

Chapter 7 – Saint Aphrodise

(Saint Aphrodise district)

That morning, she visited her friend José, the old gypsy living in Saint Aphrodise district. The poor woman from the Poet's Park was still looking for her Claude. "He's taken the key to the field, stop looking for him!" José replied almost maliciously. Once she left, the gypsy dozed off and dreamt sitting by his stove.

Although the old man has settled in a tiny ground floor, the caravan of his youth still wanders around in his head and does not stop. Up close, if you stare intensively into his green eyes, you could see all the landscapes that pass through him. A smile never leaves him, just like his cap and scarf. When he bends his arm, you can read a series of tattooed numbers. His best companions have never left him, or very few: a guitar and a dirty violin. You often hear him saying: "My remedy is gypsy music! It lifts the gloom when you ache inside!"

In the morning, instinct wakes him from his dreams when he hears a dog barking curiously. As he bends down to feed his heater with a new log, he sees cops, bobbies, policemen, approaching through the half-closed shutters. They are now banging on the door. It is impossible to escape. But why, in the name of God, does a 91-year-old gypsy still have to run away in the middle of winter? In the past, his sense of danger often saved him from many mishaps.

At the age of 14, José was working with his family, who ran a circus-with a travelling cinema and a big marquee. At a very young age, his father had trained him in trapeze and acrobatics. The young man had an athletic body, amazing reflexes, and a taste for precision. The guitar and the violin, inherited from his ancestors, had enchanted him long before his birth. What he liked best were the sessions with his cinematographer. As a perfect technician, he handled the film reels with care and listened to the slightest weakness in the machine, ready to avoid any disaster. He hated the sight of the reel jamming and burning the film

in front of the audience. He loved to hear the audience live in unison with the "oh!" and "ah! During the interval and at the end of the screening, the emotion could often be seen on the spectators faces. For him, cinema represented the incredible possibility of travelling, not only in space and time, but also in souls and hearts. Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan had moved him in "The Kid". He loved Marcel l'Herbier's "The Mystery of the Yellow Room", René Clair's "À nous la liberté", the Prévert brothers' "L'affaire est dans le sac" and Jean Vigo's "Zéro de conduite".

At that time, nomadism was forbidden because it could be considered a way of spying for the enemy. His family was placed under house arrest. The police came and detain them in the Linas-Montlhéry camp in November 1940, despite his father protests who had fought in the 1914 war and had even been gassed. His father was angry that he and his family were prisoners on French soil, arrested and guarded by French people. When he told the guards that he was French, they didn't know what to say. José tried to escape alone a few months later, but was arrested again by the gendarmerie, and placed in a correctional facility for minors. The one in Aniane in the Hérault region, a real prison where miserable people, petty thieves, sodomites and budding murderers who wielded knives lived side by side in promiscuity.

In the Aniane prison, industrial work, which was more lucrative, was introduced, rather than field work, which was considered a failure. The children worked eight hours a day, and school was only after 5 pm. Lessons were given in classes of sixty by retired non-commissioned officers who often knew nothing but a hard-on and alcohol. Toilets visits were only twice a day and at fixed times. Meals, taken in absolute silence, were preceded by prayer, and often followed by a reading. There José discovered the racism and violence of the other residents. His dark complexion and long, black, curly hair made him the whipping boy for the tough guys and their gangs of minions and vultures. It started with mockery and insults, then threats, and then harassment. For the first time he was called a foreigner, a subhuman, an inferior race. He was shaved. At mealtimes he was spat on. At night, he was attacked with pillows. During the day, he was tripped

down the stairs. In the courtyard, he was grabbed and held down either to burn him with cigarette butts or to pee on him. One day, a gang swore that he would be handed over to the sodomites. Then José had only one obsession: to escape. And at the first opportunity, he ran away. He had to be very careful, not only with the police, but also with certain places like fairs: They were very closely watched because bounties were paid to any child hunter, whether he was a peasant or even a holidaymaker.

Abuse of work, punishment, insufficient food, lack of freedom, led other children to revolt, to escape or to death. You just have to look at the dates on the graves in the cemetery of Aniane or Montlobre today.

At 16, José had the chance to join a network of maquisards and partisans near Bédarieux, a mountainous area more rugged than the Hérault plain. Far from Aniane, he again learned the meaning of humanity with real comrades: university students, workers, employees and Spanish republicans. José was the youngest, the others a little less so, and most of them were also fleeing the youth work camps and the Compulsory Work Service. Three men, one of whom was a teacher, supervised this young group to train them in the guerrilla warfare technique. It was a maquis school attached to the Secret Army where José found his place thanks to his physical skills on the one hand, but also thanks to a guitar lent by one of the Spaniards. Evenings were discreetly animated by gypsy music and magic tricks. José played Minor Swing, a famous gypsy jazz composition by Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli. Some people told stories, their stories, which José punctuated with music. The teacher gave him a taste for reading and he composed his first songs: a gypsy version of the Marseillaise and another of the International. The missions he was given were those concerning the observation and supply of the maquis. He had to contact the grocer at the Coop in Bédarieux who was in charge of supplying them. But as he was under surveillance by the French Militia, José was arrested and handed over to the Gestapo on the third occasion. Because of his young age, he was interrogated less forcefully. However, he was deported with the grocer to Buchenwald in March 1943.

Liberated in 1945, he returned to France and looked for his family. At Linas-Monthéry, he learned that they had left for Belgium. He set off again and when he crossed the border, he was asked for his papers and in particular his military book. Neither the explanations he gave, nor his deportation number tattooed on his forearm, convinced the customs officers. He was sent back to a military camp, from which he immediately escaped, crossed the border and went into hiding again. He was reunited with his parents in Belgium, after five years without any news of them. José then returned to the life he loved, that of the travellers, and remained very suspicious of the “tourlourous”, name used to describe any kind of gendarme or guard.

In the Saint Aphrodise district, people continue to knock not only on the door of the house but also on the shutters. The gendarmes shout: "José! José!" And more naively: "At least you're not dead! Open up!" The very old man replies calmly: "What do you want from me?"

He hears the answer with suspicion: "We've come from the Minister of the Interior. He gives you his approval for the recognition of your commitment in the resistance and your deportation to Germany. You will now be entitled to an additional pension!"

The door remains closed. And the caravan continues to move!