

# Le carnet de Léon · Carnet d'Histoire

Dunkerque, Mer du Nord 1940 - 1945



Roger

Robert

André



Leon's Journal



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## Leon's Journal – History Notebook

Dunkirk, North Sea 1940 – 1945

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Dear Reader,

Leon's Journal recounts the story of a young 11-year-old boy, a resident of Dunkirk, at the outbreak of the Second World War. His story is also the story of his family and friends; and for some of you, the story of your grandfather's or grandmother's parents.

It describes daily life, school rooms, classwork and film heroes of this era. But it also describes the painful moments experienced by the inhabitants of Dunkirk : the fear of being bombed, the occupation by the German army, hunger and flight from danger.

Our city was almost completely destroyed during the war. In fact, there were only several hundred residents remaining. At the war's end, the Glacis district, where I later grew up, was the site of emergency wooden barracks for the thousands of refugee families returning to Dunkirk. Many of these families had been thrown out of the city onto nearby roads under constant gut-wrenching bombing.

Now 80 years later, through this "Notebook", I want us to remember their story, their sacrifices, their courage, and their spirit of resistance and solidarity.

This famous "Spirit of Dunkirk", recently celebrated in Christopher Nolan's film, instilled in us the strength to recover and rebuild together after the war. Today, it also helps reminds us of those around the world, even some nearby, who suffer and have been driven from their country by war and misery. Finally, it means cherishing the happiness and good fortune we share together in a Europe at peace.

**Patrice Vergriete**  
Mayor of Dunkirk





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## The Phony War

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*"Hello, my name is Leon. I was born on September 17, 1928 in Dunkirk where I live with my parents, Blanche and Victor, and my two brothers, Robert and Roger.*

*Our home is on the first floor of a house located at 52 bis rue Emmercy, near the theater, the military hospital, the city garden and my primary school for boys. I will be entering the last year of primary school and my teacher, Mr. Castien, tells me that I am a smart kid who "is not afraid of anything!"*

On Sunday, September 3, 1939, we are still on vacation, the streets are quiet, families are walking, others are on bicycles or riding the trolley. We take advantage of a family outing to eat a sandwich with pickles and baby onions at "Le Centre" café, at Place Jean-Bart. It's past 6 p.m. when, suddenly, we learn that France has declared war on Germany. This causes great consternation.

The situation changes the lives of lots of families. Fathers are mobilized, bringing separation, worry and sometimes distress. For me, it's going to make me grow up quickly but I am fortunate because my dad was not called up for service, being the father of three children.

Since the declaration of war, oddly, there has been no fighting. The men are at the front where they wait for the enemy and play cards: it's a "phony war"!"



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## Everyday Life

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*“Oblivious to the phony war, my childhood life remains the same. I go to school on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, wearing a gray shirt and shorts (even in winter), galoshes donated by the Charity Office, and my beret. As graduation is coming at the end of the school year, our teacher gives us four weekly dictations plus arithmetic, history, geography, practical life lessons, as well as singing and reading.*

*Croquignol, Filochard and Ribouldingue, the famous “Pieds nickelés” comic series, are Eugene’s, Maurice’s and my favorite comic book characters. Every week, we try to buy comics to read about their newest adventures, each for about 50 cents. Nicole, Raymonde and Yvette, the girls at the end of the street like to read “Suzette” when they are not playing “to the bath” or hopscotch. We play soccer on the sidewalks (making our berets the goal posts), and games like tag or hide-and-seek. I prefer to climb trees like Tarzan.*

*On Friday May 10, 1940, an unusual noise wakes us up. We hear the hum of aircraft engines. Seaplanes fly over the city. We are told that the German air force is dropping magnetic mines at the entrance to the harbor and in the North Sea.*

*Three days later, the concern continues to grow. We see Dutch and Belgian refugees fleeing the German advance and marching in long lines along the Veurne Canal. They have evacuated, loaded with packages, pushing bundles of laundry in wheelbarrows, carts, baby carriages... It’s a sad parade!*

*We, the people of Dunkirk, are devastated and moved. Many people of goodwill gather around them and reception centers are opened to welcome them.”*



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## My Operation Dynamo Days

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*"After the mining of the harbor, Dunkirk becomes the target. On May 13, faced with this danger, my parents decide to flee to nearby Bourbourg and its countryside. Four days later as the Germans approach by land we return to Dunkirk, exhausted after walking 18 kilometers in stomach-churning fear.*

*On Monday May 27, 1940, a hail of bombs and fire rain down on Dunkirk. The Stukas, German bombers, skim the roofs emitting a hellish noise. We shelter in the basement of Delater's butcher shop, located on rue des Vieux-Remparts. My mom has taken some provisions and we play cards with the grown-ups so as not to think about what's happening.*

*"Godverdomme!" my grandfather swears in Flemish, his face covered in soot. He dozes off under the flue when there is a new explosion at around 5 p.m. The basement ceiling stands firm and fortunately we are safe and sound. Quickly we leave, bringing only our bags and gas masks. A scene of desolation awaits us and the smell of ash and smoke fills the air. The city is devastated. Tonight, like other Dunkirk residents, we are heading for the dunes to seek makeshift shelter. In the streets, we find empty, gutted, burned out houses. On the beaches, Operation Dynamo has begun. Surrounded by German troops, and under fire from their planes and artillery, Allied forces regroup along the beach preparing to evacuate to Britain. I will later learn that this is the biggest rescue operation in naval history.*

*Exhausted, I fall asleep, regularly waking up to the sound of German shells piercing the darkness. Around us, we hear English and French soldiers, hiding like us in the dunes."*



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## The Exodus : my other life

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*“According to the latest news, German troops are already occupying Boulogne, Calais, and Lille. Dunkirk is encircled.*

*We find refuge, along with many families, in the basement of the Courthouse, where the smell of large quantities of gingerbread delight my nostrils and my stomach. It also hides our body odor because soap and water are scarce, as are clean clothes...*

*The night of June 3-4, 1940 is calm, the bombardment has ceased but concern remains high. In the morning, the German troops arrive, advancing in single file. At 11 a.m., the swastika flag flies atop the belfry.*

*Among the ruins, we find refuge in the cellar of the café "Le Passe-Temps", on rue des Vieux-Remparts. In this dark cave, without water or electricity, we are visited by a young German soldier, rifle in hand, looking for "Tommies" (English soldiers) or French soldiers. My brothers and I are scared, but my mom stands up to him. The soldier leaves and we are okay.*

*We will be staying in this hell throughout the summer of 1940. Before the start of the school year, my parents decide to leave for Lille. Luggage is packed in a hurry and we can only take the bare minimum. I just have time to say goodbye to my friend Maurice, who promises to give me news from Dunkirk.*

*When we arrive in Lille, another world awaits us. For a while, the five of us live in one room, above a closed grocery store in Fives, then move into a ground floor apartment in the Vauban district where another life is beginning for us.*

*I am 12 and have a heavy heart when I think of Dunkirk. I don't know if I will be able to return there someday.”*





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## Occupation and Resistance

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*“ Restrictions and privations punctuate the Occupation. Even with tickets and ration cards, we don't have much to eat. So we have to be resourceful and inventive. Vegetable gardens, rabbit and chicken farms spring up around the city, and the black market expands. Dad, fed up with rutabaga, regularly goes by bike out to the countryside to look for fresh produce, being careful not to get caught by the police patrols.*

*My friend Maurice writes to me that after the Armistice of June 22, 1940, the German military has requisitioned the undamaged buildings and abandoned houses. The German command is installed in the sub-prefecture building. Dunkirk and the neighboring towns are declared "Restricted Zones". A pass, called "Ausweis", is mandatory to enter and leave the city.*

*There is no more freedom of expression either.*

*I am sad to learn that our school was bombed. Maurice writes that he has to walk further to school and can only go for a few hours each day. It is cold in class, and he sometimes keeps his pajamas on under his clothes to stay warm. Last week his inkwell froze, so now he manages to get closer to the stove. He receives vitamin crackers offered by National Relief and sometimes gets vegetable soup from the municipal canteen. Maurice says finding fresh water is no small feat. He must go and find some at the bottom of wells in gardens.*

*On the beaches, where people can no longer go, the German army is building blockhouses along the coast. Dad says it's because the Germans fear an Allied landing that they build the Atlantic Wall.*

*To keep his mind off things, Maurice hangs out with his friends in Rosendaël. Abbot Bonpain organizes hikes to Zuydcoote or the Vancauwenberghe wood in Saint-Pol-sur-Mer.”*





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## Occupation and Resistance

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*“In another letter, Maurice recounts the regular bombing by the Royal Air Force on German installations around the city. The morale of the population is at its lowest. Maurice keeps to his studies in the basement of the town hall.*

*We suffer from lack of freedom and censorship imposed by the Gestapo and the French militia. All media is controlled by Nazi propaganda. We are not allowed to listen to the radio, but many of us secretly follow the program "the French speak to the French". It's a daily connection between Free France and occupied France, also allowing the transmission of secret messages to resistance fighters who have codes.*

*We fear roundups. At Le Chagnot bar, a Lille café where Dunkirk people meet, Papa learns of the arrest of his dentist, who had remained in Dunkirk to provide services. Because he had sent his wife and children away and he was Jewish, he was deported. It's a shock!*

*Young adults are subjected to German propaganda supported by the Vichy government. The men must register and go to work in Germany. It is called the Compulsory Labor Service. Resisting this call, Robert, the son of our Dunkirk grocer, is arrested on the street and sent into forced labor in Germany.*

*In another shock, on March 30, 1943, Dad learns of the execution of Rosendaël resistance fighters: Abbot René Bonpain, Louis Herbeaux and Jules Lanery.*

*On February 15, 1944, everything gets tough again: there is an order to remove all the "useless mouths". Only those who are "useful" can remain. Trains from Dunkirk are sent to Aube and Côte-d'Or. Dunkirk is emptying.*

*Yet hope is reborn. We hear talk about a landing.”*





*Traduction* : Alan Sibert.

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## The World at Peace

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“It's over! The war is over!” we shout in the streets of Lille as the day dawns on September 3, 1944. But in Dunkirk, the wait is interminable. Sacrificed in 1940, destroyed and regularly bombed during the Occupation, the bypassed city is forgotten. Incomprehension and humiliation continue for the 800 or so residents of Dunkirk still living inside the embattled city. On May 8, 1945, German Admiral Friedrich Frisius, commandant of Dunkirk, is ordered to cease fighting. Finally on May 9 he surrenders at Wormhout Castle, headquarters of Czechoslovakian general Alois Liška, local commander of Allied forces.

Suitcases are packed for those of us who want to return to Dunkirk. But we must wait for the roads to be cleared of mines and safely secure. Finally, my father receives authorization to return to and to resume his work at Chantiers de France, where production, although considerably reduced by scarcity and the passive resistance of remaining workers, continued throughout the Occupation. My mother and my brothers return home a bit later. I continue to enjoy a little of the newfound freedom in Lille, staying with my uncle François and my aunt Germaine.

A dantesque scene greets me upon my return in mid-June 1945. Ruins of course, but also weeds sprouting everywhere in the destroyed streets and sidewalks. I tell myself that it will take courage, helping each other and patience to rebuild the city I had left four years and nine months earlier. In three months time, I will be 17 years old. I am finally back home. I feel FREE again.

When he comes to Dunkirk on August 12, 1945, General de Gaulle declares : “We will rebuild Dunkirk.” This is what we all want to hear as the people of Dunkirk gather along rue Alexandre III and on the devastated place Jean Bart. What emotion springs forth as the crowd starts to sing the Hymn to Jean Bart after the General's speech. ”