole in one shoe.

I remember the Boulevard Ornano and the Boulevard Barbès, deserted, one sunny afternoon in May 1958. There were groups of riot police at each crossroads, because of the situation in Algeria.

I was in this neighborhood in the winter of 1965. I had a girlfriend who lived in the Rue Championnet. Ornano 49–20.

Already, by that time, the Sunday stream of passers-by outside the barracks must have swept away the fat photographer, but I never went back to check. What had they been used for, those barracks?² I had been told that they housed colonial troops.

January 1965. Dusk came around six o'clock to the crossroads of the Boulevard Ornano and the Rue Championnet. I merged into that twilight, into those streets, I was nonexistent.

The last café at the top of the Boulevard Ornano, on the right, was called the Verse Toujours.³ There was another, on the left, at the corner of the Boulevard Ney, with a jukebox. The Ornano-Championnet crossroads had a pharmacy and two cafés, the older of which was on the corner of the Rue Duhesmé.

The time I've spent, waiting in those cafés . . . First thing

2. During the Occupation of Paris, Clignancourt barracks housed French volunteers in the Waffen SS. See David Pryce-Jones, *Paris in the Third Reich*, Collins, 1981.

3. "Keep pouring, nonstop."

in the morning, when it was still dark. Early in the evening, as night fell. Later on, at closing time . . .

On Sunday evening, an old black sports car—a Jaguar, I think—was parked outside the nursery school on the Rue Championnet. It had a plaque at the rear: Disabled Ex-Serviceman. The presence of such a car in this neighborhood surprised me. I tried to imagine what its owner might look like.

After nine o'clock at night, the boulevard is deserted. I can still see lights at the mouth of Simplon métro station and, almost opposite, in the foyer of the Cinéma Ornano 43. I've never really noticed the building beside the cinema, number 41, even though I've been passing it for months, for years. From 1965 to 1968. Address all information to M. and Mme Bruder, 41 Boulevard Ornano, Paris.

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| FROM DAY TO DAY. WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME, I FIND, perspectives become blurred, one winter merging into another. That of 1965 and that of 1942.

In 1965, I knew nothing of Dora Bruder. But now, thirty years on, it seems to me that those long waits in the cafés at the Ornano crossroads, those unvarying itineraries—the Rue du Mont-Cenis took me back to some hotel on the Butte Montmartre: the Roma or the Alsina or the Terrass, Rue Caulaincourt—and the fleeting impressions I have retained: snatches of conversation heard on a spring evening, beneath the trees in the Square Clignancourt, and again, in winter, on the way down to Simplon and the Boulevard Ornano, all that was not simply due to chance. Perhaps, though not yet fully aware of it, I was following the traces of Dora Bruder and her parents. Already, below the surface, they were there.

I'm trying to search for clues, going far, far back in time. When I was about twelve, on those visits to the Clignancourt flea markets with my mother, on the right, at the top of one of those aisles bordered by stalls, the Marché Malik, or the Vernaison, there was a young Polish Jew who sold suitcases . . . Luxury suitcases, in leather or crocodile skin, cardboard suitcases, traveling bags, cabin trunks labeled with the names of transatlantic companies—all heaped one on top of the other. His was an open-air stall. He was never without a

cigarette dangling from the corner of his lips and, one afternoon, he had offered me one.

Occasionally, I would go to one of the cinemas on the Boulevard Ornano. To the Clignancourt Palace at the top of the boulevard, next to the Verse Toujours. Or to the Ornano 43.

Later, I discovered that the Ornano 43 was a very old cinema. It had been rebuilt in the thirties, giving it the air of an ocean liner. I returned to the area in May 1996. A shop had replaced the cinema. You cross the Rue Hermel and find yourself outside 41 Boulevard Ornano, the address given in the notice about the search for Dora Bruder.

A five-story building, late nineteenth century. Together with number 39, it forms a single block, enclosed by the boulevard, the top of the Rue Hermel, and the Rue Simplon, which runs along the back of both buildings. These are matching. A plaque on number 39 gives the name of the architect, a man named Pierrefeu, and the date of construction: 1881. The same must be true of number 41.

Before the war, and up to the beginning of the fifties, number 41 had been a hotel, as had number 39, calling itself the Hôtel Lion d'Or. Number 39 also had a café-restaurant before the war, owned by a man named Gazal. I haven't found out the name of the hotel at number 41. Listed under this address, in the early fifties, is the Société Ornano and Studios Ornano: Montmartre 12-54. Also, both then and before the war, a café with a proprietor by the name of Marchal. This café no

longer exists. Would it have been to the right or the left of the porte cochère?

This opens onto a longish corridor. At the far end, a staircase leads off to the right.

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IT TAKES TIME FOR WHAT HAS BEEN ERASED TO RESURFACE. Traces survive in registers, and nobody knows where these registers are hidden, and who has custody of them, and whether or not these custodians are willing to let you see them. Or perhaps they have quite simply forgotten that these registers exist.

All it takes is a little patience.

Thus, I came to learn that Dora Bruder and her parents were already living in the hotel on the Boulevard Ornano in 1937 and 1938. They had a room with kitchenette on the fifth floor, the level at which an iron balcony encircles both buildings. The fifth floor has some ten windows. Of these, two or three give onto the boulevard, and the rest onto the Rue Hermel or, at the back, the Rue Simplon.

When I revisited the neighborhood on that day in May 1996, rusting shutters were closed over the two end fifth-floor windows overlooking the Rue Simplon, and outside, on the balcony, I noticed a collection of miscellaneous objects, seemingly long abandoned there.

During the last three or four years before the war, Dora Bruder would have been enrolled at one of the local state secondary schools. I wrote to ask if her name was to be found on the school registers, addressing my letter to the head of each:

- 8 Rue Ferdinand-Flocon
- 20 Rue Hermel

7 Rue Championnet
61 Rue de Clignancourt

All replied politely. None had found this name on the list of their prewar pupils. In the end, the head of the former girls' school at 69 Rue Championnet suggested that I come and consult the register for myself. One of these days, I shall. But I'm of two minds. I want to go on hoping that her name is there. It was the school nearest to where she lived.

It took me four years to discover her exact date of birth: 25 February 1926. And a further two years to find out her place of birth: Paris, 12th arrondissement. But I am a patient man. I can wait for hours in the rain.

One Friday afternoon in February 1996 I went to the 12th arrondissement Register Office. The registrar—a young man—handed me a form:

To be completed by the person applying for the certificate. Fill in your

Surname

First name

Address

I require a full copy of the Birth Certificate for

Surname BRUDER

First Name DORA

Date of birth: 25 February 1926

Check if you are:

The person in question

Son or daughter

- Father or mother
- Grandfather or grandmother
- Legal representative (You have power of attorney, and an identity card for the person in question)
- Husband or wife

No persons other than the above may be supplied with a copy of a Birth Certificate.

I signed the form and handed it back to him. After reading it through, he said that he was unable to supply me with a standard birth certificate: I bore no legal relationship whatever to the person in question.

At first, I took him for one of those sentinels of oblivion whose role is to guard a shameful secret and deny access to anybody seeking to uncover the least trace of a person's existence. But he was a decent fellow. He advised me to go to the Palais de Justice, 2 Boulevard du Palais, and apply for a special exemption from the Superintendent Registrar, Section 3, 5th floor, Staircase 5, Room 501. Monday to Friday, 2 to 4 P.M.

I was about to enter the main courtyard through the big iron gates at 2 Boulevard du Palais when a functionary directed me to another entrance a little farther down: the same as that for the Sainte-Chapelle. Tourists were waiting in a line between the barriers and I wanted to go straight on, through the porch, but another functionary gestured at me impatiently to line up with the rest.

At the back of the foyer, regulations required you to empty your pockets of anything metal. I had nothing on me except a bunch of keys. This I was supposed to place on a sort of con-

veyor belt for collection on the far side of a glass partition, but for a moment I couldn't think what to do. My hesitation earned me a rebuke from another functionary. Was he a guard? A policeman? Was I also supposed to hand over my shoelaces, belt, wallet, as at the gates of a prison?

I crossed a courtyard, followed a corridor, and emerged into a vast concourse milling with men and women carrying black briefcases, some dressed in legal robes. I didn't dare ask them how to get to Staircase 5.

A guard seated at a table directed me to the back of the concourse. And here I entered a deserted hall whose high windows let in a dim, gray light. I searched every corner of this room without finding Staircase 5. I was seized with panic, with that sense of vertigo you have in bad dreams when you can't get to the station, time is running out and you are going to miss your train.

Twenty years before, I had had a similar experience. I had learned that my father was in hospital, in the Pitié-Salpêtrière. I hadn't seen him since the end of my adolescent years. I therefore decided to pay him an impromptu visit.

I remember wandering for hours through the vastness of that hospital in search of him. I found my way into ancient buildings, into communal wards lined with beds, I questioned nurses who gave me contradictory directions. I came to doubt my father's existence, passing and repassing that majestic church, and those spectral buildings, unchanged since the seventeenth century, which, for me, evoke Manon Lescaut and the era when, under the sinister name General Hospital,

the place was used as a prison for prostitutes awaiting deportation to Louisiana. I tramped the paved courtyards till dusk. It was impossible to find my father. I never saw him again.

But I found Staircase 5 in the end. I climbed several flights. A row of offices. I was directed to Room 501. A bored-looking woman with short hair asked me what I wanted.

Curtly, she informed me that to obtain particulars of a birth certificate I should write to the Public Prosecutor,¹ Department B, 14 Quai des Orfèvres, Paris 3.

Three weeks later, I had a reply.

At nine ten p.m. on twenty-five February nineteen hundred twenty-six, at 15 Rue Santerre, a female child, Dora, was born to Ernest Bruder, unskilled laborer, born Vienna (Austria) twenty-one May eighteen hundred ninety-nine, and to his wife, Cécile Burdej, housewife, born Budapest (Hungary) seventeen April nineteen hundred seven, both domiciled at 2 Avenue Liégeard, Sevran (Seine-et-Oise). Registered at three thirty p.m. on twenty-seven February nineteen hundred twenty-six on the declaration of Gaspard Meyer, aged seventy-three, employed and domiciled at 76 Rue de Picpus, having been present at the birth, who has read and signed it with Us, Auguste Guillaume Rossi, Deputy Mayor, 12th arrondissement, Paris.

1. An official who has a number of nonjudicial functions in France.