

MY STORY

By Flora Hogman, PhD

The South of France - Summer 1988

It's a lovely hot summer day. The houses painted in a variety of colors are glowing in the sunlight. My eye captures an expanse of olive trees, palm trees and jasmine bushes, stretching all the way down to the sea, the glittery Mediterranean. The Couvent des Clarisses (Convent of the Clarisses Sisters)¹ stands somewhere at the top of the hill, at the end of the winding road. It has been 45 years since I was brought there to hide from the Germans during World War II. I was 6 years old then.



Flora with her mother, Nice, 1942.

How, and with whom, did I reach this convent? Was it morning, or night? I have no memory of how I parted from my mother. I only remember her promise to come for me at the end of a week. She never did.

Again, the sounds of boots hitting the pavement when the Germans made their grand entrance into Nice reverberate in my ears. It took them a long time to parade throughout the streets. Trapped on the sidewalk, my mother and I stood watching them the entire time. I was

very hungry: we'd been on our way to the daily marketing. Shortly thereafter, I was brought to the convent.

A very tall woman dressed in a long heavy robe welcomed me into the 'House of God.' She spoke from behind an iron grille in the wall. The whole thing was very spooky and the hooded woman looked so strange, I almost had the giggles. What did she mean by the 'House of God?' How was she a 'Mother Superior?' I did not dare to ask.

"Are the nuns still confined behind their iron grille?" I ask my friend Jeannette who is driving me.

"Yes, indeed! They still take vows of silence and devotion to God through prayer. The only occupation they are allowed is to embroider religious garments and to make holy wafers."

Looking back, I see myself standing alone in a well-kept garden. Orderly lanes lead to high walls that separate the convent from the road. I stare at the nuns forever walking round and round on the roof, endlessly praying, their hands pressed together on their chests, their eyes lifted to the sky, never glancing at the earth below. They always remained mysterious, elusive, scary in their long robes which enveloped them completely. How could they all be sisters?

"You were baptized while in the convent?" Jeannette enquires. I nod. Somebody held me, terrified, over a huge sink as water was poured over my head. That was my baptism.

The nuns gave rosary beads to the children, Jews and non-Jews alike. Those beads provided for our only game, a contest we pursued as we raced through the 'Ave Maria' and 'Our Father Who Art in Heaven' prayers to see who could finish first.

I knew little about God. I had no clue as to what a Jew was either, except that I should never say that's what I was!

If I prayed to God, the nuns assured me, Mother would come back. God granted wishes in mysterious ways. The hope infused my prayers with fervor and passion, and I felt they made me special to God. God had giant legs. How else could He reside both in Heaven and in the convent as the nuns claimed? The convent was God's House, I expected to meet Him there, to have Him come to love me, maybe even to be His favorite ...

I am lulled by the swerving of the car as it takes the curves in the road. For a brief moment I dissolve into the lightness of the air as two arms take hold of me. It feels good, like when my father was holding me. It's my one memory of him: he died of tuberculosis when I was two years old, just before the war broke out. Poor mother! They'd only been married for a few years. They had lived in Italy but both came from Czechoslovakia. He had beautiful, curly, flaming red hair ... Once upon a time I had a family.

My last evening at the convent, we were hurried into a covered truck. I was given a false name, Flora Hamon, and I watched in despair as a nun systematically, hastily, ripped off the real name embroidered by my mother on all my clothes. How would she ever be able to find me now? I wanted to scream. My old anger at the nuns rises in me again.

Many years ago, I composed a poem about the judgment of God by man. God was found guilty for all the ills of the world. It was blasphemy, I know, but I still feel a need to scream that into the face of God.

Why am I going back now? After all these years, I have to search for my past, find a part of myself, know who I might have been then. I want to lose the sense of deadness, the torment of a lack of memories. Deep down I am connected to the nuns because my mother sent me there.

I visited the convent once before: twenty years after the war, a pale-faced, middle-aged nun stared at me from behind the black iron grille. I said, “Thank you, you saved my life.”

“Oh, I was not one who was involved with the children,” she answered. She listed the names of the sisters who had, but regretted that they were all dead. Did she mean that I had remembered them too late? To add insult to injury she made a long speech to me about the importance of religion. (I was then an atheist.) “You don’t have to be Catholic,” she added, magnanimously, “but you have to have a religion.”

Of course, because my mother died in Auschwitz, I am a Jew, in a dim, cosmic way. I never received confirmation that she died. In 1948 I just heard that she had been sent to that place akin to the dark, plague-filled Middle Ages.

The road is flattening out. Little old grey stone houses, a bit dull but cozy and inviting, dot the landscape. They seem to have been there forever. A cypress tree often adorns the front.

Why am I going back after another twenty years? I don’t really care that much anymore, or do I? In 1986, my friend Jeannette, wrote to me, stating that she knew of an old sister, now in retirement in her own little house next to the convent. She’d been in charge of the children’s chorus. So, all the caring sisters were not dead. Did the nun I spoke to when I first visited not know her? How odd!

Jeannette offered to speak on my behalf to the old nun. Nuns in retirement were allowed to speak. Indeed, with huge blockages in my memory, I had questions. Jeannette’s mission for me was to find out how and when those cloistered women took care of us. I could only visualize the nuns, with stern faces and small eyes behind thick eyeglasses, gliding silently through empty corridors. They were disgruntled and snappish, and they reprimanded us severely for our pranks. They restrained us constantly. They forced us — scrawny, angry children — to kneel in prayer with our knees pressing painfully against the hard wooden floor. They accused us of being ‘Jesus killers.’ They smelled of sweat. They did not wash themselves or us. I wallowed in my aversion for that spooky world of nuns. This open wound was redeemed only by tearful fantasies of my parents, kissing me, hugging me, treasuring me — as the nuns never did.

The nun’s reply put me to shame. In her letter to me, Jeannette wrote that the old nun seemed very kind. She stated that the children were scared and needed reassurance, which was the first thing the nuns attended to. They would urge the children to play. The children were taught all the prayers and the sign of the cross because of the Germans who resided in the neighborhood. The nuns understood so well the children’s need for affection, she had said,

because she herself had lost her mother at a young age. Jeannette and the nun also had a wonderful discussion about God.

Yet, as I read the letter again, nothing in the old nun's account seemed familiar. The nuns must have resented us children, intruding into their lives of silent devotion to God. How could they welcome my presence? They were always staring off into the sky whenever they prayed on the roof. If only they had looked at me!

The retired nun gave Jeannette the address of a Jewish woman, Lucy, who had taken care of the children in the convent during the war, because at the age of 13 she was the oldest child there. Lucy and I rendezvoused in her trinket store in a nearby town. My heart was pounding. She seemed pleasant, alert, and she had an ironic twist to her smile as she dealt expertly with each customer.

We were hardly done with greetings and hugs when she launched into a bitterly humorous account of convent life, as if it had happened the day before, a tirade quite at odds with the old nun's version! "They were constantly on the roof, praying. I (she pointed to her chest dramatically) had to calm the girls down. They were always so scared. But I never had anyone to talk to. I tried to get the nuns to look at me, but not a chance. You see, it was a sin for them to look at other people: you know, worldly vanities (she grimaced), devotion to God. So, I never had anybody to make me feel better. They had an intercom in the dining room. When I had a problem with the children that's how I could talk to them about it, and they still could stay on the other side of the wall. God forbid they should look at me when I spoke! I took care of the wash, the sacristy, the chapel. I even had to teach the children the life of the saints to keep them occupied. The nuns were too busy praying to do anything else ..."

Truth varies with the storyteller, I suppose. I was glad my own feelings were vindicated: we both agreed how they felt about us. From Lucy I found out why the nuns had taken us in: they'd been asked, actually ordered, to do so by their archbishop.ⁱⁱ Children's lives were at stake: the Germans were murdering them. The convent was a safe hideaway, a temporary stop until the children were placed with families in the countryside.

Despite all her fights with the nuns, Lucy has visited them every year since the end of the war. Her own parents perished in the camps.

She showed me a photograph: four girls on the steps of a little house which was our dormitory. Was I one of them? She had seen so many children pass through on their way to be hidden elsewhere. No, she did not remember me. I was disappointed that I had made no impression. But I did not remember her either. Was she the vague plump figure I recalled who always scolded me? I decided not to tell her about that.



Wartime school photo of Flora in Nice.

We talked over a lunch at an Alsatian choucroute restaurant. I had to shout my questions across a long narrow table to be heard above the loud German songs entertaining the customers. She was spewing out names: Sister Monique, Sister Angelique, Sister... She was pouring out stories. Did I remember the day the nuns put blessed wafers in the soup when there were no more turnips or potatoes to eat? Was I there the day *Monseigneur* conducted Mass and she kissed his ring? And the day the German priest came in the chapel to say Mass for the German soldiers, and all the children had to remain completely silent in our dormitory? Apart from the lice epidemic which I vaguely recalled, no, I did not remember what she was describing. We cried together but I felt like a thief stealing someone else's memories.

Jeannette and I have arrived at our destination, or so we think. The entrance is majestic. I recognize the property surrounded by big walls of hewn rock. Oleander bushes shining in the summer light sprawl luxuriantly along both sides of the road. A guard stops us. No, this is not the convent. We are on the grounds of a private mansion. However, the Germans did live there during the war, he volunteers. The convent is right across the street in full view! My God! So close!

Low walls alternating with diminutive iron bars, a wide opening with no door leading to a courtyard of flat stones, a small terraced hill typical of the Southern French countryside. How could this be the same place as the convent in my memory? I recognize nothing. An eerie stillness pervades this strange place. That feels familiar, old. I am alone again in another time and space. A middle-aged woman is plucking the weeds from between the flowers which are no

longer in an orderly array and now growing quite wild. The woman lives in the neighborhood and helps the nuns to tend the garden. She also grew up nearby and had often visited the convent during the war because the nuns gave food to Christian children from the start of rationing. That is why later on Jewish children could come and remain unnoticed even though the Germans were able to watch from across the street, she explains. But how did we escape that night in the covered truck without arousing their suspicions? I still shiver at the thought.

On the very top of the hill stands a little house surrounded by a hedge of roses. That was our dormitory, the woman tells us. I recognize the three steps leading to the house from the photograph Lucy showed me. We are invited to speak to Mother Superior who had been a young nun during the war. The woman points to a door in the center of a yellowish, tall round building across the courtyard. It is the entrance to the convent. (The flat roof where the nuns prayed is behind there somewhere.) We have only to ring the bell. I hesitate a moment. The door opens as if by itself onto a large, light-filled room. A tall figure in a long heavy gown stands behind a row of iron bars which take up a third of the room. She has a broad, warm, welcoming smile. "You were here during the war?" she exclaims, and to my amazement, she opens the iron gate wide and stands there in close proximity to me.

"Flora, but of course, I know about you!" She is staring at me. "I prayed for you so much!" It's as though the ultimate proof that her prayers would be answered is standing beside her: a vindication of her faith, her purpose, and of the glory of God in Heaven. I listen in wonder to the unexpected woman who is so happy to see me. Tears roll down my face and I remember to say, "Thank you, you saved my life." I reach out my hand but she comes towards me and embraces me!

"I prayed. I prayed so much," she repeats in her embrace. "I recall when you came, you had such a nice, original name; I never saw you, but we had good ears," she says with passion. "We always listened from the roof; you did not stay very long," she adds.

So that's how it was! Because they were not allowed to look at us, they listened instead. And when they were walking endlessly around the roof, the nuns were praying for us. Amazingly, that had never occurred to me! It suddenly is obvious. It seems even good enough. Within the isolation of their world, they'd found their own way to care for us.

She has no questions about my faith, nor does she make a speech about my needing one. Instead, she opens the floodgates for an outpouring of apologies about prejudice: they were taught prejudice, taught that their religion was superior to others, that the Jews were in error. They did not know any better. It was so destructive. She stands very straight, her cheeks flushed, her eyes lifted towards the sky. Every human being is equal under God. She speaks for a long time with great conviction. I am spellbound by this survivor of my past who gives me the right to forgive her, the chance to cry with her about all that senseless war during which these nuns did their best to help us. She makes me feel the love of her God.

She bursts out, "The nuns too were very scared. Each day was frightening; the Germans were so close. Their boots would stomp the pavement endlessly each morning; their shouts invaded the silence every night. We would all have been killed had we been discovered." She

wants me to understand that. “I wish more of you would come back,” she adds sadly. It seems few have.

She does not want to know what I do in the United States. We will meet again in Heaven, she assures me. Jeannette hopes we will meet before then. I concur and promise to visit again. But Mother Superior does not want us to go yet. She suggests we meet Sister N who happens to be passing by the open door. She had been a *soeur courière*, entrusted with worldly chores, one of the nuns who took care of the children as opposed to those who always prayed. Sister N’s job had been to get food for the children. A scrawny woman, now well into her 80s, she is watering the garden from her wheelchair, dragging a hose as she moves energetically towards each flower. She is accompanied by a grey cat on a leash hanging from the arm of the wheelchair.

I embrace her spontaneously. “It was impossible!” she explains, her manner quickly becoming heated, her arms flailing. “There was so little to eat! Every day I took my bicycle up and down the hill looking for food in all the stores, begging shopkeepers. These *merdouilles* (shits!), she explodes! They didn’t care. They wouldn’t give me any extra milk or bread! And we had more and more children to feed here every day. Once I found one lousy piece of chocolate. Oh, I had to fight for it! I wouldn’t have left without it! And that Jewish couple we hid! They were so rich and yet they wouldn’t give me their black-market food coupons. I threatened to denounce them, these *merdouilles*,” she says with fury. I can hardly believe my ears!

We stop in the backyard where sunflowers bend above the dry, crusty earth. Far beyond the low walls, the outline of the Alps shines blue in the summer light, surrounding the valley, which to our eyes, blinded by the midday sun, looks dark. A familiar smell of thyme and lavender pervades the air.

“*Merdouilles*,” she mutters again under her breath. I guess she possesses the license of old age. My irreverent self enjoys this moment thoroughly.

Suddenly she, too, launches into a diatribe against prejudice. “Everyone is equal under God. Prejudice is due to ignorance, jealousy, pettiness. Intolerance is responsible for all the violence: it is drilled into people during their childhood. It all started when I was 3 years old in Morocco where I was born.”

She goes on to reminisce about her fights with her father. “You are not a man,” she would regularly declare. She had learned the insult from her brothers who would shout that to each other during their daily battles. Her father was so angry. “Wait until you’re married,” he’d threaten, “your husband will make you knuckle under.”

“Well, I fixed him,” she chuckles, “I did not marry a man. He is not born yet, the man who will do that to me.” She looks at her watch and announces, “It’s time for mass.”

As we drive away, back to the city, Jeannette and I laugh and laugh. “*Merdouilles*,” I repeat over and over as I clap my hands. How could those two passionate women have remained mute for all these years? There is no answer to why they did it. God bless them both. Somehow, the isolation of the war and the silence are long over. Even my mother feels a bit closer. ■



Flora and her Israeli relatives on another visit to her convent

Flora Hogman is a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Manhattan. She has done extensive research on trauma and identity relating to aspects of survival from the Holocaust, especially concerning children during and after the war, the effects of conversion to Christianity on adult identity, and resolution of trauma. Her publications include:

- Hogman, Flora, 2020, *The Hidden Child, Vol. XXVIII, Hatred and Reconciliation: The German and the Jewish Journeys Following the Holocaust.*
- Hogman, F., 1995 *Memory of the Holocaust, An organizing vehicle for Identity, in Echoes of the Holocaust, Jerusalem, Israel.*
- Hogman, F., 1988 *The Experience of Catholicism for Jewish Children During WWII, Psychoanalytic Review, 75 (4).*

- *Hogman, Flora, 1985, Role of Memories in Lives of WW II orphans, American Academy of Child Psychiatry.*
- *Hogman, F., 1983, Coping Mechanisms of Jewish Children During WWII and its aftermath, Journal of Humanistic Psychology.*
- *Hogman, F., 1998, Trauma and Identity through two generations of the Holocaust, in Psychoanalytic Review, V. 85, no. 4.*

ⁱ Through the 'Marcel' resistance network, run by Moussa Abadi and Odette Rosenstock, the Couvent des Clarisses hid a dozen Jewish children, including the author. The convent was denounced several times, but Sister Anne-Marie always succeeded in hiding the children prior to the Gestapo's searches.

ⁱⁱ The Marcel network operated with the assistance of the Archbishop of Nice, Monsignor Paul Rémond. In all, 527 Jewish children in the area of the Alpes-Maritimes were rescued between 1943 and 1945.