

## **Suzanne de Robillard's account** by Dan Rafiqi and Dr Tessa Murdoch

**This is a transcript of the second half of an event by the Huguenot Museum at Rochester Cathedral on the evening of 8<sup>th</sup> November 2022.**

### **Introduction** by Dan Rafiqi

The next autobiographical account possesses many similarities but also some significant differences from that of written by Isaac. Susanne de Robillard was a noblewoman, a daughter of the reasonably prominent de Champagné family from Saintonge. As the account makes clear Susanne's family initially fled to Devon, but would head onwards to the Netherlands because, in the words of her mother 'I had a large family, especially boys to place...I was not willing to put them into the service of a Catholic king, having taken them out of France for reasons of religion'. A reference of course to England's embattled James II. Susanne moved with the family to the Netherlands, before relocating in 1702 on account of marriage to Lower Saxony in Germany.

The circumstances that led to the creation of Susanne's text are curious indeed. The historian who has most energetically engaged with this text is Carolyn Lougee at Stanford University, whose translation into English Tessa will read for us. Lougee describes Susanne's text, provocatively, as an act of what she terms 'filial rebellion'. Susanne's mother had written her own account of escape earlier in 1690, one which made little mention of her daughter's role in helping the family escape. Lougee's plausible theory is that Susanne stumbled across her mother's text while sorting through her belongings after her mother's death in 1722 and decided to offer her own take which placed herself back at the centre of the family's escape from France. If hard to prove, it is a tantalizing theory. One which invites us to consider the wide variety of very personal and not always obvious agendas which informed the decision to tell one's own story. So, without further ado, let us hear the account of Susanne de Robillard's flight from her homeland.

### **Suzanne de Robillard's account** read by Dr Tessa Murdoch

Brief Account of My Departure from France, to Seek in Foreign Lands the Freedom of My Conscience and the Exercise of Our Holy Religion.

I was at La Rochelle, capital city of the Aunis and a seaport, in 1687, the eldest of the children of my father and my mother, and in their absence mistress of the household they had there, and of five of my youngest brothers and sisters, of whom the oldest was ten and the youngest two, I had gotten permission from this dear father and mother to try to take advantage of opportunities that might arise for leaving the kingdom, with all or part of the family. On 24 April of that year a good and faithful friend, who wished not to be named because of the consequences and punishments inflicted in such cases, came to alert me that a small ship ~~or vessel~~ was going to leave for England, that at his request he had engaged the captain to take four or five persons, that the hiding place could hold no more than that, that he would throw a cask of wine into the water, and that he would put us down

in the hold in its place on some salt; and, as he ran the risk of losing everything if he were found out, that he wanted to be compensated for it by a large sum of money. That did not break off the negotiation at all.

I asked our friend to come with the captain of this vessel to the house of a third party at four o'clock in the morning the next day, so as not to arouse our neighbors' suspicions about my intentions, to serve me first as intermediary and second as witnesses to the terms made between us. I agreed and promised the captain two hundred livres a head for five of us he would take, which made a thousand livres in French money, and to give him half the amount before embarking, the other half after disembarking at Exeter, a city in England, where he promised to deliver us. Having thus come to an agreement on everything before our witness, we made our arrangements together for our embarkation on the twenty-seventh of the same month of April, when at eight o'clock in the evening I took with me two of my brothers and two sisters. We dressed ourselves appropriately and put on the best clothes we had, not being allowed to take along any others. We pretended to go for a stroll in the chateau square, where all the fashionable people went every evening. I took with me the children's governess, who was in on the secret, to help me manage them. Around ten or eleven o'clock as the company dispersed, I slipped away from those I knew and instead of taking the road to our house took one in the opposite direction in order to reach the house I had been shown on the embankment near the sea, where we entered by a back door, where people were waiting for us.

They had us climb without a candle or noise to the attic, where we were until one o'clock at night. There our captain and our intermediary came to join us. I told them that my only regret was a little sister who was my goddaughter, whom I was very attached to and felt even more obliged to remove from idolatry than the others. All that was certainly not said without great emotion and without shedding a torrent of tears: I promised the captain all he could wish to have and many blessings from heaven if he would do this good deed. All these things together touched him so strongly that he let me take her, if I promised him that she would not cry at all in the vessel when they came to inspect it, which would be done in two or three places designated for that I promised him this, in the hope that God would help me and would grant me this favor.

At once, my friend and the governess left to go fetch her at the other end of the town where we lived, took the child from her bed, wrapped her with a blanket and her dress in the governess' apron. God willed that no one should notice anything; the little girl, being very attached to me, was delighted to see me and promised me to be very good and not to do anything but what I wanted. I dressed her and wrapped her up in her things.

At two o'clock the same night, four sailors were on the shore at low tide, they took us on their shoulders, me with my little sister in my arms on the head of one; they carried us like this to the ship and put us in the hiding place they had made there, whose opening was so small that a man was inside to pull us in. After we were put there and seated on the salt, not being able to be there in any other posture, the trap door was closed again and tarred like the rest of the vessel, so that no one could see anything there. The place was so low that our heads touched the planking above; we took care to hold our heads directly under the beams so that when the inspectors, as was their lovely custom, thrust their swords through, they would not pierce our skulls. As soon as we were on board they set sail and the king's men came to make their inspection. We had the good fortune to be neither found nor uncovered, and likewise the second and third time.

(At sea, the twenty-eighth April.) The wind, which was favorable to us, carried us by eleven or twelve o'clock in the morning out of the sight of all the enemies of truth. It was high time, for we were suffocating in that hole and thought we were going to give up the ghost there, as well as everything we had in our bodies, which was coming out of them every which way; we were given some air and came out of there some hours later more dead than alive. Take note, however, that despite this bad situation, my youngsters uttered neither cries nor complaints and that afterwards all felt great joy to be out of tyranny.

Our captain and three or four of his crewmen, for they were not more numerous, treated us quite cordially, gave us as many biscuits, peas, and salted meats as we could eat. Our seasickness did not allow us to cost him much. Thus passed seven days, when we landed at Falmouth, a little town in England where our captain had decided to leave us, even though it was thirty leagues away from the town he had agreed to take us to. He asked me for the rest of the money that I was supposed to give him; I found it unjust and complained about it to the governor of the said town, who listened to me favorably and received me at his home with all my entourage and a thousand tokens of kindness and compassion. He obliged the master of the vessel to take us again and convey us to the place we had agreed on with him, on pain of being punished if he disobeyed his orders.

The next day, ~~5 June [sic]~~, at ten in the morning, we left Falmouth, got back on the said vessel, on the promise that our captain had made to take us to Topsham, a little port or town near Exeter, the town where we wished to be left. But, realizing that he was taking us back against his will and in an ill temper, I concluded that he might feed us poorly, even though he was committed to that by our agreement. To make up for that, I furnished myself with provisions, which were very necessary for us since we were twenty-four hours in his vessel without being offered anything to drink or eat.

The next day, ~~the sixth~~, the sea became so calm that we did not advance at all, which put the master of the ship in an even worse temper. Several of his men to keep busy set up fishing lines. I asked them to give me one, to which they agreed; I had the good fortune after dinner to catch seven large fish called mackerels, excellent fish to eat. My good catch put my captain in a good humor; he began to talk to me and that evening sent three of them to me and my troop, all cooked and well prepared; which was as necessary to us as agreeable, our provisions having by then nearly run out.

Just when we thought we were back on good terms with him, [the next day] ~~on the seventh~~ at nine o'clock in the evening, we saw the vessel land. They made us all get off with the few clothes we had; on this shore or little port we saw neither town nor house. Fear overcame us, and not without reason, at seeing we were in this place that looked deserted to us, and my captain coming to me to say with a most resolute air: "Money, money, the five hundred livres that you still owe me!" I replied to him that his demand was unjust, since he was not taking us where he had promised to leave us, at Topsham, near Exeter. It was nevertheless necessary to pay him, after which he set sail again and we stayed behind in this place which was named Salcombe, twenty leagues from Topsham, where we were supposed to go and had so stipulated with this honest man who was not the least swayed by all my words, though they were accompanied by tears and sobs from me and my troop, who were seven persons who believed ourselves lost.

Our lamentations, or curiosity, attracted several children to this place, who took pity on us. They went on their own to fetch a man, but he spoke no French, nor we English. Being unable to make us understand, he asked us if we spoke Latin; I said: "Yes" at once, having learned a few words of it with my brothers; he said: "Good," took us by the hand and had the

youngest of my sisters carried a quarter of a league away, where there was an inn he took us to. Leaving us there, he went next to fetch a minister, to whom he related the encounter he had had with a troop of young persons whom he had found on the seacoast and taken to the said place where we were; that we knew no English, nor he French; also that he did not know what we wanted; that a young lady had said she knew Latin.

This pastor came and addressed me in an obliging manner, making a grand speech in Latin, which I could neither reply to nor understand; I remained virtually speechless. Our sad situation, my tears and those that my brothers and sisters-shed in imitation of me, so moved this good man that he promised to help us in any way he could, as indeed he did, and understood little by little where we wanted to go and where we came from. My words of Latin were very useful to me. I made him see that I still had four louis d'or, so that it was not money I lacked at all; I invited him to supper, which he did not accept, but said that he would come back the next day at eight o'clock in the morning, at which time he showed me, more by figures than words, that he had hired a shallop for us to board, that I should give two louis d'or to the master to take us to Topsham, with a letter for a man at whose house we should stop, who would receive us well and in addition furnish what we needed in order to make our way to Exeter.

The recommendation was very useful to us; we arrived there on Sunday between eleven o'clock and noon; he gave us a good dinner, a quarter of excellent roast beef; in the meantime he found us horses, some saddled for the biggest among us, the others with packs and hampers or basket to put the children in, with a man to conduct us to Exeter, where we arrived a little before two o'clock in the afternoon at the home of the French minister, named M. Sanxay, formerly minister of the church at Tonnay- Boutonne, in Saintonge, whom we knew very well, who had no small joy at seeing us and we no less at having found him and having happily arrived in these happy parts. He was on his way to the pulpit; he delayed his sermon for a quarter of an hour so that we would have the solace of hearing it and rendering thanks to God for having delivered us from the enemies of our holy religion and having set us free to be able to profess it freely with a good many others of our brothers [who had] like us come out of France and whom we knew. M. de Saint-Surin or Tonnay-Boutonne, intimate friend of my father and our neighbor in France, was among them. He and all the others took us in with so much joy and kindness that I believed I was already enjoying the delights of paradise and found no difficulty in doing even base tasks, for which I had certainly not been raised.

I rented rooms to lodge myself with my troop and made with my own hands two mattresses for us to sleep on and borrowed a cradle to put my little sister in. Eight days after our arrival, we rendered thanks in public to God for our getting out, and all, though young, made a sort of reconnaissance before the church, as we repudiated the errors of the papist church, [saying] that it was to avoid either adhering to it or being put into convents, dungeons, or galleys that we had abandoned our property, homeland, friends, father and mother, since they were still in France, that we had left, etc. Whereupon we were addressed with such a touching speech that all the flock, like us, tried to outdo each other in sobbing.

I kept my little household without a maidservant with my little family, to whom I acted as a mother for the whole time we were deprived of our own, who only came to join us three months later, in the month of July, if I am not mistaken. It was a Sunday at seven o'clock in the evening that this illustrious mother arrived with my eldest brother and a maidservant. Our mutual joy at seeing each other again is inexpressible. "Here I am," says this good mother, "and the children that God had given me, all in good health." The night was spent weeping with joy at being together again and embracing each other.