

My name is Emma Thomas. I was born here in Tarchamps on 14/09/1933. I also grew up, went to school and spent my youth here. But not all the time, because at 15 I went into service in Brussels. My father's name was Jos Thomas, he was a farmer, and my mother helped him. Her name was Elise Kneip, born in Bockholtz.

Did you also have brothers and sisters?

Yes, a brother and a sister.

In May 1940, the German Wehrmacht marched into Luxembourg. Do you remember that?

Yes, that was on 10 May. It was good weather and we watched from back there where we had the farm. I was only 6 years old, but I can remember. They came with horses, jeeps, trucks. Everything that had four wheels was rolling. Some drove on, others remained here. I don't know exactly how many there were, but there were many customs officers here. Some even had their whole family here, wife and children. Not many, but a few. Some were housed privately, some lived alone. Wherever there was even a corner free, they stayed. Some were good, others not. Some were real Nazis, others would have preferred to be at home. But that was the way it was.

You said "customs officers". I suppose because we are so close to the Belgian border here?

They always checked the border. So that nothing crossed over into Belgium and the Belgians didn't come over either. Smuggling took place nevertheless. My father was also one of the front runners. On Sundays after early mass, he tied eggs, butter and sausage around himself, depending on what there was, and set off. They dug a hole in the forest where to put the goods, covered them with fir branches, and then the Belgians picked the goods up and usually left something in return. But the people didn't always have something. My father received two plots of fir woods in this way as payment. Maybe he had given a little extra money on top for it, I don't know.

Why did smuggling take place?

They rather had clothes. They sometimes put in socks, caps, jumpers and material, which we didn't have here. There were more food items here, which they didn't have. Because the farmers had more reserves than those on the other side. There were fewer farmers there. Because those who collected things there were not farmers, but poor people. A little further up, there lived an elderly lady. It wasn't clean there, but that didn't matter. Everyone went in there. Even the Germans when they were on duty at night. Then they sat with Gréit, that was her name. She had piglets now and then, although she didn't have a sow. Someone must have given them to her. She raised them with a bottle and the piglets lay under the bed. The Germans didn't care because they had a warm place to stay. They knew this woman was smuggling, but they left her in peace.

You told me in the preliminary interview that your father was caught once?

Yes, my father was caught. He went up and suddenly they came back down with him. He in front, the Germans behind. They said that they would still be going into this house, but that he should not dare leave. He went on anyway and made sure they were not coming. Then he

threw some of the goods behind the hedge so that he would not have so much with him. When they got to the office, they said, "Well, take your clothes off." "Do I have to take my clothes off?" "Yes, yes!" So he took off his clothes and everything came out. "Look where the chap has put it!" I don't know whether he was punished. But he then said he wouldn't go again. Not at all! It wasn't long before he was gone again. Nothing happened after that, at least not that I knew of.

What changed in your everyday life after Luxembourg and of course your village were occupied by the Germans?

I don't know. We lived despite it all. We went sledging, we were always outside, but the Germans were always on the move. We always had enough to eat, others perhaps not. The people from the Minette region came to hoard, beg you might almost say. They also got something, bacon, or what you had. But we didn't have to go hungry.

What changed at school?

We learned the alphabet in German. For a while we only had lessons in the morning, until 1 pm. Suddenly that was over again. We had normal lessons. The six classes were all in the same classroom, but that was no problem. We were not used to anything else. German, history, maths, everything was in German. We also had to say "Heil Hitler!" all the time. Instead of praying, it was "Heil Hitler!"

Then the Hitler Youth was also introduced.

The Hitler Youth was also here. There was a female leader who was always looking for new recruits. But here in the village, not many went along with it.

At your age, what did you understand of resistance and collaboration? In other words, people who adhered to the Germans...

They were always among themselves. I remember that we had once started to build a wall in front of the house. Then the mayor came, who was from the village but who adhered to the Germans. My father was not allowed to finish the wall. Those who stood by the Germans or were German themselves and the others didn't have much to do with each other. But you always had to watch what you said. Because that could have consequences. This mayor was the main figure, but there were still some others that were loyal to the Germans, however, they were calmer.

You knew that too?

Yes, certainly. We didn't pay attention to it as children. You weren't told anything either, but you noticed. We just thought this one is a Nazi, this one is not.

Did you get to find out anything about the resistance?

About the young men in hiding, yes. They never talked about that in front of the children. But we still picked up somethings. Later on it was said that such and such a person was in hiding in Belgium. There were also some hidden here in the village from time to time. A family was relocated because the son did not go back.

You witnessed this yourself.

Yes, they picked up their child from church and told him: “We have to go now. You’re going home now because we must leave.” They didn’t say anything more specific. They were in Boberstein and did not come back until after the offensive.

What did the people from the village do?

They sent them parcels with non-perishable, packaged foodstuffs. Not sausage or the like, of course, but sugar, flour or biscuits. Not chocolate, because there wasn’t any more. People sent what they had. And they were always grateful.

Luxembourg was liberated in September 1944. Can you remember that?

The only thing I can remember is: “The Americans are here!” There weren’t any here yet, but my father told us that the Americans were in Wardin and that we were going to see it. We children thought it was something special. We ran up through the hedgerows to Wardin. My father knew where to go, this was the family he had always hoarded and smuggled for. We children got thick chocolate bars and chewing gum. We were in heaven. That was something new, we didn’t have anything like that. We didn’t know what oranges and bananas were because you didn’t get them. We collected apples in the woods and ate them. They were quite sour, but it didn’t matter, we ate them anyway. Chewing gum and chocolate, that was something new. That’s how we saw the first Americans.

You may have been young, but do you remember what it felt like?

One was half-relieved when they arrived. Then they said that the Nazis were gone and the Americans were coming and that everything would be better now. But that wasn’t true, that was just the beginning.

You mentioned the Battle of the Bulge, which began in December 1944. What did you experience there?

In December 1944, the Germans were here again. There were also Germans across the street at the neighbour’s house. My aunt lived in that house. I sometimes went there, and then a German said: “Come back at Christmas, then you’ll get a present.” I was happy then, a present! We didn’t know anything like that. At Christmas I thought: “Well, you go there now.” I didn’t tell them at home and I went. Then I got the present, it was a little Christmas tree. I was very happy. When I had my present, I wanted to go home again. I was about to open the door when there was a really loud bang. My aunt said, “Now you’re not going home, now you’re staying here.” We waited a bit more, then the door opened, and my mother and father came in. They had my sister sitting on a chair. “What happened?” My father said the Germans had sent them out of the house because there was a tank with ammunition. If that was hit, “the whole place would blow up”. They didn’t know anything, so they went into the woods, which was behind our house at that time. So they went up into the woods and my sister was hit by two pieces of shrapnel in her neck and hip. The German sent us down to the village where there supposedly was a doctor. There was indeed a doctor there, and he said he only had a penicillin injection. He could give her that, but he didn’t know if it would do much good. “Because down there, in the case of two people, it’s over, they’re both dead. Mother and daughter.” Then we went to my grandparents’ house. The whole house was full of people there too, I don’t know where they all came from. It was an old house. People went to where they thought the houses were stronger and afforded more protection. Then we lay there in the

stable. When night fell, we had to sleep. They always put me in the cows' trough and my cousin, who was about 4 years old, on top of me. But I didn't want that, he was heavy. In the end I just thought, "Leave him there, you'll be protected." After a few days, New Year's Eve was getting closer, we moved even further down into the village and then stayed there. We heard the whistling and the impacts. People were sometimes baking bread. We had nothing to eat, so that's what we ate. But we always had something, nobody suffered from hunger. On New Year's Day, there was a whole group of people at the door. We didn't know where they all came from. My father spoke to a German who wanted to give us some good advice: "Get out of here." This is where the main offensive would take place "towards Bastogne". My father said, "Where should we go?" "Towards Böwen," he said, meaning Bavigne. "That's where the Americans are." He said he mustn't tell anyone or else he would get into trouble. So my father said to one man, "We have to leave here. He told us that. But don't say anything else, the man shouldn't be punished for helping us." Then we started walking. There was heavy snow, it was bitterly cold. There were old people, pregnant women, small children and my wounded sister. She was carried on a chair. She couldn't walk. They took turns. There were also elderly people, my grandmother was there too. She never walked at home, but now she had to walk, and somehow she managed. Fear was the driving force. There was shooting and banging, so you walked on your own. When it banged, we ducked. For a long time afterwards, when planes came that rattled a little louder, you ducked automatically out of habit. On the way, no one got hurt. When we were closer to Bavigne, we lay down in a wood to rest. There was whistling and a banging all around us. But what should we have done? Someone took an image of the Virgin out of her pocket, and then we prayed. But that didn't help us either. So we went on to Bavigne. That's where the Americans were. They didn't know what to do either, when all of a sudden this group of people stood in front of them. So we said, "Luxembourg, Luxembourg!" They were standing there with their bayonets, we were dumbfounded. The Americans brought in trucks and we were packed onto them. And then they drove off with us. We didn't know where. And it was bitterly cold. We didn't have the clothes then that we have today. We were really frozen. And where would we end up? Some were dropped off in Redange. That couldn't possibly have been announced in those villages. But there were people there to receive us. I don't know how they knew. In Ell, where we were going, there were also Americans. We were supposed to go to a farm, but they couldn't take us in because they still had Americans in the house. They said that we could come to them when they were gone. We ended up staying with an elderly couple. My brother went to school in Bastogne and we had no idea where he was. My cousin and another cousin were also there. My uncle was in Amberloup. He picked them up in Bastogne and went with them to Warnach to his family. We didn't know where he was. My mother always told me that if the Germans ever asked me whether I had another brother, I should just answer "No". No one asked in any event. Then when we were in Ell, my brother suddenly came along with a bicycle. He had just picked up the bike somewhere, at that time everything was lying around everywhere. He and my father went back home to tidy up a bit. My mother and I stayed in Ell because my sister was in hospital in Redange. We stayed there until Easter. I also went to school there. We were very happy. When we were supposed to go home, the people from the village brought us all kinds of things. Everything they could give. Clothes, pots, plates, etc. One family from the village lived alone in a furnished, well-equipped house. People said that everyone could come back, except them. A lot of things had disappeared. When they disappeared, other things had disappeared too. I still go there today. There's no one left, they're all dead, but then I go for a walk around the village. I like it there.

You said that your brother and father went back a little earlier?

Yes, to repair the house. The roof was destroyed. There were big impact holes in it, and inside everything was broken. When they came back, the Americans were still there. They couldn't do anything because the Americans were in charge. What hadn't been destroyed by the fighting, was destroyed by them. Later, everywhere in the trenches and holes they had dug, there was china, all kinds of things they had taken from the people. People later collected the things lying around in the fields and forests. There was nothing. We went on foot to Bastogne to do some shopping after the offensive. On the way, in the hedgerows, we saw lots of skeletons. Of soldiers. They were collected afterwards and many of them were buried here near the church. Later the graves were dug up again, I suppose they took them to Hamm. You could see these skulls, it was not a pretty sight. Today you can still see the holes from the trenches. So we walked to Bastogne to buy cloth, wool, and everything you couldn't get here. There were a few small shops there. On the way back we had to carry it. And it was a long way.

How can one imagine the village, what did it look like there?

Totally shot up. Some houses were less hit, but on the whole everything was destroyed. Here was the main offensive, because all the shooting was towards Bastogne. And from Bastogne they shot back. Down in the village and everywhere else, everything was destroyed. When we came back at Easter, they had already cleared up a bit. Things were going reasonably well then. The houses hadn't been repaired yet, but the streets, which were full of rubble from the roofs, had already been cleaned up a bit. In Watrange, someone had immediately bought a truck. It was driven to Redange to buy building materials from the Glaesener company. Gradually, work was done. When we came back, things were already somewhat better. But when my father came back, he didn't know where to start.

How did this reconstruction work? Later barracks were erected?

There were these replacement barracks. I don't know who put them up. I think it was a company. Sometimes two households lived in one. The larger ones were divided into two parts. One household lived here, the other there. There was only one floor, the ground floor. They were solid with concrete components. There were also a few wooden barracks, such as the church and the priest's house. People used to say that it rained on the priest's bed because the barracks were not watertight.

How do you remember the solidarity among the people at the time of the reconstruction?

I think people stuck together back then. There was a lot of misery. People stuck together and helped each other. There wasn't the envy then that there is today. There was more contentment when things were quiet again. People also got compensation for the war damage. You had to write down what you had and what you had lost. There was a lot of cheating, believe me. No one could check that.

You told us what it looked like in the woods. There was ammunition everywhere that hadn't exploded?

Yes, the young people were obsessed with collecting this rubbish. My brother also had a revolver. He always had it under his pillow. My mother was always afraid. When he died, his

wife still had the revolver. I think she threw it away. Many people lost limbs because they played with guns. Hands or a leg. The boys were obsessed with guns. Nobody understood anything about them, but they still had to fiddle with them.

When you think back on the war from today's perspective, what goes through your mind?

When I see Ukraine, I have to think about it because it's the same. It is the same. Ukraine is perhaps more brutal now because now there are things that didn't exist then. But it doesn't matter: bombings are bombings. When I see these pictures from Ukraine. It's the same. They are the same images.