

Interview with Aloyse ELBISSER

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Mono Audio

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My name is ELBISSER Aloyse, my date of birth is the 9th of November 1918 in Romanshorn, Switzerland. At the end of 1942, the German Authorities had decided to enlist those living in the Alsace Region into the Army. This presented a serious question of conscience for me, as I only had a limited knowledge of the Bible at this time. It was due to my older sister that... I had limited options; I could either flee to Switzerland despite the risks, join the German Army, or refuse to join the Army because of my faith. I decided to do the latter and so my older sister advised me to get baptised, which I did in November 1942 in Mulhouse by Brother Genevois.

We had to ... take various precautions as Brother Genevois risked being given up to the authorities and getting into a lot of trouble.

My older sister, who had introduced me to “the truth”, already knew Brother Genevois. One Sunday, Brother Genevois invited me to his home to be baptised. The baptism took place in a bathtub.

Despite my limited knowledge of the Bible, I had enough faith, according to the Scriptures, to obey God rather than men.

I said to myself, what point is there in obeying men to go (...) and kill people that I don't know in a foreign country?

Why would I do this? Just to please the ideologies of some higher authorities? So then, I preferred to obey God, because even if I was going to suffer, it might as well be for a worthy cause.

This was a problem for my father. My father lived in fear of the Authorities, as, in my family, two of my brothers had already suffered. One of my brothers had been reported missing in 1940 and the other one was arrested because he wanted to flee to Switzerland. He was stopped on the 23rd of February 1943 and interned in a concentration camp.

When I was called up before the military draft board, I refused to show up on the actual day of my summons to make it clear that I was not volunteering to join the army. Following this, the SS demanded to know why I had refused. I now explained that I was a Christian Witness of Jehovah. I was arrested, handed over to the Gestapo and sent to Mulhouse prison. Then I was transferred to the Schirmeck concentration camp in the Alsace region of the Lower Rhine.

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Everything was separated by a 4-metre iron gate. At the camp entrance, it was like a military camp, and was accessible from the street. People walking by, didn't have a clue as to what was happening on the other side of the gate. In the majority of cases, after having gone through the gate, prisoners were met by twenty or thirty members of the SS, carrying clubs... and all sorts of things and we were attacked and mistreated in a number of different ways. We were made to lie face down on the ground even if it was muddy, to hop up and down with our feet together, to run at the speed of an athlete, while being hit or prodded with a club non-stop.

I fell sick after three weeks in the camp, in fact I nearly died. During nine days, I wasn't able to eat apart from tiny pieces of bread washed down with three litres of water and even then it was difficult to swallow the food. I was no longer able to eat the soup in the evening, or to sleep during the night and I had to work long days from seven in the morning until six in the evening, raking gravel.

My dear brothers and sisters, some days it was that rake that held me up as my head spun. After seven days, I had to take a shower just like the other prisoners. It was at this moment, that a brother saw what a terrible physical state I was in, with hollow eyes, just a walking skeleton. I am sure that you have seen the photos and the documentaries.

At one point, I was summoned before the Gestapo in Strasbourg. The brothers in the camp, who had already been called before me, warned me to be very careful about the answers that I gave, as the Gestapo had a list of questions. One in particular was, "Who introduced you to the truth?" It was, of course, a trap, if we gave a name, this person risked being arrested.

In other concentration camps, I know that some brothers were able to get Bibles and other publications into the camp without the publications being seen, but at Schirmeck, it was strictly forbidden. So, the only spiritual contact we had was between the brothers. At one time, we were 14 brothers together..... each one of us had his point of view and his spiritual knowledge to share. On Sunday afternoon, when the Authorities would allow us to have a bit of free time, we would meet together to talk about God's word and encourage each other.

I always kept in mind the scripture that says "The angel of Jehovah camps all around those fearing Him, and he rescues them". Whether it be the stress we had endured in the day, the sleepless nights or the fear of what tomorrow would bring-it was prayer that sustained us.

Just to give you an idea, by Easter 1945 we were in Germany between Rastadt and Freudenstadt.

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During the first few days of April, the French troops crossed the Rhine. We found ourselves about 40 kilometers from there. The German troops panicked, cleared out the camp where we were and forced us to set out on a walk of 160 kilometers.

Finally, the SS who had escorted our convoy, handed us over to « The TODT organization ». I don't know if you have ever heard of this organization. It was a military organization that worked in tandem with the Wehrmacht. We were handed over to camps run by this organization.

This occurred on Friday the 18th of April, a few days before the Liberation. On Sunday the 20th of April, we set out to return to France. So, there you have it !

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Key words: Schirmeck concentration camp (Alsace/Lower Rhine region/ France)

TODT or TODD organization

A Christian Witness of Jehovah

« The truth »

The « brothers »