

Chapter 5

The Houffalize Corridor

"Cutting off a leg or something else, it is still only meat."

1 On Monday, December 18, Rettigny woke to biting cold weather. The tiny village lay tucked in the forests midway between Houffalize to the southwest and Gouvy to the northeast. Henri Collette had risen long before the feeble sun. As dawn gathered its courage, it found the teenager, his boss, and other farmers on the village fringes, busily gathering bundles of twigs. The heavy logs that made fireplaces crackle and roar had been sawn and stocked in dry places weeks earlier. The twigs were meant to stoke the ovens that would transform carefully kneaded balls of dough into the large, crusty breads for which the Ardennes are known.

By nine o'clock, Henri had tired of his work somewhat and was very hungry. Continuing his task mechanically, he allowed his mind to wander. It drifted back to how fate had brought him to this place. More than four years ago, Hitler's Germany had invaded Belgium. As the occupation of his hometown, Chaudfontaine, some six miles southeast of Liège, dragged on, food had become ever scarcer. Together with a friend, he had roamed the countryside to the south on his bike, in search of the butter, eggs, and meat that war had made difficult to find in urban areas. He had eventually ended up in Rettigny, not quite thirty-five miles southeast of his home as the crow flies. One of the village's farmers, his present boss, had asked if he cared to stay on as a temporary laborer. Henri had not needed much prodding. Now, many months later, despite the nagging separation from his family, Henri felt warm and happy inside. The war was over at last. In barely a few weeks he would be sixteen and, as far as he could tell, an adult. Next spring he would go home and start a new life in a brave new world of peace.

Peace had suddenly come to Rettigny on a Saturday last September. Henri smiled as he made the scenes of that exhilarating day replay in his mind's eye once again. Haggard German troops had passed through Rettigny in disorder for days on end. Most had been on foot, pushing carriages or wheelbarrows in which they carried guns and bags. Vehicles in the trudging columns had looked like moving beehives with soldiers clinging to all sides for dear life. One lone tank had lumbered by with its front wheel missing. In the wake of the retreating columns had followed total silence. It was, almost irreverently, pierced by the unfamiliar sound of an American jeep. Then the villagers had spotted their first GIs, walking single file on each side of the road leading to Gouvy. Henri's boss had thrust a bottle and two glasses into his hand and dispatched him to the road. There he had served drinks to a seemingly endless stream of thirsty soldiers. Henri's only regret was that the Americans had not deemed Rettigny worthy of a prolonged stay and that, as a consequence, he had tasted little of the chewing gum and chocolate he knew they had been handing out freely in the bigger towns where they were billeted.

The hollow rumble of wooden wheels on frozen soil awoke Henri from his reveries. Peering out of the woods to catch a glimpse of the passersby, his heart experienced a sharp jolt. Heading in the opposite direction of the beaten Germans he had just recalled was a snakelike column of wagons pulled by horses and oxen. They were piled high with furniture and mattresses hemming in children and old folks covered in blankets. Ashen-faced men and women walked between and alongside the wagons, some driving cattle before them. The scene immediately reminded Henri of the exodus of Belgian civilians that had followed the German invasion of May 1940. Eager to learn what was going on, Henri and the other men stepped out of the forest, lining the road to question the refugees. The frightened people, whose accents instantly made clear they were from the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, warned the astonished farmers that the Germans were coming. The enemy had crossed the German border again, they claimed, was ripping through Luxembourg's northern tip, and was now already as close to Belgium as Bas-Bellain and Haut-Bellain, the very villages they had left in such a hurry not long ago.

Lacking time even to digest the news, the farmers rushed to their homes. Henri felt a nauseating knot in his stomach. They had been hearing the rumble of artillery from the West Wall for some time, but that was nothing new and no one had given it another thought. What

to do now? His boss never wavered: he, like the majority of Rettigny's farmers, was going to stay put. Jean, on the other hand, his boss's brother-in-law, decided to make a run for it. In a split second he could be seen furiously pedaling his way west. Minutes after Jean had disappeared from sight, two German behemoths were already clanking past the farm of Henri's employer. Somehow Jean on his rickety bike would manage to evade the German panzers all the way to safety. Two or three other young men from his village, however, were to ride to their deaths on one of the roads leading west.

The following morning more than a dozen enemy tanks could be seen sitting on a nearby hill, pointing their guns in the direction of Montleban and Cherain. These fat German targets finally taunted the American artillery into action later that day. As the first salvos came crashing down in and around Rettigny, the electricity was abruptly cut off and the village was thrown into darkness. It was the beginning of a night that seemed without end. Rettigny's inhabitants raced into the cellars, bunching together in those deemed most solid. In the vaulted cellar where Henri was hiding, three neighboring families soon joined his employer's family. One of the villagers arrived wounded, a piece of wood sheared off by an explosion having ripped open his brow. There was nothing to treat the wound with and no one dared leave the cellar to get what was needed. A single candle faintly lit the catacomb for a while and then died down. The inky gloom was broken only by flares from the explosions occasionally flashing through the hatch's cracks; women sought solace in an interminable recital of the rosary.

Toward morning the barrage lifted as suddenly as it had begun. People let the awkward silence sink in for a few minutes. Then someone nervously suggested, "What if we have a look?" The hatch was pushed away. As the villagers shuffled into the farm's courtyard, their eyes met nothing but half-tracks, ambulances, and German soldiers. Distressed families quickly peeled away from the group to check on their own homes. Henri's home had already been taken over by enemy troops. He and his host family had no alternative but to retire to the stables, where they were glad to share in the cattle's warmth.¹

Unbeknownst to the villagers, the German troops who had taken hold of Rettigny so brusquely belonged to the 116th Panzer Division. That elite division, nicknamed the Windhund, or Greyhound Division, had fought hard all the way from Normandy to the Hürtgen Forest. The armored outfit had been completely refitted for the

Ardennes offensive. It had been brought back almost to full strength in men and had started the first day of the offensive with close to one hundred tanks and assault guns.²

Together with the 560th Volksgrenadier Division the 116th Panzer Division made up General Krüger's 58th Panzer Corps. Krüger's force had launched its attack on the morning of December 16 in an area just below the Schnee Eifel. Contrary to expectations, it had taken both divisions two long days to seize the Our bridges and break through two heavily outnumbered regiments of the 28th U.S. Infantry Division dug in on the other side in the northern tip of Luxembourg. The understrength 560th Volksgrenadier Division, running mate and flanking force of the 116th Panzer Division, proved the weak link in the corps. The infantry division had been scraped together from occupation troops in Norway and Denmark. Its men, many rather old for soldiers and in poor physical condition, had not seen combat and had received little training.³

Once the 58th Panzer Corps had finally broken through the defenses of the 28th Infantry Division, however, it had gained more speed while racing through the northern part of Luxembourg and into Belgium virtually unopposed. As American troops began to coalesce around the St. Vith salient in the north and the Bastogne stronghold to the south, a gaping corridor of some thirteen miles was opening up between them. Into this gap poured the 116th Panzer and 560th Volksgrenadier Divisions like a river that had burst its dam. Like water flowing rapidly to the point of least resistance, so the 116th Panzer Division now rolled headlong through village after undefended village between the larger communities of Gouvy and Houffalize. Rettigny was just one of many farming settlements in the area overtaken by German troops before the inhabitants even had time to contemplate what was happening.⁴

2 Things were different in Gouvy. Situated some three miles northeast of Rettigny, a railroad connecting the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg with Belgium's eastern provinces brushed past the small town. The Americans had transformed it into a vehicle park with earth-moving machinery and a supply dump that held, among other things, eighty thousand rations. Moreover, Gouvy's small number of depot guards and MPs were watching over 350 German POWs. On the same day that its first tanks entered Rettigny, the 116th Panzer Division began reconnoitering in the direction of Gouvy on its right

flank. At the sight of the first German tanks, the handful of Americans in the town instantly set fire to the store of rations. Just as the smoke began to rise, however, a detachment of the 440th Antiaircraft Battalion arrived. It was one of several detachments sent south by the commander of the St. Vith defense force to block key road junctions on its right flank and provide advance warning of German attacks building in that direction.

Col. Robert Stone, commander of the antiaircraft battalion, was ordered to hang on to Gouvy for as long as he could. The fire was put out and fifty thousand rations were rushed to the forces in St. Vith who badly needed them. Later that day Colonel Stone received a platoon of light tanks as reinforcement. A nearby battery of 155mm howitzers trained its guns on the approaches to Gouvy in support.⁵

As German troops inched closer, Colonel Stone worried not only about the large group of German prisoners in their midst, but also about possible infiltrators. Having fled before the new German onslaught, many young Luxembourgers were hiding in Gouvy for fear of being forced into the German army. Colonel Stone called on the local Belgian gendarmes to help verify the identity of suspect men in civilian clothing. Three gendarmes who had stayed put volunteered for the task. They had barely entered the American lines, however, when gendarme Schröder was hit by what appeared to be a German dum dum bullet. It cut through the flesh of his right leg and then ripped into his left leg, where it exploded against the thighbone. His comrades hurriedly dragged the badly wounded man into a ditch.

When an American medic arrived at the scene, he found the bone shattered over a length of four inches and the arteries severed. In a hail of fire GIs and gendarmes transported the thirty-one-year-old Schröder to a dentist's office. There, in the company of the wounded man's wife, they succeeded in stemming the bleeding a little. It was the closest Schröder would come to medical treatment for several days. Troops of the 560th Volksgrenadier Division stormed Gouvy, were thrown out, then took it again and held on. On the night of December 21, a German officer with three bullets in his stomach was placed next to the gendarme. He was left there to die.

It looked as if the same fate would befall Gendarme Schröder. Gouvy's local doctor, Mr. Charles, could not get to him because he had been requisitioned by the Germans to take care of their wounded. He barely had time to slip into his own cellar now and then to check on his family and take a quick sip from a carefully hidden bottle of

calvados. When he finally did manage to reach his townsman, the casualty's left leg had become so seriously infected that Dr. Charles could see no solution other than amputation.

Even that was easier said than done. The doctor had little if any surgical experience and lacked even the most basic instruments for such a risky operation. German medical personnel at that point in the battle needed more help than they could give. Realizing that the gendarme would certainly die if nothing was done, Raymond Laloux, noticing the doctor's hesitation, offered to perform the operation himself. Laloux was the town's butcher. "Cutting off a leg or something else," he tried to convince the others as well as himself, "it is still only meat. We're going to do it."

By the time Laloux returned with saw, knife, and cleaver, the dentist's office had been readied as operating room. Blood, plasma, and a few medicines were recovered from a bag the Americans had made sure to leave with the gendarme. Schröder was anesthetized with the help of alcohol and a whiff of ether that someone had turned up. The casualty was strapped to a stretcher, with Mr. Robert, the dentist, and Miss Calbuche, the midwife, each firmly holding on to an arm.

Several hours later, butcher Laloux, his face drawn, stepped out of the operating room to announce that, should no complications set in, Schröder was saved. But the doctor worried that complications would be difficult to avoid. Because the pharmacy was in ruins, he decided to draw up a list of useful medicines and have it circulate among the inhabitants hiding in their cellars. With the battle not yet decided and shooting continuing from all sides, Schröder's despairing wife rushed from door to door to collect what she could. Together, the people of Gouvy would somehow manage to keep Gendarme Schröder alive until the long-awaited return of the Americans in January.⁶

3 Houffalize, with slightly more than 1,300 souls, was located more than four miles southwest of Rettigny. In its drive toward the Ourthe River, the last important natural barrier before the Meuse, Houffalize was the first town of some size that the 58th Panzer Corps encountered in the undefended gap between St. Vith and Bastogne. The town and surrounding villages had been liberated by the 4th U.S. Infantry Division on and around September 10, 1944. If the invasion of Normandy on June 6 had brought "the end of the tunnel" in sight,

then for Gabrielle Kauffmann in Mont, a town just northwest of Houffalize, the arrival of American troops in her own village three months later meant the definite close of "a long nightmare." "It is euphoria," she wrote, "another life is being born; at last, the hope of freedom!"⁷

The inhabitants of Houffalize itself were no less euphoric. They were not content hailing the Americans of the 22nd Infantry with flowers, fruit, cakes, and their best wines. By the time the regiment's engineer units caught up with the spearheads, the Houffalois had cleared away the trees that the Germans had blown up across the roads, and in only forty-five minutes, the town's artisans had replaced one of the three bridges over the Ourthe that had been blown up by the enemy while retreating. This wooden bridge succeeded in carrying even the heaviest equipment until the Americans themselves were able to build a new one three days later. The men of the 22nd Infantry had seen nothing like it since Normandy.⁸

Even after the euphoria had exhausted itself, relations between the population and American troops remained warm. Though few, if any, GIs were stationed in the surrounding villages, Gabrielle Kauffmann was fortunate to live next to the road in Mont that fed into the main north-south artery connecting Houffalize with Bastogne. Before long, she could hardly keep up with the American demand for butter and eggs while also taking care of the GIs' laundry. In return, soldiers rewarded her handsomely with canned goods and the soap she had craved for so long. Any children around could count on being spoiled. Meanwhile, the fair share of American troops billeted in Houffalize (as a tourist spot the town boasted no less than fifteen hotels) easily succeeded in punctuating the gloomy onset of autumn. Most of them belonged to the 59th Signal and 518th Military Police Battalions. They organized movie shows that were open to the excited civilians and dances that were designed to attract any inhabitant of the female sex. In the loaded atmosphere of a war that was dying but not yet dead, intercultural friendship and romance flourished. At least one Houffalize girl would later marry the American soldier of her dreams.⁹

Though liberated and terribly relieved, the Houffalois continued to live in the shadow of war. The heavy military traffic droning through their town in endless procession inevitably took its toll. On September 19 an American vehicle killed Louis Nicolay, a fifty-eight-year-old farmer. Americans not much later had to rush bailiff Emile Dubru to

their hospital in Clervaux. His motorcycle had been swept from under him by a jeep racing down from Bastogne. He was diagnosed with a badly fractured skull. A large truck that was transporting a tank failed to negotiate a turn in a narrow street in the town's center and smashed into the facade of the Jacqmin home, but this time there were no victims. Fate struck again, however, at the end of October when an explosive device blew up in the hands of two children who were examining it. A couple of days later one of the boys had died; he was ten.¹⁰

All that time Gabrielle Kauffmann had been unable to savor her newly gained freedom the way she had envisaged. For too many nights she had been reminded by the faint rumbling of explosions that war had stalled not much farther than the border with Germany, barely a few dozen miles from where she lived. Not even the hustle and bustle of the happy-go-lucky GIs in and around her home had prevented the unfinished war from keeping her jittery. When on December 16 rumors started to circulate in Mont about a major German offensive in Luxembourg, Mrs. Kauffmann instantly sensed that something was wrong. Her fears were rudely confirmed late that evening when a man claiming to be the mayor of the Luxembourg town of Troisvierges asked if he and his wife could stay for the night. Fearing a German breakthrough, they had not hesitated to flee on their bicycles.¹¹

The next day, while more and more people from Luxembourg poured into the villages around Houffalize on foot, on bicycles, and in wagons, refugees from St. Vith and the surrounding area began arriving in the town loaded on American trucks. That the Americans themselves were showing increasing signs of nervousness and tension worried the Houffalois more than anything else. The Houffalize mayor, Joseph Maréchal, begged the American commander to take care of his people, too, should the Germans threaten their town. The officer evasively replied that all everyone needed to do was stay calm and that, in the worst case, the people would be warned in time. Meanwhile, however, he imposed a curfew, set to begin at dark, around five o'clock in the afternoon. American patrols would shoot without warning at anyone outside their homes after that time. That same Sunday, in Tavigny, a village to the southeast, scared people crowded together in the church. They formed a procession, feverishly chanting the names of all the saints they could remember for protection.¹²

As day broke on Monday, December 18, the Houffalois watched in astonishment as the mighty American military began to pull out of

their town without official warning, leaving behind only a rearguard force. A handful of former resistance fighters from the *Armée Secrète* called on the commanding officer of this token force, volunteering their help in whatever way possible. Thanking them, the American politely declined their offer. He knew there was not going to be even as much as a delaying action to prevent Houffalize from falling into German hands.¹³

Distraught inhabitants now had to make tough decisions at a moment's notice. Should they stay or flee? What should they take? Should they leave someone behind to guard property and possessions? For those who had belonged to the resistance as well as for most young people (afraid of being sent to Germany as forced laborers) there was not much of a dilemma: they could be seen heading west on the heels of the withdrawing Americans. Families needed more time to decide and get organized. Many began a doomed race against time on foot or on bicycles. Others took to the roads in animal-drawn wagons. A few fortunates hitched a ride with the Americans or managed to secure a place on the handful of trucks owned by the more privileged of Houffalize, such as the brewer and the lumber merchant. Jostled along by refugees from the East Cantons and Luxembourg, most Houffalois decided to go no farther than the surrounding countryside. There they found temporary shelter in presbyteries, convents, schools, and the homes of friends and relatives. Some, however, barely stopped moving until they had reached as far as the provinces of Namur, Hainaut, and Brabant. By nightfall on the day that the American troops had begun abandoning it, half the population had hemorrhaged from Houffalize.¹⁴

Those civilians who had decided not to leave almost instinctively sought strength in numbers. Many joined three large groups taking refuge in the most spacious and reliable cellars in town, two of which ran under the presbytery and the tannery. The first German shell hit the town Monday evening, blowing up a cross in the old cemetery and shattering the church windows. With power cut off even before the first explosion, darkness and uncertainty descended on the town together with a heavy fog.¹⁵

While only a small outpost of the 7th U.S. Armored Division remained at Houffalize on Tuesday, December 19, General von Waldenburg, logically expecting a strong American force to be holed up there, ordered the reconnaissance troops of his 116th Panzer Division at dawn to bypass the town and scout for a bridge across the

west branch of the Ourthe. Later that day, however, von Waldenburg's corps commander decided to have the division backtrack to Houffalize—which patrols had meanwhile established to be nearly empty of the enemy—and continue the advance on the other side of the Ourthe River's main arm. Farther west than any other German troops in the Ardennes, the 116th Panzer Division began rolling toward Houffalize in full force.¹⁶

In the dead of night, Gabrielle Kauffmann was rudely awakened by loud banging on her door. While holding her breath, she could hear gruff voices arguing on the sidewalk. The banging on her door resumed, more impatiently now. Then, suddenly, a projectile shattered an upstairs window. Gathering all her courage, Mrs. Kauffmann tiptoed down the stairs and slowly opened the door. She stared into the faces of German soldiers demanding food. They took the bread she came back with from the kitchen and hurried away. Mrs. Kauffmann did not go back to bed that night.¹⁷

People in the town of Houffalize, meanwhile, had bedded down not knowing what to expect in the next hours. Behind the tightly drawn blackout curtains simmered a nervous tension. With the power lines cut, the radios could not be turned to for news. The last departing GIs had been unwilling or unable to tell the inhabitants the latest developments. As they pulled out, they had, in fact, not even bothered to blow up the two bridges now spanning the Ourthe. There was nothing for people to do but wait and listen.¹⁸

Sometime between two and three o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, December 20, the Houffalois froze as they caught the unmistakable noises of an army passing through. Nelly Simon was startled to hear boots stamp on the floor above the cellar she was hiding in with family and neighbors. The cellar door was thrown open within minutes. German soldiers, in search of Americans, descended, shining their lamps on the pallid faces of the hideaways. Gaby Dislaire watched how Germans forced their way into her family's café and with their guns motioned her father to accompany them into the cellar. With an eye on Christmas and the many Americans around, Gaby's father had the cellar well stocked with beer and liquor. The Germans took all they could carry. Marie-Thérèse and Elisabeth Otto, having dozed off in their upstairs bedroom, were awakened by the commotion around three o'clock. They sneaked to the front window, opened it as far as they dared, and peeked into the street. They stared down on a tank so big it seemed they could reach down and touch the tur-

ret. As German soldiers bawled at them, they slammed the window shut again. The two women needed to think quickly. They were not alone in the house: they had put up two GIs downstairs who had not yet managed to get out of Houffalize. Only now did they realize what the consequences would be for civilians caught hiding enemy soldiers. They rushed the drowsy men to the back of the house and into the garden where they opened a gate leading onto a road. They had barely closed their backdoor when they heard shots ring from the escape route they had urged the GIs to take.¹⁹

Houffalize was firmly back in the hands of German forces even before dawn had a chance to break. While enemy troops continued to rush past on their way west, others began to settle down. The marketplace teemed not only with tanks and trucks, but also with restless horses. Perceptive Houffalois noticed the German car park to be rather a ramshackle hodgepodge. Some of the vehicles moving out again had to be stopped now and then to allow bolts to be tightened. In no time German troops could be seen plundering stocks left behind by the Americans. This did nothing to dampen their arrogance toward the Belgians. At first light enemy soldiers were barging into houses all over town, demanding fires to be stoked and hot coffee to be served.²⁰

None of the saints invoked by the people in Tavigny on Sunday night proved powerful enough to force German armor to bypass their village. A small and isolated American unit in the vicinity, caught by surprise, could hardly have been expected to do better. When the civilians finally dared to come out of their cellars, haystacks and barns were roaring balls of fire, although their homes, as if by belated miracle, had been spared. The Americans, however, had been annihilated. Five wrecked tanks littered the village; two twisted hulks rested in the surrounding meadows. Roads were strewn with American clothing, equipment, and numerous bodies. Marie Crémer, having hidden in a shelter on the edge of the village during the battle, returned to her home to find all the windows shattered and the linen in two bedrooms ripped up and soaked with blood. She would never forget the sight of a dead American spread out in the gutter amidst broken gramophone records. The Germans had been confident enough to comb through the inhabitants' possessions before moving on. Only after a painstaking search did Ghislaine Collette discover her smudged identity card on a stack of wood outside her house. She never located the beautiful gold ring her mother had given her.²¹

On the streets of Mabompré, a village southwest of Houffalize, victorious Germans taunted the villagers they knew were hiding inside their homes. "Chocolat! Cigarettes! Mademoiselle!" they whined, mocking the GIs who had called themselves liberators too soon.²²

4 Because the Germans carved through the Houffalize corridor like a hot knife through butter, civilians escaped much of the death and destruction that clashing armies were wreaking north and south of them. They did not, however, suffer less from occupation. Reduced to pawns in the clutches of a superior force, the nature of the occupation the civilians had to endure depended largely on the kind of troops that were sent their way. As German forces were constantly being reconfigured in response to the changing circumstances of the offensive, civilians were forced to put up with living conditions that could change rapidly and sharply.

In Rettigny, Henri Collette and his employer's family were destined to continue sharing the stables with the animals for the remainder of the occupation. They were to live jammed together, subjected to chronic cold and damp, unable to change their clothes, barely able to wash until the Americans again liberated the village about a month later. Their house had been earmarked as a field hospital as soon as the first troops of the 116th Panzer Division had arrived on December 18. The wounded were given first aid in the farmhouse's numerous rooms, then they were loaded into large ambulances heading for the rear. After a few days, because her children were growing ever more hungry, the wife of Henri's boss decided to have Henri fetch food in the main house. Slipping past the guard unnoticed in the morning, treading his way through rooms full of stretchers displaying dead and dying, Henri, stomach tightening with each step, finally reached the kitchen. Nothing could have prepared even an adult for the scene in what was now the operating room. Henri experienced such a rude jolt that he thought his heart had jumped from his chest. Blood was the one element keeping together the blurred picture before his eyes. It stuck to the surgeon's arms and clothes, to the table and its heaps of bandages, to the floor. Henri, nauseated by the rank smell of so much blood, and still unnoticed, groped through the cupboards, grabbing bread as fast as possible, gathering in his arms anything for his boss's family that their stomachs might accept.

Then, as he was about to burst from the house, the guard suddenly blocked the way out. A trembling Henri was made to look at a

photograph of a young man wearing a beret, white overalls, and tri-color armband. He was posing with a gun. The man was Eudore, nephew of the boss and resistance fighter who in the days of the liberation had proudly given his uncle a picture of himself. The picture had been forgotten on the mantelpiece when the Germans barged into Rettigny. "Terrorist," the German barked, waving the picture. "Nein, nein, nicht terrorist," Henri denied, groping for German words. He rushed back to the stable with the food. Minutes later, an officer, flanked by two guards, stamped into the stable demanding an explanation from Henri's boss for the photograph. The farmer tried to argue that his nephew was a gendarme, but that he had been forced to don a resistance outfit for lack of a regular uniform. The irate officer stormed away unsatisfied, leaving his escort behind to guard the stable.

Sick from fear, Henri and the boss's family spent the rest of the day expecting the worst. Then, in the evening, amidst great commotion, the panzer troops suddenly moved out of Rettigny as swiftly as they had captured it. In their wake followed troops who looked much less impressive. They were made up of soldiers of wildly varying ages. The pallid cheeks of boys no more than Henri's age sharply contrasted with the dark stubble marking those old enough to be grandfathers. Rest and meals were their main concerns. They took possession of the former field hospital, spread straw on the floors, and collapsed onto it. A tug-of-war soon ensued between Volksgrenadiers and civilians over food. The Germans scoured the farm for anything edible. The farmer's wife did everything she could to quiet the hogs and on one occasion even had the audacity to chase after a soldier who had stolen a chicken. Having to make do without a source of heat in the stable, Henri was sent to the boss's brother's home on the other end of the village every day with a bucket of sloppy liquid made of milk, flour, and an occasional egg the soldiers had overlooked. There it was baked into pancakes that Henri hurried back to the stable, steering clear of any soldiers for fear the heavenly smell would attract their attention.

Within days, however, the mood changed again, turning grimmer than ever when SS troops began pouring into the Houffalize Gap. Having run into a brick wall on the northern shoulder, they were now ordered to help exploit the breakthrough in the center forced by von Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army. As early as the evening of Thursday, December 21, units of the 2nd SS Panzer Division poured into the gap, their sights set on the vital Baraque de Fraiture crossroads. In their wake more SS divisions were soon cutting through the corridor

to help strengthen the attack against Bastogne from the north and northeast. Impatient troops dressed in the ominously black uniforms of SS tankers began to harass the civilians day and night in the stable that Henri had begun to call home. Officers, hunched over maps on the kitchen table lit by faint petrol lamps, repeatedly summoned them from the stable, demanding to know the shortest route to this or that destination, heatedly discussing alternative routes among each other. One night they sent for the boss's wife. Henri, chaperoning the frightened woman, watched with a watering mouth as she hurriedly fried huge steaks cut from a slab of beef slammed down before her.

A few days later it was Henri's turn to be terrorized. He was just crossing the courtyard when a group of five or six soldiers marched past. Their leader pulled him over and in a metallic accent snapped at him: "Toutrou." Henri gave the German an astonished look. He had no idea what he was talking about. The soldier repeated, bellowing this time: "Toutrou!" "Ich kenne nicht," Henri stumbled in German. In a flash, the annoyed soldier grabbed Henri by the throat, his pistol at the boy's temple. Dragged along the road, Henri, terrified, his mind threatening to go blank, screamed for a neighbor he knew spoke German. The farmer quickly learned that the testy SS troopers were to be billeted in the house of the "Dutroux" family. He hurriedly pointed them in the right direction. Only then was a pale-looking Henri released.²³

Like other communities in the corridor between St. Vith and Bastogne, Houffalize was soon making the painful adjustment to renewed occupation. Civilians who had fled no farther than the neighboring villages and had seen the tanks roar by, trickled back into town to watch over their homes. On the roads leading into Houffalize, German soldiers jeered at the returning civilians whom they knew had hoped to be rid of them forever. Madeleine Simon returned to her house to find that it was not quite hers anymore and that the Germans had thought nothing of eating most of the hog her family had slaughtered just days earlier.²⁴

In a matter of days the Germans wiped away all memories of the giddy times of liberation. They reinstalled the loathed *Feldkommandantur*. They set up flak batteries at key points across town. The mayor was summoned to the town hall, where an officer coldly told him: "In September you covered the Americans with flowers, these German soldiers you will cover with stones." The first occupiers made them-

selves comfortable in the hotels and abandoned houses of Houffalize; those who followed took up residence with families. To have hardened oneself against occupation once had been difficult. To have to begin the process over again, after having been allowed to taste freedom, however briefly, was too much for some. Gaby Dislaire's mother, her café having been plundered only hours earlier, could not bear the thought of having to put up with the group of cocky Germans who had been ordered to her doorstep. A heart patient, she suffered an attack so severe that a German army doctor had to come to her aid.²⁵

In nearby villages, people who, to their acute disappointment, had seen relatively few liberators stationed in their homes, were now struggling to find enough room for hordes of enemy soldiers—and even more horses. For nearly three hours Marie Crémer's father made the rounds of Tavigny with some Germans to procure enough room for their animals in the village's stables. Some had to be wedged between the cows. His task finally completed, the soldiers returned the favor by commandeering his house, leaving his family to fend for themselves in the cellar, where they settled down on some straw and a few blankets. Unable to change their clothes or wash, they would live there until again liberated on January 18.²⁶

Cut off from newspapers and radio, some desperately sought solace in rumors. On Friday, December 22, almost a week after the offensive had begun, people in Houffalize began whispering that the Germans were withdrawing. However, the disheveled and numbed soldiers who arrived later that day were not retreating Germans but captured Americans. Jolts of disappointment mixed with pangs of pity for the soldiers they had come to associate with freedom and good times. Women flocked to the schools where the GIs were being herded into the playgrounds. The Germans robbed them of their wallets, watches, and anything else they thought useful. Some GIs were forced to hand over coats and jackets. Seeing that the Americans were starving, the women swung into action, inspired by charity as much as by a chance to thumb their noses at the enemy one more time. Despite the fact that the occupation had brought tightened rationing again and that queues for milk and bread had reappeared, they rushed home to return with whatever they had been able to scrounge from their meager stocks. They even organized a soup kitchen, passing out bowls of hot broth among the GIs under the watchful and disapproving stare of the German guards. Enemy supervision could not prevent Renée Wathelet from slipping notes from four prisoners into her shoes. They

contained the names and addresses of their families. Beneath an address somewhere in Kansas, one GI had scribbled, "I am prisoner but O.K." As soon as the Germans were pushed out of Belgium again and the postal system was up and running, Renée would dutifully inform the men's families of her encounter with them. Meanwhile, because there was not enough food in the town to provision all of the prisoners, German soldiers turned to the countryside for bread, butter, and other foodstuffs. Though they insisted it was for the prisoners, much never made its way to the stockades in Houffalize. Farmers in the nearby village of Mont made sure to put their food directly into the hands of the American prisoners who had been crowded into their church. In an ironic reversal of roles, it was now their turn to spoil their onetime liberators with apples, sandwiches, cookies, and buckets filled with milk—until the guards put an end to it all and started the POWs on their long way to Germany.²⁷

As the GIs disappeared from sight, Christmas drew near. The Germans were determined to make themselves feel at home again in the territory wrested back from the Americans. A baffled Anne Marie Dubru opened her door in Houffalize to find the local constable and a German soldier on her doorstep. The constable, visibly embarrassed by the task assigned to him, explained to her that they were requisitioning her to work for the Germans at the *hôtel Vieille Auberge*. Understandably worried, the young girl tried excuses, then protests, but to no avail. Two other girls, familiar to Anne Marie, were already waiting at the hotel. There they were made to fix meals, wash dishes, and clean the soldiers' rooms. The indignity of having to work as the enemy's chambermaids was made bearable only by the immense relief of being treated correctly.

In preparation for the feast of nativity, German soldiers were requisitioning, extorting, and stealing food wherever they could find it. Many families on Christmas Eve experienced the humiliation of having to prepare sumptuous meals for enemy soldiers who had taken up residence in their best rooms. In one home they sent the owner out into the snow under orders to return with a fine Christmas tree; they told his wife to go to the kitchen and prepare a special treat with stolen beef and poultry. They did have the courtesy, however, after having decorated the tree and engaged in boisterous sing-alongs, of offering the chilled owner a cigar. In the café owned by Gaby Dislaire's parents, celebrating Germans felt generous enough that same night to offer the family beer drawn from their own tap. In Mont, meanwhile,

Mrs. Kauffmann was trying to get her children to sleep, at last. For several hours the Germans in her house had been drinking, singing, and cracking jokes around a fir tree decorated with candles. A soldier would occasionally hurry through the cold to keep tabs on the owner and her numbed children. For some time now the family had been living in the stable.²⁸

If the Germans' facade of haughty merriment was meant to obscure the fact that theirs was not the glorious army of 1940 anymore, they failed to fool the civilians. To be sure, elite Wehrmacht units still contained cores of experienced soldiers willing to abide by certain codes of military behavior. In Tavigny, for example, German soldiers, belonging almost certainly to the veteran 116th Panzer Division, requisitioned a civilian for the purpose of providing a GI killed in a nearby field with a proper burial. When they noticed the man tug the corpse with a rope he had wrapped around its neck, the soldiers were incensed by the civilian's disrespect for the fallen soldier. They gave him a violent kick in the rear, making him start all over again at gunpoint. The cowed villager tried again, this time gently dragging the soldier to his grave by the arms.

But the worn German ranks had been patched up with too many replacements for whom professionalism and military codes had little if any meaning. Three soldiers billeted in Marie Dubru's home in Houffalize, for instance, were no more than sixteen years old. They professed a holy fear of being sent into battle. One of them actually forgot his rifle when they moved out, and Marie's father had to call him back and hand it to him. Discipline slipped as it became clear that the offensive was running out of steam. Civilians soon came to prefer the Germans haughty and derisive rather than unpredictable. Two drunken soldiers burst into the Raveau home one evening and demanded meat. Mr. Raveau explained there was none, showing them around to have his claim verified. Next the Germans demanded hot coffee, elbowing themselves in between Mrs. Raveau and her two young daughters and grabbing food from the table that had just been set for dinner. They left when they were full. But they returned a half an hour later and this time their demand was less innocent: they wanted the young girls. A horrified Mrs. Raveau slipped away, locking the door of the bedroom to which her daughters had just retired. When she returned, she learned that the Germans had gone into the cellar, apparently in search of yet more food and drink. She rushed back upstairs, grabbed the girls, and this time hid them behind a false

wall in the attic. After a superficial search of the house, the drunken soldiers, irate at having their sordid plans thwarted, finally disappeared into the dark. Before they did, however, they made sure to shoot the dog that had been barking madly at the foreign intruders.²⁹

5 Special SS security forces followed the trails of the spearheading Panthers and Tigers like jackals on the prowl. Civilians were being scrutinized, of course, from the very moment enemy soldiers set foot in their communities again. Germans in Houffalize were already searching the home of Marie-Thérèse and Elisabeth Otto from top to bottom on the first day of occupation. They had captured two GIs in a street just behind where they lived and they suspected the women of having harbored them. The women escaped serious harm only because the soldiers could find not the least shred of evidence against them.

Others were in trouble, too. When the Dubru family set off to return to Houffalize from the village they had fled to before the arrival of the Germans, acquaintances warned them to stay away. It was rumored that the enemy had found incriminating papers in their home and was looking for them. Renée Dubru could not understand what had happened. She knew her father had never been involved in the resistance. But then she remembered the letter she had been writing to a school friend when her parents had suddenly decided to pack and leave town. In it she had made a number of unflattering comments about the Germans, blurting out on at least one occasion, "We have at last been delivered from the dirty Boches." Whatever the exact reason for having incurred the wrath of the occupier, the Dubru family turned on their heels and did not return to their home in Houffalize until the Germans had been pushed out.

The occupier was all too well aware that the Houffalois had welcomed the Americans with open arms. The most glaring proof of this was a letter written by Colonel Lanham, commander of the liberating 22nd Infantry. Still posted publicly in various places when the Germans returned, it thanked the citizens of Houffalize for their "magnificent work in aiding our advance," calling their town "a living symbol of the Belgium that all Americans respect and admire." No town, the commander made sure to emphasize, had "helped us as much and as intelligently as Houffalize." Before long, having been threatened by the Germans several times, the mayor went into hiding, one of the aldermen taking over his post for the duration of the occupation.³⁰

The Wehrmacht's punishment of civilians could be harsh and summary. When toward the end of December soldiers at Houffalize's Randoux farm discovered that one of their pistols was missing, they announced that everyone on the farm would be shot unless the weapon was returned by noon. The culprit finally decided to own up to avoid a bloodbath. Despite emotional pleas from family and neighbors, he was mowed down with a short burst from a submachine gun. Unlike the regular military units, however, the SS *Sonderkommandos* hastened into the area with the express purpose of keeping tabs on the population and rooting out all opposition. And they went about their business in a coldly systematic and clinical fashion. Even before Christmas, *Einsatzgruppe L* had descended on Houffalize and begun combing through official and personal papers. They were not interested in who had been throwing flowers and kisses at American liberators. What they were eager to know was who had belonged to the resistance movements responsible for the sometimes deadly actions against German forces. In a matter of days they had sniffed out lists, letters, and liberation-era newspapers revealing the names of scores of local resistance fighters. The repercussions of the finds soon rippled beyond the confines of Houffalize proper.³¹

Marie-Thérèse Urbin Choffray had just returned home from Mass early on Saturday morning, December 23, when three SS men showed up to arrest her. When asked if she knew German, she pretended not to understand. She was taken to the town hall where she was placed under guard in the courtroom. Despite temperatures far below freezing, all the room's windows were open, and Marie-Thérèse could see the vapor of her breath. She was not alone. A few men, pale as death, sat in stony silence. She tried to inch closer to find out who they were but was ordered back to her chair. Meanwhile, the news of her arrest had spread. An acquaintance rushed to the Feldkommandantur where he knew an interpreter who had been assigned a room in his home. In the presence of the commander, the interpreter, and other soldiers, the man pleaded Marie-Thérèse's cause. While the soldiers fetched her mother and tried to calm her as much as possible, the interpreter was told to go to the courtroom to see what was going on.

Marie-Thérèse was made to wait until early afternoon for the interrogation to begin. She was taken to a separate office where several Germans were waiting for her. They shoved a paper in her face. The document, the men claimed, had been found at the gendarmerie. Marie-Thérèse was staring at the complete list of the members of *Groupe G*, a

local resistance group specializing in sabotage, to which she herself had belonged. Though her name jumped out at her as the second one from the top, Marie-Thérèse somehow managed to summon up an icy calm. She insisted that she was on that list for no other reason than that she had provided financial aid to the families of those forced to work in Germany. One of the interrogators flew into a rage, slamming the desk with his fist, warning her to stop lying. "Where did you get that money?" the others demanded. "What does your father do?" She replied that he was a notary. The interpreter from the Feldkommandantur had been present all along. He not only intervened from time to time with what seemed words in her favor, but also with his eyes appeared to be goading her on to continue the lie she had spun. The interrogation lasted about an hour and a half. It took until evening for the verdict to be handed down at last. A piece of paper was brought to an elderly guard. He glanced at it. "*Raus!*" (Get out!), he suddenly yelled at Marie-Thérèse, as if talking to a dog.³²

The men Marie-Thérèse had glimpsed in the courtroom that day belonged to a group of six who would be less fortunate than she. The day before, Eudore Weinquin had been arrested in the village of Nadrin, about halfway between Houffalize and La Roche. Weinquin had belonged to the *Mouvement National Belge* (MNB), and the SS men, speaking impeccable French, appeared to know everything about him and the organization's local resistance network. Threatening to burn down his family's home if he resisted, they took Weinquin to a command post, a pistol in his back. At the post he was made to face the wall with his hands above his head for close to two hours. As he stood there, two other members of the MNB, Léon Dethor and Emile Remy, were brought in. In the evening all three were driven to Houffalize where they met up with fellow resistance fighter Sylvain Martin, who had been arrested in Wibrin, a village not far from Nadrin. The following morning they were herded into the courtroom where Marie-Thérèse was soon to await her fate, too. The four men were almost immediately joined by two MNB members from Houffalize, Antoine Bollet and Jean Nadin. The twenty-four-year-old Nadin had been shot in the leg while trying to outrun the German spearheads. He had to be carried up the stairs by his father and aunt. They walked away not knowing if they would ever see him again.

Questioning continued throughout most of the day in separate offices. The SS interrogators turned out to have a list with more than

fifty names of local MNB members. Six of the names were theirs, and they were accused of sabotage. Denials drew heavy beatings accompanied by the dry tapping of typewriters recording their words. As the day came to an end, the SS men fleeced the accused of all their belongings: money, cigarettes, watches, even the religious medals pinned inside Léon Dethor's vest.

The six men under cover of darkness were loaded onto a truck together with ten armed guards. The vehicle wound its way out of town and into a pine forest between Houffalize and Mont. On a rutted track the men were pulled from the truck and led to an old anti-tank trench. The guards had to carry the wounded Nadin. Mr. Remy, father of six children, sensed what was about to happen. He tore himself loose from his guard. He did not get far and was shot on the spot. The others were now quickly lined up along the trench, faces toward the abyss. One by one, the SS men seized the victims by the left collar, put a pistol to the neck or behind the ear, and pulled the trigger. Nadin tumbled into his grave, followed by Martin, then by Bollet.

Weinquin was next. He felt the cold steel in his neck, then heard a dry click. In a flash, Weinquin, who had already reconciled himself to death, understood that the gun had jammed. He pushed his executioner away with all his might and made a run for it. Bullets whizzed among the trees, one gashing his jaw, but after about a mile on his stockinged feet he knew he had shaken off the SS men. Weinquin eventually managed to reach Engreux, where villagers took care of him, hiding him from the Germans until the second liberation. It was only when he returned to Houffalize at the end of January that people would learn what had happened to the men interrogated in the town hall that Saturday in December. Accompanied by an American officer, villagers located the antitank trench from which they dug up five bodies on February 2, 1945. Léon Dethor, whom Weinquin thought had also been able to escape, was among the victims.³³

On Christmas Eve, the day after the first killings, Einsatzgruppe L struck with renewed vigor. This time they arrested Albert Huberty and Armand Bastin, the former a teacher, the other a farmer. Both were from Wibrin; both were accused of belonging to the MNB. On Christmas Day an anxious Bernadette Bastin learned through the grapevine that her brother and Albert Huberty were thought to be held at the hôtel Vieille Auberge in Houffalize and were permitted to have visitors. She had a friend accompany her and immediately started

down the long road to town with food and clothing. As they neared **Houffalize**, they were overtaken by a column of American prisoners. A little further, Germans manning the town's antiaircraft batteries jeered at the women, asking them in plaintive voices if they were going to see the "English."

The Vieille Auberge was a total mess. German soldiers had been celebrating Christmas Eve, and there were bottles and glasses everywhere. The women went from one soldier to another to see what they knew about the men who had been arrested at Wibrin the other day. "Ah! Gone!" a bear of a soldier finally told them mockingly. "Gone where?" Bernadette begged to know. "Gone to work in Germany," the German said. Bernadette burst into tears. "How am I going to break that news to my parents," she sobbed, "I already have two brothers as prisoners in Germany." The women left the hotel. They hurried back along the same road they had come, hoping to regain their village before dark. For the second time that day they passed not far from where Bernadette's brother and Albert Huberty lay buried. They had been shot on the evening of the very day they had been arrested, both with a bullet in the back of the head. Their families would not learn their true fate until the end of April 1945.³⁴

In numbing repetition, the day after Christmas again brought terror to the **Houffalize** region. Fearing reprisals, three former members of the Armée Secrète, Léonard Berscheid and Michel Crémer from Cherain and Joseph Pondant from Limerlé, had fled in the direction of Wibrin before the arrival of the Germans. Once their villages were firmly in German hands, however, they decided to retrace their steps, no longer able to bear the thought of their wives alone with the enemy. They paid for the decision with their lives. Arrested and taken away on Tuesday, December 26, their mutilated corpses were eventually found in the Cedrogne wood just north of Mont.³⁵

On the next to last day of 1944, a German military doctor informed the Red Cross of **Houffalize** that the body of a civilian had been found in a wood near Fontenaille, just north of Cedrogne. Investigation by local authorities revealed the remains to be those of Jules Dubru, a forty-eight-year-old tanner, married to Louise Lammers, father of a daughter called Jeanine. But Jules Dubru had also been the leader of a local MNB group. He had been arrested on December 22, never again to be seen alive. He had died alone with his tormentors, his face roughed up, his body sprawling at the foot of a tree that alone had witnessed the crime.³⁶

6 What made the irony of Christmas still more painful for the people in and around Houffalize was that, with the clearing of the skies over the Ardennes, the Allies began sowing more death and destruction than the Wehrmacht and SS combined. Tactical air commands, frustrated by the long wait, feverishly sprang into action. Scores of fighters and fighter-bombers appeared out of the blue, hovering overhead like birds of prey, attentive to the least movement, pouncing upon any tanks, trucks, dumps, or troops caught in the open. As soldiers and vehicles fanned out to buildings for safety and supplies were hidden under roofs, not even the tiniest village could hope to escape the scars of air war.³⁷

Montleban, for example, a mere pinprick on the map northeast of Houffalize, would suffer three separate days of bombing even before the year was out. In Vissoile, a hamlet still smaller than Montleban, a bomb on Christmas Eve destroyed the community's most impressive building, the church. People in Tavigny were readying themselves for Mass on Christmas Day when fighter-bombers let them have it. The home of the Liégeois family was instantly ablaze, villagers dashing in and out to rescue furniture, chains of people rushing water in buckets to the flames. Alphonse Antoine, his stables on fire, burst into tears, demanding to know why, as he had never done anyone harm. The day after, the unrepentant planes were back and set the Kettels home on fire.³⁸

Rettigny might have remained as inconspicuous a village as ever, had it not been for the German vehicles drawing attention to its crossroads in the days following Christmas. The air raid was over in a flash, but when Henri Collette emerged from the cellar, greasy plumes billowed from a number of enemy vehicles. An agitated German plucked Henri from a chain of civilians forming in front of a house in flames near the crossroads. The soldier shoved a wooden pole into the boy's hands, pushed him toward a sea of flames, and motioned him to try and rake aside the burning debris threatening to ignite the remaining vehicles. Henri struggled in the searing heat until something suddenly distracted the German. Without a second thought Henri dropped the pole and dashed to his boss's house. He thought it wiser not to leave the stable for the rest of the day.³⁹

If villages like Rettigny failed to escape brushes with the Allied air forces, Houffalize was bound to attract their full wrath. Though made up of barely 350 houses, the town sat on a crucial road junction, with two bridges across the Ourthe still intact, in the equally crucial

corridor between St. Vith and Bastogne that ran more or less through the middle of the German bulge. The first Allied planes appeared over Houffalize around nine o'clock in the morning of Sunday, December 24. Daringly swooping down on the antiaircraft guns, they challenged the flak batteries to bitter duels lasting the better part of the day. Civilians dropped preparations for Christmas Eve, thinking it safer to retreat into their cellars. Cinette Urbin Choffray, overjoyed that her sister Marie-Thérèse had recently been released by the Germans, dashed upstairs from time to time to gape at the planes through the broken windows of their home. "We dare not go outside anymore," she noted in her diary.⁴⁰

Much the same happened on Christmas Day, but this time Allied planes claimed the lives of two civilians. One of them was hotelkeeper Charles Cawet. Having been badly wounded around ten o'clock that morning, Mr. Cawet was transported to the cellar of Dr. Verheggen. There was, however, nothing the doctor could do about the mangled leg from his cellar. An alerted military surgeon at last managed to join Dr. Verheggen around five o'clock in the afternoon. By the time the German had amputated the leg, Mr. Cawet had died from the loss of blood.⁴¹

With many of the flak batteries silenced, the town itself now became the target as Allied planners wanted to paralyze all German movement by bombing Houffalize into what they called a "choking point." The first serious bombing raids shook the town on December 26. Allied medium bombers appeared in waves between mid-morning and late afternoon, hitting more flak installations, the station, and several sections of town. Inhabitants from St. Roch, a neighborhood close to one of the flak spots, emerged dazed from the rubble after one of the first attacks. Men rushed Marie-Louise Renard, her leg mauled, to the nearest safe haven, using a door for a stretcher. They saw how German soldiers jumped from the windows of a blazing hotel. Wave followed upon wave, aircraft now also pouring incendiaries into the cauldron, causing the dust to be chased by licking flames and acrid smoke. The phosphorus fires created a panic. Even the Ourthe River could be seen burning. Those who could stampeded to the roads leading out of Houffalize. Some poured into the surrounding villages. Many others let themselves be gobbled up by the nearest forests.⁴²

"Damage everywhere," Cinette wrote that night. "Dead, wounded. Houses burning. What a mess." For the havoc wrought on the Ger-

mans on December 26, Houffalize paid with the lives of at least twenty-eight of its citizens. One of the families worst hit that day were the Wuillemmottes. Gisèle and her brother, Robert, spotted the bombers through the kitchen window shortly before noon. They had barely wriggled into the cellar with the others when a bomb squarely punched through the roof. The dust inside the cellar made breathing near impossible. Gisèle cried out. "Save yourself," her mother groaned from somewhere in the dark. Gisèle looked up to see a ray of light. The day before, her father had made a small hole in the ceiling with the intention of leading a stovepipe through it. She climbed the rubble and hoisted herself into the open. A German tank was ablaze in the street. Gisèle noticed she was bleeding from a wound she did not even know she had. A German soldier caught sight of the dazed girl and whisked her off to one of the neighbors. During a lull people rushed to the fateful scene to find seven of the family's eleven dead. They included the girl's grandmother, father, three brothers, sister, and sister-in-law. Gisèle's mother was pulled from the rubble with fractured legs and wounds to the head. By a strange twist of fate, the only person to emerge from the cellar unscathed was Gisèle's six-week-old niece. The infant had to be pried from the arms of her dead mother.⁴³

Gisèle learned only a day later that her mother had been taken to a German military hospital in a château just outside Houffalize. When she arrived there with her baby niece, she found her mother on a stretcher surrounded by wounded soldiers. Mrs. Wuillemmotte had only the company of a young girl from the village of Fraiture. The girl's feet had been ripped off by an explosion; her brother had brought her to the hospital in a wheelbarrow. Overworked German medics allowed Gisèle to take care of her mother and her civilian neighbor with warm water that she begged from a farmer's wife. It was only when a German ambulance transported her mother to Luxembourg in the afternoon that Gisèle was able to give the baby a long-needed bath. The farmer's wife parted with towels and a small shirt. One German soldier contributed some talcum powder, another a snippet of soap. Gisèle fed the infant with spoonfuls of German soup and a pinch of sugar drawn from her handkerchief and wetted with saliva. Her mother would die in a hospital in Marche a month after the war in Europe had ended.⁴⁴

Even while Gisèle was tending to her mother and niece at the château, the bombers again returned to Houffalize. One of the local priests on Wednesday morning, December 27, had barely made the

rounds of the shelters when bombs began killing those he had just comforted and given general absolution. One of the explosives leveled the Gottal garage, claiming five victims. Another one wiped away the Daulne home, somehow leaving the cellar intact and sparing the twenty-six people inside. Dust threatened to suffocate the survivors. There was no water, so someone yelled to grab some bottles and daub their handkerchiefs in wine to protect mouths and noses. As soon as the mayhem began to die down, neighbors rushed to their aid, one by one pulling them from under the rubble via the cellar window. They struggled to free six nuns whose bulging habits made them get stuck in the exit, a man nervously yelling at them to remove their clothes. The last survivor to try and escape through the window was Mrs. Bastin. She weighed more than two hundred pounds, however, and the window refused to let her pass. Only after Dr. Verheggen arrived with tools to enlarge the hole did the woman finally manage to break free.

Crazed with fear, the survivors spilled into the street, desperately looking for safety. Some quickly jammed themselves into already packed cellars nearby. Eva Dubru was still climbing the road when bombs started whistling again. Panting, her shoes lost in the cellar's pandemonium, she dragged both her children after her. Germans hiding in the doorways wanted to help her. She just snarled at them, not even slowing down. Mrs. Dubru finally found refuge in her godmother's home. The bombardment had so traumatized her that even the distant sound of an aircraft sufficed to throw her into a fit. Germans sharing the house took such pity on the young mother that they posted a guard for the specific purpose of warning her in case of real danger. Others who had survived with Mrs. Dubru kept running that Wednesday until they reached the woods. German soldiers hiding in the Bois des Moines offered to help a pregnant Mrs. Desset when she arrived exhausted. She went into a rage, warning them to stay away from her, blaming them for the death of one of her children, lost in the bombardment the previous day.

As if that Wednesday had not already been unsettling enough, in the evening the home for the elderly caught fire. People tried to rush as many as possible to safety on their backs, but before midnight flames had also devoured two of Houffalize's eldest citizens.⁴⁵

Increasing numbers of Houffalois, obeying an "old ancestral reflex," tried to escape the danger by taking to the dense forests. Many thought it safer to remain there. The bombardment of December 30, claiming at least seven more lives, and that which followed on its heels

on New Year's Eve, killing another two and bringing the total number of bombing victims to forty-two, swelled their numbers further. A foot and a half of snow had piled up and cold bit to the bone, but the refugees preferred these conditions to the maddening shock waves and phosphorus that came with bombing.

Civilians on their way to the woods in the moonlit night of December 31 brushed past German soldiers who yelled, "Houffalize! Stalingrad!" as if they were deriving perverse pleasure from the ruin of their town. Among the refugees that night, Mrs. Fux and her son Léon had special reason to ponder the cruel vagaries of fate. They had avoided deportation with the rest of their Jewish family in Antwerp in 1942 only by staying invisible in their attic. Later they had gone into hiding in faraway Houffalize. No sooner had they returned to Antwerp after the liberation than Hitler's V1s and V2s had begun threatening their lives all over again. Once more Mrs. Fux had thought it safer for her and her son to sit out the war in the quiet Ardennes.⁴⁶

Nelly Simon's family had arrived in the forest four days earlier. They had joined a number of other families in building four cabins, theirs housing no fewer than twenty-seven people. Every day made the hunger gnaw more. Two of the men went as far as Engreux to look for food. But when they begged the Germans there for bread, they were kicked out. By the turn of the year, enemy soldiers in and around Houffalize were getting as desperate for safety and food as the civilians. The Houffalois had to abandon some of the sturdiest cellars because the Germans were claiming the shelters for themselves. While the Urbin Choffrays stuck to their cellar, Germans hid behind the thick walls upstairs. "They steal a kilogram of butter," Cinette jotted in her diary on January 1. "Have no more doors that close. . . . At night they steal five rabbits and kill them with their guns."⁴⁷

After nine days and nights miserable with cold, one of the forest cabins of Nelly Simon's group was set ablaze on January 5 when someone inside tried to build a fire that would not attract aircraft. It was the signal for the entire group to return to Houffalize. Little did they know that the worst bombardment of their badly battered town was still to come.⁴⁸