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Opening extract from

War on the Margins

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WAR on the MARGINS
by Libby Cone

CHAPTER 1

St. Helier, Jersey, Channel Islands

Marlene Zimmer dropped into the chair in her sitting room with the paper, knowing what it would say before she opened it.

The Jersey Evening Post
21 October 1940

First Order relating to measures against Jews:
Concerning the Registration of Jews in Jersey
In pursuance of an Order of the Chief of the German Military
Administration in France (registered by Act of the Royal Court, dated
October 21st, 1940), and in virtue of the power delegated to me by the
Bailiff, all Jews must present themselves for registration at the
Aliens Office, No. 6 Hill Street, St. Helier, on Wednesday and
Thursday, October 23rd and 24th, 1940, between the hours of 10 a.m.
and 4 p.m.

For the purposes of this Order, persons are deemed to be Jews who
belong or have belonged to the Jewish religion or who have more than

two Jewish grandparents.

Grandparents who belong or have belonged to the Jewish religion are deemed to be Jews.

The particulars to be provided upon registration are:

- 1.Surname.
- 2.Christian name.
- 3.Date of birth.
- 4.Place of birth
- 5.Sex.
- 6.Family status.
- 7.Profession.
- 8.Religious faith.
- 9.Length of uninterrupted residence in the Island.

The declaration of the head of the family will suffice for the whole family.

CLIFFORD ORANGE

Chief Aliens Officer

Another notice followed, from C. W. Duret Aubin, the Attorney General, 'concerning the marking of Jewish business underta with signs saying *'JUEDISCHES GESCHAEFT'*, 'Jewish Undertaking.'

Her hands trembled, rattling the paper. She got up, made some weak tea. That day the

Order had been revealed to the personnel in the Aliens Office, where Marlene was employed as a clerk.

Last spring, even people like Marlene, who didn't listen to the news very much, started tuning in to the BBC to hear about the Nazi fist rapidly closing around Europe. When France fell and the troops were evacuated from Dunkirk, the Islanders, British but with many French cultural ties, finally had the war brought home to their little feudal paradise of beaches and farms. Their fears were reflected in the faces of wounded Dunkirk troops brought over from St. Malo. People sat up at night, talking about what would happen next in their lives, affected now by more than a dent in the tourist traffic. The Jersey States Government officials were ferrying back and forth between St. Helier and London, returning daily with ever grimmer facial expressions. People began to talk about invasion, and Marlene lost her appetite. On 10th June, Italy declared war upon Britain, and the Aliens Office girls had to busy themselves with the reclassification of Italians, who were promptly locked up along with the Germans at the internment centre at Grouville, as enemies. This extra work was off-putting. Pauline, a tall girl who resembled an auburn-haired Vivien Leigh, complained as she walked to the cinema with Marlene and the other girls, 'Why were they friends, and now enemies? They are the same people. It makes no sense!'

'It's just reclassification' someone said.

'But didn't they get sent to Grouville?'

'They might be dangerous; who knows?'

Marlene did not wish to trouble herself with such thoughts. She allowed the other girls to argue with Pauline, who seemed awfully concerned about the Italians. Marlene was plain. She had, perhaps, Vivien Leigh's eyebrows, but not her exquisite bone structure. She had Gracie Fields' wispy hair, but not her dazzling smile. Marlene lived in the flat off Queens Road where she had been born a little over twenty-five years before, a fact she did not like to dwell upon, as she was still unmarried. She had her family photographs, her late mother's kitchen things, her late father's silver goblet, the old

wireless, and a few pieces of comfortable furniture. A bit too impervious to the growing unease around her, she assumed that the War would spare Jersey, would just be reports on the wireless as she went about her life, a life that, if examined more closely, might be called 'aimless'.

On the 19th, Jurat Dorey had returned from London and announced that Jersey and the other Channel Islands, Guernsey, Alderney, and Sark, so close to fallen France, had been deemed indefensible and were to be declared a 'demilitarised zone.' The Germans would be allowed to take over! Chaos followed; thousands of people were haphazardly evacuated, leaving behind their homes, cars and farms. Thousands of dogs and cats were put down by the departing families, filling the harbourside streets with mute, flushed children who could not cry any more and dazed adults, torn from their pets as a last cruelty before being torn from their homes. Abandoned cows roamed the streets. People unable to leave on the last ship returned to find their homes looted. The girls talked of nothing else all day, and Marlene spent many of her evenings listening to the wireless and weeping.

In late June, just when things were seemingly quieter, German planes appeared before dusk and bore down on the port, and the one in Guernsey, bombing and strafing. They had not been informed of the demilitarisation, and the blood of farmers mixed with the pulp of the tomatoes they had hoped to load onto the boats. Burning warehouses lit up the night sky. Those who had decided to stay behind lay sleepless in their beds, berating themselves or their nearest relative, or, looked into their mirrors and wondered if the face that looked back at them was destined to waste away from starvation or bear the mark of the lash. They woke to a sky the colour of filthy rags. Two days later, as they were burying their dead, the message went out that everyone was to fly white flags of surrender. All privately-owned guns were confiscated. People emptied the shops in anticipation. The Islands were immediately inundated with German soldiers and the Nazi civilians who were to administer the occupation.

Instantly the Italians and Germans interned at Grouville were no longer enemies, but friends. They were released, and Marlene and the staff followed Mr Orange's orders to reclassify them accordingly.

Churchill had been convinced of the Islands' lack of strategic importance. Hitler saw them as a staging area for the attack on England, which Goering thought would last two or three weeks. Then they would be the gateway to Europe. Everywhere the Germans communicated the message We Own You. A flag bearing a swastika rose over Fort Regent; Marlene had seen a few in newsreels, always used to illustrate some monstrous violent act or other. She took to avoiding the streets that offered a view of the Fort and the ugly flag, but you couldn't avoid the Germans everywhere, with their air of superiority and barely suppressed violence. The soldiers seemed to make an effort to be friendly, but they bought up what was left of the fruit and vegetables with the strange *Reichsmarks* everyone now had to use, and presided over the sending of large quantities of produce and other supplies to Occupied France. Rations were made more stringent to allow for this.

Strange, solitary men lurked on the street corners, not even trying to be too inconspicuous, paying close attention to every conversation between citizens. We Own You. Some said they were secret police, and if they caught you saying anything they didn't like they would arrest you. The strict rationing of gasoline and the commandeering of cars, which were ferried over to France, led to a run on the bicycle shops and the reappearance of horse-drawn wagons and carts.

Planes were always roaring in the sky, going to France, or, more ominously, to England. After 15th July islanders were allowed to listen to the BBC again, and thousands of trembling hands turned on the wireless to hear the reports of the Battle of Britain raging almost overhead. Marlene listened and despaired, even though it seemed Britain was holding up its side. The Nazis' consternation over the unexpected British defence was reflected in the Germans' behaviour; recently a soldier had stabbed a civilian at the Alexandra Hotel. A series of warnings against rowdyism and careless driving carried more weight than usual, since the Nazi solution to everything was violence. We Own You.

Late August brought warm, dry weather and nightly firefights and bombing,

either targeting the airport, striking houses nearby, or on the nearby French coast. In September they entered the libraries and piled up the books they did not like – anything that was by a Jewish author or described something of Jewish interest. They set fire to them, and the smoke polluted the air like hatred. We Own You. Fear was a staple; hunger threatened. Life was turned upside down and you learned to scurry down the street without saying much to anyone, to avoid the gaze of the soldiers, some of whom easily took offence.

At the Aliens Office, the other employees were put off by the extra paperwork involved in this Jewish registration business. Mr Orange, almost eager to carry out the German Order, had been at his most officious that morning. Tall and slightly stooped, with wrinkled face and light, bushy eyebrows, he fancied himself to be avuncular, though nobody else did. Since the Occupation, he had expressed his new-found feeling of importance unreservedly. Orders from the *Feldkommandantur* to Bailiff Coutanche regarding the many segments of the large foreign-born population all came to his desk. This new Order was somewhat unusual; he had gathered the girls into his office to explain it to them. Music tinkled softly on the wireless; later on in the day they would hear snatches of Lord Haw-Haw pontificating on German Overseas Radio.

‘Ladies,’ Mr Orange began, clearing his throat, ‘I trust you understand this Order?’ He looked at them over his horn-rimmed glasses.

‘Yes, sir,’ they said, uncertainly.

‘It is up to this Office to carry out the Orders to the letter, so that Bailiff Coutanche and our, er, German guests are satisfied. All Jews will be coming in to register, and I ask that you be as helpful as possible in this endeavour.’

‘Mr Orange, isn't this only for aliens?’ Pauline looked quizzically at Mr Orange.

'No, Pauline. This is for ALL the Jews.' Pauline said nothing.

Marlene's chest felt tight. Why did Jersey Jews have to register in the Aliens Office? Were they suddenly not British subjects? She took a deep breath and tried to relax. I don't count, she thought. I only have two Jewish grandparents.

'We just need to do what they want, and they'll leave us be,' he had said, looking optimistic, but avoiding their gaze.

Who is 'us,' Marlene thought.

What am I, Marlene thought.

She stopped thinking for the rest of the work day, and went on filing, typing, sorting. Her head felt hollowed out; the thoughts she was emptying it of were so enormous that there was nothing left to think about. She forced herself to keep making small talk with the other girls. No, she didn't want to go to the cinema that night to see a German film; she was busy that evening, but later in the week would be splendid.

The thoughts kept returning. Am *I* one? Do I have to register? What will happen? Her late father had been Jewish; he had died when she was a young child, but her mother had told her, and shown her the wine goblet he had left for her, calling it a 'kiddish,' or something. She certainly couldn't call herself much of a Christian; she had stopped going to church very young, and her mother had never made a fuss over it, not going much herself. They went to her father's grave in the Jewish section of the Almorah cemetery every six months or so, each putting a little pebble on his headstone as they saw other Jews doing at their own loved ones' graves. Now her mother was buried near her

father, just outside the Jewish section.

Marlene jumped up and checked the clock. It was half-past six, well before the 11 p.m. curfew. She wanted to visit the graves, but it was dark outside. Even though she could bicycle there in the dark, it might arouse suspicion. She paced back and forth. Then she pulled an old overcoat out of the closet. She bustled around the flat, picking up a few handkerchiefs, a toothbrush, some underwear, a small bar of soap, a tiny sewing kit, money. She stuffed these things in the pockets and hung the coat on the back of her bedroom door. She sat down again, picked up the paper, and tried to do the crossword puzzle. It was impossible to concentrate. She got up, rummaged through drawers, and found her father's goblet. She held it reverently and looked at the indecipherable Hebrew writing on it. She barely remembered her father except from photographs, but did recall his hugging her and playing catch with a big red rubber ball. Her mother had adored her father, always had pleasant recollections of him, and never remarried after his death. What if he were alive today? What would happen to him? He would certainly have to register. Nobody knew exactly what the jerries were up to with the Jews, but nobody had heard anything good. There was no love lost between the Jews and certain non-Jewish islanders, and some people talked.

After a small supper she switched on the wireless; the war had made her a regular listener. Churchill was going on in his jowly voice, addressing the French as well as the English. 'Here in London, which *Herr* Hitler said he will reduce to ashes, and whose aeroplanes are now bombarding (Marlene shut her eyes), our people are bearing up.' He launched into a summary of the state of affairs. 'We have command of the sea. They wish to carve up our Empire as if it were a fowl,'... 'Have hope and faith, for all will come right,'" he said, after a long description of the indignities already visited upon France, and the future obliteration of French culture desired by Hitler. 'I will not go into detail; hostile ears are listening' made Marlene shiver. She kept reassuring herself that she had only two Jewish grandparents, so she didn't really count.