IN THE WAKE OF THE BLITZ

By LILY ABEGG

Dr. Lily Abegg is a Swiss journalist who witnessed part of the German western campaign in this capacity and vividly describes her experiences in the following pages.

No more than four years have passed since that campaign began on May 10, 1940. But how remote it already seems! In the years since then, the war has become far more serious and bitter, and battles are no longer counted by days but by months. One might, therefore, feel inclined to regard the western campaign as just one among many episodes of the war. But that would be wrong. It deserves a special place in history, for it has made possible the present struggle of all Europe against the United States and the Soviet Union. It also proved to the whole world the weakness of Germany's opponents. France has drawn her conclusion from this realization and is now in a process of transformation. Only England, who was defeated just as badly in the western campaign in a military and moral sense, believes that everything can go on as before, failing to realize that she owes her present relative safety not to her own strength and not even so much to her island position as to the USSR and the USA.—K.M.

“INSTEAD of driving straight to Aachen we'll go via Cologne and look at some churches.” With these words a captain of the German Army asked us on June 8, 1940, to take our seats in a few gray army automobiles standing in front of the building of the High Command of the Armed Forces in Berlin. Our party consisted of two Japanese reporters, three radio announcers, and myself, and we really felt no inclination whatever to go sight-seeing in churches. We wanted to travel as fast as possible via Aachen to Belgium and on into the battle zone.

Our big Mercedes touring cars hurtled westward along the wide new motor highway. Private motor traffic having stopped entirely as a result of the war, we had the highway to ourselves, and our driver, a typical smart Berlin boy, kept his foot pressed down on the accelerator. It was a fine, warm early-summer day, and throughout our trip we were to enjoy similar fine days, for, during almost all of the campaign, Europe experienced a spring and summer of such magnificence as is not often seen. Soon we were passing through Westphalia, where we were struck by the bridges and viaducts of the Autobahn, which are flung across the rivers and roads in arches built of beautiful red sandstone. Not having been in Germany for more than three years, I was surprised by these and countless other new public and private buildings; it seemed to me that an attractive, comprehensive architectural style was beginning to develop.

Our Captain, who, it turned out, was in private life the director of the German Academy in Rome, intended to include as many famous cathedrals and town halls as possible in our itinerary. A visit to the battle fronts with lessons in history of art! While listening to the Captain's reflections on Romanesque churches and Gothic cathedrals, we almost forgot the real purpose of our journey; above all, we lost all sense of traveling into enemy territory. But that, in addition to the beautiful buildings of Liége and Brussels, we were also to see the cathedrals of Amiens, Soissons, Reims, and even Notre Dame in Paris, was still unknown to us then; for the battle of the
Somme had only just begun at that time.

In Cologne we drove through narrow streets to a café situated on the station square, right next to the cathedral. The two Japanese inquired where the cathedral was. They could not understand why we laughed at their question, until I slowly pointed upward with my hand. Their eyes raised, they stopped as if rooted to the spot. They were speechless; but they sensed that something of Europe’s spirit was revealed to them by this mighty cathedral.

The initial battle zone we inspected was the famous forts of Liège, the first being the great Fort Baptise, a sister fort to Eben Emael, which latter had been captured in so sensational a manner by German parachutists. At first we were unable to discover how Fort Baptise had been taken. For two hours we roamed around the subterranean passages, went up and down with the elevators, and climbed onto the concrete domes. We did not dare to ask the Captain, as we were afraid that he might discover a cathedral near by. Our not exactly expert examination led us to the conclusion that the resistance of this fort must have been broken chiefly by the German artillery and Stukas. We could tell that the Belgians had, like the French, stayed in their holes, i.e., the forts, instead of trying to oppose the enemy in the open too. The defense had certainly been prepared, but why, we asked ourselves, in so unintelligent a manner? One can hardly accuse the Belgians and Frenchmen of cowardice. The commander of Fort Baptise, who had been seriously wounded, had himself carried back from the hospital to the fort, where he died at his post. The commander of the small fort of Fleuron, situated behind Fort Baptise, killed himself when he was forced to surrender. No, there was something else wrong here; during the next few days we gradually realized what it had been.

Belgian soldiers were still on duty in the fort to keep the electric plant, the water supply, etc., going. As they showed us the way through the fort they kept on exclaiming: “We couldn’t help it, it all happened so quickly,” or “We don’t know ourselves how it could have happened!” It sounded as if they had to apologize. All over the place there were chalk or charcoal inscriptions on walls and doors: “Vive le roi Léopold!” “Vive la Belgique!” King Leopold’s surrender had found the consent of the Belgian Army and the Belgian people; we later found confirmation of this everywhere.

They were not anti-German, these soldiers, but terribly disillusioned and embittered. Their world had collapsed or, to put it more accurately, not their real world but an imaginary one which years of propaganda had built up in them.

The German piercing of the Maginot Line and its Belgian continuation seemed inconceivable to the world at that time, so inconceivable that people believed they could only explain it by mysterious new German weapons. Some spoke of “freezing bombs” which froze the enemy officer to death; others of “heat bombs” which were able to melt artillery parts. Actually, however, the fortresses were captured, so to speak, in an entirely normal way and with weapons whose principles were known all over the world. To tell the truth, we too were surprised, not because we discovered a miracle but, on the contrary, because our first experiences led us to suspect that there
had been no miracle at all. Had we not secretly looked for the effects of “freezing bombs” in the forts? Had not one of us even believed to have found a gun barrel bent out of shape by heat?

In Liége and later in other towns we had ample opportunity for admiring the accurate work of the German Stukas and artillery. Sometimes, all the houses around a church had received hits, while the church itself had remained unscathed. In the German High Command in Berlin there was an art historian whose job it was to inform the fighting forces of the location of artistically important buildings which were to be spared.

“We’re gonna hang out our washing on the Siegfried Line,” we read on a wall in Louvain. This was as far as the English had got. Here we began to meet crowds of returning refugees, on foot or in overflowing motorcars, with prams or carts, beside which trotted their faithful dogs. They were returning to their villages where roses were blooming in front of the houses, in front of those that had been spared as well as of those that were destroyed. In spite of the wrecked war material lying about, it was a peaceful scene.

But why were there so many soldiers among these people? Had the Belgian Army not been taken prisoner? Some Belgian soldiers were smoking cigarettes with the German soldiers or were helping them at their work. A few Belgian officers, still with their swords and marks of rank, exchanged salutes with German officers. We were to be given an explanation for this curious state of affairs in Brussels.

BRUSSELS, which had been outside the main zone of fighting, made a peaceful impression. So far we had only seen half-empty towns and villages and refugees; and now we were suddenly in a large city full of people among whom the German occupation troops were hardly noticeable. Here one could stay in comfortable hotels and sit in cafés without the population even noticing that one was a stranger.

I went off on my own for the first time, called a taxi, and looked up my Belgian friends whom I had often visited in former years. To be quite frank, I did not feel quite at ease. Although I did not expect an unfriendly reception, I was afraid of a somewhat strained atmosphere. My friends belonged to the intellectual circles of Brussels; they were authors and painters whose second home was Paris and who had never been to Germany. But when, on going in, I was greeted with the words: “Les Allemands sont charmants,” I was so taken aback that I could only assume that the mental state of my friends had suffered from the impact of events. I soon learned, however, that what they meant was that the German troops were not living on plunder but had brought their own food; that the Gestapo had not yet hung anyone; that they themselves had fled and owed their rapid return to Brussels to the German Army; that the German army automobiles ran on real rubber tires and not on inadequate “Ersatz,” as the Belgian newspapers had claimed; that their own authorities had completely lost their heads since the beginning of the German offensive and that there had been utter confusion; that on their flight one had been presented with a shirt, the other with a pair of shoes, by a German officer; that the German soldiers were disciplined and polite, and that all they had heard up to now about Germany—and this was the essence of all they had learned—had been nothing but lies. This was why, they explained after many other astounding comments, they had had enough of their own fugitive government as well as of the French and English, and were ready to “give the Germans a chance.”

The surprisingly pro-German feeling in Belgium at that time could not maintain itself in the same degree as the war progressed. Under the impression of the German victories, the people suddenly expected everything from the Germans: bread, work, orderly social conditions and, above all, peace. It was inevitable that the ensuing winter, when food be-
came scarcer and a ration system was introduced, should bring a certain disillusionment. Germany was just as little able to bring the longed-for peace to the Belgians as to herself. But, in spite of the resultant difficulties, the Belgians have kept to their fundamental attitude of "giving the Germans a chance." The disappointment over the English and the French was so bitter that the Belgians never got over it.

When I was in Europe in 1940 (I also visited Switzerland, Italy, Holland, Hungary, Poland, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia) I gained the conviction that a German victory was the best method to acquire sympathy for Germany. The prejudices existing in neutral countries against Germany are based less on an antipathy to Germany—a country with which most of the people are not even acquainted—than on the traditional habit of looking to the old masters of the world, i.e., England, France, and the United States. These powers, among which only France has so far disappeared, won the first world war, and the neutral countries regard it as the lesser risk to place their bets on these powers again in this war. People are not pro-German because they are not yet convinced of Germany's power. The moment Germany's victory is no longer in doubt in the eyes of the world, many people will suddenly discover their pro-German feelings. How unpopular were the English before they secured their position as a great power! The sympathies for England arose in the second half of the nineteenth century; today they are vanishing again in many parts of the world in step with the decline of England's power.

The Commander in Chief of the German armed forces in Belgium and at that time also in northeastern France, General von Falkenhausen, had only recently arrived in Brussels again; they could not get over the difference between the German occupation of those days and the present one. During the Great War the Germans were hated and shot at from ambush, so that no one dared to go out without being armed. And today? Some of the officers showed their pistol holsters—there were no pistols in them, but instead letters, spectacles, documents, etc. The same peaceful atmosphere reigned in all the towns of Belgium and northern France. Later on in Paris the German soldiers went out from the very first day without their rifles, while mounted French gendarmes with carabines maintained peace and order.

General von Falkenhausen told us that the Belgian authorities were co-operating very satisfactorily. When, after an act of sabotage, twenty citizens were arrested as hostages, two high officials offered to take the place of the hostages. Thereupon the military authorities released the twenty hostages without, however, arresting the two officials in their place. The General felt confident that the perpetrators of the act of sabotage would still be found and arrested.

"As for the prisoners of war," the General said, "I don't know myself yet what to do with them." The officers laughed: "Usually we simply let them go; nothing has ever happened!"

In the evening, when we went to a restaurant, the General did not use his gray army motorcar with the standard of the Commander in Chief, but an ordinary private car. Enemy country? I had actually almost forgotten it. In the restaurant we were all just as much at ease as in Berlin, and the German supreme commander was treated like an honored guest of old standing.

The people in Belgium were impressed and saddened by the rapid events of the last few weeks, which had taken from them, at least for some time to come, their independent kingdom. But they were not so despondent and filled with consternation as the French. King
Leopold has probably never been as close to the hearts of his people as during this time. Everywhere the portrait of the King was decorated with flowers and black ribbons bearing the inscription “For Our King.” In front of the Palace in Brussels and out at Laeken, where the King was living as a prisoner of war, there were always piles of flowers.

When we left Brussels on June 12 to drive to Boulogne via Lille, the German armies were advancing everywhere and had already reached the Marne near Paris. The uncertainty as to whether there would be a battle for Paris was weighing upon everyone. An elderly German colonel grumbled: “If I have to shoot on Paris, the whole war has no meaning.” And this was the attitude of all the officers, with the exception perhaps of the youngest among them, who had not given the matter any thought.

Along the road between Brussels and Lille we saw destroyed villages in increasing numbers; there was still a stream of returning fugitives coming toward us. Abandoned trucks, tanks, and cannons lay at the side of the roads. Large provisional signposts bore the English inscriptions: “To Arras,” “To Dunkirk.” In Tournai we hurried to the great Gothic cathedral with its many towers, and then to the railway station, where the English troops had passed through on their retreat. Countless empty claret and brandy bottles covered the floor of the restaurant and even the platforms. British overcoats, knapsacks, helmets, and blankets lay all over the place.

Throughout our trip, wherever we saw empty bottles lying around we found traces only of the English, never of the French. One of the main impressions I gained was that the English must have always been terribly thirsty.

The weather continued to be magnificent. Except for the people on the road, not a soul was to be seen, and the villages and fields lay deserted. But the cattle was there and the horses. The cows stood in the pastures with full udders and lowed with pain. The hides of some of the animals bore scratches; they had probably tried to break through the hedges in their search for water. The war had passed over them. The fleeing farmers could not take them along, and in the first days of fighting the German soldiers also had no time to milk cows and water the horses. However, the farmers had provided for their animals as well as they could. Everywhere there were buckets, basins, and even bath tubs filled with water standing in the pastures.

Now we came into France, to Lille. It was here that we had the only unpleasant scene of our whole trip. We were sitting in a café at the square in front of the town hall, when a woman approached us to collect money for wounded French soldiers. She was stopped by other women, who spitefully whispered in her ear that we were Germans. Nevertheless, she accepted our money, whereupon she was abused by people on the street.

Driving on to Boulogne via St. Omer, we enjoyed the charming, fertile scenery of northern France. The crowns of the oaks and beeches already bore the luxuriant verdure of summer, and the meadows showed the deep green of June. Although many of the villages and small towns were destroyed by the fighting, the country and the fields had remained more or less unscathed. The Blitzkrieg had taken place chiefly along the highways.

What struck us in France and also in Belgium in contrast to Germany was the lack of a uniform, genuine new architectural style. The picturesque old towns and the little châteaux hidden in their parks and gardens were beautiful, but the new suburban houses, the railway stations and public buildings were ugly.

The French roads were in an excellent condition. On roads like this there could be no difficulties of supply for the Germans unless the enemy air force interfered. And it did not interfere. Unhindered, the endless columns of huge German supply trucks rolled along the
highways in bright daylight. The French Air Force had been rendered hors de combat during the first day of the offensive, and the English preferred to save their own. We did not see a single enemy plane; only at night were we bombarded in Boulogne and Amiens by the English.

The big cannons of Boulogne, which point out to sea, were now manned by German naval troops; but on the whole the town was occupied by very few soldiers. Here in Boulogne, English detachments had already fled to their ships. A Belgian military surgeon, who had remained behind to look after the wounded, told us about the indescribable scenes which took place during the embarkation of the British troops. The enemy was approaching, and there was no escape except onto the ships. Many tried to get on board but were turned back, if necessary by force: no—only Britishers! Those who had to remain behind could not understand, and curses were the last salutations for the departing ally. In Dunkirk, where three French divisions had to remain behind, this tragedy reached its climax. This is where we drove on to now.

As the town of Dunkirk came in sight, we saw black clouds of smoke rising up behind it. The edges of the road and the fields were strewn with cars of all kinds, some wrecked and some unscathed: brightly painted delivery cars of dairies, laundries, and department stores; elegant limousines and low-slung racing cars; trucks from breweries and coal dealers; motorcycles with side cars; and even fire engines. The glorious retreat can hardly have presented a very military aspect! We found it difficult to penetrate into the town, as piles of debris from the destroyed houses blocked the roads. A heavy odor of putrefaction, fire, and oil hung in the air. On a large square stood hundreds of destroyed British and French tanks and cannons. At the wharves, with their burned-down warehouses and trains, oil was still burning as well as grain. A few undamaged piles of brushes, linen, felt hats, and other goods lay among the charred rubble. Our driver discovered some exquisite French lingerie in British knapsacks, a fact which he reported to us with suitable comments. Even the stone quais were charred in places, and the water in the canals and harbor was black. When one threw a match into it, it burned.

The bathing beach had been the actual scene of the British flight. Although nine days had passed since the surrender, we felt as if we could still see the fleeing English soldiers. Here they had just abandoned their motorcars, there they had even driven them into the sea in their hurry. Here lay their coats, steel helmets, blankets, water bottles, rifles, leather pouches, shirts, handkerchiefs, books, spectacles, wallets, fountain pens, pencils, even their passports, army orders, and family photographs. Several improvised landing stages ran out into the sea composed of forty to fifty trucks placed side by side. Landing stages of this kind, so the officers told us, could be found all along the coast as far as Ostend. Close to the beach the masts and funnels of ships sunk by the Stukas stuck up out of the water.

In view of this overwhelming spectacle, it became clear to us that Dunkirk had been a military as well as a moral blow to Britain. After the panic of Dunkirk a renaissance of British morale and of the British soldier was unthinkable without foreign support and encouragement. Meanwhile, the British have landed in Italy, and a new landing attempt may occur elsewhere in Europe at any moment. But the British no longer come alone: they are accompanied by American divisions.

At four o'clock in the afternoon of that day the loud-speakers proclaimed: “This morning Paris was declared an open city. The German troops have already begun to march in.” So off we went to Paris.

From Béthune to Amiens we crossed one of the main battle centers. The country on both sides of the road was a scene of desolation, and now and again we passed the graves of German and French soldiers. In a forest which from
outside looked untouched lay the gruesome remains of a French artillery regiment destroyed by Stukas. We arrived at Amiens late in the evening. We found out from a German military patrol that there was no local military command here; there was only a lieutenant, to whom one of the soldiers took us. The lieutenant informed us that there were 20,000 prisoners of war in the place, with an insufficient number of guards. British planes were coming over every night, and he could undertake no responsibility for us if the bombs should fall on the prisoners’ camp.

With these words he took us to one of the most beautiful little palaces I have ever seen. Although there were fires behind us and on both sides, this building had not been touched. By the light of two candles we inspected the rooms with their formal elegance and old French furniture. In the dining room the table was laid for twelve people; on exquisite china plates lay the moldy remains of a dessert; beautiful old silver spoons and forks lay beside the plates, and wine and champagne glasses, charming porcelain figures, and withered flowers stood on the table. We opened the drawers of the buffet; they were filled with valuable old silverware. Thousands of German soldiers had passed through the town, and nothing had been touched. The occupants of the house had left everything behind, even underwear, clothes, and shoes. In the sitting room of the daughter of the house, the writing bureau stood open; letters lay around, a diary, and snapshots of some good-looking young people on the beach at Deauville. The two Japanese with us said it was the most beautiful European house they had ever seen and carefully brushed off the dust of travel before sitting down on the silk-covered chairs.

At the break of dawn we hurried over to the famous cathedral, which served as a model for the cathedral of Cologne, and then drove on to Paris. On the way we overtook merrily singing and marching German infantry, horse-drawn field artillery, and a regiment with heavy motorized guns. At St. Maxense on the Oise a horrible sight was presented by hundreds of dead horses drifting down the river. We were told that the horses of a French artillery regiment had got into a panic as the result of a Stuka attack and had jumped into the river.

PASSING by the little château of Chantilly, we found ourselves after a while among suburban houses. Someone in our party said he thought it was Paris. Impossible, I declared, for St. Denis, through which we were bound to pass, looked different. Finally—we were almost at the Place de la Concorde—the Captain said a little uneasily that it must be Paris after all. None of us had at first recognized the city. Deserted streets with no people and no vehicles; all the shutters and doors were closed, so that the houses looked like dead boxes. It was like entering a landscape of the moon with apartment houses.

At the Place de la Concorde we met German soldiers and the first few French civilians. In front of the Ritz we discovered a few large gray Mercedes cars. When the Captain and I entered the hotel we knew at once where we had got to. There stood the Führer’s aide-de-camp Brückner, in conversation with a famous general, and there were several other faces which we recognized from newspaper photos. The gentlemen were in a good mood and did not take our invasion of the Führer’s headquarters amiss. While they were finding out the address of the local military command for us, one of them told us that there had not been a soul in the whole big hotel, and that they were just about to open up the rooms to find provisional accommodation. At that time, the presence of the Führer in Paris was a secret and of course we took care not to tell anyone of our discovery.

The local military command directed us to the Hotel Scribe, where we found a few German officers, a doorman, and one single waiter. As the doorman was busy running the elevator, we picked our own rooms and opened the windows and
shutters. Toward evening, a few more waiters turned up, so that the dining room began to take on a more normal aspect. The food was supplied by the German Army.

We strolled through the silent streets; even the German soldiers, always ready to strike up a song, were silent here. I was relieved to notice a café being reopened on the Boulevard des Italiens. In the course of the afternoon, several others followed suit. In the Rue de Rivoli a German artillery detachment was taking time out for a rest. A few heavily made up women of unmistakable profession tried to get into conversation with the soldiers. But when a group of French prisoners of war were led past, the girls turned away from the Germans and hurried over to the passing Frenchmen. There they stood, together with a few old men and women, and the tears ran down their cheeks.

At the Arc de Triomphe there were already more people, standing looking down sadly at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, some of them sobbing. The eternal flame was burning, and fresh flowers lay there. German soldiers joined the group and saluted the grave.

The atmosphere in Paris at that time was curiously subdued and unreal. There were no rejoicing conquerors, nor was there any evidence of spite toward the invaders. The French were stupefied because their Paris was occupied and their army beaten, and the German soldiers could not understand how they had got here so quickly.

A German corporal arrived with a few soldiers and explained to them the meaning of the Arc de Triomphe. He began with the words: "We are standing here on France's most sacred soil . . . ." When he read off the heroic exploits of the French Army inscribed on the arch, one of the soldiers exclaimed: "Didn't they fight a lot against us!" Another one protested: "No, most of all against the English!" and read off the long series of France's victories against England.

On June 15 the first German parade was held at the Arc de Triomphe. It was the division under General von Briesen, who later fell in Russia. After the parade the slim, gray-haired General, standing on the bridle path of the avenue, told us about the twenty engagements his division had fought on its way here via Holland. He held out his left hand to us, for the right one was injured. In spite of this, he mounted his horse alone and then rode off at a gallop with his officers. The group of horsemen in its cloud of dust, with the Arc de Triomphe and the blue sky as a background, was like a painting.

Although no more than about twenty per cent of the population had remained in Paris, the city gradually came to life again. The reason for the totally lifeless impression given by the city on the first day was that the population had been told by loud-speakers during the surrender to remain in their houses for twenty-four hours in order to avoid incidents. Now numerous refugees were already returning, on foot, in carts, or in motorcars. The German officers told us that there was a surprising lack of mutual helpfulness among the refugees, especially on the part of the more wealthy ones. When, for instance, a large, half-empty limousine was stopped with the request to take a few pedestrians back to Paris, this was often refused by those in the car.

In the cafés on the great boulevards and at Montparnasse, people were only too ready to tell us about the panic-stricken flight before the entry of the Germans. Of course, it was hardly the cream of Paris society which was to be found at that time on the streets and in the cafés. The people were curious and talkative. Again and again they touched the tires of our car and the upholstery to see whether the material was genuine. They were amazed at the large number of automobiles used by the German armed forces, and always wanted to know where all the bread came from which the Germans had brought with them. Had not all the newspapers said that Germany was on the brink of starvation? It was like in Belgium, only more so. The newspapers—Le Matin and Victoire ap-
peared again after June 16—also complained that the Germans had had too many tanks. Had they not known that before? Germany never tried to make any secret of her rearmament. Like everyone else in Paris, the newspapers abused the mistaken policy of the Reynaud government, which had just resigned.

On June 17, Marshal Pétain asked for an armistice, and on the following day we started back for Berlin. Our trip took us via Sedan—north of which town the first piercing of the Maginot Line had occurred—to Reims, which had fallen without a fight only three days earlier. Reims proved a disappointment to us, for we had hoped to enjoy a glass of champagne here. But the German command had probably foreseen that others might also have this obvious idea and had simply barred the entire deserted town.

On this day all the German soldiers we met along the road were in excellent spirits. They believed that, in view of Marshal Pétain’s request for an armistice, hostilities had already ceased. The soldiers were happy about the victory but, more than anything else, they were happy that the shooting was over.

When we were back in Berlin and the armistice had been signed in Compiègne, there was no exultant rejoicing in Germany over the victory. People were satisfied and glad, but there were very few who imagined that the war was over. The experience of the Great War has made the Germans distrustful, and most of them did not let themselves be carried away by the Blitzkrieg in the West; the premonition of approaching conflicts and the readiness to face them were already there. In retrospect I often have to think of the atmosphere in Germany at that time. It explains why the Germans have held out in spite of the setbacks suffered in the fighting of the last few years. They never had any illusions, and they know what is at stake.

**CARTOON OF THE MONTH**

*By SAPAJOU*