

## Interview with Marie ZION, born MEYER

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1 hour 11 minutes 55 seconds

### Summary

Marie, born on October 20, 1929, was the eldest of the 5 children born to Joseph MEYER (b. May 19, 1999) and Marie KREMER (b. October 15, 1900). Neither of her parents spoke French, only the local patois. Her brother François was born in 1931 and Emile in 1933. Joseph was a carpenter and cabinet-maker with his brother and after the war, they had a woodcutting business.

They were a very religious Catholic family, attending mass three times on Sunday and for the children, every day of the week before school started. Because of a special arrangement between the French government and the Catholic Church, the "Concordat", Alsace-Lorraine was the only part of France where religion was taught in public schools. This was true even when the region was annexed by Germany.

Marie remembers the arrival of the Germans as soon as the armistice was signed in June, 1940. The French school teachers were replaced by German ones and German nuns taught the girls. Speaking French was severely punished. She and her brothers and sisters were told to say the least possible for fear of being arrested.

Their father did not have enough money to purchase a radio – or, he was against it on principle. When the children had to write a report for school on the Führer's speech the next day, they went to a neighbor's house.

She mentions that if refugees were caught or young men trying to escape induction into the German army (the "malgré nous", serving in spite of their personal loyalty to France), they were deported with the family that hid them to the camps of Schirmeck or Dachau.

She remembers posters going up, "Die Juden sind unzer Unglück."

People were happy to hear about the D-Day landing, but it took over 6 months for the Allies to arrive in the region.

Marie describes how the family hid in the cellar – which was actually a sort of barn where the pigs and cows were kept and provisions stored - at one point, for over two weeks.

The Americans were bombing, but so were the British (shell casings in bronze from British munitions were found in the forest and a cousin fashioned one into a decorative vase). At one point, a mortar shell exploded near-by, breaking all the windows and destroying an inner wall.

During the fall of 1944, the Germans requisitioned the family home built in 1936, relegating 7 people to two rooms, to be used as an infirmary. The children did not see who arrived or departed. Later, in early December, 1944, the Americans arrived, but left quickly around the 30th. Marie remembers that the Americans were much nicer than the Germans and were generous, distributing Nescafé, chewing gum, chocolate, and cans of red beans.

Marie passed her “Certificate d’études”, a diploma given after elementary school, to students between the ages of 11 and 13, after the war, but did not continue her studies. She went to work in a mirror factory and was needed by her mother at home.

She married in 1959 and had 5 children. Luckily, her future husband had just returned from Colomb Bechar, where he completed his military service in Algeria before the fight for independence and repression by the French authorities and the army became violent.

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### **Background information for the four interviews conducted with Marie Meyer Zion, Josephine Meyer Zion, Joseph Schouver, and Andrée Meyer Schouveron February 16, 2019 in Meisenthal, in the département of the Moselle**

Meisenthal is a small village situated between the cities of Metz and Strasbourg, in the northeast corner of the Moselle in what is known as the “Pays de Bitche”. Just after WW II, it numbered around 900 inhabitants and today, closer to 700.

The département de la Moselle was annexed to Germany after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and remained German until 1919, when it was returned to France. In 1940, it was again annexed to Germany and its inhabitants were obliged to enroll in the German army. Those whose loyalties were to France, but had to fight with the Nazis, were known as the “Malgré nous” – literally (conscripted) “despite ourselves”.

They speak the local dialect, françique rhénan or bitchois, which is related to German. It is unlike Alsatian. Most of the inhabitants still speak this patois and French. Their parents, educated when Meisenthal was part of Germany, only spoke this language and German, although they had again become French citizens.

Meisenthal and near-by Saint Louis-lès-Bitche were known for their glass factories, even in the late Middle Ages. In the 17th century, the factories started up again, producing fine crystal and some of the exquisite pieces of Emile Gallé, the glass designer from Nancy, and Lalique. There is a plentiful supply of wood and sand, and local ferns and heather provided the potassium needed for the industry. Skilled glass workers from Eastern Europe were attracted to the region for this reason.

In late 1944, the region became a raging battleground as the Allies tried to move east to Berlin and the German army resisted. The Meyer home, built in 1936 on the rue de Bitche, was first turned into an infirmary by the Germans and later, in December, by the American soldiers in the area. The entire family of 7 was relegated to the kitchen and one room of their own home. They did not really mix with the soldiers. (According to Céline Zion, the Meyer family may have been Jewish many centuries ago, but their ancestors converted to Catholicism.)

The U.S. 70th Infantry Division, known as the “Trailblazers” were engaged in these battles. Part of the division landed in Marseille in early December, 1944, and moved north under deputy commander Herren. These first troops were known as “Task Force Herren”.

Lieutenant Charles I. Lobel, in the 274th Infantry Regiment, was part of an anti-mine squad. He later was honored with a Bronze Star. Although he was not wounded, he ended-up at the Meyer home-infirmery in December, 1944, and then, at one point, was ordered to pack-up quickly and leave. The Meyer children remember an American soldier frantically looking for something and having to depart without it.

In 1959, Josephine Meyer, who had just married, came back to her childhood home and cleared one of the upstairs rooms so she and her husband could move in, since lodging was scarce. She opened the doors of a little black iron stove used to heat the rooms and found a slim leather wallet with some identification and several family pictures. It belonged to Charles Lobel, but at that time, she had no idea how to contact him or even how to find out if he was still alive.

In the fall of 2018, Josephine's granddaughter, Céline Zion, searched the internet and found the address of a Dr. Charles Lobel in Hillsborough, CA. She wrote him to return the wallet. Dr. Lobel had passed away, but his wife still lived there. Their daughter Meredith Lobel Angel wrote back to Céline and said that she would like to come to Meisenthal to pick-up the wallet herself, with her daughter Fiona Angel. She then notified her cousin Peggy Frankston about what had happened and Peggy organized a visit, uniting all the sisters, for February, 2019.

No Jews lived in Meisenthal; the few Jews in the region owned small businesses in Bitche or Inwiller. One of the Meyer sisters said a Jewish family owned a business that sold stoves and ovens. They left before Moselle was annexed - many survived and came back to reclaim their property, entrusted to locals. Gauleiter Wagner was known for his cruelty and people just tried not to provoke the German soldiers stationed there. Small acts of resistance like hiding potatoes and eggs when the authorities came to count provisions could be severely punished.

All those interviewed spoke of the Mayor of the town and director of the local glass factory, Antoine Maas. People thought he was collaborating with the Germans by inviting officers to dinner while, in the cellar, his daughter Jacqueline hid resistance fighters and those trying to cross the Maginot Line or escape into Switzerland. She then guided them through the forests in the dark.