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Two Jewish heroines of the SOE

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## Two Jewish heroines of the SOE

MARTIN SUGARMAN

Jewish participation in the hazardous war of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the Second World War was – as in all theatres of war – far out of proportion to the community's numbers in the general population.

Some of the Jewish SOE agents are quite well known: Captain Adam Rabino-vich (codenamed 'Arnaud'), Croix de Guerre, murdered by the Gestapo; Captain Isadore Newman ('Julien' or 'Pepe'), MBE, murdered at Mauthausen Camp; and Captain Maurice Pertschuck ('Martin Perkins' or 'Eugene'), MBE, murdered at Buchenwald Camp. In addition, hundreds of other Jews fought with SOE agents in resistance groups in occupied countries, especially in France and Poland.<sup>1</sup> Much less well known, however, are two of the Jewish women who fought in France: Denise Bloch, Croix de Guerre (who was French, but served in the British forces); and Muriel Byck, Mentioned in Despatches, who was British.

The SOE was a British secret war department, formed in 1940 to 'set Europe ablaze' by organizing and supplying underground resistance movements against the Nazis (and later the Japanese) in all occupied countries. It was one of several such secret armies, and was commanded from London by General Colin Gubbins, who was Vice-Chair of its Council; the Chairman was the banker Charles Hambro, until succeeded by Gubbins in 1943.<sup>2</sup> The French section of SOE, however, was commanded by Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, a Dunkirk veteran, working from secret offices at Marks and Spencer's HQ in Baker Street, London.

This French section infiltrated thirty-nine women into France by plane, boat, submarine and parachute between May 1941 and July 1944. Whichever service they were recruited from – such as WAAF or ATS – the women were often enlisted into the FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) as cover. Of these thirty-nine, fifteen were captured, of whom only three survived. Of the twelve murdered by the Nazis one was the Jewish agent Denise Bloch<sup>3</sup> and another a Jewish agent named Muriel Byck, who died of meningitis after six weeks of intense work in the field, on 23 May 1944.<sup>4</sup> (The Free French section sent in a further eleven girls from the Corps Auxiliaire Feminin, or French ATS, all of whom survived, making a total of fifty women who served in France.)

### 'Ambroise'

Ensign F/27 Denise Madeleine Bloch – codenamed 'Ambroise' – First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, SOE, received the King's Commendation for Brave Con-

duct, Légion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre avec Palme and Médaille de la Résistance avec Rosette. She was murdered by the Nazis at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for women near Mecklenburg together with Violette Szabo, George Cross, and Lilian Rolfe, Croix de Guerre, sometime between 25 January and 2 February 1945. Denise, who had three brothers, was aged twenty-nine and was the daughter of the Parisian Jacques-Henri and Suzanne Barrault Bloch, née Lévi-Strauss.<sup>5</sup> She is commemorated at Brookwood Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, Surrey, panel twenty-six, column three, and on a separate plaque with Szabo, Rolfe and agent Lefort. Her name appears also on the FANY memorial in St Paul's Church, Wilton Place, Knightsbridge; on a plaque at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp and on the F Section memorial at Valençay, France, unveiled in May 1991 by the Queen Mother.<sup>6</sup>

Denise has been described as 'broad shouldered and blonde',<sup>7</sup> but her service photograph<sup>8</sup> reveals a dark-haired beauty. She dyed her hair blonde in France<sup>9</sup> after the police raided her flat in Lyon and stole photographs of her with her black hair.<sup>10</sup>

In F Section of SOE Denise enlisted under the assumed name of Danielle Williams, although some SOE documents<sup>11</sup> insist on spelling her real name as 'Block'. Vera Atkins – Squadron and Intelligence Officer in SOE F Section, and Personal Assistant and number 2 to Buckmaster – remembers her as tall, sturdy and argumentative,<sup>12</sup> but explains this last trait as reflecting her wide experience in the Resistance in France before her exit to England, and the fact that she knew better than her trainers what Nazi occupation really meant.

The archives of the Special Forces Club in London<sup>13</sup> and the SOE files<sup>14</sup> reveal that Denise and her family were living in Lyon where she worked as Secretary to Lieutenant Jean Maxime Aron (codenamed 'Joseph') an employee of Citroën and a Jewish resistance leader. She was engaged to a M. Mendelsohn (himself an agent), but this was allegedly a convenience to assist her work.<sup>15</sup> She was recruited in July 1942 in Lyon by M. René Pièrcy (codenamed 'Adolphe' or 'Etienne')<sup>16</sup> and in turn recruited her 'fiancé'. Denise worked first in the 'Detective' circuit commanded by Captain Henri-Paul Sevenet (codenamed 'Rodolphe'),<sup>17</sup> with the wireless operator Captain Brian J. Stonehouse (codenamed 'Celestin'). As well as being a courier, she was meant to look after and accompany Stonehouse, whose French was not good.

In her London debriefing on 11 June 1943 Denise described how she had seen Stonehouse in the street in Lyon with two men on 24 October 1942, had followed them and had seen that he was taken to a police station: she realized he had been arrested.<sup>18</sup> Stonehouse was good at drawing and always kept his sketch book to hand (which Denise often carried), despite Denise's warnings to him not to carry such incriminating items. He also once addressed her loudly in the street in English and said 'After the war you must come to Scotland to see my house'. Denise alleged he was homesick and too young for his job. Curiously,

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Plate 1 Denise Bloch, agent photograph. (Courtesy of the Special Forces Club and SOE Archive.)

Stonehouse's debrief document does not mention Denise at all, yet he clearly worked closely with her for some time.<sup>19</sup>

She was clearly in danger following Stonehouse's arrest, so left for Marseille on 26 October. While there, she was sent to a rendezvous at her hotel to receive secret papers about landing grounds and other matters from agent 'L'Allemand' at 7 pm on the evening of 31 October. The next day he was arrested, but she could not explain to her debriefers why this had happened.<sup>20</sup>

From Marseille she volunteered to return to Lyon with the papers she had been given, instead of Aron, but he and Sevenet insisted on accompanying her because she would be vulnerable as a woman alone. However, they had already been betrayed to the Gestapo and Aron was arrested at the station, near the small entrance, by a Gestapo group that had his photograph from a raid on his



Plate 2 Brian Stonehouse, who worked with Denise in France. He died on 2 December 1998. (Courtesy of the Special Forces Club and SOE Archive.)

flat (he later escaped and returned to Britain on 26 July 1944). Sevenet was right behind Aron, but slipped through. Denise also evaded capture by accidentally leaving by the main exit, and she and Sevenet were met by Amedée Contran; all three then went into hiding in St Laurent de Chamousset near Lyon on 3 November 1942, in the house of Mme St Victor.

Denise admitted to having sent her mother a cable in Lyon which had been intercepted by the police. The police had searched her mother's flat and found nothing, but the cable may have been the reason the police were waiting at the station in Lyon for her and her two comrades. However, since the Gestapo were expecting Denise to arrive with Aron they missed her when Aron left the station alone.

Denise then moved to Villefranche-sur-Mer on 10 November, remaining in hiding and out of action until January 1943. She made only one trip – to Nice

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to have her hair dyed – before she moved to Toulouse, where Sevenet introduced her to Sergeant Maurice Dupont of circuit ‘Diplomat’ who was to help her cross from Oloron into Spain and out of danger.<sup>21</sup> When deep snow and enemy patrols prevented this, they had to return to Toulouse.

In Toulouse they met Colonel George Reginald Starr (codenamed ‘Hilaire’ or ‘Gaston’) of circuit ‘Wheelwright’, who took her to work in Agen with Philippe de Vomécourt (later the commanding officer of Muriel Byck, who will be discussed below). After two other Jewish SOE agents, Lieutenant Maurice Pertschuck (‘Eugene’) and his wireless operator Lieutenant Marcus Bloom (‘Urbain’), were arrested in April 1943, Starr decided to send Denise to London as his courier, together with Dupont, as they now had no wireless transmission facility. Denise had met Pertschuck several times while carrying messages between Toulouse and Agen, and described him at their meetings as often dishevelled and worried, seeing him last on 12 April for their usual lunch together.<sup>22</sup> The following week Pertschuck failed to arrive for his lunch appointment. She and Starr waited at an agreed safe address and made inquiries, and later discovered that he had been arrested the day after their previous meeting, on 13 April.

In her London debrief Denise gave useful information: how, since young men were constantly picked up on the street by gendarmes and Gestapo for labour work in Germany, agents sent to France in future should not look too young or they would be stopped and arrested. She also emphasized to SOE that future agents must speak excellent French, for anyone with a foreign accent was deported at once to Germany. In addition, she described how Gestapo agents spoke such good French – many having lived there for twenty years or more – that you might not know if you were talking to a French person or a German.

Denise went on to describe graphically how on one occasion she had been carrying her radio in the usual suitcase pack and had been about to travel on a bus when she saw a Gestapo inspection in progress at the bus stop. She engaged one of the Gestapo in poor German, causing him some amusement, and asked him to hold her case while she bought a newspaper. She then showed her papers to a civilian inspector, returned for her case and got coolly on the bus with no trouble.<sup>23</sup>

She also related how she and Sevenet had found by chance a sympathizer in the Deuxième Bureau (French Internal Security) who would issue agents with forged cartes d’identité.

Denise and Dupont finally left Agen on 29 April via Toulouse for Montrejeau (where they spent the night), and then spent three hours in a train to cover the 17 kilometres to Cirs de Luchon, on the first stage of the journey to Britain. Starr had promised her a route out of the country involving only 3 kilometres on flat ground. At Cirs, she told the chef de gare that she had urgent papers to carry to Britain, and he replied that she was mad as there were 600 yards and



several patrols to pass before reaching the hotel where she could get help. But they advanced, met no Germans, and the proprietor of the Hôtel des Trois Ormeaux gave her a room for the day until he could arrange two guides for the price of 5000 Fr to get her over the Pyrenees.<sup>24</sup> She left at half past midnight, and after fifteen hours hiking across the Pyrenees at 3300 metres, with bare legs and a half-length coat (at one point her guides made a fire to warm her) they reached Bausen at 3 pm on a Saturday. She had to wait three days for the bus, but was glad to be able to rest. The Spanish police confiscated all her papers, including Colonel Starr's report, but she proceeded via Veille to Lerida, arriving on 5 May, where she met the British Consul from Barcelona and had dinner with him. He gave her documents to proceed to Madrid on 8 May, where she stayed for five days, and in her hotel met four Allied escaped airmen (two American and two British). From Madrid, Denise continued to Gibraltar on Saturday 15 May, for three days, then to Lisbon and ultimately to London, arriving on 21 May 1943, after a twenty-two-day journey.

There she gave her verbal report to SOE, underlining the lack of arms, money, wireless transmitters and of general stores such as clothes and food of which Starr was especially short.<sup>25</sup> She also warned that Starr had asked that the SOE should be careful to whom they supplied arms, as some resistance groups were left wing and might create problems after the Nazis were ejected.

Denise's debriefers commented afterwards that she was very anxious to return to Lyon to work, but SOE warned her that she was now almost certainly known to the Gestapo.<sup>26</sup> She felt this was not so, but said that if it was true, Starr also needed to be brought out as they had often been seen together. She added that as she had been at the same address for months, the Gestapo could have picked her up by now, and that she had managed to meet her mother for a meal three months ago. In addition, she had alternative cartes d'identité in the names of Katrine Bernard and Chantal Baron.

Denise now proceeded to formal training for ten months as a wireless operator and parachutist with SOE in Britain, and was enlisted as a FANY Ensign. According to B. E. Escott, F Section training began at Wanborough Manor, near Guildford, for those who had passed the first stiff interviews in London.<sup>27</sup> From here they continued to Arisaig House in Inverness-shire for training in arms and explosives. Those requiring specialist instruction (industrial sabotage, wireless and so on) continued to specialist centres round the country. Then came parachute training at Ringway near Manchester while living at Tatton Park and, finally, security training (use of safe houses, letter boxes and so on) at Beaulieu in Hampshire. For SOE in general there were as many as fifty training schools, mostly in isolated country houses.<sup>28</sup>

At her initial training school, the following comments were written about Denise's progress; 'An experienced woman with knowledge of the world. She has courage and determination and a thorough understanding and hatred of the Boche. Has complete self-assurance and is capable of handling most situations.

Has a feeling of physical inferiority which limits her athletic activities. Keen to get back into the field and under a good male organizer would make a very good W/T operator or courier. Is not physically suited to the training of Group A [i.e. paramilitary training].<sup>29</sup> Vera Atkins recalls one of Denise's final pre-mission briefings at a secret location commonly used on such occasions, an SOE flat at 6 Orchard Court, Portman Square,<sup>30</sup> as well as the final kitting-out in authentic tailor-made French clothes.<sup>31</sup>

Denise returned to work in France on the night of 2–3 March 1944 with Captain Robert Benoist (codenamed 'Lionel'), and was landed by an RAF Westland Lysander at Soucelles, 10 kilometres south of Vatun and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  west of Villeneuve, near Nantes. The secret drop was codenamed 'Laburnum'.<sup>32</sup> Her circuit (or *réseau*), called 'Clergyman', was a large one, consisting of 2000 armed members of the FFI (Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur), which had had to be re-established after its collapse the year before. One source alleges that the plane was met by the resistance leader and former pilot Clément Rémy, codenamed 'Marc'.<sup>33</sup> Denise now ran a double risk in France, being both an official SOE agent and Jewish.<sup>34</sup>

Her orders were to act as courier, encoder and wireless operator, to assist in the attack on high pylons over the River Loire at Ile Héron and to cut railway and telephone lines converging on Nantes before D Day, to disrupt German communications. Benoist's orders were that Denise 'will be under your command but it must be understood that she is the ultimate judge in all questions regarding the technicalities and w/t [wireless telegraphy] security. She will encode the messages herself . . . and it is of the utmost importance that her time on the air should be reduced to the minimum.'<sup>35</sup> She contacted London within two weeks, on 15 March,<sup>36</sup> and worked for three months sending thirty-one messages and receiving fifty-two.<sup>37</sup>

Benoist, a wealthy racing driver, was captured on 18 June 1944 in Paris while visiting his dying mother and was later hanged at Buchenwald. Denise was captured the next day, 19 June, following a Gestapo raid on Villa Cécile, a château belonging to the Benoist family in Rambouillet at Sermaise, west of Paris, where she was based with agent Jean-Paul Wimmelle who managed to escape.<sup>38</sup> Vera Atkins said that although it was clear there had been a betrayal – and they knew immediately she was captured by a message from their agents – it would be discovered who was involved only by locating in an archive the German documents on the issue.<sup>39</sup> Nazi spies and sympathizers proliferated in France at the time, so such incidents were commonplace. After the German surrender, SOE was wound up very quickly, on 1 January 1946, as it was felt that no good could come of finding the traitors. In the turmoil of postwar Europe matters like these were often left uninvestigated and unsolved.

As the Allies approached Paris, the Germans were forced to move all their prisoners further east and into Germany. Imprisoned at the infamous gaol in Fresnes, 12 miles south of Paris, Denise was taken to Gare de l'Est by coach on



8 August with Szabo and Rolfe. They had all been in Fresnes prison at the same time, but had not met each other. A report by Vera Atkins – when seconded to the Judge Advocate General's Branch HQ BAOR, on 13 March 1946 – mentions that Denise had also been seen in interrogation centres at 3 Place des Etats-Unis and the notorious 84 Avenue Foch, the Gestapo headquarters in Paris.<sup>40</sup>

Each prisoner was given a small parcel by the Red Cross, enough to last for two days. Their third-class railway wagon was attached to the end of a heavily guarded train carrying 300 German wounded as well as male prisoners. The women prisoners – separated from the men, who included Wing Commander Yeo-Thomas, 'The White Rabbit' – were chained by the ankles in pairs. Vera Atkins' report states that other SOE agents on the train included Major Peulève and Squadron Leader Southgate *en route* for Buchenwald.<sup>41</sup> After many hours delay, the train left on a hot August late afternoon for Germany.

The following day, when the train was attacked and damaged by the RAF, Violette Szabo crawled into the male-prisoner section to bring them food and water. The journey was continued later that night in trucks. On reaching Metz, they were billeted in stables for the night; agent Bernard Guillot alleges he saw many women prisoners while he was being moved between prisons, and especially mentions Denise in his debrief of 12 April 1945.<sup>42</sup> From here the girls were sent on to Gestapo headquarters in Strasbourg and later to Saarbrücken, where the three girls were seen as they arrived by Mlle Monique Level, a French prisoner, who described how Lilian looked quite ill.<sup>43</sup> They reached Ravensbrück after a week's journey on 22 August 1944.<sup>44</sup>

Details of Denise's imprisonment and death are related by E. H. Cookridge in his book, *Inside SOE*.<sup>45</sup> The three SOE girls managed to share the same bunk in their prison hut, where they were seen by SOE agents Yvonne Baseden and Eileen Nearne.<sup>46</sup> But after three weeks at Ravensbrück, she and Szabo and Rolfe (with Nearne) were taken on 3 September to Torgau, a labour camp 120 miles south of Ravensbrück, where conditions were slightly better and they worked in a factory. Nearne said they were in good spirits, especially Violette, who was constantly planning an escape.<sup>47</sup> Lilian, however, was unwell.<sup>48</sup> Later, Nearne was sent elsewhere and never saw them again.

Several weeks later, on 5 October, they were returned to Ravensbrück, but on 19 October were again moved.<sup>49</sup> This time they were sent east to join an Aussenkommando 300 miles away near Königsberg, labouring in heavy forestry and building work at an airfield. They travelled by truck, arriving in November 1944, and worked for three months in the harsh conditions of an East European winter, mainly with Russian and Polish POWs.<sup>50</sup> Both Lilian and Denise were unwell as a result of the ill treatment, while Violette stood up to it better. Witnesses described how all three stuck together and showed remarkable spirit.<sup>51</sup>

Violette became particularly friendly with Solange, while Lilian, who was increasingly ill and was moved into a hospital, was befriended by Renée Corjon.

Then, on 20 January, the three agents were again returned to Ravensbrück. Solange and Corjon speculated that it might be for repatriation via Sweden or Switzerland, but in fact it had been decided in Berlin to carry out mass executions; the Allies were fast approaching and the Germans wanted to kill prisoners who had witnessed atrocities or who constituted a 'danger' to the German State.<sup>52</sup>

At Ravensbrück, Yvonne Baseden saw them yet again and was shocked at their much deteriorated health. They told her they had managed to contact some male POWs on their transport back and had given them a list of agents they had seen imprisoned, hoping it would get back to London. Baseden alleges they were optimistic about getting onto another transport, perhaps to perform lighter work outside the camp. A French prisoner, Mary de Moncy, who worked in the infirmary, had been able to get them some food and clothes.<sup>53</sup> It was de Moncy who later told Yvonne Baseden that the girls had been taken to the punishment cells for solitary confinement, all three being in a poor state and Lilian unable to walk. After a further three days they were moved to an L-shaped block of cells called the bunker, and were seen by an unnamed Czech woman.<sup>54</sup> Odette Churchill (who received the George Cross) describes the bunker thus: 'A short passage with a barrel gate at the end with spikes leading to the floor and ceiling, had on one side the cheerful rooms of the SS . . . the gate swung on a spring hinge and led to a flight of stairs descending to a stone underground second passage with white electric light, and cells on one side, which were all in darkness inside . . . the cell doors had hatches through which food was passed.'<sup>55</sup> A day or two later all three agents disappeared.

After the war it was discovered that the three women had been taken from their cells to the yard behind the crematorium at about 7 o'clock one evening, Denise and Lilian now on stretchers and only Violette able to walk. Camp Commandant SS-Sturmbannführer (Major) Fritz Sühren read the death sentences ordered by Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Central Security Office) in Berlin, with Second-in-Command Schwartzhuber also present. SS-Oberscharführer (Sergeant) Zappe guarded the girls while this was done. SS-Scharführer (Junior Sergeant) Schulte (or Schülter) – a block leader from the mens' camp – then shot each girl in the back of the neck with a small-calibre pistol, as SS-Unterscharführer (Corporal) Schenk (in charge of the crematorium) brought them forward and held them. Camp doctor SS-Sturmbannführer (Major) Trömmer certified the deaths and the clothed bodies were removed singly by internees and immediately cremated. The camp dentist, Dr Martin Hellinger, was there to remove any gold teeth.

Sühren was arrested by American soldiers on 3 May while bringing Odette Churchill from Ravensbrück to the American lines as a mitigating offering. He escaped, was recaptured, escaped again and was recaptured two years later in 1949 by the British, who found him working in a brewery. He was handed over

to the French who, as Peter Churchill wrote, 'had no foolish sentiment about these murderers'<sup>56</sup> and tried and then executed him in, ironically, Fresnes prison. The dentist was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, was released in 1951 and practised in Germany for years afterwards.<sup>57</sup>

For months after the war it was unofficially believed that the three girls had been liberated by the Russians and were possibly on their way home via Siberia, or even Sweden, as had happened to some survivors of the German camps. A document dated 28 April 1945 in the SOE files, however, states that SOE believed the three girls were still at Ravensbrück.<sup>58</sup> Then, in April 1946, a newspaper story about the missing girls was seen by a Mrs Julie Barry, living at Joyce Grove, Nettlebed, Oxfordshire, a Guernsey woman who had been deported to Ravensbrück and allegedly forced to become Kapo no. 39785 in the Strafeblock.<sup>59</sup> Barry was in fact a Jewish refugee who had arrived in Guernsey in July 1939 as Julia Brichta and in April 1942 had married a local man, Jeremiah Barry. She was denounced by local Guernsey residents and deported to Ravensbrück via France on 5 May 1944.<sup>60</sup> When interviewed by two War Office officials, Barry's story was that she saw the three girls at Ravensbrück in rags, faces black with dirt and hair matted, spoke to them and gave them food and clothing. She especially remembered Violette Szabo. But her story cannot be confirmed. Another British POW at Ravensbrück was Mary Lindell, who is quoted by Escott as affirming that the usual method of execution there was by hanging and that she had had it on reliable authority from others in the camp that the girls' clothes were returned to the stores intact after execution.<sup>61</sup> Yvonne Baseden, however, pointed out that Mary de Moncy said their clothes were never returned.<sup>62</sup> We will probably never know the truth.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, Vera Atkins went to Germany and on her own initiative had herself attached to the Nuremberg War Crimes Investigation team.<sup>64</sup> She began conducting inquiries in Germany on all missing agents, and at Minden prison she found and interviewed SS-Obersturmführer (Lieutenant) Johann Schwartzhuber, the Second-in-Command – Schutzhaftlagerführer, or Camp Overseer – at Ravensbrück and previously a prominent prison guard at Auschwitz, on 13 March 1946.<sup>65</sup> After some strong words from Atkins, a guilty-looking Schwartzhuber admitted that he remembered the three women who had been brought back from Königsberg and put in the cells at Ravensbrück. He then confirmed how the girls were killed, adding that a female overseer had escorted them to the crematorium yard (this may have been Barry) but had been sent back before the execution. He described how 'all three were very brave and I was deeply moved . . . we were impressed by the bearing of these women . . . and annoyed that the Gestapo themselves did not carry out these shootings . . . I recognize with certainty the photograph of Danielle Williams [Denise Bloch] and I think I recognize the photograph of Lilian Rolfe. I know that the third

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Plate 3 Vera Atkins, Squadron and Intelligence Office, F Section SOE. (Courtesy of the Special Forces Club and SOE Archive.)

had the name of Violette.’ The translation was confirmed by a German linguist, Captain A. Vollman.

Schwartzhuber also confirmed that Lilian Rolfe was unable to walk and had to be assisted to the place of execution, leaving the cells and passing, via the kitchen, through the main gate, by the garage, to the crematorium itself. Barry insists that only Violette walked and the other two were on stretchers. Violette was shot last and had to watch her friends murdered in front of her.

Like Sühren (who also testified to the courage and cheerfulness of the girls), Schwartzhuber was sentenced to death after his trial in Hamburg and hanged. Thus, the indefatigable Vera Atkins could write letters of condolence to the girls’ families only in the spring of 1946, and only with the help of this evidence from Vera Atkins could Whitehall issue death certificates for the three agents, more than a year after their murder. They have no known graves.

A further piece in this narrative fell into place in 1968 when Alan Rolfe, brother of Lilian Rolfe who was murdered with Denise, saw an announcement in the *Daily Telegraph* of 24 May in memory of Denise Bloch, signed ‘Dave’. After enquiries at the newspaper, Alan Rolfe was contacted by Flight-Lieutenant David Lomas who knew Denise when she was training in England and was lobbying Lambeth Council to name a block of flats after Denise Bloch, as they had done for Rolfe and Szabo on the Vincennes Estate at Norwood, South London. He never succeeded, however, as Lambeth Council argued that all the flats had been named. In July, Lomas was killed in an aircraft crash in the Far East, it is thought, so the matter was never pursued. Perhaps it was because Denise was French that her name was not used; we do not know. But Vera Atkins did confirm in an interview that Denise may have been close to Lomas, since the private lives of agents on leave from training was their own.<sup>66</sup>

### ‘Violette’

Muriel Tamara Byck, MiD, Honorary Assistant Section Officer 2071428, WAAF/SOE agent 9111, seconded to the FANY, codenamed ‘Violette’ and ‘Michèle’, was born on 4 June 1918 in Ealing. She was the daughter of Luba Besia (née Golinska) and Jacques Byck, French Jews who had taken British nationality.<sup>67</sup> They were divorced and Jacques, who had been born in Kiev, was in 1943 living in New York, while Luba, who had been born in Lvov, had remarried and was living in Torquay in 1943 as Mrs G. E. Leslie, at 2 Bayfort Mansions, Warren Road.<sup>68</sup> Muriel joined the WAAF in December 1942 and became a full member of the SOE in July 1943.<sup>69</sup> Her background information file reveals that she spoke fluent French and moderate Russian and in 1923–4 had lived in Wiesbaden, Germany.<sup>70</sup> She went to school from 1926 until 1930 at the Lycée des Jeunes Filles, St Germain, France; and from 1930 until 1935 attended the Lycée Français in South Kensington, London, where she took the



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Plate 4 Muriel Byck, died on operations in France. (Courtesy of the Special Forces Club and SOE Archive.)

baccalauréat before proceeding to study at the University of Lille, France for a short time.

Between 1936 and 1938 she was a secretary in London and from 1937 until 1939 an Assistant Stage Manager at the Gate Theatre. Muriel had a strong sense of duty and from 1939 to 1941 volunteered to work in the Red Cross, WVS and as an ARP Warden in Torquay. From 1941 to 1942 she worked as a National Registration Clerk in Torquay and then joined the WAAF as a clerk in December 1942, pending a Commission. She was recruited into the SOE in July 1943 because of her excellent French and began initial training in September 1943 at Winterfold, Cranleigh, Surrey. From there she proceeded to paramilitary training at Meoble Lodge, Morar, Inverness-shire, until October and wireless-transmitter training at Thame Park, Oxfordshire, in November–December 1943.

While in training she was graded 'average' as a General Agent, but with a high intelligence rating (eight out of nine) and a high grade for morse and mechanical aptitude. She was described as 'a quiet, bright, attractive girl, keen, enthusiastic and intelligent. Alert but not very practical and as yet lacks foresight and thoroughness. She is, however, self-possessed, independent and persistent, and warm in her feelings for others . . . a girl of considerable promise who will



require much training to help her to overcome her lack of experience, her complete ignorance of what the work really involves and her general guilelessness. Her temperament would appear to be suitable for work as a courier, or possibly propaganda.<sup>71</sup> Vera Atkins remembers her as self-assured and completely committed to this hazardous work, in order to defeat Nazism and all it stood for. At Meoble she showed little aptitude for paramilitary training – close combat, fieldcraft, weapons training, explosives and demolition – except for signalling. She was not very strong physically, although she successfully completed parachute training. She was commissioned (WAAF Honorary Assistant Section Officer) on 1 April 1944.

Muriel – petite, dark and aged twenty-five – was engaged to be married to a French agent in the offices of the OSS (American Secret Service). His alias was ‘Lieutenant Morange’ and they had met while training.<sup>72</sup> He had given her a leather-covered powder compact. When her circuit leader, Major Phillipe Albert de Crevoisier de Vomécourt, DSO, codenamed ‘Antoine’, met Muriel in London and was security-checking her possessions before her jump, he told her she could not take the gift with her as it was too new and nothing like it could be bought in France. If she were caught with it, it would give her away as a foreign agent.<sup>73</sup> Muriel insisted on taking it, but he agreed only if he could make it look old, which he achieved by rubbing it with ammonia.

Muriel was given three sets of identity papers, with photographs that differed only by her arranging her long black hair in different styles. Her operation was codenamed ‘Benefactress’ and her forged papers named her as Michèle Bernier.<sup>74</sup> She was told that if for any reason she had to change identities, she should inform London of the details immediately. SOE were so concerned about her youthful looks that they gave her training with a make-up artist in London on how to look older by using a pencil under her eyes.<sup>75</sup>

Her flight took off from Tempsford aerodrome near Bedford, after four delays due to bad weather, and she parachuted into France on the night of 8–9 April 1944. With her were agent Captain Stanislaw Makowski, codenamed ‘Dmitri’ or ‘Maurice’<sup>76</sup> and two other agents, Captain C. S. Hudson (‘Marc’ or ‘Albin’), who was her CO until de Vomécourt arrived by plane – and Captain G. D. Jones (‘Lime’, ‘Isidore’ or ‘Gaston’). Muriel was to work as wireless operator with the resistance leader de Vomécourt of Réseau ‘Ventriloquist’ in the Orleans-Blois area, and to train any wireless operators it was possible to recruit locally.<sup>77</sup> She was to supply London with details about these new recruits so they could be given codenames and status. She was also to establish postboxes for contact should radio contact break down. Although under command of ‘Antoine’, she was ordered to be as self-reliant as possible on all wireless matters. She was to take 100,000 Fr and for security reasons to keep expenses as moderate as possible.

Part two of Muriel’s orders mentions an emergency address – handwritten in

contrast to the typed order sheets – for her to contact should she become separated from her dropping party and the reception committee on landing; it was Bureaux Agricoles, 10 Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, Chalcauoux. She was to ask for M. Chabéna or M. Monésheer using the password, 'Je viens de la part de Philippe voir si vous pouvez m'aider', to which the reply would be 'Veuillez attendre un instant'. Curiously, written next to this instruction is the word 'Blown', suggesting this address had been compromised.<sup>78</sup>

After landing at Issoudun she was taken to Salbris, to the home of Antoine Vincent, a member of the circuit. Here she again met de Vomécourt, and the two men took her to a meal at a small restaurant by the level-crossing just outside town. It was used almost exclusively by Germans, and when they arrived Muriel was terrified. 'We can't stay here', she whispered, 'let's get out while we can!' But Vincent explained that she had been brought here deliberately to get used to the sight of Germans and that once she was, she would not worry too much about them. She did not enjoy her meal that day.<sup>79</sup>

Her circuit had four transmitters in different locations covering a wide area within a 10-mile radius of Vincent's house and, in accordance with her orders, they were constantly moved about to avoid detection by the Germans, and transmissions were kept as brief as possible.<sup>80</sup> Her first transmission was on 7 May 1944 and she subsequently sent twenty-seven messages and received sixteen.<sup>81</sup> She never used the same set consecutively or at the same hour on any day, so was continually cycling from one to the other. Although many a man's health and nerves degenerated under the stress, Muriel remained cheerful and buoyant despite her frail and youthful looks. Rushing from location to location, she would encode, send, receive and decode messages, always on schedule, and on her own initiative she would often do this for other circuits as well so that messages would not be delayed. She also acted as a courier, alerting sabotage teams over a wide area.<sup>82</sup>

Her base was in Vincent's junk yard, 25 yards from his garage which was used as a repair shop by the Germans. Her station consisted of a rickety hut with a rusty corrugated-iron roof, with light filtering through cracks in the wall. She was surrounded by old tyres, car parts and the reek of oil and petrol and had a box and table to work at. While she was transmitting, a guard was posted at the yard gate to warn her of danger.

One day in late April, while transmitting to London, she noticed an eye looking through a hole in the shed wall. Her stomach lurched, but she quickly switched to plain language to tell London she was being watched. Continuing to send, she picked up the set and approached the hole, in time to see a German soldier leaving the yard. Full of fear, and not understanding where the lookout was, she packed her equipment, threw dust over her box and table to disguise the fact that anyone had been in the hut, and slipped into Vincent's house and told him what had happened. He decided to get her away in a car after consulting

de Vomécourt, who came to collect her. When the Germans arrived – forty of them – they were already sceptical that their soldier had actually seen a pretty woman with a transmitter in a junk-yard shed. They searched and found nothing and the soldier was given ten-days detention for wasting his officers' time.

Securely relocated in a new safe house, with the help of the resistance doctor Andrieux, Muriel returned to work; her cover was that she was recovering from an illness and had come from Paris to recuperate. She had to take medicine during the night and her hosts should not be worried by her alarm-clock going off at strange hours (this was, of course, to cover her wireless operations) or by visits from her 'uncle' de Vomécourt.

In early May it was decided by London and the circuit to bomb the nearby German ammunition dump at Michenon. At 2 pm on 7 May, Muriel received a message from London saying that the dump would be hit the following night. The raid was a great success, but Muriel had been shaken by the terrific explosions and became tired and listless. She was moved to the house of a circuit member, Dédé, and of his wife and three daughters at Nouan-le-Fuzelier, and later to the home of a blacksmith, Jourdain, at Vernou, 30 miles to the west. De Vomécourt had been away, but returned when he was told Muriel was ill. He told her there was a plane leaving soon for England and that she could write to her parents. (These two letters were enclosed by de Vomécourt when he wrote to her father to describe Muriel's death, on 6 December 1944.<sup>83</sup>) But Muriel deteriorated seriously and collapsed at Jourdain's home. A physician was called (in his letter to her father, de Vomécourt says three doctors attended her) and diagnosed meningitis, saying she must be taken immediately to hospital.<sup>84</sup> This was a great risk, but de Vomécourt decided it must be. She was much admired by her comrades.

He went alone with her in the ambulance to the hospital at Romorantin, saying he was Muriel's uncle, Monsieur de Courcelles, and that they were evacuees from Paris. Whether or not the nuns believed him, they admitted the patient and did all they could to save her. An operation was performed at 10 am but she died in Phillipe's arms at 7 pm on 23 May 1944. De Vomécourt described how he 'assisted personally at all the duties generally assumed by the family' after Muriel had passed away,<sup>85</sup> and that she was buried secretly in a temporary vault, under a false name in a zinc coffin so that 'you will be able to transport her later if you wish'.<sup>86</sup> De Vomécourt attended her funeral, having great difficulty in persuading her many friends to keep away for fear of arousing Gestapo suspicions. He followed the hearse alone through the town to the cemetery and just escaped the Gestapo – who had come for him there – by jumping the cemetery wall where a car awaited to whisk him away.<sup>87</sup> After the War, Gleeson alleges, her family had her body brought back for burial in England.<sup>88</sup> However, Escott rightly says she was reburied in the Commonwealth War

Graves Commission cemetery at Pornic, 20 kilometres southeast of St Nazaire. She lies in plot two, row AB, grave eighteen.<sup>89</sup> In her will she left her savings of £42 to her fiancé.

It emerged subsequently that Muriel had had meningitis as a child, but that she had told nobody for fear of being refused enlistment in the SOE, as there is a risk of recurrence.

In his letter to Muriel's father, de Vomécourt added that he would be happy to introduce him to Muriel's many friends in France as soon as it was possible for him to come, and that a lady who had lost her only son in the Maquis, and at whose house Muriel had once stayed, was writing to him and Muriel's mother to express her appreciation of Muriel's great work and sacrifice for the liberation of France. Her moving letter, written in French in March 1945, is a long tribute to Muriel, full of praise for her wonderful personality and beauty, her sense of duty and hard work, her laughter and gaiety, and describes her as a unique person, who died as a soldier, giving her life, like the lady's son, for right and justice.

Muriel, who never abandoned her Jewish faith and spoke often of her devout family in England, nevertheless wore, as a good luck charm, a little gold cross given her by a resistance man who had met her at the parachute drop at Châteaurenault. To this day, resistance members and their children, as well as other local people of the Sologne area, visit her memorial at Romorantin, Loire et Cher, to lay flowers at remembrance ceremonies.<sup>90</sup> Muriel is also commemorated – like Denise Bloch – on the Knightsbridge and Valençay memorials and at the Lycée Français in Kensington. These courageous women by their example disprove the anti-Semitic libel that Jews under Hitler went like sheep to the slaughter or avoided fighting.<sup>91</sup>

### Acknowledgements

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Imperial War Museum, London, and other library staff in the Reading Room; staff at the Public Records Office, Kew, London, and at Battersea Park Road Library, London.

## NOTES

- 1 M. Sugarman, 'Jews in the SOE and French Resistance' (AJEX Museum files 1998), contains an incomplete but growing list.
- 2 Nigel West, *Secret War* (London 1992) 9.
- 3 J. Gleeson, *They Feared No Evil* (London 1976) preface.
- 4 *Ibid.* 57–8.
- 5 Foreign and Commonwealth Office files of the SOE Adviser, Sir Duncan Stuart, unnumbered pages, henceforth FCO.
- 6 J. D. Sainsbury, *The F Section Memorial* (London 1991).
- 7 R. J. Minney, *Carve Her Name with Pride* (London 1988) 160.
- 8 Irene Ward, *F.A.N.Y. Invicta* (London 1955) 240.
- 9 FCO photo.
- 10 FCO debrief of Denise Bloch.
- 11 PRO HS6 Series.
- 12 Interview, 24 April 1998, East Sussex. Vera Atkins, CBE, Croix de Guerre, Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur, kindly agreed to meet me on 24 April 1998 at her home in East Sussex. She was at the time in her ninetieth year, but her memory was sharp, and she was remarkably forthright. She was Squadron and Intelligence Officer to SOE F Section, and Personal Assistant to Buckmaster, and had known all the agents over the war years who had passed through the SOE offices in London. Her multifaceted job included briefing agents on the latest rationing regulations in France, obtaining French tailor labels for clothing, supplying faked travel documents and photos of bogus husbands or wives (J. Tickell, *Odette* [London 1949] 60).
- 13 Letter from Gervase Cowell, Chair of the Special Forces Club Historical Sub-Committee, to author, 13 February 1998.
- 14 FCO.
- 15 FCO debrief of Denise Bloch, 11 June 1943. Mendelsohn was arrested on 30 October 1942 and imprisoned for a year, during which Denise's father tried to have him, Aron and two others released by bribing the Germans through a lawyer for 1,500,000 Fr. Mendelsohn escaped from France on 31 December 1943 and reached England on 17 April 1944 (FCO debrief, p. 3). It seems that everyone in the Bloch family was active in some way in the resistance.
- 16 FCO.
- 17 FCO.
- 18 FCO.
- 19 PRO HS6/437, 6 June 1945 FCO.
- 20 FCO.
- 21 FCO.
- 22 FCO.
- 23 FCO.
- 24 FCO.
- 25 FCO.
- 26 FCO.
- 27 B. E. Escott, *Mission Improbable* (London 1991) 31–4.
- 28 West (see n. 2) 267–9.
- 29 FCO.
- 30 Interview, 24 April 1998, East Sussex (see n. 12).
- 31 A group of German refugee Jewish tailors working from a secret workshop near Oxford Circus produced these items, scouring London's synagogue worshippers for authentic French and German labels and either buying the clothing or borrowing items to copy for SOE agents being dropped into France. Vera Atkins named a Captain Ken More who was in charge of procuring items of this kind for SOE and other relevant agencies. The Jewish leader of the tailoring group itself was made an honorary Captain in the SOE. (Gleeson [see n. 3] 25.)
- 32 H. Verity, *We Landed by Moonlight* (London 1978) 220.
- 33 J. O. Fuller, *The German Penetration of SOE* (London 1975) 137.
- 34 L. Jones, *A Quiet Courage* (London 1990) 127.
- 35 M. R. D. Foot, *SOE in France* (London 1966) 88.
- 36 FCO.
- 37 G. Cowell, Special Forces Club files (see n. 13).
- 38 FCO.
- 39 Interview, 24 April 1998, East Sussex (see n. 12).
- 40 Vera Atkins, FCO, henceforth VA FCO.
- 41 VA FCO.

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- 42 PRO file HS6/439.
- 43 Her report in PRO HS6/440.
- 44 Mlle J. Rousseau, Sancellemonts, Haute Savoie; VA FCO.
- 45 E. H. Cookridge, *Inside SOE* (London 1966).
- 46 PRO file HS6/437, 20 June 1945 and 15 June 1945 respectively.
- 47 Minney (see n. 7) 168.
- 48 Mme Renée Corjon, Bellvue, Nogent-sur-Vernisson, Loiret; VA FCO.
- 49 Mme Renée Rossier, Allègre, Haute Savoie and 3 Villa Montecalme, Paris. 18; VA FCO.
- 50 Mme Solange Rousseau, St Maur, Seine et Marne; VA FCO.
- 51 VA FCO.
- 52 Jones (see n. 34) 85.
- 53 PRO HS6/437.
- 54 VA FCO.
- 55 Tickell (see n. 12) 266–7.
- 56 Peter Churchill, *The Spirit in the Cage* (London 1954) 234.
- 57 Cookridge (see n. 45) 173.
- 58 PRO HS6/438.
- 59 Minney (see n. 7) chaps 19 and 20.
- 60 F. E. Cohen, 'The Jews in the Islands of Jersey, Guernsey & Sark During the German Occupation, 1940–45', *Journal of Holocaust Education* 6:1 (Summer 1997) 34–5. I am indebted to Stephen Stodel of London, nephew of a former Jewish POW, Morris Stodel, Royal Signals, for pointing out this article to me.
- 61 Escott (see n. 27) 208.
- 62 PRO HS6/437.
- 63 An unsigned leaflet in the author's possession, apparently produced by the PRO on 20 July 1998 when new SOE papers were released for public scrutiny, states that at least 87 per cent of SOE files were deliberately destroyed between 1945 and 1950, some by the SOE and some by the SIS; many others have not been released. The debrief document on the fate of Violet Szabo is missing, as are many on other operations and on allegedly unfounded allegations of treachery as well as the assassination of alleged traitors in the field. Other documents were lost in a fire at the Baker Street headquarters, including most of the files from the Polish section.
- 64 Interview, 24 April 1998, East Sussex (see n. 12). After the War ended, Vera Atkins felt strongly that she should investigate what had become of the agents who had disappeared on active service. Against the wishes and advice of her superiors, and facing some hostility, she travelled to Germany in November–December 1945 to assess whether she could discover the fate of the missing agents and who in the Allied Occupation Forces would or could help her.
- 65 VA FCO. After approaching agencies such as the Red Cross and Military Intelligence, she spoke to the Commanding Officer of the Legal Department of the British War Crimes Offices in Germany, at Bad Oynhausen near Hanover (then HQ, BAOR), Group Captain Tony Somerhough, who allowed her to interview some imprisoned Nazis; she realized that she might make some headway in her own investigations, and even though she was not legally trained and there were no vacancies in the War Crimes Offices, the CO allowed her to stay. MI5 paid her Army salary and she stoically continued with her work until the end, driven by her determination to discover the truth for herself and the families of the agents whose whereabouts and fate were unknown.
- 66 Interview, 24 April 1998, East Sussex (see n. 12). The original correspondence has been donated to the AJEX Museum by Alan Rolfe.
- 67 Cookridge (see n. 45) 633.
- 68 PRO HS6/467.
- 69 Jewish Chaplains' Cards, AJEX Museum, Hackney, London.
- 70 SOE Foreign & Commonwealth Office files on Muriel Byck, courtesy of Sir Duncan Stuart; henceforth FCO Byck.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 P. de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day* (London 1961) 170.
- 74 FCO Operation Instruction No. F95, 26 March 1944; henceforth FCO 95.
- 75 PRO file HS6/582, report by de Vomécourt, 11–19 January 1945.
- 76 Foot (see n. 35) 468.
- 77 FCO 95.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 de Vomécourt (see n. 73) 186.
- 80 FCO Byck.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Escott (see n. 27) chap. 14.
- 83 FCO files.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Foot (see n. 35) 383; de Vomécourt (see n. 73) 202–10.
- 88 Gleeson (see n. 3) 57–8.
- 89 Letter from Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 20 February 1998.
- 90 Cookridge (see n. 45) 377.



91 Further material on this subject follows:  
**First World War:** Revd Michael Adler, *British Jewry Book of Honour* (London 1922, reprinted London 1998); *Australian Jewry Book of Honour* (Sydney 1923); Martin Sugarman, 'The Zion Muleteers' (*Orders and Medals Research Society Journal*, winter 1995, London, and *The Military Advisor*, summer 1996, USA); Col. J. H. Patterson, *With the Judeans in the Palestine Campaign* (London 1922) and *With the Zionists in Gallipoli* (London 1916); V. Jabotinsky, *The Story of the Jewish Legion* (New York 1945); P. Gariepy, 'Jewish Soldiers at Gallipoli' (*The Gallipole Journal*, winter 1996, summer 1996, winter 1997, London); R. Freulich, *Soldiers of Judea* (Jerusalem 1964).  
**Second World War:** H. Morris, *We Will Remember Them* (London 1989); H. Morris, *The Addendum* (AJEX, London 1994); Martin Sugarman, 'A Well Kept Secret – No. 3 (Jewish) Troop No. 10 Commando' (*Medal News*, London, April 1996 – the Troop consisted of 120 Commandos, nearly all Jewish, 25 per cent of whom were killed in action); also Ian Dear, *Ten Commando* (London 1987); Morris Beckman, *The Jewish Brigade* (London 1998); Peter Masters, *Striking Back* (USA 1997); Martin Sugarman, 'Jews at Arnhem', 'Jews at Dieppe', 'Jews in the SOE/French Resistance', 'Jews with the Chindits', 'Jews in the Korean War' (Archives of the AJEX Museum, Hackney, London 1998); *Canadian Jews in the Second World War* (Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal 1947–8); *South African Jews in the Second World War* (SA Board of Deputies, Pretoria 1950); *Australian Jewry's Book of*

*Honour the Second World War* (Australian AJEX, Sydney 1973); Martin Sugarman, 'Jack Nissenthall – the VC hero who never was' (*Orders and Medals Research Society Journal*, summer 1998, London, and *The Military Advisor*, Autumn 1998, USA); Jack Lennard, *Jews in Wartime* (unpublished manuscript, AJEX archives, London); Y. Suhl, *They Fought Back – Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe* (New York 1975–6); Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, CF, *Soldiers from Judaea* (London 1944).

**Other conflicts:** Harold Pollins, '11th Tower Hamlets Volunteers – The First Jewish Unit in the British Army' (*Bulletin of the Military Historical Society*, February 1998, London); A. Prago, 'Jews in the Spanish Civil War International Brigade' (*Jewish Currents*, New York, February 1975; over 10,000 Jews fought against Franco's Fascists, 500 from Mandatory Palestine); David Diamint, *Combattants Juifs dans l'Armée Républicaine Espagnole* (Paris 1979) also in Yiddish (Warsaw 1967); Martin Sugarman, 'List of Jews in the Spanish Civil War' (AJEX Museum, London); E. Rubin, *140 Jewish Marshalls, Generals and Admirals* (London 1952); G. L. Green, *The Royal Navy and Anglo-Jewry, 1740–1820* (London 1989); several privately published books on Jews in the USA and Russian armed forces, AJEX Archives, London; E. Rosenthal, 'Jewish Heroes of the Boer War' (*South African Jewish Times*, autumn 1948, contains references to the hundreds of Jews who fought for the Boers, copies of which are held at AJEX Museum archives; well over 3000 Jews fought in the British forces).