

Frau Angela

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“We never forgive enough, but forget too much”

Madame Swetchine (1782-1857)
Russian-French author

Prologue

Angélique Dams* was born in August 1913 in a small village in East Flanders, the daughter of a merchant and an arrogant housewife..

She has one brother and one sister. Angèle is an anxious and introverted child; her sister is her complete opposite. Her brother has the same good nature as his father. He, too, is far too well-behaved. He dies at a young age. Both Angélique and her sister marry civil servants.

This marriage, as well as the harmful influence of her aggressive sister, turns Angèle into a completely different woman. After six months of marriage, she calls it quits with her civil servant. She leaves him, and not long after, the divorce is a fact.

From that moment on, Angèle is no longer the same woman: she is afraid of nothing and no one anymore.

She decides to go into business; after all, blood is thicker than water!

When the Second World War breaks out in 1940, we find Angèle Dams back in Brasschaat, where she lives.

* Both the first and last names of the main character, as well as the names of all those involved, were changed to arbitrary, fictional names out of respect for the deceased and/or their surviving relatives. However, changing the names does not detract from the authenticity of the story.

QUOTES FROM REVIEWS

- A page-turner and must-read

John R. Bol.com

- This should become a bestseller

Papillon Bol.com

- A compelling story that reads like a dream

Koos Verkaik

- A breathtaking book about imprisonment, betrayal, and injustice

Hanneke Tinor-Centi

- Gripping and fast-paced. Historical and personal

Boekenkrant



Chapter 1

As I do almost every afternoon, I am sitting in the 'Paon Royal', a chic and stately café on Queen Astrid Square, near the zoo, enjoying my self-imposed work break. As a self-employed person, I can afford to do so.

Two months ago, the Germans invaded Belgium.

The Antwerp city centre is buzzing with activity. You don't notice all that much of the occupation yet. Here and there, perhaps a German uniform, which, in its drab severity, stands out starkly against the colourful summer clothing of the civilian population. Here and there, the German uniforms even elicit admiring glances from women walking or shopping.

I have ordered a tea. It is quite busy in the 'Paon', but the table next to mine is still free.

Two uniformed Germans enter; they are wearing the blue uniforms of the Wehrmacht. They sit down at the table next to mine and get into an animated conversation. The older of the two is a handsome man: tall, with dark hair, not an Aryan type at all.

The other is younger and unattractive. He is fat and has a flushed face.

The older one looks like an aristocrat, the younger one a peasant.

Suddenly, completely unintentionally, I hear the words 'Mehl' and 'Kaffee' being spoken.

I prick up my ears. I earn my living during the war by buying and selling foodstuffs. Perhaps there is something to be made here?

From the conversation between the two officers, I gather that it concerns Belgian material seized by the Wehrmacht. It is destined to be transported to Cologne.

This seems like a good opportunity!

I stand up and very boldly introduce myself to the two Wehrmacht men. As the daughter of a cattle dealer, I am used to dealing with people.

I apologize for the 'Störung' and politely ask if the gentlemen happen to have coffee to sell. The oldest looks at me intently for a few moments and then says:

'Einen ganzen Zug.'

'Und auch Mehl,' the ugly fellow immediately adds.

I am 'eingeladen' to take a seat at their little table.

The tall handsome one introduces himself as Beutzen; I estimate him to be about thirty-five.

He is definitely an officer, for there are gold stars on his epaulettes.

The peasant, an ordinary soldier, is named Reinhardt. He must be about twenty-four or twenty-five.

I am told that 'den ganzen Zug' is a whole train full of foodstuffs.

What interests me mainly are the non-perishable goods. After some back-and-forth, I reach an agreement with the two Germans. For one hundred

thousand francs, I buy all the unroasted coffee and the flour.

‘You have to arrange the transport yourself,’ laughs Beutzen. ‘No problem at all,’ I reply, ‘I have enough business contacts.’

‘You can come pick everything up at the South Station the day after tomorrow,’ says Reinhardt. He pauses for a moment and then adds, half whispering, half hissing: ‘...and remember... cash payment!’

I nod in agreement and stand up. ‘Understood, I’ll be there.’ I say goodbye; my suppliers are staying behind; they even insist on paying for my drinks...

As I step out of the ‘Paon’, I feel myself being watched by two pairs of German eyes.

My slender, blond appearance has apparently made an impression. All sorts of thoughts race through my mind.

I realize all too well that—by buying up the coffee and the flour—I am committing receiving stolen goods. And yet, I feel not a shred of remorse. After all, I am buying back what the Germans took from us Belgians!

The priority now is to find someone as quickly as possible who can provide me with the necessary truckloads. I walk to the harbour and decide to enlist the help of a friendly harbour director.

He receives me extremely kindly, listens to my story, and... promises to contact the necessary people.

I go home and wait.

In the late afternoon, the harbour director calls me. "I think I have found the right person," he says. "Come to my bungalow this evening, then everything can be arranged."

That evening at the bungalow, I meet Rik Florus from Zandvliet.

He is a 14-18 war invalid and, by the looks of it, he has been through quite a lot. Moreover, he has already been partially informed by the harbour director, for he asks me directly: "What are those trucks for?"

"To pick up coffee and flour at the South Station," I answer. "I trade in foodstuffs."

Florus looks at me with sly, half-closed eyes. "Hmm, I think I can help you," he chuckles. 'Thinking doesn't get me trucks,' I reply, somewhat irritated.

'Listen, madam,' says Florus, 'we are both in business. How much are you paying me for this little deal? Money, that interests me. I want to hear a figure from you now...'

I deliberately wait a moment before answering. Florus looks at me penetratingly from under his heavy eyebrows. Involuntarily, I think of a cat stalking its mouse prey.

I look him straight in the eyes. 'Ten thousand francs,' I say.

'Plus a bag of flour and a sack of coffee,' Florus immediately adds.

Although ten thousand francs plus a bag of flour and a sack of coffee represent a small fortune, I agree, shaking my head.

‘You’ll hear from me tomorrow,’ Florus growls, and before I can ask him anything else, he is already out the door.

‘You can bet he’ll get you those trucks,’ the port director reassures me. ‘You’ll definitely hear from him tomorrow...’

Indeed. The next day, Rik Florus contacts me. He has managed to gather the necessary trucks. They belong to a certain Coppens, a beer merchant from Antwerp. I don’t sit still and dive right in... By evening, the vast majority of my purchased ‘Zug’ has already been sold on.

The next day, I am picked up by Coppens’ son, accompanied by Florus. Apparently, he doesn’t want to take any risks. He doesn’t want to miss out on his bale of coffee and his sack of flour, as well as the ten thousand francs.

The drivers of the two trucks seem fine to me. At least, they don’t ask any annoying questions.

We drive to the South Station, and upon arrival, the trucks are loaded with sacks of flour and bales of coffee. Beutzen leads the entire operation, and once everything is loaded, I pay him the agreed hundred thousand francs.

‘Danke schön,’ he smiles and hands me a paper full of stamps and signatures. When Beutzen notices my surprised look, he laughs: ‘You’ll need that!’

Only now do I realize that it is a pass.

‘Have a good trip!’ shouts Beutzen, and off he goes.

What I had already sold in the previous days is delivered first, and Florus also receives his agreed share and wages.

I decide to store part of the rest of the cargo in a rented basement kitchen on the Italiëlei and part with the friendly harbour director. I do not want to store any of the purchases at my home address on the Bredabaan.

As we drive out of a small tunnel, the driver suddenly curses piercingly.

The Feldpolizei are standing in the middle of the road; they are waving a red-and-white sign and make us stop. My heart is pounding in my throat...

But I know that offense is the best defense, and I jump out of the truck. With a charming smile, I hand the pass to the Feldwebel. I don't even give him the time to ask anything.

He looks at the paper somewhat suspiciously at first, but when he sees all those stamps and signatures, he says curtly: ‘In Ordnung, durchfahren!’

Back in the truck, both the driver and I heave a deep sigh of relief.

We get home without further difficulties.

Two days later, Florus stands at my door in the evening. He is not satisfied with what I have given him.

‘Listen, madam,’ he says, ‘you are making a fortune selling that coffee and that flour. I want another sack of flour and a bale of coffee.’

I laugh him outright. ‘I gave you what was agreed upon, and as far as I’m concerned, that matter is settled. End of story!’

Florus looks at me deeply and penetratingly for a few moments. His nostrils twitch as he snaps at me, hissing like a snake: ‘So, madam thinks she has a strong case.’ ‘Well, that will cost you dearly.’

He turns around, mumbles something unintelligible between his teeth, and disappears.

I pay little further attention to Florus’s visit. I have made more than a decent profit from the sale of the flour and coffee.

That is the only thing I am thinking about; I am living in a kind of euphoria.

A few days later, around noon, a German officer rings the doorbell. He has a warrant with him. I must report to the Ortskommandatur in the Pelikaanstraat! Damn scoundrel Florus, are the first thoughts that flash through my mind.

My brain suddenly goes into overdrive... I must try to buy time. ‘Entschuldigung,’ I begin to the officer, ‘aber... uh... ich bin ziek... uh krank.’ ‘I have an appointment with the doctor.’

‘Gehen Sie erstens zum Arzt,’ replies the German, ‘and then report immediately at the Ortskommandatur.’ He slams his heels together, salutes with his arm forward while a powerful ‘Heil Hitler’ rolls from his mouth.

I have no time to lose... action must be taken quickly.

First and foremost, I pay a brief and businesslike visit to my lawyer, Mr. Van Noten.

I tell my story in telegraphic style. ‘If I am arrested, which will more than likely happen, I want you to defend me,’ I conclude my account. Mr. Van Noten agrees and will assist me if necessary.

From the lawyer, I go to the beer dealer who delivered the trucks.

I play my cards on the table with Coppens. I tell him everything, including what I think about Florus. To keep him out of trouble as much as possible, I say: ‘The coffee and the flour belonged to me; that is all you know. I only hired trucks from you to transport goods. You don’t need to say anything more.’

Then I go to the Pelikaanstraat.

With trembling knees, I step into the Ortskommandatur. A German police officer listens only half-heartedly when I tell him I need to report in.

‘Thre Papieren,’ he barks at me. I hand him my identity card. He tilts his head to the side: ‘Mitkommen’. In an adjoining room, he sits down at

a desk and very carefully notes down my personal details. I have to remain standing.

When finished writing, he leans back. A strange smile plays around his lips. He looks at me with a peculiar, almost hypnotic gaze...for minutes... without saying a single word. Then suddenly he asks, almost whispering: 'Frau Angela, did you buy coffee?'

What else can I do but answer in the affirmative.

'Sit down,' he says now, extremely kindly.

He presses a small bell.

The door swings open and a soldier pushes someone inside. I have to swallow hard when I look at that man's face. It is swollen and covered in scabs of clotted blood. Only then do I realize, to my horror, that the man is Beutzen. Not much remains of his handsome appearance.

The police officer asks: 'Frau Dams, do you know this man?'

I do not dare look at Beutzen. My 'nein' sounds almost inaudible. Then the officer wants to know from Beutzen if he knows me. Not a word comes from the broken lips of the Wehrmacht officer; he only shakes his head 'no'. A brief nod of the head from the police officer and the soldier pushes Beutzen back outside.

Not five seconds later, someone else is led in. I recognize Reinhardt immediately. He, too, bears the marks of a thorough interrogation, yet compared to

Beutzen, he still looks presentable. Did he perhaps offer less resistance?

Again the same question: 'Frau Dams, do you know this man?' My 'nein' now sounds short and sharp.

'Do you know this woman?' the police officer now asks Reinhardt. 'Jawohl,' comes the reply. 'She is the woman who picked up the flour and the coffee, and she is also the one who paid one hundred thousand francs for those goods.'

'Gut,' sighs the police officer. Again that same brief nod of the head and the soldier leads Reinhardt away. Our eyes meet for a moment. In his eyes, I read a silent hatred. No, no hatred towards me, I can clearly tell...

'Frau Dams,' the officer's voice rings out, 'Frau Dams, you are hereby officially charged. You are under an arrest warrant.' I think I hear a slightly mocking tone in his voice. He presses the bell button and another soldier appears, a different one than before.

'Mitnehmen,' he commands. 'Into prison. Charge: handling of stolen German army property!'

I am being taken as a prisoner to Begijnenstraat.

Chapter 2

I am locked up in cell number 3. My cellmate is Cathy Van Reeth, a stenotypist by profession. I tell her my story, she hers. She was forced to work for the Germans. One day, a life-sized photo of ‘der Führer’ was hung in her office. Cathy had already been immensely annoyed by this, and one day she had cried out in despair:

‘Please, take that portrait of Hitler out of here. With a guy like that on the wall, I cannot-possibly- work.’ The photo of Hitler was not taken down... but... Cathy was arrested.

The charge was: ‘Defamation of the Führer’.

She tells me that her trial turned into a farce, but that she was sentenced to fifteen months in prison.

When I hear that, I break out in a cold sweat. Good heavens, I think despairingly, if you have to spend fifteen months behind bars for such a trifle... what awaits me then?

In the Begijnenstraat, we are treated fairly well. We are allowed to write letters, we can receive visitors, and the prison food is edible. I write to my mother that I am in prison. As soon as she receives the message, she comes to visit me. She also makes sure that my lawyer is notified. Once a day we are given fresh air. We are allowed to walk freely around the circular courtyard. Several cell windows overlook this courtyard. During a walk, I