

## **‘Agent de toute confiance et de tout premier ordre’<sup>1</sup>**

### **Anne-Marie van Oost, a case study of a woman’s participation in the Belgian resistance during the Second World War**



*Figure 1. Anne-Marie van Oost (left) and Henri van Oost (Right). Private archive*

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<sup>1</sup> ‘A first-rate and trusted agent’; Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie, n° II/ 300/ 093. AS 368.  
Report about service in the resistance from commander A. Haus. Centrum voor historische  
documentatie van de Krijgsmacht . Evere, GL.





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#### **Abstract**

This thesis explores the multifaceted roles and contributions of a woman in the Belgian resistance during the Second World War. The research is based on the case study of Belgian resistance agent Anne-Marie van Oost. While historical narratives have often sidelined the participation of women, this research aims to highlight their critical involvement and the diverse capacities in which they served. Through a comparative analysis of Anne-Marie’s recognition files with those of her male relatives, her personal biography and additional literature, this study examines a woman’s experience and participation in the resistance in an occupied country in Western-Europe.

The research reveals that women were instrumental in communication, safeguarding fugitives, and the provision of supplies to resistance fighters. Their efforts were crucial to the success of the resistance operation and it allowed women to transcend gender norms and work with the men on a similar level. It even provided opportunities for female agents to fulfil leadership roles. This thesis also delves into the gender-specific challenges faced by these women, including the difficulties of their recruitment and how societal expectations hindered their position within a resistance group. In addition, the research nuances the contested claims by historian Fabrice Maerten about women’s mere ‘supportive’ roles in the resistance.

By shedding light on the contributions of this courageous woman, this study aims to rectify historical misconceptions and provide a more inclusive overview of the Belgian resistance movement. The findings contribute to the Belgian

studies on the Second World War and the under researched Belgian resistance historiography. The research highlights the need to re-evaluate traditional historical narratives and recognize the indispensable role of women in shaping the outcomes of wartime resistance efforts.

### **Word of thanks**

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor professor Sandra Manickam for her support with this thesis and my applied project. In addition, I am grateful for the feedback from my second reader professor Lara Green and the aid of the other teachers from the history faculty at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Lastly, I want to thank my friends and family for their assistance and words of encouragement during this process.

### **List of abbreviations**

ARA Algemeen Rijksarchief

AS Armée Secrète

FI Front de l'Indépendance (Independent Front)

GL Geheime Leger

### **List of figures**

Figure 1. Anne-Marie and Henri van Oost. Private archive.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Women have been absent from the historiography of the resistance for a long time. After the Second World War, stories from brave resistance fighters came out and some of these figures turned into national heroes. Scholars have agreed that women were not passive bystanders during the time of the occupation in Western Europe, but the stories of these female fighters are under researched and hidden from the public.<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons for this emptiness has to do with the traditional narrative that was designed for men and women. As argued by D'Ann Campbell, if women were sent to combat or portrayed in an aggressive, combative role, this would undermine the idea of the passive wife and mother, which was her expected role for middle and upper-class women in Western societies.<sup>3</sup> Resistance invited women to participate in the war, but revealed the struggle of the men who on the one hand needed the extra help, but on the other hand felt like it undermined social rules. The men were responsible for protecting the country and for protecting the women from violence.<sup>4</sup> The female agents in the resistance are under researched in Western European studies and they are almost never the main objective of the research. According to François Marcot, this minimal attention also has to do with the limited amount of sources.<sup>5</sup> This research wishes to contribute to the field of resistance studies in Belgium, which have been neglected for 50 years and shift the focus to the women in this

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<sup>2</sup> Rita Thalmann, "L'oubli des femmes dans l'historiographie de la Résistance," *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 1(1995): 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> D'Ann Campbell, "Women in combat: the World War II experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union," *The Journal of Military History* 57(1993): 302.

<sup>4</sup> Penny Summerfield, "Gender and war in the twentieth century," *The International History Review* 19, nr. 1(1997): 7.

<sup>5</sup> Michèle Corthals and Babette Weyns, "'La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'. Verzet tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog in de Belgische historiografie (1944-2020)," *Journal of Belgian History-Revue Belge D'Histoire Contemporaine-Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 52, nr. 1-2(2022): 39.

movement. The Belgian historiography on resistance is still in its early stages and there are not enough studies to make a complete overview of this topic yet. Scholars are still focused on the basic who, why, where and when questions. The topic of resistance is especially neglected in the Belgian research of the Second World War, due to the overwhelming attention that has been given to the study of the collaboration, the reasons for which will be discussed below.

There are multiple reasons why the Belgian resistance struggled for recognition and its place in collective memory after 1945. First of all, when the resistance came out of hiding after five years, the first images the public saw of them were their violent repressions of collaborators and Germans. This did not rhyme with the ideas of brave men that fought to liberate their country. On top of that, the resistance is criticised for unnecessary violence during the war and the Belgian inhabitants mainly attribute the liberation to the Allies. The Belgian resistance groups did not liberate Belgium, but their intelligence and sabotage significantly increased the speed at which the Allied soldiers were able to free the country.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the multiple resistance groups were unable to speak with a unified voice after the war. They are upstaged by the classic political parties of Liberals, Socialists and Christen-Democrats.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, this void in public memory is different in the north and south of the country. The Flemish-speaking North has a larger number of collaborators with the German occupier.<sup>8</sup> Frustrations concerning the unavailability of facilities in

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<sup>6</sup> Koen Aerts and Bruno De Wever, "Het verzet in de publieke herinnering in Vlaanderen," *Journal of Belgian History-Revue Belge D'Histoire Contemporaine-Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 42, nr. 2-3(2012): 78-79.

<sup>7</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "Verzet," *CegeSoma*, consulted 05-03-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/artikels/verzet.html>; This is an article from the online platform of the CegeSoma institute (similar to the NIOD in the Netherlands). The site contains multiple articles about people and events from the war, based on the institute's archives and research about the Second World War in Belgium.

<sup>8</sup> Aerts and De Wever, "Het verzet in de publieke herinnering," 78-79.

Dutch has driven many Flemish people into the arms of the Germans, who promised to accommodate these needs. The majority of the resistance initiatives up until 1942 were concentrated in Wallonia and its important industrialist cities. The antifascist feeling was more widespread there with much higher votes for communist and socialist parties in the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> The already existing gap between the North and South because of the language barrier is enhanced by the contrast between the collaboration in Flanders and the resistance in Wallonia. This led to violent incidents between both parties after the liberation. The Belgian government therefore decided not to invest in the commemoration of resistance and actively silenced this part of history. These realities led to an underrepresentation of the resistance in Belgium and in Flanders in particular, on a scholarly and popularised level.<sup>10</sup> The research on Belgian women is therefore hindered by the fact that women and war held a difficult position in Western Europe and the complicated relationship of Belgium and Flanders with the resistance.

To contribute to the research on female resistance in Belgium, I will be focussing on the life of the female resistance fighter Anne-Marie van Oost. This specific woman and her family could bring to light some of the lingering questions about the Belgian resistance operation and its female participants, such as what women's roles were in the resistance in Belgium, how this movement recruited its female agents and how tasks differed for men and women. My main research question asks how women participated in the Belgian resistance during the Second World War, based on the life of Anne-Marie van Oost. The family makes for a good case study on resistance with sufficient documentation and the possibility of introducing a gender

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<sup>9</sup> Fabrice Maerten, *Was opa een held? Speuren naar mannen en vrouwen in het verzet tijdens WOII* (Tiel: Lannoo, 2020), 70-71.

<sup>10</sup> Aerts and De Wever, "Het verzet in de publieke herinnering," 78-79.

comparison between the male and female members. The first chapter will present a history of the van Oost family and outline the concepts of gender and resistance. It also gives an overview of the academic field up to this point. Chapter two will be used to dive deeper into women's position within the heterogeneous Belgian resistance and the resistance group of the Secret Army, which all members of the family van Oost were a part of. This second chapter describes the first part of Anne-Marie's participation in the resistance and shows that her actions are already different from men during the recruitment. The final and third chapter will be the second empirical chapter on women's participation and addresses the different roles that were fulfilled by women through the case study of Anne-Marie.

### 1.1 Anne-Marie and the van Oost family

Anne-Marie van Oost and her family guide this research on women's participation in the resistance. Georges van Oost was a businessman from Gent, who married the French noblewoman Marie-Louise de Douville de Franssu. Their oldest daughter Anne-Marie was born in 1923, followed by her brother Henri in 1925. They grew up in the castle 'Den Ast' in the small village of Huise in East-Flanders and were raised with strong moral values of loyalty to God, king and country. When the German occupation in Belgium started in 1940, Anne-Marie, together with her brother and father, decided to join the resistance group of the Secret Army.<sup>11</sup> The family van Oost played an important role for the resistance in East-Flanders during the war. Their efforts do not go unnoticed and it eventually leads to Georges' and Marie-Louise's arrest in 1944 and the fact that neither one of their children will make it home that year.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This is known in French as l'*Armée Secrète* (AS). From here also referred to as SA.

<sup>12</sup> Claire Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily," *CegeSoma*, consulted 19.12.2023, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/oorlogsportretten/van-oost-echtq-de-gerlache-de-gomery-lily.html>

When her father and mother were released from prison in July 1944, Anne-Marie was lured into a trap by the Gestapo and arrested in Brussel. The discovery of her fake passport in the mailbox of the safehouse led to her condemnation. During her interrogations, she refused to give up names or information on the resistance. After seven months in prison, she was put on the train in the direction of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. In her own book *Le Faux Silence* or the false silence she is quiet about most of the horrors of her time in the camp.<sup>13</sup> 'I think you understand, that which is still in my silence, is there because I have difficulty talking about it'.<sup>14</sup>

Together with 1500 other women, Anne-Marie left the camp in April of 1945 and was brought to Sweden, as part of a deal between the Red Cross and Heinrich Himmler. She was reunited with her parents in Huise in July of 1945. Relief and sorrow went hand in hand, since they were still grieving the death of Henri, who died in a car accident in February of that year as a member of the Belgian tank division.<sup>15</sup> After her marriage to the arctic explorer Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery in 1946, Anne-Marie applied for her own recognition as a resistance fighter as well as for her deceased brother.<sup>16</sup> She wrote in her book that it was Henri that was the true hero and force of the resistance: 'My work was more about helping the resistance members, than being a resistance fighter myself.'<sup>17</sup> 25 years after the war, she felt like her actions were not worthy of the title of resistance.

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<sup>13</sup> Lily de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence* (Mulleme: de Gerlache de Gomery, 1974), 18-21.; Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>14</sup> "je pense que vous comprendrez, de ce qui est encore dans mon silence, la raison des difficultés qu'il y a de dire."; de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>16</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri, Letter from P. Thielemans to the Minister of Defense.

<sup>17</sup> 'Mon travail, c'était plus d'aider les résistants que d'être résistante moi-même.'; de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 17.

## 1.2 Gender and resistance

To better understand the female participation in the Belgian resistance, I will elaborate on some key terms that will be used in this research. Grasping the concept of gender and the difficulties of defining female resistance, are vital to this topic. This study questions the influence of gender on women's ability to act, participate and join the resistance. The general definition of gender means the ideas that a society relates to being male, female or another identity. Gender is understood here as the expectations and limitations that are connected to being a woman and how these shape the society in which they live. Michèle Corthals says that it is this gender aspect that has an impact on women's participation in the resistance movement. Women in the Belgian society of the 1940s are unequal to men in a judicial and social sense and they are also politically excluded. They did not receive voting rights in Belgium up until 1948, well after the war. These exclusions from certain professions, political access or financial independence have an effect on their ability to act in the resistance. Women are limited in access to knowledge, networks and goods that could help them in their resistance efforts.<sup>18</sup> Resistance in WWII was also originally understood by scholars as a form of armed combat against the German oppressor. Women usually did not take up arms, which meant that they were excluded from this definition. Engaging with the resistance was therefore originally seen as a male activity, that only included women if they fulfilled male positions of leadership or armed combat.<sup>19</sup> Developments from the 1970s onwards broadened the definition of resistance to also include non-armed resistance, like aid for victims or securing Jews, which were tasks that

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<sup>18</sup> Michèle Corthals, "'Ménagères à l'action!' De Belgische clandestiene communistische vrouwenpers over vrouwelijk verzet tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog," *Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis* 52, nr. 1-2(2022), 56.

<sup>19</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "Vrouwen in het verzet," *CegeSoma*, consulted 30-01-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/artikels/vrouwen-in-het-verzet.html>

were often undertaken by women. They became part of the definition of resistance, 25 years after the liberation.<sup>20</sup>

It is extraordinary events like a war that create opportunities. Women in Western Europe could use resistance to resist the common expectations of women at the time to participate in this movement and join the male environment of the resistance for five years.<sup>21</sup> Women joined the public sphere and a political and military environment that they were excluded from otherwise.<sup>22</sup> This relates to ongoing debates about women and agency. According to Kelleher, agency should be understood as the ability to take action and take control of one's own destiny.<sup>23</sup> Women historians in the past fifty years have credited women with agency when they have in some way escaped the patriarchal norm and found a way to exercise power. These scholars want to show what women's roles were in society and document when and where changes in gender roles and expectations happened and also why this occurred. Martha Howell remarks that this does not mean that we have to look for exceptional women, those that were one of the few that succeeded in exercising power. The research on female agency should focus on demonstrating that many individuals found ways to navigate and bend the rules of the society in which they lived, not to deny or uproot the male-dominated world in which they existed.<sup>24</sup> This study wishes to show that Anne-

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<sup>20</sup> Corthals, "Ménagères à l'action!," 56-57.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the shadows. A new history of the French resistance* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2015), 131.

<sup>22</sup> Corthals, "Ménagères à l'action!," 56.

<sup>23</sup> Marie A. Kelleher, "What do we mean by 'women and power'?", *MFF* 51, nr. 2(2015): 109-10.

<sup>24</sup> Martha Howell, "The problem of women's agency in late mediaeval and early modern Europe," in *Women and gender in the modern Low Countries, 1500-1750*, eds. by Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda C. Pipkin (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 21-22.

Marie was one of many women that found her way in the resistance, not that she was the exception.

### 1.3 The historiography of women in the Belgian resistance

#### 1.3.1 The early historiography of the resistance

The resistance in Belgium has a minimal place in public memory and received little attention after the war, as discussed above.<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that the topic has not sparked some scholarly interest.<sup>26</sup> In the years following the liberation, the historiographical debate was looking for a unified, Belgian Resistance with a capital 'R' in their studies. Soon, it was clear that the multiple resistance organisations and the diverse nature of the movement, that ranged from boycotting to clandestine press, made it impossible to find one Belgian Resistance. It varied from local resistance to organised groups with distinct political affiliations, like a communist or liberal approach. This was not a homogenous group that could be described in one term such as 'The Resistance' like in other neighbouring countries. Scholars like Henri Bernard and Leo Lejeune still tried to find a unified resistance, since this would help with their legitimacy after the war. The resistance historiography of the 1950s and 1960s debated on different approaches, like the attributions of Lejeune and Lucien Deleuze to Henri Michels' *Revue d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*. This French historian dedicated a special edition of his magazine to the wartime in Belgium. These older studies were often very patriotic and solely based on a select corpus of sources. At the end of the first 25 years after the war, the research was slowly moving away from the need to write about a complete and unified Belgian resistance.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>26</sup> Aerts and De Wever, "Het verzet in de publieke herinnering," 78-79.

<sup>27</sup> Corthals and Weyns, "La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'," 13-23.



### 1.3.2 Changes in the 1970s

The 1970s brought a shift in the historiography of the resistance. Thus far, most research relied on interviews with survivors and resistance fighters. It is understandable that sources were limited in groups that want to stay hidden, but this scarcity of written sources was barely addressed. Jean Dujardin wished to research the different motives of people to join the resistance. Previously, it was assumed they enrolled out of patriotic feeling. Dujardin established the heterogeneity of the resistance and with that, he wondered who actually joined this movement. He was the first one to introduce different sources and use the post-war governmental files that acknowledge someone's service during the war.<sup>28</sup> Under the influence of the French historians, there was more room for resistance without combat and that meant that women and the working class became part of the research. In the 1980s, there were not many changes in this field, except for a translation of most of the studies from French to Dutch to reach a wider audience.<sup>29</sup> The scholars in Wallonia were further along in their research than the historians in Flanders, because the topic of resistance was less controversial in the south of Belgium.<sup>30</sup>

The limited work that was available about women in the Belgian resistance until the 1990s focussed on the impact of the war on their emancipation afterwards and not on their actions during the war.<sup>31</sup> This is part of the so-called *Watershed debate* that looks at the influence of the war on women's position in society.<sup>32</sup> This led to two theories: the transformation thesis and the continuity thesis. In the 1950s and 1960s, the transformation thesis was

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Dujardin, "Le service 'D' et l'aide aux illégaux," *Cahiers* 1(1974): 9-74.

<sup>29</sup> Corthals and Weyns, "'La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'," 23.

<sup>30</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>31</sup> Corthals, "'Ménagères à l'action!'," 57.

<sup>32</sup> Jelena Batinić, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans. A History of World War II Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 10-11.

dominant, which proclaimed that the war helped women evolve to modernity. The first feminist wave from the 1970s believed in the continuity thesis that stated that after the war, there was little change for women and they returned to traditional roles. The 1980s brought forward a third idea with the notion that the war did not do anything for gender equality and only accentuated the differences between men and women. Contemporary historians like Penny Summerfield and Joan W. Scott have declared this question unsolvable and proposed to look at more important questions, for example the influence of the war on the expectations that men and women had for themselves and for others.<sup>33</sup>

### 1.3.3 Research from the 1990s onwards

The 1990s built on the changes of the 1970s with a more bottom-up and inclusive approach for individuals and with the use of multiple sources. Under the influence of the *social turn* in historiography, Fabrice Maerten and José Gotovich wrote the first academic books with a central focus on the resistance. Maerten has shown great influence with his work on resistance in the province of Henegouwen in Wallonia and was the first to publish findings about female resistance on a local level.<sup>34</sup> He found that women experienced their participation in the resistance as a liberating and emancipatory era, but that they had a hard time integrating back into a society that had not changed with them over the course of the war.<sup>35</sup> Mid 1990s, a series of debates between Western European historians came to the conclusion that the resistance in Europe was very diverse in three points: geographically, chronologically and

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<sup>33</sup> Summerfield, "Gender and war," 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Fabrice Maerten, *Du murmure au grondement. La Résistance politique et idéologique dans la province de Hainaut pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale (mai 1940-septembre 1944)* (Mons: Analectes d'histoire du Hainaut, 1999, 3 vol).

<sup>35</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "La résistance, facteur d'émancipation des femmes? Le cas du Hainaut," *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis* 4(1998): 203-4.

socially. This topic should therefore be studied with attention for the local context and the differences in time. Scholars realised the resistance was more than the combat groups and it was their interaction with the local network that made them operate successfully. They could not be studied separately. This also led to studies about the underlying motivation to turn to resistance. Peter Largrou argued that women committed humanitarian acts of resistance that were not motivated by political or ideological convictions. They acted out of their supporting role as a mother or a wife that helped her family and pitied the people that were in hiding for the Germans. Helping the country as an extension of her task to protect her family.<sup>36</sup> The historian Claire Andrieu denied these claims and said that the dangers that come with harbouring fugitives or smuggling information, are too grave to just attribute the female motivations to a humanitarian feeling.<sup>37</sup>

According to Babette Weyns and Michèle Corthals, the renewed interest and efforts of the government around the year 2000 to invest in the commemoration and memory politics of WWII, both collaboration and resistance, led to the introduction of resistance into public debate.<sup>38</sup> It is only from 2010 onwards that publications on this topic have gone up. This recent scholarship has shown more interest in local resistance in villages and cities, like Bruno de Wever and Karolien Steen with their study on resistance in Gent.<sup>39</sup> The majority of studies on the Belgian resistance in the past 20 years barely include scholarship on women. The historian Michèle Corthals is the first

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<sup>36</sup> Corthals and Weyns, "La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'," 38-39.

<sup>37</sup> Claire Andrieu, "Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche," *Le Mouvement social* 180(1997): 85-86.

<sup>38</sup> Corthals and Weyns, "La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'," 47-48.

<sup>39</sup> Aerts and De Wever, "Het verzet in de publieke herinnering," 78-79.; Bruno De Wever and Karolien Steen, "Het verzet in Gent tijdens de bezetting in de Tweede Wereldoorlog," *Journal of Belgian History-Revue Belge D'Histoire Contemporaine-Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 52, nr. 1-2(2022): 86-118.

scholar working on a PhD solely about the women in the Belgian resistance. So far, she has published some preliminary work, like the influence of the communist press on women's recruitment and their expected tasks in the resistance. The communist movement is the only group who actively encouraged women to participate in the war. This angle has been taken by some other scholars, since communist ideology made fewer distinctions between men and women and their participation in armed combat. It is impossible at the moment to write an overview of women's involvement in this historical field, since there is not enough research yet on local cases to make comparisons and assemble these into a complete study of the female resisters. This study in particular, will add to the gap in the research by building on the ideas of studying local cases like De Wever, Steen and Maerten did for Gent and Henegouwen, combined with a focus on a select number of people like the case studies on female resisters by the CegeSoma Institute. The resistance historiography needs these smaller studies to eventually bring the stories together and make broader conclusions. Unlike most of the previous research, I will be looking into a woman in the Belgian resistance and focus on her exact movements and actions and how they are influenced by her gender. According to Laurent Douzou, research should not linger in trying to prove women participated, but focus on how they resisted in WWII.<sup>40</sup> Similarly to Michèle Corthals, I do not want to know how women were perceived or emancipated by their role in the resistance after the war, but understand how they held this position during the occupation.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Laurent Douzou, "La Résistance, une affaire d'hommes ?," *Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent* 31(1995): 24.

<sup>41</sup> Corthals, "'Ménagères à l'action!'," 59-72.

#### 1.4 Sources and methodology

The documentation for this research on the van Oost family is based on biographical studies by Claire Pahaut and Marie-Pierre d'Udekem d'Acoz on Anne-Marie and her family, combined with Anne-Marie's personal biography.<sup>42</sup> The primary sources about Anne-Marie are the files that were composed by the government after the war. These documents were drawn up to award official acknowledgment to resistance fighters or people that suffered losses in protection of the country during the war. This practice started in 1945 and it could lead to many benefits like special war pensions or financial rewards. The files contain information on specific actions that were committed by the suppliant and what roles and services they fulfilled during the German occupation, either in a resistance group or individually. The included paperwork varies from basic administrative information filled in by the person himself to letters of coworkers and supervisors in the army that report on the actions of these resistance fighters. The dossiers from recognised members of the Secret Army are particularly interesting, since they contain significantly more detailed information than the general files from the government. These files all contain a short note that says: 'Record of services for the SA' (see figure 2), filled out by the head of the Secret Army. Furthermore there is a 'Report about behaviour and manner of service' and a questionnaire in chronological order that is filled in by the applicant themselves (see figure 3). These categories of the documents will be used in footnotes to indicate which part of the file is being referred to.

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<sup>42</sup> Marie-Pierre d'Udekem d'Acoz, "De verzetsactiviteiten van de familie van Oost," *Bulletin de l'Association de la Noblesse du Royaume de Belgique (ANRB)* 303(2020): 94-97; Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily.;" Lily de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence* (Mulleem: de Gerlache, 1974).

There are limitations to the documentation within the sources themselves. On the one hand, these are bureaucratic and administrative reports, so the information on concrete actions can be general and concise. On the other hand, these documents include handwritten accounts of the person who requests this investigation. The questionnaire contains an abundance of information about the resistance fighter, but might contain some personal flattery and overestimation of one's actions to obtain a better recognition. The dubious personal evaluations are contrasted with often more truthful accounts of supervisors that report on the resistance activities of the applicant. Especially the dates in these handwritten accounts should be handled with care. Many applicants lied about the date they joined a resistance group, due to a long standing conception about the 'resistance fighter of the last hour' in the Belgian resistance historiography. This narrative was formulated to discredit the resistance after the war. It supposes that many people became part of the resistance after D-Day in 1944 and thus only joined when the victory was already in sight. These people were not regarded as true resistance fighters and were given less or were even denied compensation. Therefore many people highlight their participation before the sixth of June 1944. These recognition files also contain examples of uninformed family members that are forced to fill in the detailed accounts of a person's movements in the resistance, because they died during the war.<sup>43</sup>

The two different files of Anne-Marie van Oost serve as a different angle for her recognition. She was recognised as a member of the resistance group of the Secret Army and as a resistance fighter in general. This provides a very broad view of her life during the war, with comments on her actions, motivation and character. Both files consist of fifteen to twenty pages with

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<sup>43</sup> Maerten, *Was opa een held?*, 199-200.

letters from officials, a personal questionnaire and reports from commanders. The main research will be based on these personal dossiers from the war as a primary source. In addition, I will use literature to support the findings and give historical context, which is largely based on research from CegeSoma.<sup>44</sup> The similar files on her father and brother will serve as a contrast to Anne-Marie's case to see if gender differences have an influence on her actions and roles in the resistance. For example, her brother and father are recognised as an armed combatant by colonel De Ridder from the Bureau of Resistance, unlike Anne-Marie.<sup>45</sup> This does not mean that women did not receive recognition as an armed fighter. According to De Wever and Steen, men had a bigger chance of succeeding with this application, while in practice they might have committed other types of resistance acts.<sup>46</sup> The qualitative analysis of these sources will allow me to dive deeper into women's participation in the Belgian resistance.

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<sup>44</sup> The CegeSoma Institute is similar to the NIOD in the Netherlands. This institution publishes research about the First and Second world war in Belgium. Their site contains multiple articles about people and events from the war.

<sup>45</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri, n° 71.604/ II. Certificate Armed Combatant. ARA, Dossiers van de gewapende weerstanders.; Dossier van Oost Georges, n° 14565/II. Certificate Armed Combatant. ARA, Dossiers van de gewapende weerstanders.

<sup>46</sup> De Wever and Steen, "Het verzet in Gent," 93-94.

300.093

## ETATS DE SERVICE A L'A. S. STAAT VAN DIENSTEN BIJ HET G. L.

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<p>Nom : VAN OOST Naam : .....</p> <p>Prénoms : Anne Marie (Lilly) Voornamen : .....</p> <p>Domicile : 50 rue Basse des Champs Woonplaats : Gand</p> <p>Lieu et date de naissance Huyas Plaats en geboortedatum : .....</p> <p>20. octobre 1903</p> <p>Etat-civil : cël Burgerlijke stand : .....</p> <p>Profession : sans Beroep : .....</p> <p>Situation militaire : néant Militaire situation : .....</p> <p>Unité de l'A.S. : Etat Major Zone III Eenheid van het G.L. : .....</p> <p>Grade dans l'A.S. : agent de liaison Graad in het G.L. : .....</p>	<p>Date d'affiliation : 1er Juin 1944 Aansluitingsdatum : .....</p> <p>Missions accomplies, détentions et condamnations, blessures, etc. Volbrachte zendingen, gevangenhoudingen en veroordeelingen, kwetsuren, enz.</p> <p>Perioda de prefalante: mission de liaison entre E.M. de Zone et Cts de Secteurs de la Flandre Orientale. Periode d'alerte: Missions liaison et de transmission d'ordres secrets entre le point de contact des estafettes motocyclistes et P.C. de Zone au maquis. Periode active: (exécution des sabotages) Mission de liaison au bénéfice d' l'organisation des plaines de parachutage et des terrains des Fingues Mission de liaison auprès d'un chef de groupement de saboteurs.</p> <p>arrêtée le 26 Juillet 1944 à Bruxelles Déportée en Allemagne le 30 Aout 1944</p>
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Figure 2. Record of services for the SA. Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie, n° II/ 300/ 093. AS 368.

Centrum voor historische documentatie van de Krijgsmacht . Evere, GL.



## Chapter 2: The resistance in Belgium

### 2.1 Chapter introduction

The first chapter outlined the general ideas for this research and gave an overview of the literature so far. The past studies have not addressed how women were recruited for the resistance nor looked into how gender might have affected this practice. The reasoning behind recruiting certain members for a group is heavily influenced by gender. This first step of resistance participation sets up which people are able to join a resistance group and also impacts which tasks are assigned to them.<sup>47</sup> The following chapter is concerned with the general position of women within this movement and see how gender played a role in the recruitment of female agents, illustrated by Anne-Marie van Oost. The chapter is divided in two sections. Firstly, the background of the Belgian resistance and its development during the war, plus an extended focus on the evolution of the resistance group of the Secret Army. Some additional context on this group helps understand in which environment Anne-Marie and her family operated and how the evolution of the group impacted the van Oost family in their efforts. This first section will rely on the work from Maerten that was done for the CegeSoma and on the study of De Wever and Steen on the resistance in Gent.

The second part will look at the recruitment of women for the resistance and will be illustrated by the use of Anne-Marie's files. There were three stages in her time in the resistance, the pre-alert and alert phase were for testing and recruitment and her active period started when she officially joined the resistance group of the Secret Army on June first in 1944. This will be explained in chapter three. The information on the recruitment of her father and brother will serve as a comparison to see how members from the same family were

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<sup>47</sup> Summerfield, "Gender and war," 4-5.

recruited at different times and for different reasons. For all three, this research is based on the documents that were filled in by their commanders in the Secret Army and not on their own testimonies.

## **2.2 United and divided**

The Belgian resistance is a very heterogeneous movement that splinters into several smaller groups with distinct political affiliations and goals. The diversity of groups and their own organisations make it difficult to make general conclusions about topics like women's participation, since every case is diverse depending on which resistance group was joined. Therefore the following section will provide an overview of the resistance in Belgium and zoom in on the Secret Army resistance group. The earliest Belgian resistance against the Germans is centred around the French-speaking middle class and bourgeoisie that descend from veterans from the First World War. A strong anti-German feeling was present in these circles. Their main occupation is harbouring fugitives, helping British soldiers and distributing clandestine press. The first official resistance group in the early years was the Independent Front (IF) in 1941, erected by the Belgian Communist Party.<sup>48</sup> Their clear anti-fascist feeling results in this organisation, which encompasses most resistance initiatives on the left side of the political spectrum. The socialist and more right wing voters do not join. The reluctance of the last group to join the IF resulted in the formation of the Belgian Legion, a more patriotic right-wing group. Next to these bigger groups, there are smaller local initiatives like the more liberal V-Liga or the White Brigade from Marcel Louette. Outside of the organised resistance, ordinary Belgian citizens helped hide Jews or fugitives that refused to go for mandatory service to Germany, set up intelligence networks and clandestine press or participated in protests. The three main resistance groups

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<sup>48</sup> in French known as the *Front de l'Indépendance* (FI); Maerten, "Verzet."

at the end of the war are the left wing Independent Front, the more right wing Belgian Legion and the smaller French bourgeoisie and middle class with their own intelligence service and their Belgian National Movement. The number of participants surged in 1942 because of the mandatory labour in Germany, the harsher persecution of the Jewish inhabitants and the growing German repression. The reports of German losses in Stalingrad and El Alamein in Northern Africa against the Allied troops gave another incentive for the Belgian citizens to join the resistance. The Belgian movement rounded off at about 150.000 participants in 1944.<sup>49</sup>

### 2.2.1 The Secret Army

One of the many resistance groups in occupied Belgium was the Secret Army. This study will only discuss this group, but further information about the other Belgian resistance groups can be found in the work of Fabrice Maerten.<sup>50</sup> The clear alignment of the political and moral convictions of the right-wing Secret Army that fought for king and country and the van Oost family led to the membership of Georges, Henri and Anne-Marie in this particular group. The SA's extensive funds and better contact to the Allies in London than other groups meant more opportunities for their members. Not all Belgian resistance groups received contact or support from overseas.<sup>51</sup> For example, the improved communication between the Secret Army command and London created possibilities for Anne-Marie to participate in transporting goods and

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<sup>49</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>50</sup> Fabrice Maerten "La résistance : un combat dans l'ombre," in *Guerre, occupation, libération. Belgique 1940-1945*, eds. Wannes Devos & Kevin Gony (Brussel: Racine, 2019), 201-15.

<sup>51</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

information for the SA from the Allies that landed in occupied Belgium to her own commander (see figure 3).<sup>52</sup>

The Belgian Legion was one of the biggest resistance groups in 1944 to support the Allies in the liberation of the country with approximately 54.000 members.<sup>53</sup> They were based on a military, combative group that wanted to support the king in 1940. In 1941, they reconvened their goal into assisting the British and Allied troops to help liberate the country. They changed their name multiple times throughout the war, but settled on the Secret Army in 1944.<sup>54</sup> The SA had a stronghold in the armed resistance in Gent, where 28% of the resistance fighters in the city were a part of this group. This organisation had six groups in different parts of the city in 1942. The commander for East-Flanders was Albert Tollenaere.<sup>55</sup> The little experience of the members of this resistance group, combined with recklessness and impatience resulted in multiple arrests by the German occupier. Tollenaere was taken in October of 1942 and his successor was taken three weeks later.

After the next two commanders, Charles Claser and Jules Bastin, were arrested in 1943, the AS opted for a reorganisation. Certain figure heads of the group escaped the wave of arrests and slowly started to build certain subdivisions in various parts of the country. The Belgian government in London and the Allies improved their contact with the Army of Belgium, their new name, and their commander Yvan Gérard. This led to more specific instructions, better

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<sup>52</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie, Personal questionnaire. n° II/ 300/ 093. AS 368. Centrum voor historische documentatie van de Krijgsmacht . Evere, GL.; This report about her liaison assignments states that she was responsible for transporting messages and orders about military operations between Aalter and Wingene and between Huise and landing zones for the parachutists in June and July of 1944.

<sup>53</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "Geheime Leger (Het)," *CegeSoma*, consulted 25-03-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/artikels/geheim-leger-het.html>

<sup>54</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>55</sup> De Wever and Steen, "Het verzet in Gent," 108.

communication and even ammunition and explosives that were delivered from across the Channel. This military aid contributed to a swift liberation in 1944, where the SA was part of multiple sabotages of bridges, telephone lines and train tracks. They assisted the Allies with communication and were vital to the liberation of the port in Antwerp. Commander Jules Pire led the final operation of the Secret Army in 1944. He proclaims his organisation to be neutral in its political conviction, even though they are known for their right wing and royalistic sympathies, and managed to attract members from all layers of society. The SA lost about 4000 people during the war.<sup>56</sup>

## 2.3 Joining the resistance in Belgium

### 2.3.1 Recruitment

Gender played an important role when it came to recruiting resistance fighters. In the US and the UK, women were recruited for the war, but their tasks were separated from the men. The posters clearly stated that the men were recruited for the killing and women would be used 'to back them up'. The Auxiliary Territorial Service or British women's army expressed in their recruitment that women were not allowed to fire weapons and that the men would do the fighting if they did the rest. The shortage of men led to the use of British women in armed combat in the last years of the war.<sup>57</sup> The following section zooms in on how the low number of female resistance fighters can be partially linked to the process of recruitment. Based on statistics from research by the CegeSoma, the common profile of a female resistance fighter is a young woman, under the age of thirty who was usually unmarried and without children. Resistance groups had a tendency to recruit these younger women because they were fit and not tied down by marriage. Unlike their female

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<sup>56</sup> Maerten, "Geheime Leger."

<sup>57</sup> Summerfield, "Gender and war," 5-6.

counterparts, men were less likely to be held back by a socially obligated caring position for the family and therefore asked to join more often than the women. Maerten adds that the data tend to forget about older women that supported their husbands in their resistance efforts and the many female agents that did not apply for recognition after the war.<sup>58</sup> For example, Anne-Marie's mother never received her recognition as a resistance fighter.<sup>59</sup>

The resistance groups selected their new members, based on various factors, gender being among them, but age, abilities and physical condition also mattered. The new recruits for the resistance were informed through a personal one-on-one connection. This could range from a family member that talked about it in the house or through neighbours and friends that you met in your daily life. You could either volunteer for the job or be asked to join a resistance group.<sup>60</sup> It seems like Anne-Marie caught the attention of the Secret Army with her previous work as a telephone operator and as an assistant at a service centre in Gent, where she cycled to on a weekly basis. Her ability to travel from place to place on her bike, without causing suspicion, was the perfect profile for a female resistance agent.<sup>61</sup> She was introduced in the organisation by Camu (alias Baudoin), the manager of the Bank of Brussel and the commander of the AS in East-Flanders.<sup>62</sup> Her father and brother were recruited by Fernand Thielemans and Jacques van der Straeten.<sup>63</sup> During the war, all three were under supervision of the commanders Louis Camu and Auguste Haus. Camu was arrested in 1944.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Maerten, "La résistance," 201.

<sup>59</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>60</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>61</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>62</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>63</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Personal questionnaire; Dossier van Oost Georges. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>64</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

The resistance operated in such a way that often family members did not know their parents or children were part of a resistance group. For the safety of the operation, it was best to know as little as possible. There are other examples of families participating in the resistance together. Jean-Luc Denys describes that he and his two brothers joined the Secret Army at various times. His parents were in the dark, until his father found his oldest son outside after curfew and discovered he was involved in the resistance.<sup>65</sup> In this case, the van Oost family definitely knew of each other's resistance activities. Not only did they work together throughout the war, commander Louis Camu also personally consulted Anne-Marie's parents to ask for their daughter's service. In reply Marie-Louise said: "I give to Belgium what is most precious to me: my two children."<sup>66</sup> The patriotic sympathies of the couple and their support of the resistance played a part in the recruitment of their two children.

Maerten concluded in his research on the province of Henegouwen that women were generally recruited later than the men. He found that in 6 out of 10 cases, the women were recruited in 1943 or 1944. This is related to the growing needs of the resistance for communication, for smugglers or safe places for fugitives. The women were suspected less by the German soldiers and replaced many men in these particular jobs in the last years of the war.<sup>67</sup> A similar trend can be seen in the documentation on the family van Oost. The file from the Commission of National Recognition reveals that Anne-Marie served in the Secret Army for the entirety of the German occupation, which would mean from 1940 until 1945. In a more detailed list from the ministry of Internal Affairs, it is stated that she only joined the resistance and the SA in the summer of 1944. Before her official recruitment, Anne-Marie was involved in

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<sup>65</sup> Jean-Luc Denys, *Gent '40-'45: Drie Broers In Het Verzet* (Gent: Skribis, 2022), 50-51.

<sup>66</sup> d'Udekem d'Acoz, "De verzetsactiviteiten van de familie van Oost," 94.

<sup>67</sup> Maerten, "La résistance," 185-86.

various work that was related to the war and the resistance, hence the difference between the two records. Based on Anne-Marie's file, her previous work, like her job as a nurse in the hospital in Akkergem for the Red Cross in 1944 or her assistance in the organisation Aid for the Children of Prisoners of War in 1943, was all referred to as 'circumstantial evidence' in her file.<sup>68</sup> On paper, these seem trivial, caring positions that have limited impact on the resistance. In practice, these actions were used to support and help the Belgian resistance fighters.<sup>69</sup> The documentation on her male counterparts tells a less ambiguous story. Henri's file reports that he joined the resistance right away from July first 1941 until October of 1944. His tasks expanded quickly and he became a second lieutenant in his division.<sup>70</sup> Her father, Georges, became a member of the resistance and the AS in July of 1943.<sup>71</sup>

The resistance was initially not looking for female agents and only decided later on that these agents could be an asset for smuggling information and goods for the operation. Women were therefore recruited for very specific positions, which were the roles that they mainly fulfilled during the war. The time that people joined also has implications on how they are able to gain experience and rise in the ranks. If women, like Anne-Marie, are not fully acknowledged in acting out tasks for the resistance, since they are either not fully part of a resistance group or are asked to join later than the men, this will hurt their participation within the resistance.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> This is known in French as Aide aux Enfants des Prisonniers (AEP); Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery. Evaluation National Recognition Committee.

<sup>69</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Record of Services for the SA.

<sup>70</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>71</sup> Dossier van Oost Georges. Report Bureau of Resistance.

<sup>72</sup> Corthals and Weyns, "La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'," 39.



### 2.3.2. Test phase

The official dates of joining a resistance group do not include the time of a test phase that already took place before this moment. This period of testing is not awarded in the files as an official part of resistance, even though the new members are working for the operation for several months. The line between what is or is not part of resistance is blurry. After being recruited, the new resistance participants go through a series of tests. These are small assignments that look at people's strength, discretion and courage and see how much risk they are willing to take for the Belgian liberation. When all of this goes well, more difficult and riskier tasks are assigned to the new members.<sup>73</sup> On the first of October 1943, Anne-Marie van Oost entered her pre-alert state. The pre-alert and alert states are the names of her test phases. She fulfils a communication assignment between the staff of Zone III of Gent and the commander of the zone East-Flanders (see figure 2).<sup>74</sup> The Secret Army had divided the Belgian territory in five zones. Zone III corresponded with the modern provinces of East-and West-Flanders.<sup>75</sup> In the period of pre-alert, Anne-Marie distributed information within East-Flanders between two commanding points. In her alert-phase, she was responsible for the communication between the command of the motorcycle group and the headquarters of Zone III of the resistance fighters in hiding. In this second test phase, her work field expanded geographically and she was also given more responsibilities as a contact person for the hidden resistance. In March of 1944, Anne-Marie moved from Huise to a family friend's house in Ter Vaart in Mariakerke, as a means of precaution for the more challenging assignments she received from the SA in her alert phase. This house had the advantage of

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<sup>73</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>74</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>75</sup> d'Udekem d'Acoz, "De verzetsactiviteiten van de familie van Oost," 95.

having two exits, one near the canal and one towards a busier street. This aided her in her pursuits of hiding resistance agents and fugitives.<sup>76</sup> She was already an important link for the local resistance in March, three months before she officially joined the SA in June.

It is interesting to see that neither the file of her brother, nor her father mention any of these test phases in their reports. It is therefore impossible to compare the test-phases of the men with Anne-Marie because there is a lack of information. If they had one, it seems like both men did not have to wait long to be accepted for service. Henri was only sixteen when he joined the Secret Army, three years earlier than his older sister.<sup>77</sup> Georges was already an older man at 74, but his business and wealth probably made him a desirable target for the resistance in Gent.<sup>78</sup> This might indicate that women were tested longer and more severely than men. The three brothers from the Denys family also do not indicate a separate test phase, but they do mention they were asked to participate in communication for the agents in hiding or distributing illegal press. These were similar to Anne-Marie's first assignments, which might indicate that these tasks were often given to new members.

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<sup>76</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>77</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Certificate Armed Combatant.

<sup>78</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

## 2.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter shows that joining the resistance group of the Secret Army was definitely more difficult for women because of delayed recruitment and their extensive test phases. The very select profile that the resistance group preferred and the longer period of testing created boundaries for women to join the group. As shown through this case study, other factors also impacted women's recruitment, next to the gender aspect. First of all, the Secret Army provided an environment with more opportunities for its members than other resistance groups. In addition, Anne-Marie was from a family that was politically aligned with the Secret Army's ideals and other members of her family already joined the resistance. Her profile of a fit young woman also matched with the resistance's ideas of a female agent.

## Chapter 3: 'To be a woman is to be ignored'<sup>79</sup>

### 3.1 Chapter introduction

There are few statistics on women and their roles in the resistance, so the current research on this topic is condemned to qualitative and often stereotypical data.<sup>80</sup> On the one hand, their invisibility, as is highlighted in the title of this chapter, was used to their advantage. On the other hand, the title hints to a double meaning, since women were also left out and forgotten in the history of the resistance.<sup>81</sup> Penny Summerfield argues that the war created opportunities for women to fulfil different jobs and the lines between masculine and feminine work became unclear. Although British war posters revealed that men were recruited for killing and women to back them up, in reality both sexes worked together and even participated in the same tasks.<sup>82</sup> This is in contrast with Maerten, who points out that women participated in 'supporting' roles, such as the tasks they were used to in their homes for their family.<sup>83</sup>

The following chapter wishes to look into these claims by Maerten on women's supportive roles and dive deeper into women's participation in the resistance. This section focuses on the tasks that were completed by Anne-Marie during her active phase in the Secret Army, in June and July of 1944. Her father and brother will again serve as a comparison to establish which factors were responsible for women's various tasks. Unlike the previous chapter, this information is based on the personnel questionnaires. This survey was filled in by Anne-Marie herself after her return from Ravensbrück in 1945. Due to her brother's death, Anne-Marie and her husband Gaston de Gerlache applied for

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<sup>79</sup> Gildea, *Fighters in the shadows*, 130.

<sup>80</sup> Andrieu, "Les résistantes," 84.

<sup>81</sup> Gildea, *Fighters in the shadows*, 130-31.

<sup>82</sup> Summerfield, "Gender and war," 4-5.

<sup>83</sup> Maerten, "Vrouwen in het verzet."

his recognition. The questionnaire on his actions is probably filled in by his sister and his parents.<sup>84</sup> Based on her file, three main roles are present in her resistance work: she is a liaison officer, a smuggler and responsible for safeguarding fugitives. All three jobs reveal something different about Anne-Marie's efforts in the resistance and help understand what roles female agents fulfilled and why.

## 3.2 A woman's role in the resistance

### 3.2.1 Liaison officer van Oost

The first role Anne-Marie fulfilled within the resistance group of the SA was that of a liaison officer. This communicative position was often assigned to women and shows how they had a profound influence on the resistance operation.<sup>85</sup> Communication is vital for the survival of the resistance and since women were less suspicious or under less surveillance than men, they were better suited for this dangerous position.<sup>86</sup> Gildea concludes that women in western European resistance, like France or Belgium, were mainly employed as liaison officers to help exchange information between or within resistance groups. This role was to ensure communication and maintain a good relationship between individuals or organisations.<sup>87</sup> Anne-Marie van Oost is one of the known female communication officers for the AS in Gent. Her messenger role was twofold. She delivered messages between the commanders of Zone III of the AS and of East-Flanders and also assisted in aiding the communication for the British parachutists (see figure 3). From 1943 onwards, the government in London and the Allies improved the connection to occupied Belgium and the parachuting officers delivered direct

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<sup>84</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>85</sup> Maerten, "Vrouwen in het verzet."

<sup>86</sup> Douzou, "La Résistance, une affaire d'hommes?," 18.

<sup>87</sup> Gildea, *Fighters in the shadows*, 130-31.

communication, money and weapons to the main resistance groups from non-occupied Britain.<sup>88</sup> Anne-Marie cycled around the Flemish countryside and was able to sneak information past the German soldiers by concealing messages in her curls.<sup>89</sup>

As can be seen in Anne-Marie's case, a certain level of fitness was required for these liaison agents. The Belgian resistance fighter Alice Cheramy was used for communication by the Belgian intelligence organisation Clarence in the province of Brabant. Her commander Franz Leemans praised her commitment, especially when she was so tired of all the cycling she had to do for her liaison role.<sup>90</sup> The telephone lines and the letters were closely monitored by the Germans, which meant that the widespread resistance had to communicate through couriers. Cycling was preferred to using trains, since these passengers were regularly searched. If the distances were too great, public transport was an option and this is where women were also often used. French resistance agent Andréé Blanchère confesses that while smuggling a suitcase with ammunition and pamphlets from Valence to Avignon, she was told by her commander to smile at all times to the German officers. While approaching the checkpoint, she gave a smile to a German soldier and took his arm. She made it to her destination without being searched.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Maerten, "La résistance," 204.

<sup>89</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>90</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "Alice Cheramy," *CegeSoma*, consulted 25-05-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/oorlogsportretten/cheramy-alice.html>

<sup>91</sup> Gildea, *Fighters in the shadows*, 145.

2° Liaisons :  
 Verbindingen :

a) En quoi consistaient-elles ?  
 Waarin bestonden ze ?  
 Transport de messages et d'ordres concernant  
 les opérations militaires

b) A quelle époque ?  
 Op welk tijdstip ? 1<sup>er</sup> Juin 1944 au 28 Juillet 1944

De (endroits)  
 Van (plaats) Aelthie vers Wengine  
 Huyse vers places de parachutes

Chez qui ?  
 Bij wie ? Dans les 2 Flandres

Figure 3. Personal questionnaire. Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie, n° II/ 300/ 093. AS 368. Centrum voor historische documentatie van de Krijgsmacht . Evere, GL.

2° Liaisons :  
 Verbindingen :

a) En quoi consistaient-elles ?  
 Waarin bestonden ze ? Liaison entre la boîte aux lettres 50 rue basse au  
 Champ et Huyse (le Hôtel)

b) A quelle époque ?  
 Op welk tijdstip ? Juin 1944

De (endroits)  
 Van (plaats) de gare à Huyse vers Huyse

Chez qui ?  
 Bij wie ? mon fils Henri et le groupement d'Huyse

Figure 4. Personal questionnaire. Dossier van Oost Georges, n° II/300/ 176. AS 300. Centrum voor historische documentatie van de Krijgsmacht . Evere, GL.

Based on the questionnaires, Henri, Georges and Anne-Marie indicate that they all fulfilled a liaison role, but there are small differences between Anne-Marie and her male relatives. When comparing figures 3 and 4, Anne-Marie's document clearly states that she transported the messages between various points. Georges indicates that he was just offering up his mailbox in Gent. His older age would have hindered his work in the field. George's file states that he was used for the regional intelligence network from Gent to Huise. His daughter operated in a much larger area of East-and West-Flanders, so her role as a liaison appears to be more important than her father's. (see figure 3 and

4).<sup>92</sup> Henri had a more extensive communicative role where he was named officer of the entire zone by a report by colonel Auguste Haus. In addition, he is an important link for the communication to the Allies in London.<sup>93</sup>

The exact meaning of a liaison role differs for the individual person. Henri was in charge of a network of communication throughout the entire zone from the castle in Huise. He officially joined the AS earlier than his other family members, which could explain why he fulfilled a managerial role over his father and sister. While her brother served an active role in the shadows, her father fulfilled a more passive role in the communication, where he offered up his property in Huise and Gent for the resistance's use. It is possible that in Georges' job as a factory owner, he was utilised in a different way than his young children. Anne-Marie was put on the foreground as a courier, since the liaison role was better suited for a non-conspicuous woman.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, the men were also involved in this field, but in a less visible way. This position also depended on age and fitness, since this was quite a physical role that required the members to travel by bike or on foot throughout large areas.<sup>95</sup>

### 3.2.2 The safehouse in the castle 'Den Ast'

The start of the *razzia's* on Jews in Belgium in 1942 created a higher number of fugitives that led to a shortage of safehouses. People that were not officially part of a resistance group, but sympathised with its course assisted in this area. Mainly people in the countryside were asked to help hide the fugitives and the Jewish children. The resistance groups specifically called in the help of women to fill these positions. For example, Emilia Dutry and her daughters assisted in

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<sup>92</sup> Dossier van Oost Georges. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>93</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Report about behaviour and manner of service; Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>94</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>95</sup> Gildea, *Fighters in the shadows*, 130-31.



accommodating Jewish children in various safehouses in Gent.<sup>96</sup> Anne-Marie's first acts of resistance can be understood in this light as an intermediary for refugees and as the coordinator of a safehouse. With her family's help, the castle 'den Ast' became an axis for the resistance of East-Flanders (see figure 5). The house served as a transit point for funds and fake documentation, plus a safe place for fugitives.<sup>97</sup>



Figure 5. Castle 'Den Ast', Huise. "Oude Postkaarten Beschikbaar Voor Oudenaarde." [www.vecu.be](http://www.vecu.be). Consulted 21-06-2024. <https://www.vecu.be/vecuzoek.php?pays=B&prov=OV&localitenl=Oudenaarde>.

Anne-Marie helped find fugitives and her mother assisted in safeguarding these people in the castle. Meanwhile Georges delivered weapons and

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<sup>96</sup> De Wever and Steen, "Het verzet in Gent," 104.

<sup>97</sup> d'Udekem d'Acoz, "De verzetsactiviteiten van de familie van Oost," 94.

information to his son Henri, who ran the local resistance from their home in Huise.<sup>98</sup> All four members of the family assisted in the operation and in safeguarding the refugees. Anne-Marie and Henri operated from the castle and purposely listed their address as Nederkouter 52 in Gent, Georges' second house in the city, instead of their ancestral home.<sup>99</sup> This was to divert attention from their business in Huise. Georges van Oost assisted in hiring and concealing people in his factory, who refused to go for mandatory labour to Germany. His address was in turn registered in Huise.

Anne-Marie's questionnaire inquired whether she helped hide people and who they were.<sup>100</sup> Among these characters is Baron Jacques van der Bruggen. This officer also assisted in hiding fugitives and had a safehouse in Mariakerke. He instructed Anne-Marie to organise a summer camp of two months in the Belvédère, which was a side building of the castle in Huise, for the children of prisoners. She had a history in organising these camps with her background in scouting. The camp greeted the Belgian flag every morning as their own way of resistance to the German occupier in 1943.<sup>101</sup> Gildea points out that resistance groups tried to deal with the consequences of resistance like the arrest and deportation of some of their members. The children and orphans that were left behind were taken care of by the resistance groups and this task fell to the women of the organisation.<sup>102</sup> By the time Anne-Marie organised the camp for the children in 1943, she was already unofficially working for the SA as a courier.<sup>103</sup> The children's shelter was possibly a good cover to hide the real

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<sup>98</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Report about behaviour and manner of service.

<sup>99</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Acts of service for the SA.; Dossier van Oost Henri. Acts of Service for the SA.

<sup>100</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>101</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>102</sup> Gildea, *Fighters in the shadows*, 144.

<sup>103</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery. Report Bureau of National Recognition.

practices of the castle for the German occupier. The castle was confiscated by the Germans in 1940, but managed to operate unnoticed in this way throughout the war.<sup>104</sup> Anne-Marie's book about her time in the resistance recalls the interrogations by the Gestapo after her arrest in 1944. When asked about her connection to van der Bruggen, Anne-Marie answered she only knew him from organising the children's camps. In response, the German police said that they did not want to hear about the children again, since that was not what they were interested in. This small interaction reveals that the stereotypical idea of a woman's care for children was above suspicion for the German command.<sup>105</sup> This means that the local resistance network of the SA is partially protected by Anne-Marie and her children's shelter. It is her female caring position as the owner of a home that is the cover for the resistance operation in Huise.

This female role as a safehouse keeper is definitely supported by the German reluctance to suspect a woman of committing subversive activities and especially of one that occupies herself with the care for children. Similarly to her liaison role, other factors are also influential. Anne-Marie's network plays a pivotal role in her abilities to contribute to the operation with the link to her brother who leads the operation from the castle in Huise, her father's wealth, which creates the possibility to switch between the houses in Gent and Huise and the support of baron Jacques van der Bruggen through the camp and his safehouse in Mariakerke.

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<sup>104</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>105</sup> 'Ach! Ach! toujours les camps d'enfants; cela ne nous intéresse pas.'; de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 18.

### 3.2.3 A smuggler

Next to her roles as liaison officer and a safekeeper of refugees, Anne-Marie portrayed another role in the resistance. Women were not only the optimal choice for intelligence networks, but also aided the resistance in transporting weapons and explosives. It was a lot easier to get past German checkpoints when you were carrying ammunition in your baby's stroller.<sup>106</sup> Just like resistance fighter Nina Erauw, Anne-Marie revealed that she was involved in weapon transport, aside from her job as a liaison.<sup>107</sup> Her file reveals that she smuggled ammunition from the castle in Huise to Aalter, a village east of Gent and also to the whole of East-and West-Flanders in the summer of 1944.<sup>108</sup> The improved communication between London and Belgium opened up opportunities for the Allies to send aid, food and ammunition. These goods would be picked up by couriers like Anne-Marie and distributed within the organisation of the SA to eventually assist the liberation of the country.<sup>109</sup> This transport was again a family activity, since Anne-Marie secretly exported goods from her brother Henri's headquarters in the family castle, aided by intelligence from her father in Gent, to the head of the Zone III commander Auguste Haus in Wingene.<sup>110</sup> Henri's file mentions he aided in ammunition transports from Gent to Huise and this was then picked up by his sister.<sup>111</sup> Georges van Oost did not assist in weapon transport for the AS. His main task is listed as slowing down production in his textile factory Alsberghe & van Oost to hinder the German occupation.<sup>112</sup> Once again, his age might influence the

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<sup>106</sup> Thalmann, "L'oubli des femmes," 4.

<sup>107</sup> Claire Pahaut, "Nina Erauw, Je suis une femme libre," *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire asbl Hainaut, Culture et Démocratie 2* (2009): 8.

<sup>108</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>109</sup> Maerten, "La résistance," 204.

<sup>110</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>111</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>112</sup> Dossier van Oost Georges. Personal questionnaire.

SA to not use him for smuggling like his children. The field work was done by Anne-Marie, the management by Henri and Georges provided houses from which the operation could be run by his children.

#### 3.2.4 Women's supportive roles?

Women's roles in the resistance have been framed by Maerten as merely supportive positions to aid their husbands or sons.<sup>113</sup> Anne-Marie's case shows that she is not just supporting her male relatives, but their activities often overlap. The intertwining of the family's resistance work had an effect on the role she was able to fill at the end of her career in the Secret Army. She was able to take over for her brother.<sup>114</sup> Henri became sous-lieutenant in the AS, according to his file from the Secret Army.<sup>115</sup> Because of his mother's warning, who received word from the resistance's intelligence network, he fled to a safehouse with the aid of his sister.<sup>116</sup> Brother and sister clearly operated in the same network in East-Flanders and had complementary and sometimes shared responsibilities in this sector of the AS. The particular incident of the liberation of resistance officer Albert Mélot by the AS on July 15th 1944 in Gent created severe repression by the German occupier and led to multiple arrests, among which Anne-Marie's parents. These arrests created gaps in the command of the resistance in Gent and forged opportunities for women to step in. It is not uncommon for wives or daughters to take over their husbands or father's position in the resistance. The high number of arrests and the chain reaction afterwards caused continuous and fast alternation of ranks and positions in the resistance groups. Wives and female relatives were often

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<sup>113</sup> Maerten, "Vrouwen in verzet."

<sup>114</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery. Report Bureau of National Recognition.

<sup>115</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Acts of Service for the SA.

<sup>116</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

already well-informed and involved in the operation.<sup>117</sup> For example, the Belgian resistance fighter Andrée de Jongh became the head of an escape network to the Pyrenees in 1941 when her male colleague was arrested and agent Louise de Landsheer was in charge of the intelligence network Zéro after many arrests.<sup>118</sup>

The sources on Anne-Marie are unclear about what is meant by ‘taking over her brother’s position’. In her personal questionnaire Anne-Marie says that she never attained the rank of sous-lieutenant or any rank for that matter in the SA.<sup>119</sup> It is possible that Anne-Marie took over some of her brother’s tasks, but she did not partake in all of them. This could explain why she never applied for this recognition. To add to this uncertainty, the governmental investigation has not succeeded in finding any evidence of Henri obtaining such a title. Fernand Thielemans has written a letter to the Minister of Defence on behalf of Gaston Gerlache and his wife Anne-Marie to get the proper recognition for her deceased brother. The minister replies there is no record of Henri receiving this type of rank (see figure 6).<sup>120</sup> If this title is not officially acknowledged to her brother, it will be equally complicated to attribute the same to his sister. Since we are faced with a lack of documentation, it is impossible to prove that Anne-Marie was the head of the operation in Huise after her brother was forced to resign. We can conclude that she did fulfil more extensive tasks in the summer of 1944, due to the increasing arrest and repression by the Germans. This was

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<sup>117</sup> De Wever and Steen, "Het verzet in Gent," 92-93.

<sup>118</sup> Marie-Pierre d'Udekem d'Acoz, "Andrée de Jongh," *CegeSoma*, consulted 08-05-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/persoonlijkheden/de-jongh-andree.html>; Gerd De Coster, "Louise De Landsheere," *CegeSoma*, consulted 27-05-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/persoonlijkheden/de-landsheere-louise.html>

<sup>119</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>120</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Letter F. Thielemans to the Minister of Defense.

followed by gaps in the resistance network that created opportunities for female agents to enter positions of leadership.

Quelles sont les décorations qui ont été prévues pour Henri van Oost en tant que résistant? Il a été promu sous-lieutenant auxiliaire mais nous n'avons pas de trace d'un document.

D'autre part Monsieur Henri van Oost s'est engagé en 1944 comme volontaire après la Libération de Gand au Belgian A/C Reg.A.Squard BLA. Puis-je également vous demander de me renseigner quelles sont les décorations qu'il aurait pu recevoir pour ce passage à l'Armée.

Je m'excuse de vous importuner avec ce problème, Monsieur le Directeur, mais je me permets de vous signaler que la famille van Oost a fortement été éprouvée par la Guerre (Madame G. de Gerlache a été prisonnière Politique, ses Parents Mr et Me van Oost ont été arrêtés et le fils est décédé en service commandé et qu'un dossier de famille est en voie de constitution destiné aux archives de la famille.

En vous remerciant d'avance, veuillez recevoir, Monsieur le Directeur, l'expression de mes sentiments respectueux et reconnaissants.

*Thielemans*

Figure 6. Letter F. Thielemans to the Minister of Defense. Dossier van Oost Henri, n° II/300/012. AS 918. Centrum voor historische documentatie van de Krijgsmacht . Evere, GL.

### 3.3 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has delved into the complex and often overlooked roles of women in the Belgian resistance, highlighting the dual nature of their invisibility: both as an advantage in their operations and as a factor explaining their absence in the historiography. Women's roles as liaison officers were crucial for maintaining communication for the resistance's operations. Their seemingly secondary tasks of smuggling and safeguarding fugitives were vital for the resistance and reveal the multi-faceted responsibilities of the female agents. Through the examination of Anne-Marie van Oost's activities and the comparison with the roles of her father and brother, this chapter has highlighted the significant contributions of women, who were often seen as fulfilling supportive positions, but were actually crucial for the resistance's survival and efficacy and were also involved in leadership roles. Dismissing mainly female positions of communication or smuggling as supporting roles, diminishes the vital part they played in the resistance and overlooks other roles they fulfilled during the war.



## Chapter 4: Conclusion

The role of women in the Belgian resistance has long been overshadowed by that of their male counterparts, which is linked to limited historical documentation, societal perceptions and Belgium's issues with their relation to the resistance. This thesis has sought to shed light on the contributions of female resistance members, specifically through the case study of Anne-Marie van Oost and her family. By examining the family's involvement in the Secret Army and by looking into the broader context of female participation, this research demonstrates the critical and multifaceted roles women played during the Second World War. The historiographical gap regarding women in the Belgian resistance is evident from the limited academic attention they have received until recent decades. Traditional gender roles and the stigmatisation of women's involvement in war and violence contributed to this neglect. However, as demonstrated in this study, women's participation was not only substantial but also vital to the success and sustainability of resistance efforts.

The case study of Anne-Marie van Oost exemplifies how women, despite societal constraints and gender norms, made significant contributions to the resistance efforts. Women's participation in the Belgian resistance is at times shaped by these stereotypical norms and it influences their recruitment and their roles within the resistance. Female agents often underwent extensive testing phases and were primarily involved in more visible positions on the street in communication or transporting ammunition. Anne-Marie's involvement as a liaison officer, smuggler, and key operator within her family's resistance network demonstrates the vital roles women played beyond their mere supportive positions. The van Oost family's operations at their castle in Huise show that cooperation between all members, regardless of gender, was crucial for the survival of the resistance organisation. Their situation illustrates

how women transcended traditional gender norms and assumed leadership roles, particularly when male leaders were arrested or forced to go into hiding. Anne-Marie took on significant responsibilities that influenced the workings of the local resistance, the Secret Army resistance group and in turn also affected the resistance's contributions to the liberation of Belgium by the Allies.

Anne-Marie's story challenges the traditional narrative that women's contributions were minimal and reveals instead their essential involvement in resistance activities. This research aims to enhance the understanding of the various roles of female agents in the Belgian resistance and to ensure their contributions are correctly recognized in historical accounts and the historiography of the Belgian resistance. These findings are solely based on the case study of Anne-Marie van Oost and her participation in the Secret Army. While her case provides valuable insights, it also highlights the need for further comparative studies across different regions and resistance groups in Belgium. As the academic field on the Belgian resistance continues to expand, such comprehensive research will become more feasible. This study is still a good addition to a more comprehensive and inclusive historiography, recognizing the diverse and indispensable roles women played in the resistance against the German occupier during the Second World War.

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# 'Agent de toute confiance et de tout premier ordre'<sup>1</sup>

A podcast about a Belgian family in resistance during the Second World War



Figure 1. Sketch of episode one about Anne-Marie van Oost by Michou Nanou-De Bruijn

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## **Chapter 1. Definition of Purpose and Objectives**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The resistance in Belgium has struggled to get appropriate recognition and disappeared from collective memory after the Second World War, the reasons for which will be discussed below. By shedding light on the contributions of a courageous family, this project aims to rectify historical misconceptions and provide more insight into the forgotten Belgian resistance movement from the Second World War. This podcast proposal is based on the research from a master thesis on the Belgian resistance, in the context of an applied history master program. The podcast wishes to bring academic research to a wider audience through the use of a popular medium. This proposal is divided in two sections: the context of the podcast is discussed in the first three chapters and the actual script for the recording can be found in chapter four. The first chapter will outline the difficult position of resistance in Flanders and Belgium and the relevance of making a podcast about this topic. It also talks about past endeavours for applied projects and the aims for this particular podcast. The second chapter will address the intended audience and the related decisions about the language for the project. The third chapter is focused on the podcast format and the final chapter is the script for the first episode of this podcast series.

### **1.2 The forgotten Belgian resistance**

There are several factors that contribute to the minimal knowledge on the history of the resistance in Belgium. First of all, the Belgian resistance is a very heterogeneous movement that splinters into several smaller groups with distinct political affiliations and goals. It is diverse in gender, place and political belief, so it is impossible to speak of one unified Belgian Resistance. Some organisations had more communist leanings, like the resistance group of the

Independent Front and others found support in the right-wing royalist group of the Secret Army.<sup>2</sup> Secondly these multiple resistance groups were unable to speak with a unified voice after the war. They are upstaged by the classic political parties of Liberals, Socialists and Christen-Democrats and can not draw attention to their cause of getting appropriate attention and recognition.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, the resistance had a problem with its image after the war. The first time the public sees the hidden resistance, they see the violent repressions of collaborators and Germans. The resistance movement is also criticised for unnecessary violence during the war and the Belgian inhabitants mainly attribute the liberation to the Allies. The resistance groups indeed did not liberate Belgium, but their intelligence and sabotage significantly increased the speed at which the Allied soldiers were able to liberate the country. On top of that, the narrative of the 'resistance fighter of the last hour' was formulated to discredit the resistance after 1945. It supposes that many people became part of the resistance after D-Day on June sixth 1944 and thus only joined when the victory was already in sight. The majority of the people were thus not regarded as true resistance fighters.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, the void in Belgian public memory is also different in the north and south of the country. The Flemish-speaking North has a larger number of collaborators with the German occupier than the French-speaking South.<sup>5</sup> Frustrations concerning the unavailability of facilities and certain professions in Dutch had driven many Flemish people into the arms of the Germans, who promised to accommodate these needs. The antifascist feeling was also more widespread in the southern part of the country with

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<sup>2</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "Verzet," *CegeSoma*, consulted 05-03-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/artikels/verzet.html>

<sup>3</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>4</sup> Fabrice Maerten, *Was opa een held? Speuren naar mannen en vrouwen in het verzet tijdens WOII* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2020), 199-200.

<sup>5</sup> Koen Aerts and Bruno De Wever, "Het verzet in de publieke herinnering in Vlaanderen," *Journal of Belgian History-Revue Belge D'Histoire Contemporaine-Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 42, nr. 2-3(2012): 78-79.

much higher votes for communist and socialist parties in the period before the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> To avoid a public divide between resisters and collaborators and to not enhance the already existing gap between Flanders and Wallonia, the resistance commemoration was deliberately silenced by the Belgian government.<sup>7</sup> Therefore the research on the Belgian resistance has suffered from the complicated relationship of the country with resistance and especially Flanders' difficult relation to this contested part of their history.

### **1.3 The resistance in applied projects**

In the 1970s, scholars rediscovered the story of the resistance and tried to grasp a better understanding of this tumultuous time with new research. This resulted in past attempts to reach the Flemish audience with the story of the resistance. It brought about the opening of the *Museum van het Verzet* or the Museum of Resistance in Brussel by resistance veterans in 1972. It was only around the year 2000 that the government let go of the silence and started to reinvest in the commemoration of resistance. According to Babette Weyns and Michèle Corthals, the renewed interest and efforts of the government to invest in the commemoration and memory politics of the Second World War, both collaboration and resistance, led to the introduction of the resistance into public debate. It is just from 2010 onwards that publications on this topic have gone up and found their way to popular media.<sup>8</sup> The topic of resistance became a part of local exhibitions in Flanders like the project *For King and Country* from 2010 in the St-Peter's Abbey museum in Gent or the exhibition in Nazareth

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<sup>6</sup> Maerten, *Was opa een held?*, 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>8</sup> Michèle Corthals and Babette Weyns, "'La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'. Verzet tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog in de Belgische historiografie (1944-2020)," *Journal of Belgian History-Revue Belge D'Histoire Contemporaine-Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 52, nr. 1-2(2022): 47-48.

called *Vergeten Verzet* in 2022.<sup>9</sup> The most notable attempt at an applied project was the television series created by the national Flemish broadcaster (VRT) in 2019, called *kinderen van het verzet* or children of the resistance by historians Koen Aerts and Bruno De Wever. This fits in with a long line of documentary series by the public broadcaster, where they interview the children of parents who were witnesses of important historical events. This series is based on the stories of the children of Flemish resistance fighters. The relatives talk to the audience about their parents' lives and their memories from the war. The show also introduces academic experts to provide historical context. It rendered a high number of viewers, but failed to reach younger audiences.<sup>10</sup>

These projects only reached a select audience, which will be further discussed below. Through the new medium of podcasts, this project wishes to bring the story of the resistance to a broader Flemish audience in an innovative way. The story of the van Oost family will be used as the central theme for this podcast series. This Belgian family makes for a good case study on resistance with sufficient source material and available documentation. Following just one family helps the audience to grasp the complicated topic of resistance. Georges van Oost is a businessman from Gent, who married the French noblewoman Marie-Louise de Douville de Franssu. Their two children, Anne-Marie and Henri, grow up in the castle 'Den Ast' in the small village of Huise in East-Flanders. They are raised by their parents with strong moral values of loyalty to God, king and country. The siblings move from a sheltered childhood to a

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<sup>9</sup> Marie-Pierre d'Udekem d'Acoz, "De verzetsactiviteiten van de familie van Oost," *Bulletin de l'Association de la Noblesse du Royaume de Belgique (ANRB)* 303(2020): 94. ; Gemeente Nazareth, "Het vergeten verzet. Tentoonstelling," *Gemeente Nazareth*, consulted 19-06-2024, <https://nazareth.be/ontspannen-en-leren/cultuur-en-erfgoed/tentoonstellingen/het-vergeten-verzet-vrouwen-tijdens-woii-in-en-rond-nazareth/het-vergeten-verzet-tentoonstelling>

<sup>10</sup> Corthals and Weyns, "'La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'," 50.



life of war and resistance. Georges, Henri and Anne-Marie join the same resistance group of the *Armée Secrète* (AS) or Secret Army (SA). The clear alignment of the political and moral convictions of the right-wing and royalist Secret Army and the van Oost family led to the membership of all three in this particular group. Anne-Marie's mother never officially joined this resistance group.<sup>11</sup> Through this series we follow all four family members on their journey through five years of war, occupation and resistance in Belgium.

#### **1.4 Aim and relevance of making a podcast**

It is important to go further into these applied projects for the Belgian history of the resistance, as to tell the story of a forgotten part of collective memory. This podcast wishes to contribute to the field of resistance in Belgium, which has been neglected for 50 years and shift the focus to the brave men and women that fought to liberate their country from German oppression. The medium of podcasts would be perfect to convey this part of history in an appealing way. This medium has grown immensely in the past few years and recent reports from the Imed Digimeter from 2022 show that 23% of Flemish people listen to at least one podcast every month. This has gone up 3% in comparison to the previous year. The Flemish government publishes this report on media consumption every year.<sup>12</sup> The more recent report from 2023 offers similar results in which 57% of the citizens listen regularly and 26% of the Flemish people even listen monthly to a podcast. There are also growing trends of news consumption through this medium.<sup>13</sup> Podcasts offer many

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<sup>11</sup> Claire Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily," *CegeSoma*, consulted 19-12-2023, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/oorlogsportretten/van-oost-echtq-de-gerlache-de-gomery-lily.html>

<sup>12</sup> Karel Vandendriessche, Eva Steenberghs, Ann Matheve, Annabel Georges and Lieven De Marez, *Imec.digimeter 2022. Digitale trends in Vlaanderen, Imed Digimeter, 2022*. Consulted 13-01-2024, [https://www.imec.be/sites/default/files/2023-03/imec\\_digimeter\\_2022.pdf](https://www.imec.be/sites/default/files/2023-03/imec_digimeter_2022.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Lieven De Marez, Robbe Sevenhant, Floor Denecker, Annabel Georges, Gilles Wuyts and Dimitri Schuurman, *Imec.digimeter 2023. Digitale trends in Vlaanderen, Imed Digimeter,*

benefits, like easy accessibility, low cost, an informal way of presenting information and the fact that it is not limited to a specific time or place. Unlike regular radio programs, you can listen to them whenever or wherever you like with your smartphone. A broad range of people, from celebrities to highly acclaimed newspapers have invested in podcasts and the topics range from self-help and gardening to true crime and history.<sup>14</sup>

The field of historical podcast in Flanders has expanded over the years and the available products vary from academic makers to more non-professional endeavours with the recent successful Flemish podcast of *Geschiedenis voor herbeginners*, made by three history teachers. The common features of these history podcasts are the fact that they are historically accurate and often based on academic research. These creators are not trying to tell the whole story, but tend to focus on extraordinary details like the exact colour of the robes of Louis the Fourteenth or describing the smell of the lamb from the table of Henry VIII. This is told as colourful as possible by using music, voice actors and sound effects. These stylistic choices evoke the narrative of the past as lively as possible for the listener and create a unique experience of knowledge consumption.<sup>15</sup>

While these historical podcasts have sparked a lot of interest with scholars to get their academic research across to a broader audience, there have been no podcasts about the resistance in Belgium. The podcast *Geschiedenis voor Herbeginners* has dedicated an episode to the Belgian resistance, but only managed to explain the broad lines of this movement. They have not gone into

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2023. Consulted 06-03-2024,  
<https://www.imec.be/sites/default/files/202403/imec%20digimeter%202023%20Rapport.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Richard Berry, "Part of the establishment: Reflecting on 10 years of podcasting as an audio medium," *Sage Journals* 22, nr. 6(2016): 661-62.

<sup>15</sup> Pim Huijnen, "Geschiedonderzoek in podcasts stelt de zoektocht centraal, niet het resultaat," *Aanzet* 37, nr. 1(2022): 28-31.

depth on specific actions and individuals or addressed major problems, like the severe lack of women in the Belgian resistance historiography.<sup>16</sup> The growing popularity of resistance in the current media, like recent articles in Dutch and Flemish newspapers, reveal that there is a market for this kind of content.<sup>17</sup> This particular podcast could contribute to a better understanding of the resistance in Belgium with a comprehensive storyline that focuses on one family to explain this movement. The combination of the growing attention in the academic field for the resistance and the popular field of historical podcasts could render this project a valuable asset to improving the knowledge on resistance for people in Belgian society.

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<sup>16</sup> Geschiedenis voor Herbeginners, “Deel 6: Hoe bood het verzet weerstand tegen de bezetter?” *Podcast geschiedenis voor Herbeginners*, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2Qg7C4sxXoPbvMSoTROcrX?si=87319276388e47e4>

<sup>17</sup> Douglas de Coninck, “Zij en haar vriendinnen redden honderden soldaten in WO II: ‘Ze heeft geleefd als een cycloon’,” *DeMorgen*, 20-04-2024, consulted 10-05-2024, <https://www.demorgen.be/tv-cultuur/zij-en-haar-vriendinnen-redden-honderden-soldaten-in-wo-ii-ze-heeft-geleefd-als-een-cycloon~bf167d1a/>

## Chapter 2. Reflection on Intended Audience

### 2.1 The younger generation

The already limited research from the academic field on resistance has had trouble finding its way to a bigger audience and reaching more layers of society than just the educated middle class. The intended audience for this podcast would be the Flemish citizens and particularly the younger members of society. Young adults refrain from using traditional media like television or the radio and often turn to social media for news and knowledge consumption. The Digimeter report from 2022 shows a clear surge in the use of podcasts for the 18 to 24 year-old age group (see figure 2). 39% of them listen to at least one podcast a month and this has risen 12% in comparison to the previous year. The podcast landscape has grown in the last five years and especially during the pandemic. You can listen to them on your smartphone through apps like Spotify and with your subscription you can access the shows for free whenever and wherever you like. The Digimeter report concludes that podcasts do not reach every layer of society. Older generations have a harder time navigating the world of podcasts, due to technical complexities or the lack of a smartphone. People with lower education also tend to use this medium less often.<sup>18</sup> The goal of this project is to get the resistance's story across to a large audience, but it is impossible to reach everyone in Flanders and surroundings by choosing podcasts as my medium. The younger Flemish citizens are therefore the main audience for this project. A younger generation, between 16 and 30 years old, will respond well to this series, since they are close in age to Anne-Marie and Henri van Oost. The siblings lead similar lives to young people's experiences nowadays. They cycle to school everyday during the week, have a few hobbies like tennis, football and scouts and hang out with

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<sup>18</sup> Vandendriessche, Steenberghs, Matheve, Georges and De Marez, Imec.digimeter 2022.

their friends on the weekend. A radical change, like the start of the Second World War, disrupts their normal lives completely and leads to a life in the shadows as a resistance agent. This brings the question back to today and how you as a young person would act in a situation like this. Would you join the resistance, with the chance of being sent to a concentration camp? Collaborate with the Germans to survive? Or maybe move away, trying to escape German oppression? These are questions the siblings van Oost also faced and decided to answer by joining the resistance. The parallels between the lives of Anne-Marie and Henri and those of the audience will create an emotional connection that will encourage people to keep listening.

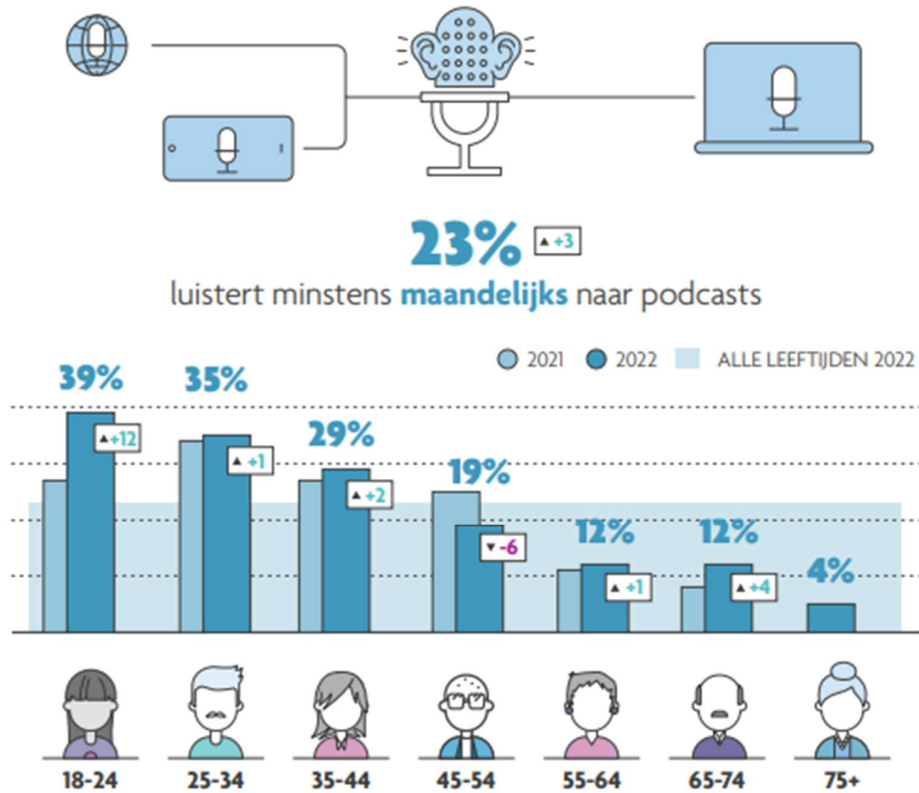


Figure 2. Graph about Flemish podcast listeners in 2022. Karel Vandendriessche, Eva Steenberghs, Ann Matheve, Annabel Georges and Lieven De Marez, Imec.digimeter 2022. Digitale trends in Vlaanderen, Imec Digimeter, 2022. Consulted 13-01-2024, [https://www.imec.be/sites/default/files/2023-03/imec\\_digimeter\\_2022.pdf](https://www.imec.be/sites/default/files/2023-03/imec_digimeter_2022.pdf)

## 2.2 Language

The language that will be used for this project also has an effect on the expected audience. Belgium is a country with three national languages, namely Dutch, French and German. Most citizens do not speak the other two, aside from their own first language. Each language community in Belgium has their

own public broadcaster and media channels.<sup>19</sup> This podcast will be recorded in Dutch, because the target audience is located in Flanders. It is especially in this region that the story of the resistance has received so little attention and where it is not a part of collective memory. In addition, the van Oost family's story is also based in Flanders. Although opting for Dutch as the main language means that the project excludes the non-Dutch speaking inhabitants in Belgium and anyone else who is not familiar with the language, the podcast does have the advantage of generating an audience across the border in The Netherlands. The language divide in Belgium is a problem that comes up in many academic fields. This ensures that cultural projects will only be consumed by a select audience and are never able to reach all Belgian citizens. This language barrier is also one of the causes for the fragmented research and limited knowledge about the resistance in Belgium. Flanders and Wallonia had a hard time combining and sharing their information and research after the war.<sup>20</sup>

The French language will still play a minor role in this project. The van Oost family comes from an aristocratic background, which means that they lived in circles that conversed mainly in French. The children were raised bilingual, but French was their first language. Anne-Marie wrote a book called *Le Faux Silence* about her time in the war and it is written in French.<sup>21</sup> This publication contains poems and information about her family's endeavours in the resistance and her time in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. The included poetry and various personal quotes would not make sense in a language that they were not written in. This source material will therefore be implemented in the original language in the podcast, to help avoid mistakes and prevent a loss of

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<sup>19</sup> Corthals and Weyns, "La résistance n'a pas encore son historien'," 50.

<sup>20</sup> Aerts and De Wever, "Het verzet in de publieke herinnering," 78-79.

<sup>21</sup> Lily de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence* (Mullein: de Gerlache de Gomery, 1974).

nuance during a translation to Dutch. This means that the majority of the podcast will be recorded in Dutch and that the French language will only be used for smaller quotes or for the poems from Anne-Marie's book.



### **Chapter 3. The podcast format**

The format for the podcast is a narrative that is centred around the stories of the four members from the van Oost family. None of the characters in this family are still alive, so this rules out scheduling interviews for the podcast or using them to tell their own story. I have also decided against working with expert testimonies on this matter, because there are few scholars available that are skilled in the field of resistance studies. In addition, the language barrier is once again a concern. Since many experts are native French speakers and this podcast will be made in Dutch, there is an incompatibility that is hard to overcome in an interview when both parties speak in a different language. I will therefore opt for a format where each episode addresses a certain theme within the research of the Belgian resistance, which is supported by academic findings and literature. Each character of the van Oost family will be the guide of one of these episodes with their personal story and all the family members will serve as an example to understand the broader academic theories. For example, Anne-Marie's episode will talk about the overarching ideas concerning female resistance agents and the academic research on this topic, with the additional examples from her life and her resistance activity. In the second episode, Georges van Oost's story helps explain how factory owners and workers struggled to keep their business alive by cooperating with the Germans, while trying to boycott them at the same time.

This format is inspired by the Flemish podcast *Geschiedenis voor Herbeginners*. A group of history professors from Antwerpen tackles historical figures like Napoleon or events like the First World War in their show. The narrator gives a general introduction and then takes the audience through the main events. To transport the audience to the past, the podcast uses quotes from autobiographies, scenic music and voice actors to bring some of the historical

figures to life.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, I would like to give the van Oost family a voice by utilising a voice actor for each of the characters. They would appear during the episode to explain something in their own words and to break up what would otherwise be one long monologue of historical information. Anne-Marie's personal biography from 1974 is full of personal information about her life during the Second World War. These testimonies will hit a personal and emotional note with the listeners and create a deeper connection with the story of these characters and their experiences in the Belgian resistance.

This podcast series also draws inspiration from the recent podwalks made by the Flemish broadcaster VRT. In this project, television maker Arnout Hauben takes the audience on a walk through the Flemish landscape, past many historical buildings and sites. This type of podcast uses GPS-controlled audio that gives you directions and interesting stories about your environment. For example, when you pass an interesting landmark, the podcast will pick up a GPS-signal and provide you with additional information about this site before continuing the walk. This innovative technology was already popular in The Netherlands for the podwalk about the show *Het verhaal van Nederland* and it has now found its way to the Belgian market.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, I would like to use the format of podwalks in this project and take the listener on a journey through the landscape where the family's story takes place. This project thus also contributes to the aims from the Flemish government to promote the Flemish cultural heritage and tourism. In the first episode about Anne-Marie, I want the audience to walk through the village of Mullem and appreciate the castle she lived in or the church she visited on Sundays. The many interesting sites that

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<sup>22</sup> Geschiedenis voor Herbeginners, "Deel 6: Hoe bood het verzet weerstand tegen de bezetter?"

<sup>23</sup> VRT, "Arnout Hauben gidst je dwars door Vlaanderen met nieuwe VRT PodWalks-app," *VRT*, 26-04-2024, consulted 18-06-2024, <https://www.vrt.be/nl/over-de-vrt/nieuws/2024/04/26/arnout-hauben-gidst-je-dwars-door-vlaanderen-met-nieuwe-vrt-podw/>

played a part in Anne-Marie's life can be admired while listening to the podcast and this creates a multilayered experience. The exact route and stops for this podwalk can be found in the appendix (see appendix II). It is also possible to enjoy the podcast without visiting the actual sites and using the podwalk.

This project will encompass a series of four podcast episodes, one for each family member. Every podcast episode will have music and audio to accompany the recording. This music transports the listener to a specific time period. It sets the tone and invites the audience to imagine themselves in the late 1930s and beginning of the 1940s in Belgium. Additionally, the music will be used to indicate to the audience where the podcast is located in time. Different audio is used to signal if we are in the present with the narrator and talk about Belgium today or are talking about the life of the van Oost family in the 1940s. The detailed list of the sound material and when and how this audio will be used can be found in the script and the overview of the audio material (see appendix I). Every episode will start with the introduction of the idea and the purpose of the podcast. The family member that will be narrating will also be introduced, plus the theme that will be discussed for this particular episode. The following chapter outlines the script for the first episode on women in the resistance through the case study of Anne-Marie van Oost. The incorporated images were taken on my personal walk through the village and were the inspiration for the podcast format. They serve as an extra illustration for the reader and show what the participants of the podwalk can expect on their path.

## Chapter 4. Script for episode one: 'To be a woman is to be ignored'



Figure 3. Castle 'Den Ast', Huise. Rafvanderdonckt.be. 2024.  
<https://www.rafvanderdonckt.be/genea/foto/kasteel-mullem.jpg>

### 4.1 Introduction

1 Welcome to Mullem, a historic village near Oudenaarde that was voted the prettiest village in East-Flanders. It is located in a valley surrounded by trees and meadows. The serene atmosphere and the beautiful yellow houses that date back centuries, give the village a strong appeal to visitors. Hidden between the hedges and willow trees, you can see the infamous castle 'Den Ast'. The white building bathes in sunlight and makes the castle seem even more impressive than it already is. The smell of summer roses and violets from the garden drifts towards passersby. The inhabitants of the castle governed the villagers of Mullem for many years. Yellow was the colour to indicate the tenants of the castle. This building has lived through many historical events and

also played its role in the Second World War. At the time, the castle was occupied by the van Oost family. The daughter of the family was called Anne-Marie van Oost. She became the last mayor of Mullem, before its merger with the city of Oudenaarde.<sup>24</sup> She decided to write a book about her life during the war. This is the opening poem.

2. AM: ... de connaître à vingt ans

l'enfer noir et satan

Dans les ombres qui naissaient

tous les contours disparaissaient

et cachaient l'ancien monde

sous des formes immondes

qui déambulaient grotesques

paraissent être des fresques

d'apocalypse vécue

parmi les hommes mis a nus ...<sup>25</sup>

3 This is a passage from Anne-Marie's book 'Le Faux Silence' from 1974. 25 years after her return from the concentration camp Ravensbrück, she feels comfortable to describe the horrors she lived through during her time in the camp and shed some light on her experience in the Belgian resistance. This episode will dive deeper into the female participants of the resistance movement and their struggles, triumphs and peculiarities. This series wishes

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<sup>24</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>25</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 8.

to reintroduce the history of the resistance and help to get to know the brave people that resisted the German occupier in the shadows. Follow me on this journey with the family van Oost and discover the Belgian resistance. Welcome to the series 'A family in resistance'.

(insert opening music)

4 Can you name a female resistance fighter? Well, neither can I. The women of the resistance have suffered low visibility throughout the years and to this day remain unknown to most of the Belgian people. This does not mean that they were not there: smuggling weapons, distributing clandestine press or sabotaging the Germans, but just that they are not remembered as such. In recent years, scholars have dedicated more time and attention to the female agents in the resistance. One of the first issues in this research was the difficulty of women and violence. A combative role as a resistance fighter did not match common ideas in Western Europe as befitting for a woman. She was preferably seen as a loving daughter or wife, supporting her husband, father or son. Women in the Belgian society of the 1940s are unequal to men in a judicial and social sense and they are also politically excluded. They were not allowed to oversee their own financial transactions and did not receive voting rights up until 1948.<sup>26</sup> It is impossible to describe just one profile of a Belgian resistance fighter, but the statistics show that the majority of the participants are men between the ages of 20 and 40 years-old.<sup>27</sup> Immediately after the German invasion in 1940, resistance was on the move in Belgium. Women were definitely present in this resistance, but they were scarcely represented

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<sup>26</sup> Michèle Corthals, "'Ménagères à l'action!' De Belgische clandestiene communistische vrouwenpers over vrouwelijk verzet tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog," *Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis* 52, nr. 1-2(2022), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "La résistance : un combat dans l'ombre," In *Guerre, occupation, libération. Belgique 1940-1945*, eds. Wannes Devos & Kevin Gony (Brussels: Racine, 2019), 211.

in combative clandestine groups in the first two years of the German occupation. This made scholars believe that they played a minor role in the resistance. The growing unrest and the German repression sparked a fire that led to a growing enlistment of women in 1942. Official data from the Belgian government show that only 15% of the Belgian resistance fighters were women, which rounds off at about 30.000 people of the 150.000 participants. These numbers are not completely accurate, since many women never came forward as resistance agents. The common profile of a female resistance fighter is a woman, under the age of thirty who is usually unmarried and without children. The resistance believed that these younger women would not be tied down to a socially obligated position of staying home to care for their family.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Fabrice Maerten, "Vrouwen in het verzet," *CegeSoma*, consulted 30-01-2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/artikels/vrouwen-in-het-verzet.html>

## 4.2 A woman in the resistance

### 4.2.1 Anne-Marie van Oost

5 To better comprehend this complicated story of the resistance, we will be guided by the stories of resistance agent Anne-Marie van Oost.

AM: “In a small village called Huise in East-Flanders, I lived in the castle ‘Den Ast’ with my family. My father is Georges van Oost. He was the owner of a textile company called Alsberghe & van Oost. Sometimes, my brother and I could stay over in the house in Gent. It was great for playing hide and seek.

My father became part of the nobility in 1937, after which he met my mother, Marie-Louise Douville de Franssu. She is originally from an aristocratic family in Picardy in France.<sup>29</sup> My parents told me they were so happy when I was born in October of 1923. They started calling me Lily, which I sometimes prefer to my real name. Two years later, my brother Henri was born. I sometimes called him Coco and kept on doing it when I realised he hated that nickname.<sup>30</sup> I also had a second brother. My mother was devastated when Jacques died after four months. I can barely remember him.

Henri and I loved running or cycling around the fields near our house. When we went to church on Sundays, my mother used to fuss about my blonde curls being all tangled up with grass and hay. After school, I loved playing tennis or going horse riding with friends. I love the outdoors, so I decided to join the local scouting group of Saint-Coletta. When I was seventeen, I was overjoyed when I became a member of the only female clan of scouts in the city. I was also beaming with pride when I earned the totem name of ‘intrepid lioness’. When we sat together for dinners in the evening with my family, my

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<sup>29</sup> Pahaut, “van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily.”

<sup>30</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 18.



father always reminded us of how important family and country were and that we should not forget that it was something worth fighting for. I could tell my parents were more worried in the summer of 1939, after the German invasion of Poland. They feared the war would reach our doorstep. In 1940, Belgium became an occupied country and when the German command claimed our castle in Huise, my whole life changed.”<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.2.2 How to join the resistance?



Figure 4. The lane behind the castle. Private archive.

6. Behind the castle, there is a long cobble road with trees on either side and a view over the meadows. In the distance, you are able to see the three towers of the city of Gent. This is about 35 kilometres away. Anne-Marie caught the attention of the resistance group of the Secret Army in 1943 with her previous work as a telephone operator in Gent, where she cycled to on a weekly basis.

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<sup>31</sup> Pahaut, “van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily.”

Her ability to travel from place to place on her bike, without causing suspicion, was the perfect profile for a female resistance agent.<sup>32</sup> New recruits for the resistance were usually informed through a personal one-on-one connection for the resistance. This could range from a family member that talked about it in the house or through neighbours and friends that you met in your daily life. You could either volunteer for the job or be asked to join a resistance group.<sup>33</sup> Anne-Maire was recruited by Louis Camu or better known by his alias Baudoin. He was the manager of the Bank of Brussels and the commander of the Secret Army in East-Flanders.<sup>34</sup> The resistance operated in such a way that often family members did not know one of their parents or children was part of a resistance group. For the safety of the operation, it was best to know as little as possible.<sup>35</sup> In this case, the van Oost family members definitely knew of each other's resistance activities. Not only did they work together throughout the war, but Louis Camu also personally consulted Anne Marie's parents to ask for their daughter's service. In reply her mother Marie-Louise said: "I give to Belgium what is most precious to me: my two children."<sup>36</sup>

After being recruited, the new resistance participants go through a series of tests. These are small assignments that look at people's strength, discretion and courage and see how much risk they are willing to take for the Belgian liberation. When all of this goes well, more difficult and riskier tasks are assigned to the new members.<sup>37</sup> On the first of October 1943, Anne-Marie van Oost entered her pre-alert state. Pre-alert and alert are the names of her test phases in the Secret Army. She received a communication assignment between

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<sup>32</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>33</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

<sup>34</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie. Personal questionnaire.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Luc Denys, *Gent '40-'45: Drie Broers In Het Verzet* (Gent: Skribis, 2022), 50-51.

<sup>36</sup> d'Udekem d'Acoz, "De verzetsactiviteiten van de familie van Oost," 94.

<sup>37</sup> Maerten, "Verzet."

the staff of Zone III of Gent and the commander of the Zone East-Flanders.<sup>38</sup> The Secret Army had divided the Belgian territory in five zones. Zone III corresponded with the modern provinces of East-and West-Flanders.<sup>39</sup> On June 1st of 1944 she was officially admitted to the resistance group of the Secret Army.

#### 4.2.3 Women's roles in the Belgian resistance

7. I turn my back to the castle and take the winding road downwards. As I make my way to the village, I pass by the yellow houses on my left and right. The reflected sunlight makes everything seem almost golden. I halt when I arrive at the old town hall. On either side of the door there is a portrait, one of a man and one of a woman. The text on these bronze plaques says it represents the baron and baroness de Gerlache de Gomery.

(insert news message).



<sup>38</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>39</sup> d'Udekem d'Acoz, "De verzetsactiviteiten van de familie van Oost," 95.

Figures 5 and 6. Portraits of baroness Lily de Gerlache de Gomery and baron Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery. Private archive.

Anne-Marie is remembered by the village as its former mayor who dedicated her time and effort to the people of Mullem and as the wife of the former arctic explorer Gaston de Gerlache, but what about her time in the resistance? This news report reveals that even in 2023, women's actions in the resistance were not deemed as important as their other endeavours. Women's participation in the resistance has suffered from scrutiny on their particular roles and tasks. Historian Fabrice Maerten points out that they mainly fulfilled supportive social roles of messengers and smugglers. Women were put into these positions because they were under less suspicion by the German occupier.<sup>40</sup> The traditional ideas of a woman only being occupied by the care of the family, the household and the children lived deeply in the German society of the 1940s and were adopted by the soldiers that were stationed in these parts. It was therefore a lot easier to use a female agent to get past a German checkpoint when she hid weapons in her baby's stroller or messages in her bra.<sup>41</sup>

8. AM: "During my time in the Secret Army they asked me to deliver messages between the commanders in Gent and Aalter. This was quite some distance, but fortunately I used to do a lot of sports. Commander Haus pressed that I should always take my bike, since trains and cars were checked too frequently.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, I would be stopped by the Germans at a checkpoint. During the interrogation, I always felt like I was in an oral exam at school that I had studied for. I remembered from my training that I had to keep my voice calm and steady. It was advised not to tell elaborate stories

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<sup>40</sup> Maerten, "Vrouwen in het verzet."

<sup>41</sup> Jilian Wales, "Women's resistance efforts in Nazi Germany 1939–45: herstory," in *The ANU Undergraduate Research Journal*, eds. Kazi Rahman, Kaveenda Samarasinghe and Sarah Tynan (Canberra: ANU eView, 2013), 227-232.

<sup>42</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

that would get me into trouble and most importantly, to keep smiling at the men.<sup>43</sup> Another girl told me she had to distract the patrolling soldiers at the gates, so the army could smuggle goods and weapons past the checkpoint. I always thought of her when trying to pass the German guards. I would hide the secret messages in between the curls in my hair. This was a place they would never look!”<sup>44</sup>

9. The idea of women only being involved in supportive roles has been contested by other historians like Penny Summerfield.<sup>45</sup> Some women made it to high ranking positions, like Andrée de Jongh who led an escape network or Marguerite Bervoets who was the owner of the clandestine paper *La Déliverance*.<sup>46</sup> The Belgian resistance was weak because it was so intertwined. The arrest of one person could lead to a wave of arrests and the disappearance of entire operations in certain parts of the country.<sup>47</sup> The commander of the Secret Army, the group which the van Oost family was a part of, was replaced three times during the course of the war because of multiple arrests.<sup>48</sup> The wives, daughters and sisters that were close to these men were familiar with the operation and were therefore the ideal candidates to take over the leading position. They probably worked alongside their husbands in the resistance, so it was easy to fill the sudden void when the men disappeared in a German

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<sup>43</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Pahaut, “van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily.”

<sup>45</sup> Penny Summerfield, “Gender and war in the twentieth century,” *The International History Review* 19, nr. 1(1997): 4-5.

<sup>46</sup> Marie-Pierre d'Udekem d'Acoz, “Andrée de Jongh,” *CegeSoma*, consulted 03.05.2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/persoonlijkheden/de-jongh-andree.html>; Fabrice Maerten, “Marguerite Bervoets,” *CegeSoma*, consulted 03.05.2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/persoonlijkheden/bervoets-marguerite.html>

<sup>47</sup> Bruno De Wever and Karolien Steen, “Het verzet in Gent tijdens de bezetting in de Tweede Wereldoorlog,” *Journal of Belgian History-Revue Belge D’Histoire Contemporaine-Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 52, nr. 1-2(2022): 92-93.

<sup>48</sup> Fabrice Maerten, “Geheime Leger (Het),” *CegeSoma*, consulted 25.03.2024, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/belgie-in-oorlog/artikels/geheim-leger-het.html>

prison.<sup>49</sup> Anne-Marie herself presumably took over for her brother to lead the local resistance network in Huise, when Henri had to go into hiding.<sup>50</sup>

During the war and especially in the early years, many women took to the streets to protest against the occupation and demand food or the return of their husbands. Many historians have labelled this as social opposition, while historian Michèle Corthals indicates that this was an important form of resistance to boycott German industry and criticise the regime in a safe way. According to Corthals' research, the communist women's press encouraged the women to engage in public and private resistance acts. They called for them to attend public street protests and to commit individual resistance acts. The little viewfinders in the papers looked for women that wanted to hide resistance fighters in their house or just visit these men in their safehouse.<sup>51</sup> Many women like Anne-Marie also assisted in roles as a nurse or in organising events for children of parents that were deported or imprisoned. On paper, these seem trivial, caring positions that have limited impact on the resistance. In practice, these actions were used to support and help the Belgian resistance fighters. Anne-Marie organised a children's camp on the grounds of the castle in Huise.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, her brother Henri was leading the regional resistance operation from the castle and hiding fugitives from the Germans with his mother.<sup>53</sup> The children's home was the diversion that took away suspicious eyes from the castle and made them disregard the practices in Huise, since they were only the actions of a woman caring for some orphaned

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<sup>49</sup> De Wever and Steen, "Het verzet in Gent," 92-93.

<sup>50</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery. Rapport Bureau of National Recognition.

<sup>51</sup> Corthals, "'Ménagères à l'action!'," 59-72.

<sup>52</sup> Dossier van Oost Anne-Marie echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery. Evaluation National Recognition Committee.

<sup>53</sup> Dossier van Oost Henri. Acts of Service for the SA. n° II/300/ 012. AS 918. Centrum voor historische documentatie van de Krijgsmacht . Evere, GL.

children.<sup>54</sup> During her interrogation by the Gestapo, Anne-Marie is asked about her connection to Jacques van der Bruggen, a man who helped her set up the camps as well as an important agent for hiding fugitives within the resistance group of the Secret Army. She answers that she only knows him from organising the children's camps. In response, the German police says that they do not want to hear about the children's home again, since that is not what they are interested in: 'Ach! Ach! toujours les camps d'enfants; cela ne nous intéresse pas.'<sup>55</sup> This small interaction reveals that the stereotypical idea of a woman's care for children was above suspicion for the German command.

Women's roles in the resistance are definitely influenced by gender stereotypes. On the one hand, this condemned them to take on social roles, like fulfilling positions as nurses or communication assignments, but on the other hand they had an advantage when fulfilling these roles. These supposedly innocent figures were the perfect fit to smuggle messages and weapons past certain checkpoints, distract the guards or run a safehouse for British soldiers in their basement. The roles that were fulfilled by women in the resistance, illustrated in Anne-Marie's case, were not only influenced by her gender. Her age, connections, abilities and other factors all influenced the position she obtained. Anne-Marie was young and unmarried, which made her a good possible agent, in the eyes of the resistance. She was also someone who already cycled around the countryside on her bike, which made her an excellent candidate for communication assignments. Her connections through her father, with a house and factory in Gent and the castle in Huise and through her brother that ran the local resistance for the Secret Army, she had the opportunity to organise safe spaces for people on the run and eventually take

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<sup>54</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

<sup>55</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 18.

over the control of the organisation when her brother had to take cover. The combination of all these factors positioned her into her various roles.

#### 4.2.4 What about these women now?

10. AM: “Baron Jacques van der Bruggen came to me last night. My parents are finally allowed to leave the prison in Gent and are on their way to our family home. It is the end of July 1944 and I can feel the end is near, just a little more time and Henri and I can join them in Huise. We can all be together again. I just have to lay low for some time in the Ardennes.”

With her parents arrested by the Germans on suspicion of working for the Secret Army and her brother in hiding, Anne-Marie was also advised to take cover. Unfortunately, Henri nor Anne-Marie will make it home that year. On her way to pick up a fake passport in Brussel, she gets lured into a trap by the Gestapo and arrested. During her interrogations, she refused to give names or talk about the Secret Army operation. The discovery of her fake identification in the mailbox of the safehouse led to her condemnation. After seven months in the prisons in Gent and Antwerpen, she is put on a train in the direction of the concentration camp Ravensbrück. In her own book, she is silent about most of the horrors and the sorrows of her time in the camp. The silence is how she felt she could cope with this experience and how she wished to respect her family's privacy and honour.<sup>56</sup>

AM: “je pense que vous comprendrez, de ce qui est encore dans mon silence, la raison des difficultés qu'il y a de dire.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Pahaut, “van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily.”

<sup>57</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 11.



She prefers to write about the women she met during her time there. She paints the portraits of her fellow female prisoners, from her unlikely communist friend Jeanne to the wife and daughters of Albert Mélot, who was a highly placed resistance fighter. Together with 1500 other women, Lily left the camp in April of 1945 and was brought to Malmö in Sweden, as part of a deal between the Red Cross and Heinrich Himmler. He wished to gain favour with the Allies through this agreement. She was finally reunited with her parents in Huise in July of 1945.

12. The small church of Huise is visible in the distance. The building and its graveyard are calm and abandoned. At the entrance there is a giant monument for the fallen soldiers from both the Second and First World War. Henri van Oost's name is listed first on the right hand side. Relief and sorrow went hand in hand upon Anne-Marie's return home. Henri died in a car accident in February of that year as a member of the Belgian army's tank division, which was only revealed to his sister when she was released.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."



Figure 7. Monument for the fallen soldiers of Huise. Private archive.

13. We have reached the last part of this episode and the most important question: Why do we have no recollection of these stories of brave women like Anne-Marie? After the visit to the church in Huise, we follow the main road back to the village of Mullem. Behind the willows, I can see the small church of the village. Once inside, I am looking at a stained glass window on the left side of the church. The sun illuminates the depicted male and female figures. The little sign underneath recalls that this window was gifted by the baroness Lily de Gerlache de Gomery to honour her brother. It depicts the two siblings, Anne-Marie as the Holy Mary on the left and her brother as Saint-Henri on the right.

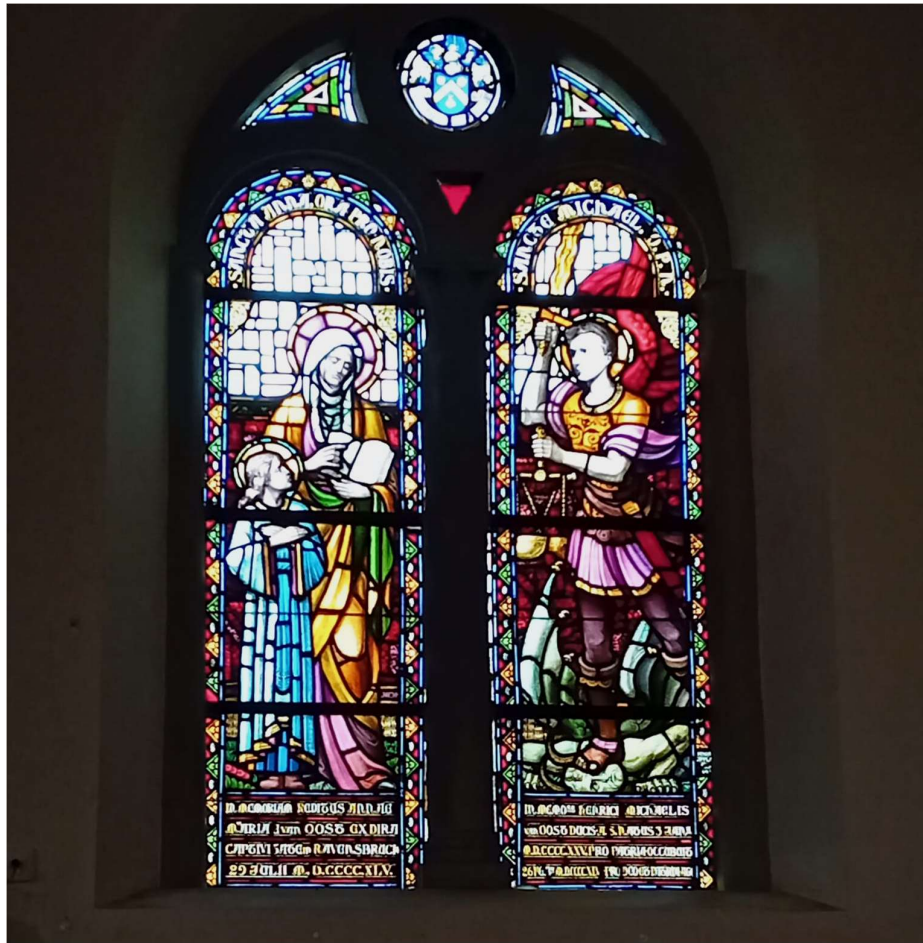


Figure 8. Stained glass window on the left wall of the church in Mullem. Private archive.

We have seen that the Belgian and Flemish climate was not ideal for the remembrance of the resistance and on top of that, how gender stereotypes of women that should not be associated with a violence impacted this part of public memory. In addition, it was also the women themselves that had a hand in this oblivion. They applied less for recognition as a resistance fighter than the men, because they felt they just supported their husbands or fathers and minimised their own efforts. The exact number of female fighters is therefore quite uncertain.<sup>59</sup> Anne-Marie wrote in her book from 1974 that it was her

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<sup>59</sup> Maerten, "Vrouwen in het verzet."

brother that was the real hero. He was the true force of the resistance. During her interrogation by the Gestapo in 1944, she was convinced it was Henri that should be saved at all costs:

AM: “Coûte que coûte, il fallait gagner la bataille, être digne de lui, de nos engagements dans la Résistance, surtout ne dénoncer personne.”<sup>60</sup>

She refuses to give up his name to ensure he can carry out his position within the resistance. This hints to the fact that women also tended to downplay their own efforts compared to the men. Until the 1970s, the idea that their roles were worth less than their male counterparts, still lived on.<sup>61</sup> Something that Anne-Marie also described in her own words.

AM: “Mon travail, c’était plus d’aider les résistants que d’être résistante moi-même”.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Maerten, “Vrouwen in het verzet.”; Pahaut, “van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily.”

<sup>62</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 13.

### 4.3 Outro

14. Our little visit to Huise showed that this charming village is filled with clues about one of their most famous female inhabitants. After her return home, Anne-Marie married baron and arctic explorer Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery in 1946 and moved into the castle in Huise, when her parents passed away. Her past experience in the war, combined with her courage and leadership expressed itself in her future endeavours. She continued to play a role in her father's peace organisation 'the friends of the rose', enabled the manufacturing of a memorial for the women that fought against fascism and succeeded her husband after 18 years as the mayor of Mullem. In 2014, Flemish minister Jan Jambon declared in a speech that resistance was not a crime. Anne-Marie was furious and said that she had not survived the Second World War and was about to blow out her last breath, for someone to tell her that collaboration was not a crime. She argued that it was a betrayal of your country and that Belgium had to be better in educating the young people about this part of history. A recommendation that is taken to heart with this podcast.<sup>63</sup> She died on March 1st in 2020, surrounded by her five children in the castle 'Den Ast' in Huise.<sup>64</sup>

15. This is how we end our story on Anne-Marie van Oost and her remarkable journey during the Second World War. She travelled from Huise to Gent and to the rest of Flanders. Her perilous job in the resistance took her to Brussel and to a concentration camp in Germany. She was fortunate to return home and to be reunited with her parents, sadly without her younger brother present.

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<sup>63</sup> Christiaïn Laporte, "Grande résistante et survivante de Ravensbrück, Lily de Gerlache s'est éteinte," *La Libre*, 02-03-2020, consulted 07-06-2024, <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/societe/2020/03/02/grande-resistante-et-survivante-de-ravensbruck-lily-de-gerlache-sest-eteinte-43QJA3O3UVE3FMRQVVNVHDALLA/>

<sup>64</sup> Pahaut, "van Oost, echtg. de Gerlache de Gomery Lily."

Her brave story inspired many and continues to inspire until today. Thank you so much for listening and stay tuned for our next episode.

AM: ...Et quand un jour

À mon retour

À la liberté

en pleine clarté

Il fallait revivre

comme un fantôme ivre

Mon Dieu, mon Père, ma Mère

Avez-vous vu mon air d'enfant vieillard

Dans le brouillard

Chargé de toutes les poussières

De mon passé dans la misère

D'un temps de terreurs

Et d'un camp d'horreurs?<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> de Gerlache de Gomery, *Le Faux Silence*, 8.

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## Appendix I

### List of (potential) sound (archival) material for episode one: 'To be a woman, is to be ignored'

This section will be used to explain the stylistic choices of the podcast like the music, voices, background audio etc. as well as give an insight in how these contribute to the story and the message the episode wishes to convey. The music takes you through the episode and indicates where we are in time and to signal the setting. In this podwalk, the narrator is telling the story while walking through the village of Mullem and Huise. The audio and music will signal when the story goes back to Anne-Marie's time and her personal story and when we are in the present with the narrator and the current research on women in the resistance. The coloured numbers indicate where this section fits in within the script.

#### 1. Introduction

1. For the opening sequence, there will be the sound of birds and the rustle of the wind through the trees. The sounds have to convey a sense of calmness, peace and the idea of spring or summer in the village of Mullem. After 2 seconds, the sounds of a bell and laughter from some tourists on bikes can be heard, the sound of their wheels on the little rocks on the ground and their fleeting voices indicate that they are passing by. After this, you can hear the bells of the church in the distance. The narrator will introduce the setting and welcome you to Mullem, a small village in the Flemish Ardennes and home to the infamous castle van Ast and its inhabitants.

2. After this introduction, I will use a female voice actor to read out the opening poem of Anne-Marie's book. For this role, I want someone that sounds young and hopeful, with a hint of French in their Dutch accent. This is based on the

voice from the real Anne-Marie van Oost from various audio fragments. In the background, there will be some accompanying music by Eric Wilhelm that is soft, a little sad and calm.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKRitgo5bVo&ab\\_channel=EricWilhelm-Topic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKRitgo5bVo&ab_channel=EricWilhelm-Topic)

3 Afterwards, the formal introduction to the series and the podcast will be explained, followed by the opening music of the series. This is music of the Allies in the 1940s with Frank Sinatra

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJ9laplRrm4&ab\\_channel=FunkyChez](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJ9laplRrm4&ab_channel=FunkyChez)  
(+/- 20 sec)

4. The sounds of the trees and the birds and the tourists passing by return to indicate we are back in the present. The narrator takes up the mic again and introduces the topic of women and resistance.

## 2. Main Body

5. A song from the 1940s starts playing and brings the listener back to the past. After 5 seconds, the same voice actor from before narrates Anne-Marie's section and introduces the listener to her life.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKYKStouuBI&ab\\_channel=ScrambledEggs1969](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKYKStouuBI&ab_channel=ScrambledEggs1969)

The music becomes more silent once the actor starts talking.

6. The music ends and the sound of the wind and the trees returns, a bell from a bike is aggressively rung and you can hear a man puffing on his bike. This makes a bridge to Anne-Marie's resistance work on her bicycle throughout Flanders. This section introduces women's recruitment for the resistance.

7. The sounds of footsteps on the cobblestones, a person's breath from walking. The podwalk moves to a different location, from the castle to the village centre. The narrator takes over and talks about Anne-Marie's portrait on the old city hall.

Afterwards, a news message follows from 2023, explaining the portrait.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ch3U3StBjI0&ab\\_channel=AVSOost-VlaamseTelevisie](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ch3U3StBjI0&ab_channel=AVSOost-VlaamseTelevisie) (0.32-0.51)

After this, the narrator comments on the news segment to make a bridge to women's participation in the resistance.

8. The voice actor for Anne-Marie steps in and talks about her duties in the resistance. The same music from her earlier segment plays in the background.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKYKStouuBI&ab\\_channel=ScrambledEggs1969](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKYKStouuBI&ab_channel=ScrambledEggs1969)

9. Music fades out and the narrator takes over again after two seconds. The podcast continues to discuss women's roles within the Belgian resistance. The podwalk signals to the participants they should start walking towards the village of Huise.

10. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKYKStouuBI&ab\\_channel=ScrambledEggs1969](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKYKStouuBI&ab_channel=ScrambledEggs1969)

The same music starts again to bring the audience back to 1940 and Anne-Marie's voice introduces the final part of the episode.

11. The sounds of the outside return, footsteps on the cobblestones. The narrator makes his way to the neighbouring village of Huise. The narrator discusses Anne-Marie's arrest.

12. The footsteps halt. At the church in Huise, the narrator talks about Henri's death when the audience visits his grave. The sound of footsteps receding and the start of a sad and melancholy song to accompany the audience on their way back to Mullem. It plays full length

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il7DWoLySW8&list=PLXRivw5Pd9qIAqt\\_On-hR6kFIahfjLsQ&index=8&ab\\_channel=MrRJDB1969](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il7DWoLySW8&list=PLXRivw5Pd9qIAqt_On-hR6kFIahfjLsQ&index=8&ab_channel=MrRJDB1969)

The sound of footsteps return. The podwalk brings you back to Mullem. The sounds of birds, trees in the wind and suddenly the sound of a little river. Sounds of walking that change from stones to grass. The narrator arrives at the church outside of Mullem.

13. The sound of the church door opening and the following silence of an empty space. Footsteps on the marble church floor that halt after a few steps. The narrator is inside the church. He introduces the stained glass window.

### **3. Outro**

14. Footsteps on the marble church floor, the church door opening and the sounds from outside (birds, water, wind) are present. The narrator is standing outside again. He finishes Anne-Marie's story.

15. The same music from the beginning starts again, but faintly. The narrator rounds off the episode. Anne-Marie's voice finishes the episode with the final part of her poem. The music continues playing for 10 more seconds after she is done talking and eventually dies out, signalling the end of the podcast.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJ9lapIRrm4&ab\\_channel=FunkyChez](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJ9lapIRrm4&ab_channel=FunkyChez)

## Appendix II

The map below illustrates the route for the podwalk. The walk would start at the castle at number fourteen in the Korte Aststraat and would then make its way down to the village. From there the participants walk towards the Rooigemsebeek and end up in the village of Huise and its church at number thirteen. After this visit, they follow the Lange Aststraat back to the castle and once again reach Mullem. The final stop is the church in Mullem at number one. This loop is about two kilometres in total and should cover the length of the podcast.

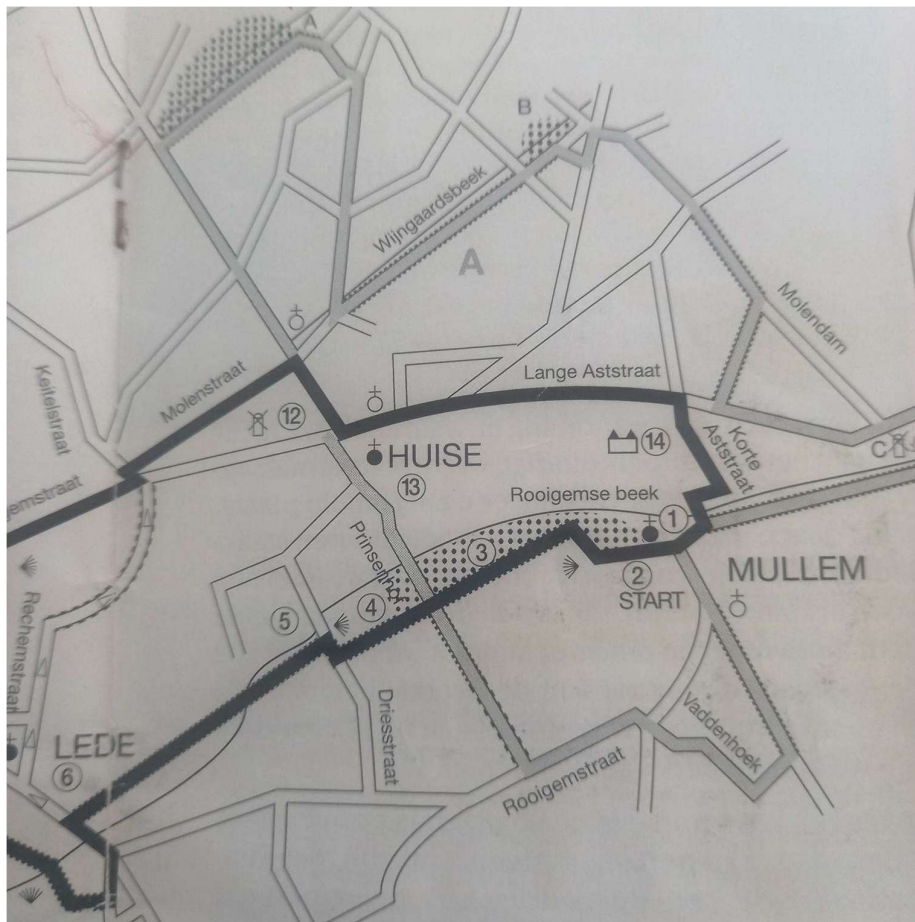


Figure 9. Map of Mullem-Lede. Private archive.