

Interview with Andrée SCHOUVER, born MEYER

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35 minutes 10 seconds

Summary

Andrée was the youngest member of her family, born on March 27, 1942, so she has few memories of the war, though she mentions that she saw a sleeping bag for the first time when the Americans requisitioned the Meyer home. However, both her sisters remembered that she was born on the night that the son of a family that was staying with the Meyers, Joseph Weinart, enrolled in the Wehrmacht against his will, had to report to duty. He held her in his arms before he left, sent to the Eastern front in Russia, never to return.

There was no kindergarten in Meisenthal after the war, so official schooling started when she entered first grade at the age of 6. Her teacher was a nun and taught in French, which she had to learn, since the local dialect was spoken at home.

Andrée was a gifted student and was determined to become a teacher. Thanks to the money her sisters Marie and Josephine earned and their willingness to delay getting married, remaining at home to help their mother, she was allowed to fulfill her dream. She was sent to a boarding school ("internat") in Phalsbourg at the age of 13 and passed the difficult entry exam for the state school which prepared teachers, l'Ecole normale des instituteurs. Graduates were obliged to serve the French ministry of education for 10 years after receiving their diplomas.

Andrée met her future husband in Metz while he was completing his military service. Joseph was singled out as an excellent student and also trained to become a teacher. When they were married in 1964, the local priest still performed the ceremony in German.

Andrée taught kindergarten and elementary school and Joseph Schouver taught elementary school, raising 5 children as they moved around to various assigned school districts together.

Both have retired and now live in the Meyer family home in Meisenthal.

Andrée mentions that her father was a member of the municipal council and that her mother was awarded the "Médaille de la Famille". The "Father of Europe", Robert Schumann, came to Meisenthal after the war and decorated many of the citizens of the town.

Andrée has kept some photos from the year 1940 which were photographed by the interviewer. (See list of photos, with the Meyer house as it looks now.)

The black-and-white photos were taken by her mother's brother who had come to visit from Metz. They show French soldiers in the snow around the house in 1940 and part of the family in March, 1940 – Marie, Joseph (?), Marie Meyer, Franzel or François. Her brother Emile was not in the photo.

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-infirmary 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.