Joseph Joffo.
Un Sac de Billes (1973)
A Synopsis

Pages numbers refer to the Livres de Poche edition.

Chapitre 1 (pp.9-16)

It is 1941. Joseph Joffo, aged 10, describes his favourite marble, whose uneven surface reminds him of a planet. His flights of childhood imagination are interrupted by his elder brother, Maurice (12), who is impatient for their game to continue: “Alors, merde, tu te décides?”. We see Maurice, socks round his ankles, sitting on the pavement with his little pile of marbles, watched by their wrinkled and weatherbeaten old neighbour, Granny Epstein (note the Jewish surname). We learn that we are in a district on the northern edge of Paris, la Porte de Clignancourt in the 18th arrondissement, just north of Montmartre and the Sacré Coeur basilica. It is a neighbourhood full of refugees (fuyards) from Eastern Europe, many of whom have been there for decades.

Joseph has not yet played his marble and Maurice is getting impatient (“...qu’est-ce que tu fous?”). But then Maurice has been winning (he has pocketfuls of marbles already) and Joe has only one left, his favourite. He hesitates. He shoots. He loses. He cries. Maurice tells him to stop snivelling. The two boys should have been home half an hour ago. They’ll be in trouble.

Dad’s barber’s shop is in the Rue du Clignancourt in the colonie juive (p.17). As they approach, Maurice gives back his brother’s favourite marble. The shop is full of customers; some of them are regulars. The boys make short work of their homework and then escape, via the shop, back into the street, their favourite playground, the place where they are at their happiest, where they love to explore.

Two men in black are walking casually in their direction at the other end of the avenue. SS officers in uniform. The boys both have the same idea at once. They stand in front of the shop window, obscuring the view of the yellow and black notice in the window: “Yiddish Gescheft”. The Germans fall for it. They enter the shop and join the waiting customers. The boys laugh while, inside the shop, an intense silence descends as two SS officer wait, “genoux joints au milieu des clients juifs de confier leurs nuques à mon père juif ou à mes frères juifs.”

Chapitre 2 (pp.17-28)

The first Nazi’s haircut is underway in front of a fascinated audience which includes the two brothers. Joe is nervous. Has he gone too far? Will the German realise where he is and shoot everyone? Albert, Joe’s elder brother, strikes up a casual conversation with his uniformed client, to the latter’s surprise. Other clients are drawn into the conversation. The atmosphere becomes positively friendly. Joe has visions of the beating he imagines his brothers will give him when the Germans have left. Joe’s father starts to cut the second Nazi’s hair. Samuel, a local Jewish market trader, breezes in, stops dead when he sees the SS men, makes an excuse and leaves … to spread the gossip in the neighbourhood that “le père Joffo” is cutting German hair!

One of the Germans volunteers the remark, “la guerre est terrible, c’est la faute aux Juifs”. Monsieur Joffo doesn’t react and continues his work. The Germans prepare to pay, at which point M.Joffo asks if they are happy with their haircuts. When they say that they are, their Jewish barber explains, theatrically, “Eh bien [...] avant que vous partiez, je dois vous dire que tous les gens qui sont ici sont des Juifs.” Time stops. One by one, the waiting clients leave the shop. Without batting an eyelid, the German says, “Je voulais parler des Juifs riches” and leaves with his friend. In the
shop, nobody moves for what seems like a long time. When the spell breaks, Joe realises that he has probably escaped a good beating. The emotion brings tears to Joe’s eyes.

A change of scene. Mme. Joffo has tucked her sons up in bed. The two boys are on the verge of starting one of their habitual bedtime battles when the light goes on. Dad enters and, to their relief, announces that he is going to continue their bedtime story. Through his father’s stories Joe has learnt that his grandfather Jacob, whose daguerréotype (photo on a glass plate) hangs in the living room, was a Russian from Bessarabia. He had been rich and held in high esteem in his village south of Odessa. Life there had been happy until the pogroms (anti-Jewish persecution) began. When his fellow Jews started to be murdered by the Tsar’s troops, he took matters into his own hands and began to assassinate soldiers at night. The result was renewed persecution.

So Jacob Joffo decided to take his family and flee across Europe to France, the land of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, the three principles of the French Republic which, in the eyes of Joe’s father, have preserved them until now from anti-semitic persecution. In the past, his father still wants to believe it could never happen in France, in spite of the two men who came in the night to stick a poster bearing the word “Jew” in the window of the barber’s shop.

**Chapitre 3 (pp.29-54)**

A winter morning before school. Mme Joffo is sewing large yellow stars made of cloth onto her sons’ jackets. Each one bears the word “Juif”. This morning is the first morning on which all the local Jews will have to wear the badge imposed on them by the Nazis. M. Joffo arrives, sees his sons’ stars and jokes with them that they must now ensure they are the first to get to school “pour faire chier Hitler” (“to p*ss Hitler off”). The boys set off for school, Maurice teasing Joe for hiding his star behind his scarf.

At the school gate, they are met by Joe’s old friend Zérati who is warmly dressed against the cold. Zérati stares at the star for a long time. There is silence, then he expresses his admiration: “...t’as vachement du pot, ça fait chouette.” (“You lucky beggar. That looks really cool.”). Relieved laughter all round. Zérati can’t get over Joe’s star, “c’est comme une décoration.” Joe starts to feel better about wearing it. Then Zératı draws the other boys’ attention to the badge, wanting to share his admiration rather than to start any bullying; but one boy in the group has obviously picked up anti-semitic language and Nazi propaganda from somewhere and uses it now: “T’es un youpin, toi? [...] C’est les youpins qui font qu’il y a la guerre.” Joe cannot grasp what is happening. As far as he knows, he is an ordinary French child; yet now he is branded a Jew. And what is a Jew, anyway?

The racist taunts continue: “T’as vu son tarin?” (a prominent nose was one of the Jewish stereotypes highlighted by Nazi propaganda). The comment leads Joe’s thoughts to other anti-Jewish propaganda he has seen recently, this time a poster of a monstrous spider with a Jew’s head crouching menacingly over a globe. The picture was entitled “Le Juif cherchant à posséder le monde”. Joe had never seen its relevance for Maurice or himself. He didn’t even look Jewish. The atmosphere in the playground is tense. There’s a fight brewing.

Period 1 with Father Boulier. Geography. Joe is sure he’s going to be tested on his homework. It’s high time he was picked. But the teacher won’t meet his eyes. What’s wrong? Has Joe suddenly become invisible? He decides to find out and deliberately tries to attract a telling off by dropping his slate, willing his teacher to punish him, to acknowledge his presence in the class. Though this would normally have triggered a detention, Fr. Boulier’s eyes seem vacant and, although he is
clearly aware that it is Joe who has interrupted the lesson, he continues as if nothing had happened.
And Joe? “...j’ai compris que pour moi, l’école était finie.”

At break, in the playground, the taunts continue. This time, Joe is beaten up, saved only by the intervention of a surveillant. Maurice, too, it seems has had a beating. Both boys return to class.

“Ce qui me reste de cette matinée [...] c’est cette sensation d’impuissance à comprendre.” What troubles Joe is that he doesn’t understand why all this is happening. As far as he knows, he has no religion, though he gets on well with his parish priest, who lets the boys play basketball behind the church and gives them treats. He is even a member of the church youth club (patronage). So what makes him different now?

Joe’s faithful friend Zérati runs to catch up with him and Maurice and offers an exchange: a Jewish star for a bag of marbles (un sac de billes). It’s Joe’s first business deal.

The boys have returned home, battered and bruised, for lunch with the family. Their parents are obviously troubled. M Joffo announces that they will not return to school that afternoon and that he will have something to say to them that evening. No school! The boys are ecstatic and take to the streets of Paris. The troubles of the morning are forgotten. Their eucalyptus cigarettes are brought out and smoked. They agree that, later, they will undertake one of their regular night-time raids on the till in the shop to retrieve the liquorice left by customers in lieu of small change. Not knowing that this evening in Paris is to be their last, they head for home.

Meanwhile, Joe reveals that many of the neighbours have already moved out of the quartier, that his elder brothers had also left earlier in the year for reasons still unexplained, and that business in the barber’s shop is slow.

Something serious is obviously afoot. When they get home, the curtains are drawn and M. Joffo begins “un long monologue qui devait longtemps résonner à mes oreilles, il résonne d’ailleurs toujours.” The boys listen, transfixed as their father tells them his own story of evading enlistment in the Russian army at the age of seven by following his father’s instructions to leave home alone and to find his own way in the world. He tells the story, too, of his wife’s flight from Russia, of their meeting in Paris, of starting up the barber’s shop. And then he tells his sons that it is time for them to leave. His reason: “lorsqu’on n’est pas le plus fort, lorsqu’on est deux contre dix, vingt ou cent, le courage c’est de laisser son orgueil de côté et de foutre le camp [...] il faut fuir.” Henri and Albert, he reveals, are in Free France, on the south coast. The boys’ parents plan to follow them very shortly. But for now, Maurice and Joseph must travel alone.

M. Joffo then gives the boys their travelling instructions. They will take the metro to the Gare d’Austerlitz, a train from there to Dax, from Dax to the village of Hagetmau, and from there across the border separating occupied France from the zone libre. Finally, they will find their way to Menton, on the Mediterranean coast and near the Italian border where their brothers wait for them. Their parents will provide them with 5,000 francs each, a huge sum. Most importantly, they must never reveal to anyone that they are Jewish. To make his point, Joe’s father acts out a rôle play with his sons during which he slaps Joseph in the face to try to make him reveal the “truth”. Joe still doesn’t understand what the word juif means. Neither, it seems, does his father. All Monsieur Joffo can offer by way of explanation is that his people have always been hunted from time to time and that this is one of those times: “C’est la chasse qui est réouverte, alors il faut repartir et se cacher en attendant que le chasseur se fatigue.”
A meal follows, during which almost nothing is said. The boys are given two satchels of provisions. A quick goodbye during which the parents try to be upbeat and optimistic, and then Maurice and Joe set off into the night. C’en était fait de l’enfance. (“Our childhood was over”).

**Question**

Imagine that you are the young Joseph Joffo. In French, in the first person, summarise your memories of life in Paris and explain why you had to leave. You should write between 200 and 230 words and base your account on the contents of the first three chapters.

**Chapitre 4 (pp.55-74)**

La Gare d’Austerlitz, Paris. Enormous crowds of people. The two boys follow in the wake of a porter with a luggage trolley as he forces his way through the crowd. Maurice, who clearly has a great deal of native wit, picks the most sympathetic looking person at the front of the ticket queue and spins a yarn about his little brother’s sore foot to persuade the passenger to let him queue jump. Tickets in hand, they head for the train. It is overflowing with passengers and luggage. People are arguing over seats. The only space they can find is in a corner on the floor between a suitcase and a cardboard box. They settle in and attack their picnic lunch.

The train pulls out. An old lady takes an interest in them and asks questions. Maurice lies for both of them and gives false surnames. The lady offers them lemonade. Joe spends the time looking at the other passengers. He spots a Catholic priest in his black cassock and, for a reason he cannot explain, feels reassured. He snoozes and dreams of Russian soldiers, school friends, Paris and SS officers. The train pulls into Dax.

When he comes to, Joe notices that most of the passengers have already left the train. The priest is still there though. Maurice explains that a lot of people jumped off the train before it reached the station. They hear orders being given in German and see German policemen. They take refuge in the compartment where the priest is sitting. Outside, Germans are catching passengers who have tried to make a run for it. Shots are fired. Men are caught and beaten. Joe suddenly realises that the priest’s hand is resting on his shoulder. He turns to address his protector: “Monsieur le Curé, nous n’avons pas de papiers.” The priest obviously understands their position and the three sit waiting for their papers to be checked.

A German soldier arrives and demands their documents. The old lady in the compartment is taken away for questioning. The priest presents his papers, cracks a joke with the Germans and then explains, “Les enfants sont avec moi” The German leaves. The boys have made it! They follow the priest into the station buffet. Maurice is intrigued: how can a priest bring himself to tell a lie? The priest explains that he did not lie: “…vous étiez avec moi comme tous les enfants du monde le sont également. C’est même l’une des raisons pour lesquelles je suis prêtre, pour être avec eux.” He asks them where they’re going. Maurice tells him the partial truth this time. The priest takes out a piece of paper and scribbles down his name and address, inviting them to let him know if they get through safely. Joe asks him what will happen to the old lady who was taken away by the Germans. The priest’s answer is obviously a deliberate lie designed to protect Joe from the awful truth (he prays in Latin before he answers, presumably asking for forgiveness): ils l’ont renvoyée chez elle. Joe is relieved. He had imagined her being transported to a transit camp.

The boys head for the bus station. There is a two hour wait before the bus leaves for Hagetmau. They buy two tickets. La France libre n’est pas loin.
Imagine that you are Maurice Joffo. In French, in the first person, describe the evolution of your feelings from the moment you arrive at the Gare d’Austerlitz to the moment you buy your bus tickets for Hagetmau. You should write between 150 and 170 words.

Chapitre 5 (pp.75-117)

The bus carrying the two boys arrives in Hagetmau, a small village set in flat countryside. A German patrol has ignored the bus on their approach. The village seems deserted. There is a smell of woodsmoke and cows. The shops are closed. It is midday, and Maurice surmises that everyone must be eating. The boys explore. They are getting hungry and decide to try the local café, which is full of people, about a hundred of them. A busy waitress takes them to a pedestal table and provides two plates. They order the only menu there is, rather poor quality lentils with a suggestion of bacon and some stringy stuffed aubergines.

Joe looks around at the other clients. From their appearance he can tell that they are townspeople, refugees like himself, no doubt Jewish too (please note, the café is serving them bacon!), waiting for their chance to cross the demarcation line one kilometre away. The waitress tells them that the café has been as busy as this every day for more than 6 months and that business is good. She can also tell them that getting across the line is fairly easy as long as it is attempted at night. Joe steals a basketful of wilting apples which have been left on a neighbouring table. The café starts to empty. The boys pay the inflated bill and find themselves back on the street.

Maurice decides that they will try to cross the line that night. What they need is a passeur, a courier. They stop a local boy, Raymond, who is making deliveries on his bicycle. He knows immediately what they are after and gives them directions to a local farm, but warns them that the farmer charges 5,000 francs per person. They are stunned. They have just over 1,000 francs left. Then the boy offers to take them over the line for a tenth of the farmer’s price. He persuades them to do the rest of his deliveries for him that afternoon and they agree to meet at 10pm by the bridge. They cannot believe their luck and set off happily on their errand, two city boys on their first adventure in the country.

They are on their way to their last delivery when a whistle from the trees stops them in their tracks. A man beckons to them. They soon realise that he is a refugee too. He explains that he is Jewish and that his wife and mother-in-law are in the woods behind him. They have been conned out of 20,000 francs by someone posing as a passeur and they are filthy and exhausted. Maurice suggests they come to the bridge at ten. Having heard the man’s story, the two boys determine not to let Raymond out of their sight that night. Evidently still in good spirits, they have a race, just for fun. Maurice wins. Hungry, they find a local who sells them two eggs. Night is falling. Their adventure is about to begin. Joe imagines himself as a cowboy in Red Indian country!

Raymond arrives on his bike, whistling nonchalantly. Joe notes disappointedly that he is not at all like a Comanche scout! Maurice hands over the money and introduces the Jewish family who have also arrived. They set off noisily across the fields, but Raymond seems not to be worried. Entering the forest, Joe senses that they are not alone. Others are attempting the same thing. Joe loses all track of time. Before they know it, they are in the zone libre. Joe is astonished that it has been so easy: he had imagined a wall and barbed wire with floodlights and guards. Instead, “rien, strictement rien”. He feels cheated. Raymond explains that crossing the line is always pretty easy in this neck of the woods because the Germans are too far away and rarely send patrols. He slips away.
The boys cross a ditch and come to a farm. They enter the farmyard. A man approaches them and tells them they have arrived. He points them to straw and blankets in a shed and invites them to sleep for as long as they need to. They may knock at the window if they need anything. Joe is soon asleep. When he wakes up an hour or two later, Maurice is missing. He senses it: he has always been able to sense his brother’s absence since they were small. Why has he left? Where is he?

Joe determines not to panic. Maurice cannot be far away. He has probably just slipped out to relieve himself. No, that can’t be right: it’s not like him. Joe hears voices. Germans? Thieves? Thieves have been known to attack refugees. He goes to the door and opens it carefully. There’s a group of people approaching him, children amongst them. They push past Joe and throw themselves down on the straw. Still no Maurice. Worried, Joe goes outside into the clear, cold night. Sticking his hands into his pockets, he finds a piece of paper, a note from Maurice: “Je vais revenir, ne dis rien à personne. M.” The “M” makes Joe think of spies and adventure. Relieved, Joe goes back to his place in the barn, which now contains many more people than it had a few minutes previously. He sleeps.

Dawn. The barn is full of refugees, fifty or more of them. Maurice is still not amongst them. Suddenly, Maurice is beside Joe. He explains his absence. He has been back across the line eight times, has brought over 40 people and has earned 20,000 francs. Their money worries are over.

A discussion ensues. What if Maurice had been caught? And then, wasn’t it a bit shameful to charge people to bring them across the line? Maurice is adamant: of course not! He was doing the refugees a favour and saving them a lot of money. Anyway, they are going to need Maurice’s earnings to continue their journey. Once again, Joe has to give in to his brother’s superior logic: “Je sens qu’il a raison, une fois de plus.” But Maurice is now warming to his theme. Their discussion becomes a shouting match which ends when Maurice thrusts the money into Joe’s hands and dares him to give it back to the refugees.

Maurice has learnt that, even on this side of the line, they will have to beware of the French police who have orders to arrest the Jews. He also knows that some will let them pass, others can be bribed.

They decide to ask the farmer for some food. Alone with him (the other refugees have left at first light), they enjoy breakfast in his kitchen. He tells them about a book he remembers reading when he was a boy, Le Tour de France de deux enfants. Maurice and Joe remind him of the characters in the book, which had, it seems, a happy ending. “Mais il n’y avait pas d’Allemands dans l’histoire”. As they leave, the farmer hands them some more bread to serve as a picnic.

They set off across the countryside on the winding route départementale, followed by a dog and singing an old boy scout song. Their legs are getting sore and blisters are starting to form. They count off the kilometers to Aire-sur-Adour where, they have been told, there is a station. Joe is limping now. Each kilometer seems longer, but Joe refuses to be the one who slows them up. At 18 kilometers from Aire, Maurice is the one to call a halt, which suits Joe perfectly. Maurice decides to sleep. Joe, meanwhile, takes off his shoe to inspect his blister. Not daring to remove his sock, he creates a dressing with his handkerchief to reduce the rubbing. The dog is still with them. Perhaps, thinks Joe, it’s a Jewish dog, a refugee too. Maurice is still sleeping.

Joe hears the sound of wheels behind him. A horse-drawn carriage, un fiacre, is approaching like something out of the films of the olden days. He decides to stop it and ask for a lift. The man who answers his request seems to him to have an distinguished bearing: he is almost tempted to bow when he speaks to him. Correcting Joe’s terminology (the carriage is a “barouche” not a carriage), the man agrees to take him and his brother as far as he is going in his creaky old calèche.
The coachman chats amiably with the boys as they set off and explains that his car has been requisitioned. To be able to get around he has therefore had to “exhumer cette antiquité que les bons soins de mon fermier avaient conservée en assez bon état”. One senses from his choice of vocabulary that this is a refined man of some status. And indeed he is. He introduces himself as the Count of V. and the horse as the last which not to have been requisitioned by his village. He is a garrulous character and lectures the boys about the war, the Republic and France’s glorious past under its former kings. If France were still a monarchy, he believes, it would have had the strength to send the Germans packing.

At two kilometers from Aire-sur-l’Adour, the Count offers melodramatically to take them all the way into the town as a “thank you” for listening so attentively to his speech! The boys have trouble stifling their giggles.

**Question**

Drawing only on the first five chapters, describe the dilemma which confronted French Jews living in the north of France in 1941. How did life change after the Germans arrived? What were the choices facing Jewish families? What happened to those who headed for la zone libre? What were the dangers, trials and challenges facing them on the journey? Were they safe once they had crossed the demarcation line?

Write only about what can be inferred from this text, not from your general knowledge, and quote in French to support the points you make. Answer the question in French in the third person. You should write between 250 and 350 words.

**Chapitre 6 (pp.118-186)**

After a long, slow and uneventful journey, the boys arrive at the Gare St. Charles in the colourful, sunlit city of Marseille having learned, by eavesdropping on conversations, that even in the zone libre, the gendarmes have orders to arrest Jews. Hand in hand, full of the excitement of their adventure, Joe and Maurice set off to explore. They have several hours before they need to catch the train to Menton. As city boys, they are not overawed, but there is something about the atmosphere of Marseille that enlivens them, “une joie, un air vif et rapide qui nous coupait le souffle”.

On one corner they come across a big blue cinema designed to look like an old steam boat. It is showing the German fantasy adventure Les Aventures du Baron Munchausen. They agree to come back to the cinema when it opens at 10 a.m..

Meanwhile, they continue their exploration. Suddenly, unexpectedly, they are face to face with the sea. It is the first time they have seen it. When they walk right up to the edge of the quayside, a boat owner in badly-fitting clothes tries to persuade them to take a trip to the château d’If (the prison island that once held the Count of Monte Cristo) in his ageing yellow boat. Maurice declines, on the grounds that they would be sea sick. They chat with the man about Paris (he has a brother there), and they learn about the shortage of food in Marseille. The owner, a real bavard, invites the boys on board and shows them the boat’s engine, explaining to them how it works. He is so talkative that they have difficulty in making their excuses and leaving.

They walk a little further and then take a ferry across the port, where they find tiny, narrow, steep streets and a less friendly atmosphere. An enormous woman grabs Maurice’s beret as a joke. Joe hurriedly takes his off and hides it! The prostitutes throw it from one to the other until one of them,
on the first floor, invites Maurice upstairs to retrieve it. What should he do? Shutters are beginning to open in other houses as more residents of the red light district become aware of the practical joke in the street of which the two boys are the object. Finally, a large woman with long, red hair chides her colleague for teasing children and Maurice gets his beret back. They boys take to their heels and eventually find their way back to the cinema.

They are almost alone in the unheated auditorium. A couple of tramps are behind them. The show begins with pro-German newsreel propaganda about the war and film of a fashion show in Paris. The shots of their home city remind Joe of his parents and make him wish there was some way of communicating with them. Then it’s the interval: the boys play word games to while away the time and end up quarrelling. Then the film begins. They watch it three times in a row. It is, for Joe, ironic that the Nazi propaganda machine could produce “une oeuvre qui enchanta la matinée de deux jeunes Juifs”.

They only emerge from the cinema at four o’clock, rested, famished and with headaches. Maurice dives straight into a pâtisserie which is still managing to sell what look like cakes in spite of the food shortages. They buy four and fill their faces.

With time still to spare before their train leaves, they walk down to the part of the city where the cathedral meets the port and kill time on the docks “comme deux émigrants cherchant à s’embarquer clandestinement”. Menton (and Africa, Joe notes) are not far away.

Returning to the Gare St. Charles, Joe goes off to find a toilet and, on his way back, is stopped by two unfriendly looking gendarmes. Trying to look as innocent as possible, he tells them he’s about to catch a train, that “dad” has his papers and that he’s “over there” with the suitcases. Asked for his address, he gives that of an imaginary flat above the cinema where he has just passed the afternoon (and of which “dad” is the owner). They let him go. He crosses the baggage hall as if heading for the spot where his “father” is. Maurice sees him and must have deduced that something is wrong. He mingles with the passengers, trying not to be seen. And then he sees the gendarmes heading his way again. Desperate, Joe picks a passenger who is about the right age to be his father and, with a big smile on his face, asks him the time. He gets a rude reply. There is a clock nearby after all. Acting to save his life, Joe laughs and exchanges a few more words with the passenger, who must, by, now, think he is mad. The gendarmes walk on, taken in, no doubt, by Joe’s charades.

Maurice finds him again and tells him that, overhearing conversations, he has learned that everyone in the station is having their identity checked. As they discuss options, a large number of policemen in uniform enter the concourse. Should the boys leave and sacrifice their tickets; or try to walk out along the railway line? No, too dangerous. The police are beginning to ask people for their papers. The arrival of their train is announced, they join the crowd rushing for the platform and... they’re in luck. The guards have forgotten to lock the doors of the train. They can climb straight on. The train is not checked and, half an hour late, pulls out of Marseille. “Nous avons poussé un énorme soupir de soulagement, c’était la dernière étape.”

The journey is long and slow with frequent, unexplained stops in open country. By dawn, they have reached Cannes. Joe goes back to sleep. When Maurice wakes him, they have arrived at their destination.

They are about to spend four months in Menton, “une petite ville dont les Anglais avaient fait la richesse” now under lethargic Italian occupation. The first thing they do is to find a restaurant near the station and buy themselves a meal. A sympathetic waitress ensures that they get “les meilleurs morceaux de la cuisine”.

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Shortly afterwards, they set off to find their brothers’ barber’s shop and are reunited with Henri. Albert is having a day off and is back at the brothers’ house, to which Henri now takes them. All four are at last together.

Over lemonade and pain au chocolat, Joe and Maurice tell their elder brothers of their adventures and Henri & Albert recount their own, which include an amusing encounter between a German policeman and a cunning Jewish passenger who, even with the name Simon Rauschenberger, managed to pass himself off as a “catholique orthodoxe”.

Joe and Maurice are told they are to sleep on the floor of the dining room. Henri goes back to work. Albert heats up some water so the boys can have a wash, their first for a long time. In clean clothes, they are sent out shopping but, before heading off on their errand, they give vent to their exhilaration on the nearby beach: “nous avons couru, sauté, dansé, crié, nous étions ivres de joie et de liberté.”

In the shops, they discover that they can overcome all sorts of difficulties (e.g. the absence of ration tickets) by telling people whose brothers they are. Henri and Albert appear to be well-known and well-liked. They return to the house “chargés comme des mules” and set to work to prepare a celebration dinner. Later, perhaps helped by half a glass of wine, Joe sleeps for 17 hours.

The boys’ next three days are filled with football on the beach, shopping trips, experimenting with pasta and exploring their surroundings. One day, they let themselves into the overgrown garden of a deserted villa and spend the whole afternoon playing there, returning home only just in time to carry out their assigned chores, for they are now in charge of laying the table and tidying the apartment.

One night, Maurice comes up with a suggestion. They should find a way of earning some money, in order to help their brothers and pay their way. As they get to know some of the local children, Joe makes the acquaintance of a boy called Virgilio who is in the habit of spending his summers helping to look after the cows on a farm up in the mountains. In term time, though, he is unable to leave the town. Joe, who does not have to go to school, leaps at the opportunity and, the next day, takes the bus to the half-abandoned village of Saint-Agnès. Once there, he stops a man with a donkey and asks the way to Monsieur Viale’s farm. The man’s directions take him on a long walk into the timeless Provençal countryside “dans un décor grandiose de rochers, d’escarpements et de ravins”. He is determined to contribute to his family’s budget by bringing home milk, butter, cheese and other products of the farm; but he realises that he is so far from Menton that he will not be able to get back often.

Several kilometers further on, Joe comes across the farm. Wary of dogs, he approaches cautiously. It is Madame Viale who opens the door to him. She takes him by surprise. She is not what he has expected a farmer’s wife to be. He will learn later that she came to Provence from Parisian high society several years previously. Her father had been a diplomat and the family had lived in the prestigious faubourg Saint-Germain. Having refused numerous suitors in 1927, she had contracted tuberculosis and has been sent to Menton to recover far from the polluted air of the capital. One day, while out for a walk in the countryside, she had twisted her ankle. She had been rescued by Monsieur Viale, who had been on his way back to his farm. Young, dashing, not unlike the film star Clark Gable in appearance, he had carried her all the way to his house. Fourteen years later, she was still there. They had married three months after meeting.

Mme Viale tells Joe this story at least four times during his first week at the farm. He notes that she is always listening to gramophone records and reads a lot. Even before he has met Monsieur Viale, Joe knows instinctively that he will be taken on and that his principal task will not be to carry out chores around the farm but to listen to Madame over cups of tea.
Monsieur Viale arrives. Joe explains his presence. He is accepted immediately. His first few days are spent repairing dry stone walls and washing wine bottles in the cellar. He eats with the Viales and is positively encouraged by the husband to spend time listening to his wife and playing chess rather than working on the farm. It is an unspoken agreement, but he has clearly been employed not just as a farm hand but as a companion for the lady of the house.

Joe spends ten days in this way, eating well, forgetting about the war, which is never mentioned anyway. One evening, he asks permission to go back to Menton for a day to see his brothers. He is told that he may and is given his an envelope containing his first wages. When he leaves the next morning, he takes with him his money and some eggs and bacon. He does not know, at this point, that he will never see the farm again.

Returning to Menton, he expects to find his brothers at home. When he walks through the door, Albert and Maurice are having breakfast in their pyjamas, Henri is finishing off his coffee. He is dressed in a suit and has a suitcase with him. Joe senses that something has just happened. Henri explains that they have had some bad news. A letter has arrived informing them of their parents’ arrest. Joe returns to reality with a bump.

M. and Mme. Joffo, it appears, had got out of Paris just in time leaving everything behind and had eventually made their way to Pau by bus. They had succeeded in crossing the ligne de démarcation but had been arrested by the French police and sent to a camp, from which they had smuggled out the letter which the boys have just received. Henri tells his younger brothers that the place where their parents are being held is a transit camp for the processing of slave labourers.

Joe reads the letter for himself. In it, his father asks Albert and Henri to ensure that the two younger boys go to school. Henri announces his intention to go and find their parents. Albert will carry on at the salon and will find a school for Joe and Maurice. Ten minutes later, Henri leaves.

After lunch (a bacon omelette made with the ingredients brought from the farm), Albert, Joe and Maurice visit the school and Albert asks to see the head teacher, who is obviously not a man to stand any nonsense. He asks to see their school records. Joe hopes that the bureaucratic difficulties caused by the fact that all their paperwork has been left behind in Paris will mean that he and Maurice cannot be admitted to the school. He is disappointed! Albert manages to negotiate one last afternoon of freedom for them in order to buy school supplies, but they must be in school the following morning.

Albert’s contacts have enabled him to acquire some ration tickets for cloth, so they are able to visit a tailor’s and to be measured for some new school overalls (tablier). They also buy bags, pencil cases and exercise books. Then Albert leaves them and the two boys kick a ball around for a while, thoroughly depressed. Bored, they then go for a walk and they bring each other up to date with their news. Maurice has been working at a baker’s shop and Joe tells Maurice about the farm. That evening, they make another omelette and Albert sends them to bed early. Joe has trouble getting to sleep.

The next day, Joe is surprised to find himself in the class of a female teacher (une maitresse) whereas Maurice gets an old schoolmaster who has been brought out of retirement and whose classroom discipline leaves a lot to be desired. Each evening, Maurice tells stories about the chaos in his classroom. Joe is not so lucky, but his teacher is young, pretty and friendly and he finds himself working well.
Every day, the school distributes biscuits with extra vitamins to every pupil and the more puny pupils are given vitamin sweets and cod liver oil by the school nurse. Joe doesn’t merit a sweet but a classmate swaps his for four of Joe’s marbles every day. (Joe wins his marbles back at break and starts to earn a reputation as a mean marbles player. Almost as mean as his brother, that is.)

Joe starts dropping in at Virgilio’s house on his way home from school and they become firm friends. Virgilio has a passion for the game knucklebones (osselets) and they play it all the time.

Eight days pass and there is still no news of Henri. Albert is becoming more nervous. He announces to his two younger brothers that, if there is no news of Henri by the end of the week, he will set off to look for him. He tells them that if, after 10 days or so, he does not return, Joe and Maurice are to set off for a little village in the Massif Central where one of their elder sisters has been in hiding. And then Henri comes home, beaming. His first words are, “Ils sont libres”. He starts to tell his story.

On reaching Pau, he had easily found the transit camp which had been set up in the town’s stadium. Jews were there in their thousands, living in tents under police guard. Henri had struck up a conversation with a camp guard at a small bar outside the stadium. The guard had advised him to go home. Henri had explained that his parents had been arrested by mistake, that they were not Jews and that his father had been on his way to join him in his barber’s shop. The guard had left, only to return later with a sergeant who had asked Henri to give him a haircut. Henri had given him “la plus belle coupe de sa vie” and had refused to be paid. Instead, he had asked the sergeant to put in a good word for him with the camp commandant and to ask for an interview. The sergeant had told him to be at the gate the next morning at ten o’clock.

The next morning, after one or two false starts, he had been let into the camp by the sergeant and had been taken to a breeze-block building set apart from the huts in which the prisoners were accommodated. Henri had been kept waiting for at least half an hour and had then been ushered into the presence of the commandant. He had given detailed reasons why his parents could not be Jewish, claiming that, as his mother’s maiden name was Markoff, not only could she not be Jewish (“Je défie quiconque de trouver un seul Juif russe s’appelant Markoff”) but that she was a direct descendant of the Romanovs of Russia and hence related to the Russian royal family! If a member of the imperial family had been Jewish, Henri had claimed, the orthodox churches of Russia would have crumbled.

Asked about his father, Henri had deployed the following simple argument. The Germans had deprived all Jews of the French nationality. Monsieur Joffo was, as his papers showed, French. He therefore had to be non-Jewish. And in any case, Henri had added, the commandant could always telephone the Préfecture in Paris to make sure. The commandant had called his bluff, had picked up the phone and had asked to be connected to the Préfecture.

Henri explains how nervous he had been at this point but how important it had been for him not to betray the slightest sign of concern or he would have found himself under lock and key as well. There had been a long wait, then the commandant had been connected and had asked for information about Monsieur Joffo’s status. After a short conversation, he had replaced the receiver and had confirmed that Henri’s father had not been stripped of his nationality. He was therefore free to leave, as was Madame Joffo. Half an hour later, Henri had been reunited with his parents.

He explains to Albert, Maurice and Joe that their parents are a little thinner but well and are currently in Nice. The boys are to wait for a message before going to see them.
Joe wants to know why it was that the person speaking on the phone from the Préfecture in Paris could say that their father was not Jewish. The question immediately puts Henri in a serious mood and he explains that he has done a lot of thinking about that. He believes that there are two possible explanations. The first is that there had been a hold up in the bureaucracy and that their father’s papers had not yet reached the Préfecture. Secondly, perhaps the employee in Paris had not been able to find the file and so had made up an answer, perhaps to save an innocent person. Albert thinks this is unlikely. Joe has his own explanation. Perhaps the commandant had been told that Monsieur Joffo was Jewish but had decided to let him go. This intrigues his brothers and although Henri says that he thinks it unlikely, given the character of the man, they are obviously impressed by Joe’s ingenuity. They tease him about becoming a writer of detective novels in future. Joe is convinced that his explanation is the right one.

Four days later, a letter arrives from Nice. Their parents have found an appartment and a couple of rooms for Henri and Albert on the floor above it. The picture Monsieur Joffo paints of Nice is of a town bursting with life and he suggests that there will be plenty of work for them all when they join him, but he suggests waiting another month or two before leaving Menton. Joe wants to go straight away, but life has to continue as usual for a while. Spring is on the way, the weather is warming up. They will soon be able to swim. Maurice and Joe decide to buy swimming costumes. They are showing them off at home when there is a knock on the door. Two policemen ask for Albert and Henri Joffo. The elder brothers learn that they have been called up for the S.T.O., the Service de Travail Obligatoire, a scheme under which French workers were sent to Germany. Their decision has been made for them. They cannot “se jeter dans la gueule du loup”. They will leave for Nice the next morning.

Question

Mettez-vous à la place d’Henri Joffo. Expliquez, en français, pourquoi vous êtes allé à Pau, ce que vous y avez fait et les raisons pour lesquelles ce voyage a été si dangereux. Quel en a été le résultat? (200-250 mots).

Chapitre 7 (pp.187-216)

The scene has moved to Nice and opens with Joe trotting behind Marcello, an Italian soldier, carrying two heavy baskets of tomatoes. The Italian has a broken nose and an appalling French accent. He announces that they are going to a bistrot near the port called Tite, a place which has become a focus of black market activity. Italian troops are occupying Nice in a typically relaxed fashion. The bistrot is open, as usual, and contains of Marcello’s friends, three Italian soldiers who were, in former life, a student, a postman and a carpenter. Joe knows them all. The tomatoes are exchanged for a bottle of olive oil (Joe explains that olive oil, with which the Italian troops are over-supplied, has become a medium of exchange on the black market). Joe describes the complex web of bartering in which he and the Italians have become involved: oil is exchanged for tomatoes and cash, which is used to buy cigarettes, which are exchanged for rice, which is bartered for flour or Parmesan cheese, and so on. Maurice and Joe are clearly making a comfortable living from their new business. In Joe’s words, “La vie était belle”.

The Italian soldiers sit around in the bistrot discussing how to prepare salad. They are short of parsley. Joe begs a couple of packets of cigarettes on credit from one of the soldiers and sets off to exchange them for some parsley. He knows he is likely to find some at the butcher’s shop near the port. The Italian who is preparing the salad dressing is singing an aria from an Italian opera. Maurice and Joe leave the bistrot, Maurice to search for real coffee (he knows where to find
everything these days) and Joe to get his parsley. How much easier their work would be if they had a bike. They are walking so much that the soles of their shoes are wearing out.

Joe has time on his hands and decides to take a stroll along the Promenade des Anglais, where Nice meets the beach. The terraces of the hotels are full of Italian officers, usually accompanied by elegant women, the sort whose hair Albert and Henri are now cutting in their new salon opposite the Hôtel Adriatique. They, too, have gone up in the world and are developing a reputation as high class hairdressers. They are even visiting more wealthy clients at home or in their expensive hotel suites. Life is good. Joe’s parents have settled in well to their new life. If it weren’t for the news of the war on the BBC every evening, Joe would think he was on holiday.

Joe is getting his news from more than one source. In pro-German propaganda broadcasts he has heard mention of German victories on the Russian front and the imminent fall of Stalingrad. The BBC also mentions Stalingrad, but emphasises the huge numbers of German deaths during the Russian winter, the immobility of the German heavy armour, bogged down in the Russian mud. Whom is Joe to believe? He talks occasionally to Maurice about it, but it is hard to imagine snow-covered battlefields when you are swimming in a warm sea under a blue sky.

September is not far away and, with it, la rentrée, the start of the school year.

Joe’s parents are supportive of their sons’ new lifestyle and share their joy at the healthy state of their finances. They understand that their sons are learning an important lesson about life from their black market adventures. The family is in good spirits. Monsieur Joffo is even telling Jewish jokes. Joe leaves the apartment, off on another adventure under the blazing sun, and passes an Italian sentry, gun in one hand, mandolin in the other.

The school year begins. It is raining. Joe is back at school. There are geography lessons, music lessons. Joe is not good at music, unlike his classmate François, who has the voice of an angel and sings solos on those occasions when the class is made to sing patriotic songs.

The boys’ tomato business has slowed down, partly because the boys have less free time, partly because tomatoes are no longer in season. The boys are still frequenting the bistrot, though, and playing draughts with the Italian soldiers. The Italian army has finally woken up to the fact that it has been supplying too much olive oil so trade is not as brisk as it was in the summer. Marcello, Joe’s friend, teases him about his inability to detect that his (Marcello’s) fiancée is far from attractive. So why has he got engaged? Her father is a useful business partner, explains the Italian.

It is Madame Joffo’s birthday. Her presents include a sewing machine, an invaluable object at the time. There is birthday cake. Monsieur Joffo tunes in to the BBC while the others enjoy themselves. He then returns to the room, his face pale, and announces that the allied armies have landed in North Africa: “c’est le commencement de la fin”. Maurice runs to get the atlas and they pore over a map. Algiers is not far from Nice: “juste la mer à traverser et ils sont ici, nous n’avons plus rien à craindre” thinks Joe, who eats his piece of birthday cake whilst imagining soldiers and camels in the desert.

From that evening onwards, the family plot the movements of the German and Allied armies on a map as they hear about them from the BBC. The allied landing in Sicily coincides with the arrival of summer. At school, the children expect the arrival of the Americans at any moment. The occupying Italian army, though, seems unperturbed. Tomatoes are once again in season and business picks up. Joe and Maurice have obtained a bicycle to make deliveries easier.
The last day of the school year. Prize day. Maurice gets the gymnastics prize, Joe gets one for reading.

Joe is on a delivery when Maurice intercepts him and tells him, urgently, to follow him. They run up to the town’s rubbish dump where Maurice shows him four guns in good condition. Italian guns, abandoned by soldiers. What should they do with them? Tell the Resistance? They decide to hide them and to give themselves time to think.

Back on the sea front, Joe and Maurice discuss where the guns might have come from. Maurice has heard rumours of Italian desertions and even of Mussolini’s arrest. They decide to go to Tite’s bistrot.

Though most of the Italian soldiers they know have left Nice, they think Marcello is still in town. And among the new, younger arrivals Joe has made a friend, a former student of accountancy from Milan, who is now sitting at a table in the bistrot studying his French grammar. This soldier tells Joe that the Italians are soon to leave. A peace treaty with the Americans is likely to be signed soon. But if the Italians go, the Germans will take their place as the occupying force on the Côte d’Azur.

Over the next few days, Italians start to desert in large numbers. On 8th September, the news comes through that the Italians and the Americans have signed an armistice. The Italians now have to fight the Germans.

One morning, the people of Nice wake to find the occupying army gone. But the mood is sombre. The BBC has announced that Berlin is sending 30 elite divisions over the Alps and plans to occupy the whole of Italy. On 10th September the first train-load of Germans arrives and, with them, the Gestapo and the SS. The second occupation of Nice has begun.

Chapitre 8 (pp.217-255)

The Nazis have established themselves in Nice. The Gestapo have taken over most of the hotels. The Joffo family are having to stay indoors. No more adventures for Joe and Maurice for now. More and more Jews are being arrested.

Henri comes home. He has been eavesdropping on his German customers, who are unaware that he can understand them. He has learnt that Jews are being taken to the Hôtel Excelsior and sent to the camps in sealed trains every Friday. He believes it is time for the family to leave Nice. Monsieur Joffo agrees and lays out his plan. They are going to do what they have done before and leave in twos to avoid attracting attention.

Henri and Albert will head for Aix-les-Bains. Joe and Maurice will go to what masquerades as a pro-Vichy paramilitary youth camp, a “camp pétainiste”, called “Moisson Nouvelle” (New Harvest) in Golfe-Juan.

The boys arrive at Moisson Nouvelle, the last place, in theory, where the Gestapo will come looking for young Jews. They do not take to Gérard, the first boy they meet, an awkward lad who greets them with a version of the Nazi salute, but they ask him to take them to the “chef du camp”.

The camp director, M.Subinagui, is a man of considerable presence and personal warmth. He explains that he has agreed to their father’s request that they be admitted to the camp, even though they are officially too young. He tells them they will be “en sûreté”, the only indication he gives that he is aware of their true reason for being there. The régime of the camp is explained to them. They have a choice between working on site at cooking and cleaning or leaving the camp and
becoming involved in market gardening and pottery, from which the camp makes some of its income. The boys choose pottery.

Gérard shows the boys to their tent and explain the camp timetable to them, clicking his heels and saluting at every opportunity. As he leaves, a voice from within the tent tells them not to worry about Gérard: “il est bien brave”. The voice belongs to Ange Testi, a boy who is avoiding his chores by pretending to have a stomach ache. When Joe asks him what the camp is like, his answer takes him aback, “Oui [...] c’est idéal, il y a beaucoup de Juifs.” Joe and Maurice deny that they are Jews. Ange claims not to be either. He also claims to be “en vacances”.

Ange explains that he is from Algiers (the capital of Algeria) and that he had been on holiday in France when the Americans invaded North Africa. He is now unable to return home. He found his way to the camp almost by accident. Subinagui had listened to his story and had taken him in. He is taking life as easy as possible, doing chores when he has to, snoozing when he can. He explains that there are about 100 boys in the camp. Joe decides that Ange has the potential to become a good friend and begins to regret having taken the decision to work outside the camp at Vallauris.

The bell goes for supper. Joe and Maurice meet a few more potential friends including Jean Masso. Then there is a parade and a sunset flag ceremony, followed by free time, then bed at nine o’clock.

The next morning, the two brothers are summoned to the camp stores where they are issued with their uniforms. Almost immediately, they are sent on their way to Vallauris and to the pottery workshop of the Compagnons de France. They are greeted warmly by the workshop director and meet the ten or so other boys who work at the pottery.

Joe has his first experience of working with clay but is frustrated that his teacher does not allow him the freedom to experiment with it. Every time he shows a little creativity (or what his teacher calls a lack of sense of proportion), he is made to start again. His request that he be allowed to work in his own way is met with an angry lecture about the importance of learning by example. By lunchtime, it is becoming clear that neither Joe nor Maurice have much of a talent for pottery. That evening, back at Vallauris, they go to see Subinagui and explain their difficulty. He is attentive and sympathetic and arranges for them to work in the kitchen instead. Three wonderful weeks are about to begin.

Maurice starts to learn the art of butchery from a professional. Meanwhile, Joe takes on more general kitchen tasks, always in the company of Ange and Masso. The three become firm friends. They collaborate in small thefts of food from the kitchens and involve themselves in flour and sugar trafficking.

Visitors to the camp bring news of the continuing war. The Germans have been taking whole regiments of Italians prisoner. Joe wonders about the fate of his Italian friends. The advance of the Allies has been temporarily halted. But the boys talk little about the war amongst themselves. To do so would be dangerous: there are too many boys from pétainiste and pro-German families. The latest news from outside is that the Germans have taken the gloves off: anyone suspected of being Jewish is being sent to the camps.

One day, Maurice shares with his younger brother his fears about the possibility of a Gestapo raid on Golfe-Juan. He believes that the two of them need to invent false identities for themselves in case they are questioned. He has decided on a story. Like Ange, they will say, they have come from Algiers. Because the Allies have landed in North Africa, the Germans will be unable to check their story.
They run through the details of their invented past together. They will be sons of a hairdresser from Algiers. Their address will be 10 rue Jean Jaurès (because, says Maurice, there is always a rue Jean Jaurès). If asked to describe their home, they will describe the house in Paris. They will have attended a school in the same road as their house. And to be certain that their story will wash, Maurice says he will let Subinagui in on the secret. He is sure they can trust him. The awareness is beginning to dawn that they are not the only children in their predicament in the camp.

By chance, Ferdinand, a 24-year-old who has been excused military service on health grounds and who works as Subinagui’s right-hand man, offers to take the two boys into Nice in his van. They only have to think for a moment: they will be safe in their uniforms, and they might get the chance to see their parents. They accept. Ferdinand drives like a madman. Joe would have been sick if they had not had to stop to change a wheel.

In Nice, they follow Ferdinand as he goes about his business. At one point, the two boys have to wait for their driver outside a building. It is stiflingly hot. Ferdinand does not reappear, however. Maurice enters the building to look for him… and doesn’t return either. Joe gets bored and starts pacing the street. Fed up, he decides to look for his brother. He enters the building. He has been exploring the house for only a few moments when he is knocked to the ground by the butt of a gun. He finds himself looking up at a Nazi soldier whose first word to him, as he throws him violently against a door, is “Youd”. Joe is thrown into a room where he finds Ferdinand, Maurice and two women, one of whom is crying.

Ferdinand admits that their predicament is his fault: the house was a centre for the Resistance and the Germans have set a trap. Ferdinand has been scared by the rumours circulating in the camp and has come to the house to try to obtain false papers with which to escape the German occupation. He is, he admits, a Jew.

Maurice is confident. They will be interrogated and then set free. The room is stuffy. The heat is intense and there are no windows. Three hours pass and nothing happens. Joe has plenty of time to think. He finds himself wondering why the German soldier was so violent with him. His mother had been right when she had said that war was an absurd and stupid thing.

The door opens. There are two German soldiers. The occupants of the room are hustled outside, the boys hand in hand. A military lorry takes them to the Hôtel Excelsior, the headquarters of the Gestapo in Nice.

Translation

Translate into English Joe’s reflection on the nature of war on pages 252 – 253, from “On ne s’est jamais vus…” to “…elle avait raison finalement.”

Chapitre 9 (pp.256-305)

Inside the Hôtel Excelsior. Crowds of people of all ages, lots of noise. Joe, under guard with his brother, is scared. In his poignant description of an elderly couple at the hotel we can see why: “J’étais jeune, très jeune, mais je crois que même plus jeune que je ne l’étais, j’aurais compris que ces deux vieux se regardaient comme des gens qui ont vécu ensemble toute leur vie et qui savent que l’on va les séparer et que sans doute ils feront seuls, chacun de leur côté, le bout de chemin qui reste à faire.” Joe is seeing the Holocaust at close quarters.
Lists of names are called by plain-clothes Gestapo officers. People stand when their name is called and board lorries which will take them to the station. The elderly couple is amongst them. Joe looks at his two guards. He is struck by the fact that they appear to be ordinary people, not brutes. So why are they doing this?

The lobby empties. SS officers come and go. Joe is still holding Maurice’s hand. Finally, Joe, Maurice and the people arrested with them are summoned upstairs. The two women are taken away, then return in tears. Joe feels as if he is in a dentist’s waiting room. An interpreter arrives and the two boys are ushered into a former hotel bedroom. An SS officer is sitting there. He appears bored.

Ferdinand is interrogated first. He insists that he is not Jewish. All it takes for him to start telling the truth is a couple of slaps in the face. Having admitted he is a Jew, he is given a green ticket and sent downstairs.

Joe and Maurice’s turn has come. It is time to tell their story about their home in Algiers. Maurice does the talking, confident as always, even when asked at which church he was baptised and made his first communion. He appears able to add convincing details to their story as the need arises. The boys are told they are to have a medical inspection to see if they are circumcised. Maurice pretends not to understand the meaning of the word.

They are taken upstairs to a room where three doctors are just finishing work for the day. One of the them is German. As the two French doctors prepare to go home, the German tells Joe and Maurice to take off their shorts and underpants while a Nazi soldier stands guard. Seeing that they are indeed circumcised, the doctor tries to get them to admit that they are Jewish. Maurice insists that their parents had them operated upon when they were younger for a condition called phimosis (an over-tight foreskin). The doctor has heard this one before. Maurice clings to his story. The operations took place in Algiers. He embroiders a few memories around his assertion to make it sound more convincing.

In a surprise move, the doctor gives them his name (Rosen) and tells them he is Jewish. He is trying to get them to open up to him. Maurice doesn’t flinch: “D’accord [...] vous êtes juif, mais pas nous, c’est tout.” The doctor examines them again, and then murmurs, “Chapeau”, an expression which means something like, “Good show” or “Congratulations”. If the boys have not convinced him, he is at least prepared to play their game. As they are shown out of the room, Joe overhears the doctor’s comment to the guard: “Das ist chirurgical gemacht.” (“They have had an operation”).

At six the next morning, the boys are interrogated separately. Joe has to describe his bedroom back home. His interrogator tries to catch him out over a detail, unsuccessfully. Were his elder brothers involved in politics? Which newspaper did his father read?

Back in their room, which is not locked, the brothers add detail to their story. Joe tries to memorise everything. At midday, Joseph is summoned again. He has not eaten for 24 hours. Questions about school. Joe demonstrates some of his playground games. Questions about the layout of Algiers. Joe is faithful to the story concocted with Maurice but adds details from his memories of Marseille. Questions about friends shared with his brother. Joe mentions Zérati, and discovers later that Maurice has done the same. The interrogation ends, but only at seven that evening are they taken to the kitchen for a bowl of soup.

Six days later, the two boys are still under arrest. For the last two days there have been no interrogations. Maurice has heard from the interpreter that the Germans have not decided their fate yet. Joe and Maurice are put to work in the kitchens from seven a.m. till late preparing vegetables and washing up. Joe is beginning to suffer from a migraine headache.
A chance encounter with the Jewish doctor in a corridor. He is not wearing his white coat, seems surprised to see the two boys and hurries away. Why, Joe wonders, did he do what he did? He must condemn hundreds of others to the camps every day. Perhaps, Joe speculates, he was impressed with their tenacity. Joe’s headache is getting worse.

Friday. The day when the train leaves for the camps. The hotel seems to be fuller than ever. Maurice and Joe spot Masso in the crowd with two others from the camp at Vallauris. They run to meet him. Masso explains that, the previous night, the boys’ camp was raided by the SS who were looking for circumcised boys. But Monsieur Subinagui, aware of what had probably happened to the Joffo boys, had already sent the Jews away at the dead of night before the Germans arrived. Masso was caught on a road near Grasse because he had no papers on him. He was circumcised at the age of six for medical reasons and is confident of not being put on the train with the Jews. Joe and Maurice have to get to the kitchens to start work. They say goodbye, unaware that they will never see Masso again. He was put on the train, Joe learns later, to make up the quota of prisoners required by the Gestapo and sent to the death camps.

Joe’s headache is now a serious problem. He keeps being sick and he has developed a temperature but at least he and his brother are being left alone by the Germans for a while. Maurice is having to force Joe to eat. He starts to have vivid, delirious dreams about machine gunning large numbers of Nazis. When he next regains consciousness, he is in bed in another room where a pretty girl is looking after him. From her he learns that he was found in a corridor of the hotel and that the doctor has diagnosed the early stages of meningitis.

Joe drifts in and out of consciousness and the frightening dreams continue. The girl nurses him attentively, staying with him for most of the night. He finds her presence reassuring. He has hallucinations and starts sleep-walking. And then he starts to recover.

About a week into his illness Joe asks Mlle. Hauser why she does not wear a nurse’s uniform. She smiles and tells him that she is not a nurse. The reason she gives for being in the hotel and looking after Joe is, “Je suis juive”. He desperately wants to say, “moi aussi” but kisses her instead. Later, she brings him books to read.

Then, one morning, the doctor walks in, gives Joe a brief examination and tells him to get dressed and to be downstairs in five minutes. Joe will never see his nurse again. Another interrogation is about to begin. The Germans have not forgotten about the Joffo brothers after all.

The boys are before a new Gestapo interrogator and a humourless interpreter with a flat, mechanical voice. The German tells them that M. Subinagui has confirmed their story in every detail. Maurice is told he can leave, but he must be back within 48 hours with proof that he and Joe are not Jewish. In particular, the Germans want their first communion certificates from the church in Nice where they have claimed they were confirmed. If he fails, Joe, he is told, will be chopped into little pieces. Maurice, confident as always, promises to return.

While waiting for his brother to reappear, Joe is put to work around the hotel and starts to become a familiar face to the Germans who work there. Then Maurice returns with the certificates. He tells Joe his story.

He had gone back to their home to find his parents, both of whom were more or less in hiding and had lost a lot of weight. Then, remembering the priest who had helped them on the train from Paris, he had entered the local church and had talked to the priest, who had immediately offered to provide the confirmation certificates. Not only that, but he had promised to bring their case to the attention
of the Archbishop. Leaving the church with the certificates in his pocket, Maurice had then gone back to Golfe-Juan to explain the situation to Subinagui. He too had volunteered to ring the Archbishop to confirm the boys’ story.

The brothers show their certificates to the interpreter, who takes them to the Gestapo interrogator, who does not believe they are authentic. They are told that the papers will be checked.

Immediately they leave the interrogator’s office they are given an errand to run. One of the employees at the hotel gives them a large, flat basket and tells them to go and get some tomatoes. Joe knows where they are kept, on a terrace at the back of the hotel which adjoins the neighbouring building. As they gather the tomatoes, they realise that nothing but a low wall separates them from the house next door and from freedom.

Should they make a run for it? Both boys are tense. Maurice murmurs “On y va,” … and then Joe notices a movement, the slightest suggestion of a shadow behind the corner of a building, perhaps the boot of a German soldier, waiting for them. They continue to fill their baskets with tomatoes. Joe pretends to be trying to catch insects, playing the innocent, but also trying to get a glimpse of what is behind the wall. In a split second, as he and Maurice leave the terrace, he sees the shadow of the barrel of a machine gun. It was a trap. And, sure enough, when they arrive at the hotel kitchen with the tomatoes, the cook expresses surprise when they tell him what they have brought. He has not sent for tomatoes and none appear in any of the dishes served at the hotel that day or the next.

Three days later, the Catholic priest who supplied the false confirmation certificates arrives at the hotel and sits waiting in silence for three hours, at the end of which time he is told no-one will see him. He asks an interpreter to let the Gestapo know that he intends to return the next day, and will continue to do so “jusqu’à la victoire de IIIe Reich” if necessary to save two children from an administrative mistake. He also mentions that his Archbishop is ready to raise the matter with Berlin if necessary. The boys have been lucky once again: they have stumbled upon “le curé le plus têtu, le plus humoriste et le plus acharné à arracher des Juifs des griffes des Allemands” in the region!

The next day, even before the hotel has been formally opened, the priest is back. He settles in a chair with his prayer book, evidently prepared for a long wait. He continues to sit in full public view but, by midday, has still not been invited to talk to the Gestapo. He pulls out a sandwich, eats it, asks a soldier (in good German) for a glass of water and continues to wait. He is beginning to attract attention and is making the Nazis feel uncomfortable. At two o’clock, he gets an interview.

The following day, he is back again with a number of documents, one of them a handwritten letter from the Archbishop certifying the brothers’ link with Algiers cathedral and threatening to come see the Gestapo himself if they are not freed. Anxious to avoid an embarrassing clash with the Catholic Church, the Germans finally let the Joffo boys go.

It is the priest who takes them away from the hotel, holding them by the hand. They emerge into the bright sunshine of the Côte d’Azur. To their surprise, waiting for them outside in the van from Moisson Nouvelle is Monsieur Subinagui, who is delighted to see them. Not long after setting off, Subinagui stops the van on the sea front to go and buy some cigarettes. While they wait for him to return, the boys run onto the beach, take off their shoes and socks and paddle in the sea. Joe is glad to be free: “Je ne pense à rien, ma tête est vide, je sais seulement que je vais vivre, que je suis libre, comme les mouettes.”
Back at the camp, Joe is called to the telephone (Maurice is working on a farm three kilometers away). It’s his father. Monsieur and Madame Joffo, it seems, are well. M. Joffo sends his boys his love. They will see each other soon.

There are fewer boys at the camp and the atmosphere has changed since the Gestapo raid. But Joe is in paradise, enjoying the freedom and the fresh air. Winter is not far off. Sometimes it seems as if the war will go on for ever. News of distant battles filters through to the boys.

About two weeks after their release from the hotel, Joe is woken in the middle of the night by Maurice who tells him to get dressed. Outside the tent, Subinagui tells them to join him in his office. When they meet a few moments later, he is holding the bags with which they have travelled since they left Paris. They are about to find themselves on the road again.

Translation

Translate into English Joe’s observations of the Germans who inhabit the Hôtel Excelsior on pages 273-274, from “Les différents services...” to “…des clercs tatillons et appliqués?”

Question

Mettez-vous à la place de Joseph Joffo. Expliquez, en français, ce qui vous est arrivé depuis le moment où vous êtes arrivé à Nice avec Ferdinand jusqu’au jour de votre libération. Qu’est-ce que vous avez vu et entendu dans l’Hôtel Excelsior? Qu’est-ce que vous avez fait pendant tout ce temps? Qu’est-ce que vous avez appris des Allemands? (300-350 mots).

Chapitre 10 (pp.306-328)

Subinagui gives the boys their travelling instructions. They are going to a little village near Montluçon where their sister is expecting them. They have to leave because their father has been arrested by the Gestapo. He is in the Hôtel Excelsior and he has been arrested with his papers on him, so the Germans will not need long to make the connection to Joe and Maurice. Mme Joffo has gone into hiding. The boys have no time to lose.

They set off into the countryside, avoiding the roads. Joe does not know where Montluçon is but he suspects it is far from the sea. He doesn’t want to leave the Mediterranean. They walk to Cannes, on the coast, waiting for dawn before the risk being seen walking in the streets. The town begins to wake up. They continue their walk and reach the station. They buy two single tickets for Montluçon from a ticket clerk with a sense of humour who can imitate an explosion but cannot tell them when they will arrive. Their first stop will be Marseille.

And then they run into the interpreter from the Excelsior. They tell him they’re on their way to another camp. He wishes them a pleasant journey. If he hasn’t arrested them by now he can’t know about their father.

Their journey begins, and the further north they go the further the temperature drops until they are very cold indeed. The train is not heated. Before long, they are wearing every article of clothing they possess. Other passengers are in winter clothing. The boys have only their shorts and shirts.

Although it is only the beginning of October, Montluçon is freezing cold. The winter of 1943 has arrived early. Arriving in this grey town for the first time, they try running along the streets to keep warm. It doesn’t work. They decide that they have to buy a coat, even though they have no clothing
coupons. They find a dusty old clothes shop and enter. The shop is heated. Joe experiences “la sensation peut-être la plus agréable de toute ma vie” – warmth. The brothers huddle around the stove, aware that the shop assistant is staring at them, which is hardly surprising, given the way they are dressed. She asks them what they want. Maurice explains. She can’t help them. She hasn’t even got a pullover. All she can offer is two scarves. The boys put off their departure from the warm shop for as long as possible by chatting to the commerçante. Then Joe notices that it is getting dark. He suggests that he and Maurice go looking for a hotel. The lady interrupts, tells them that the hotels have been requisitioned by the Germans and offers the boys a room for the night in her house. She feeds them gratin dauphinois that evening and refuses payment the next morning.

The following day, Joe and Maurice take a grey, asthmatic bus across a wintry landscape to Ainay-le-Vieil, more of a hamlet than a village. Joe notices that the barns are empty of hay. They find their sister, Rosette, living with her husband in a house near the church. There are tears when they tell her of their father’s arrest. She serves her brothers milk in porcelain bowls and provides them with woollen pullovers.

Rosette is obviously pleased to see the boys, but Joe also senses that she is anxious. When they ask her what’s wrong, she tells them that there is an informer in the village. It is too dangerous for them to stay. She tells the story of a local farmer who was arrested by the Gestapo for sheltering two women and had his arm broken. The Germans had threatened to shoot him if he tried to hide Jews again. However, no-one knows who the informer is, even though there are only 80 to 90 adults in the village. Everyone suspects everyone else. Villagers have stopped talking to each other. They are afraid of spending too much money for fear that others will suspect them of having accepted a bribe from the Germans. The village is caught in a vicious circle.

Rosette is as sure as she can be that her Jewishness will not be discovered; but the boys are going to have to leave for Aix-les-Bains, in the Alps, where Henri and Albert are living.

There is a knock at the door. It’s an old lady from the village, who has called to collect some eggs. As she enters, she comments, “J’ai vu que vous aviez du monde.” Joe and Maurice have been noticed already. They remember their manners and introduce themselves. She observes how alike they are, which enfuriates Joe. He hates to be told that he looks like Maurice. He decides that she is the informer. The old lady continues to ask questions, and has obviously worked out that the boys are Rosette’s brothers. When she comes to pay for the eggs, Joe notices that her purse is stuffed full of bank notes. She asks if they plan to stay long. Her question makes up Joe’s mind for him. He replies, “Non, on est juste venus dire bonjour à Rosette et on repart sur Roanne.”

When the old lady has left, Rosette explains that she often drops in for a chat and that Vouillard is not her real name. This convinces Joe even more firmly that she is a spy … until Rosette reveals that her real name is Rosenberg. The old lady is Jewish. She has only been in the village since 1941. Joe’s theory crumbles and he apologises silently to the old woman.

Rosette wants the boys to stay for lunch and to meet her husband, but the boys have so much experience of being on the run now that they know they must not waste a minute. They have to go immediately. Their bags stuffed full of socks and sandwiches, they set off on foot. There is no bus. As they walk, Joe reflects on how much he has changed since they left Paris and on the way in which the experiences of this war have robbed him of part of his childhood: “…je me demande si je suis encore un enfant […] Ils ne m’ont pas pris ma vie, ils ont peut-être fait pire, ils me volent mon enfance, ils ont tué en moi l’enfant que je pouvais être.” Tomorrow, they will be in Aix-les-Bains. Joe finds that he no longer cares where their journey takes them. “Je m’en fou.” It is a law of nature that the prey runs from the hunter. He is going to do everything possible to ensure that he is not caught. The Alps beckon.
Chapitre 11 (pp.329-378)

It is the end of 1943. Joe is concentrating on perfecting his most recently-acquired skill, forging ration tickets. He has found a way of using a razor blade to transform a 4 into a 1, which has the effect of turning a coupon for starch-based foods (féculents) into a coupon for a kilo of sugar. “Résultat : même en cette année d’intense privation, vous pouvez mourir du diabète.”

Joe is beginning to become known in the large mountain village where he is now living. People stop him in the street to entrust their ration tickets to him and he is earning a little money as a result. The work is hard because the freezing cold numbs his fingers. It is so cold in his bedroom that his washing water has frozen. Dressed in almost every item of clothing he possesses, Joe thinks he looks like a chilly caterpillar as he scratches away with his razor blade.

It’s already dark and Joe knows he will need his sleep as Monsieur Mancelier, his new landlord and employer, will wake him at four a.m.. Joe’s new responsibility in the small town which he calls R., is the early-morning delivery of newspapers. Monsieur Mancelier is the owner of the local librairie-papeterie.

Joe describes the Mancelier family. “Au centre, c’est le père,” Ambroise Mancelier, a man in his fifties with a stiff leg and a moustache. He walks with a stick. He was decorated in the 1914-1918 war and wears his medal ribbons with pride. He is an ardent admirer of Maréchal Pétain. There are photos and statuettes of the Maréchal throughout the house. He firmly believes that France’s only hope lies in collaboration with Hitler. He also detests the Jews but, unaware that he has one living under his roof, gets on well with Joe.

Madame Marcelle Mancelier is unremarkable. “Il suffit de la regarder pour ne pas avoir envie de la décrire.” She works hard, dresses plainly and looks after the paperwork in the family shop.

The Manceliers’ son, Raoul, works as a solicitor’s clerk in another part of town and is rarely at home. He, too, supports Pétain and doesn’t disguise his views.

Raoul’s sister, Françoise, who is about two years older than Joe, is much more memorable. He adores her from a distance; he will remember her vividly in later life; he clearly loves her. But she is inaccessible. Her fourteen years make her too old for his twelve, and so nothing happens. Though Joe would like to have been able to write about his “histoire d’amour,” he has to confess that “rien n’eut lieu, ni baiser, ni serment, rien. [...] Comment raconter quelquechose qui n’a pas d’histoire?”.

Joe recounts how he arrived in this family in the first place. He had spent two days with his brothers Albert and Henri and his mother in Aix-les-Bains. The decision had then been taken that keeping five members of the family together was too risky, so Maurice had been sent to the town of R. where a friend of Albert’s had found him work in a hotel. A few days later, Maurice had learned of an opening at Mancelier’s bookshop, and Joe had set off to join him. Finding himself living in the Manceliers’ family home, he had been obliged, by the father of the family, to attend mass with them on Sundays. Three reasons inclined him to do as he was told: firstly, one did not say no to a man like Ambroise Mancelier; secondly, Joe was curious to discover what a Catholic mass was like; and thirdly, he would be able to spend an hour in the “enivrante présence de la très belle Française aux belles joues.” In church, he imitated the worshippers as best he could, enjoying the view of Françoise at the same time.
Joe is on his way out of church after mass. He is at the back of the crowd leaving the building, waiting to get through the door with Françoise behind him. Suddenly, a woman in front of him dips her hand into the receptacle of holy water by the exit, turns round with her fingers extended, seems to recognise Joe and goes to bless him with the water. Joe, unfamiliar with Roman Catholic custom, shakes her hand and says, “Bonjour, madame.” Those around him react with a mixture of amusement and consternation. Most embarrassingly of all, Françoise has noticed. Joe worries that she will never take him seriously again, that she will not want to marry him. The only way he can think of to repair his reputation in her eyes is to save her from some terrible fate, perhaps a shipwreck, “Mais comment sauver quelqu’un d’un naufrage en Haute-Savoie?” Joe is mortified. “Françoise ne sera jamais ma femme, je suis indigne d’elle. C’est affreux.”

Sunday lunch back at the house. Monsieur Mancelier is holding forth again on his favourite topics, France, Europe and Maréchal Pétain. He lectures Joseph: great men are men with ideals, not ideas; the greatest political ideal for a white European is the construction of Europe; only three great men in French history have upheld this ideal, have wanted to create a Europe “capable de lutter contre ses adversaires de l’ouest, de l’est ou du sud”. They are, as Joe has heard his host say many times before, Louis XIV, Napoléon and Maréchal Philippe Pétain. All three were misunderstood in their lifetime. The Sun King, Louis XIV saw his grandson murdered; Napoléon was imprisoned; but Maréchal Pétain … “c’est un dur à cuire, il a fait Verdun, et rappelle-toi une chose, mon petit gars, quand on a fait Verdun, on passe partout.”

By this stage, Monsieur Mancelier’s family are letting their boredom show and Joe has stopped listening. He is looking forward to dessert. At the end of the meal, when Raoul arrives with his wife, the pro-Vichy conversation picks up again. Raoul is less sure of a German victory than his father and suspects that “la masse technologique américaine” will create obstacles for the 3rd Reich. (Joe misinterprets this phrase. For him it conjures up thoughts of a strange kind of sledgehammer – “une masse” – which, he imagines, the Americans are using as a secret weapon!).

Raoul would have preferred France to ally itself with Mussolini and Hitler in 1936 : the three countries together, supported perhaps by Franco’s Spain, would have been invincible. England would have fallen in no time, followed by Russia. Raoul’s wife then asks, “Et pourquoi n’as-t-on pas fait ça?”, a question to which Ambroise Mancelier, laughing, replies, “Parce que […] au lieu d’être gouverné par des Français défendant leur sol et leurs droits, le gouvernement était pourri de Juifs.” So, M. Mancelier makes no secret of his anti-semitism. Joe is getting bored and leaves the room.

Once outside, he runs to the Hôtel du Commerce where Maurice works. His position in the hotel is enabling him to do well on the black market again. He tells Joe that he is working with a member of the Resistance who listens to the BBC and has been telling him that the news of the war is encouraging. The Germans are still in retreat.

One day, Maurice points out a mountain in the distance. That, he explains to Joe, is the maquis, where the Resistance are. He believes that they are attacking lorries and trains. Joe immediately wants to join them: it would be the perfect way of re-establishing his reputation in the eyes of Françoise. No, they are too young, replies his brother. He has already asked that question. They head for the run down football pitch and kick a ball around. This is where, now that they have been accepted by the local boys, Maurice and Joe come regularly to play football, even in the snow.

Christmas 1943. The boys have had a card from Henri. The family are well and send their greetings. Maurice is tired. He was not able to get to bed before 4 a.m. because of a group of Germans and their collaborators who were celebrating late into the night at the hotel. But he is able to share with his brother the left-overs which he was able to steal from the party.
Joe walks back alone through the snow to the stadium. He finds a bench and, surrounded by mountains and a white landscape, eats his way through foie gras and coffee cake. He may be Jewish, but he sees no reason not to celebrate Christmas in his own way.

As he re-enters the Mancelier family home, the father is listening gravely to a pro-Vichy lecture on the radio given by Philippe Henriot, a right-wing politician and fervent supporter of Pétain who would be made Secretary of State for Information (i.e. propaganda) that winter. As the talk ends, M. Mancelier comments, “S’ils publient ces éditoriaux dans un livre, je serai le premier du pays à l’acheter.”

Back in his freezing bedroom, Joe buries himself under his mattress and picks up a book he has “borrowed” from the shop … but not in order to read it. It contains a quantity of No.4 ration tickets. He starts work.

1st April 1944. Someone laughs behind Joe’s back. Is there a hole in his shorts? No, it’s April Fool’s Day and someone has stuck a paper fish to his back. Children can still have fun, even though the war continues. And yet, the war is going badly now, for the Germans at least. The Resistance are becoming more active. Two days ago, the railway depot was blown up, an event which had catapulted Monsieur Mancelier into a rage directed against “tous ces jeunes salopiauds qui ne seraient contents que lorsqu’ils auraient ramené l’Anglais en France, réduisant à néant le travail de Jeanne d’Arc.” Good right-wing stuff!

Joe knows, from the expression on M. Mancelier’s face when he looks at his portraits of Pétain, that the war is not going well. But the weather is improving and the mood of the inhabitants of R. is buoyant. Joe is in good spirits as he sets out to finish his paper round. At the hotel, the patron asks if he wants to see his brother; but, before he can go looking for him in the cellar, there is a squeal of brakes outside. Two lorries block the street. It’s the militia, “les plus détestés, […] les chasseurs de résistants.” Some of them block off escape routes, others enter the building.

One of the customers smiles at Joe and walks towards him. Joe does not recognise him. He drops a crumpled envelope into Joe’s bag. Joe hides it with a newspaper. All he says as he pushes Joe towards the door is, “M. Jean, au Cheval Blanc.” As Joe makes to leave, he runs into two militia men. To the customers, “Les pattes en l’air, vite.” (“Hands up!”). And to Joe, “Tire-toi, gamin.” (“Get out, kid”). Joe escapes, finds his bike and leaves. As he reaches the corner he looks back. The man who gave him the envelope has been arrested. Joe heads for the Cheval Blanc café.

Maryse, the waitress, is surprised to see him. “Je cherche M. Jean,” he explains. She flinches. Carefully, she asks him why. He explains. She tells him to follow her to the garage behind the café. The man who opens the door looks a little like Henri. Suspicious, he asks Joe to describe the man who gave him the envelope. Then he tells Joe to hand it over and reads its contents. Joe seems to have been recruited. Monsieur Jean says, “Quand j’aurai besoin de toi, c’est [Maryse] qui te le fera savoir.”

It turns out that this is to be Joe’s only contribution to the fight to liberate France. The call to help M. Jean never came.

D-Day, 6th June 1944, was a black one for Ambroise Mancelier. To his way of thinking, an army of English Communists, American blacks and Jews was invading French soil. He was in a foul mood.

One day, Joe is working in the shop when the son of Mouron the baker, a friend of Maurice’s, enters and, after buying a paper, asks the price of a book about Pétain which is on display in the
window. Joe is stunned: he had thought this boy was a supporter of the Resistance. When Joe tells him the price, he buys it, but then says he wants to leave it on display in the shop window. Mme Mancelier agrees reluctantly. The boy takes a label, writes on it the word “Vendu” (“sold” and “sold out”) and attaches it to the photograph of Pétain on the front cover. At this, Mme Mancelier asks him to take the book. He says that, if he can’t leave it in the window, he will not buy it. As he leaves, slamming the door, he shouts, menacingly, “A bientôt, madame Mancelier.”

The shop is doing little business. Joe must be selling no more than three books a week. He is running errands, as usual. When he visits the baker’s, either the father or the son regularly ask him if Monsieur Mancelier isn’t beginning to “faire dans son pantalon” at the thought of what is inevitably coming. The family no longer dare to leave their home. One evening, someone smashes a window in the kitchen. It is clear that feeling is rising against the pétainiste bookshop owner and his family.

Joe goes out each evening to find Maurice. They go to the church bell tower from where they can see, in the distance, the route nationale and the columns of military vehicles moving north, many of them ambulances. There is no news from Aix-les-Bains. Letters are no longer getting through. Maurice has seen some maquisards (resistance fighters) at the Hôtel du Commerce, dressed in leather jackets with pistols and machine guns.

One evening, Joe cycles to the hotel with a pile of books which he has stolen from the shop. They are destined for the maquisards, particularly for the injured who are being cared for in the caves. There has been no further sign of the militia. Maurice has heard that the man who gave the envelope to Joe was later put up against a wall and shot. The thought makes Joe feel ill and hopeless.

The baker says he has seen German tanks from his rooftop. News spreads fast. By the evening, the villagers are panicking. Will the Germans make a last stand in R.? Rumours about the Americans are circulating. They are only 50km away. Someone has made an American flag. The war will soon be over.

Joe does the day’s accounts alone in the shop. The Manceliers are shut in upstairs. Ambroise paces his bedroom, no longer listens to the radio. How long before the liberation comes? It’s 8th July 1944.

Joe’s asleep. It’s early morning. Someone calls his name. There’s a rumble in the distance. He pushes open the shutters and looks out of his window. The square is empty … except for Maurice. He’s smiling. “Ils sont partis.” The Germans have left. No fuss, no noise. They’ve just gone. “Je m’accoudais à ma fenêtre un beau matin d’été et c’était fini, j’étais libre.”

The two boys set off for the centre of the village. People are starting to come out into the streets. Flags are appearing at the windows, French, British, American. People are embracing, and Joe is “fou de joie” because he has survived and because he has no papers to deliver.

The next day, when the papers come, Joe is overwhelmed with customers, many of whom don’t even wait for their change. Three girls are paraded through the village that afternoon, their hair shaved off and swastikas painted on their faces. There is a rumour that the son of a neighbour, a militia man, has been shot in the woods.

Monsieur Mancelier is surrounded in his own living room. The baker’s son has thumped him on the chin. Joe leaps to his defence and saves him from the vengeance of the village with a single sentence, “Laisse-le, il m’a planqué quand même pendant longtemps et ça pouvait lui coûter chaud de cacher un Juif.” There is stunned silence. Then Mouron asks if Mancelier knew Joe was Jewish.
Joe recalls Mancelier’s anti-semitic diatribes. His revenge will be to be the Jew who saves Mancelier’s skin. “Bien sûr, il le savait!” Joe leaves. He is fairly sure the mob will not kill Mancelier. He is right. The Manceliers are taken to prison. Ambroise is trembling with humiliation, fear and rage. “Devoir sa peau à un Juif après avoir applaudi Henriot tous les soirs pendant quatre ans, c’est le genre de choses qu’il ne pouvait pas avaler.”

Joe finds himself patron of the shop. New newspapers are being published every day. The underground press is coming out of hiding. Joe finds himself more important than the mayor or the baker. He is the source of all news. He is working 15 hour days and the money is pouring in.

And then, one day, the headline in all the papers is “Paris Libéré”. Joe travels back in memory to Montmartre, to his parents’ shop, to his bedroom and he is gripped by the desire to get to Paris as soon as he can. He sets off for the station at a jog. He is stopped by three men wearing armbands and hunting boots and carrying German sub-machine guns. Who are they? Resistance fighters from another area? They tell Joe to turn round and go back. He asks them what is going on. Silence. One of the men gestures to him to go back. Joe protests, “Vous me prenez pour un S.S. déguisé ou quoi?” Silence. In front of the shop there is a crowd of people, all armed, addressing each other as “captain” and “colonel”. The three men deliver him to an officer: “on l’a récupéré”.

Joe is taken inside and told that he cannot leave. He is responsible for communicating the news in the village: “tu dois rester à ton poste car nous sommes encore en guerre...” Can’t he go back to Paris? No. “D’accord, alors fusillez-moi.” One of the soldiers swallows his cigarette butt in surprise. The colonel is speechless. Joe embarks on his defence. He’s been away from home for 3 years. No-one is going to stop him from returning. His name is Joseph Joffo. “Je suis Juif”. The colonel reasons with him. Then the door opens and in steps Monsieur Jean. He speaks up for Joe, asks him if he wants to go home. Joe cannot prevent himself from crying with relief. Someone has come to his rescue. Shortly afterwards, he is on his way back to the station with an escort of about 15 resistance fighters! He pushes through the door to the platform. “Sur ce quai, il y avait dix millions de personnes.”

And what of Maurice? Before leaving for the station, Joe has seen him. His boss has tried to stop him from leaving too.

The crowd on the station platform is enormous, “toute un exode à l’envers”, Joe observes. Passengers are anxious. The station master is pushing through the crowd, climbing over luggage. The train is more than an hour late, and there are rumours of broken track ahead. Joe tries to use his small size to advantage and manages to push forward, lying to other passengers about his need to reach a mythical little brother. He scramble over baggage, challenged by other travellers, crawling between people’s legs. At last, he reaches the edge of the platform. Caught in the crush, he has to wait a further two and a half hours, getting cramp in his legs, shifting his weight from leg to leg. At last, the train is sighted. The crowd starts to stir, and he struggles to prevent himself from being pushed onto the rails. The train pulls in and it is full. There is chaos. It stops. The doors open and, with the breath almost crushed out of him, Joe tries to climb into a carriage. A well-built man forces his way in ahead of him. Women are crying. Another ten centimetres and he’ll be aboard, but the big man is trying to shut the door and pushes Joe back onto the platform with his backside. Furious, Joe bites him in the hand. The man turns around, exposing a gap into which Joe throws himself. He is aboard. The door closes. It takes him the next thirty kilometers to manoeuvre himself into an upright position.

Meanwhile, Maurice has been putting his own resourcefulness to work to get himself back to Paris. A friend of his boss has a car but no petrol. Maurice negotiates a seat in the car in exchange for fuel. The only problem is, he doesn’t have any. He fills a bottle with old cognac and another 19 with tea.
He then persuades an army sergeant to taste the first bottle and to buy all 20 in exchange for 5 jerrycans of petrol. It’s enough to get him to the capital.

Maurice tries to get his boss to pay him. His boss refuses. So Maurice offers to take a few cheeses to Paris, where there are food shortages, to sell them and to send the money back to the village. His boss agrees. Of course, Maurice manages to sell them in Paris and pockets the cash. “Ce qui ne fut que justice.”

Three years after his departure, Joe finds himself once again at the Marcadet-Poissoniers métro station. The street has not changed, but Granny Epstein is no longer there and the Goldenberg restaurant is closed. He reaches the shop. Albert and Henri are at work. His mother is there too, but not his father. “…j’ai compris qu’il n’y serait jamais plus”. Joe sees his reflection in the window. “C’est vrai, j’ai grandi.”

Epilogue

Joe is now 42 years old and has three children. He is asking himself why he wrote this book. He reflects, “il est sorti de moi comme une chose naturelle, cela m’était peut-être nécessaire.”. He wonders how his son will see the book when he comes to read it.

He tries to imagine how he would feel if he had to say to his son, that evening, “Mon petit gars, prends ta musette, voilà 50,000 francs (anciens) et tu vas partir.” He is filled with joy at the thought that his son will not have to do what he had to do when he was a child.

Joe greatly admires Einstein. He knew that we are only ever a split second away from potential suffering. As Joe watches his son sleep, he wishes for only one thing: that he should never have to go through the suffering and fear that he knew during the war years. But then, what has he to fear? It won’t happen again … will it?