

I was known as Jos Origer from Eschdorf or “the white man *vun der Tëmel*”. I was born on 17/04/1931. Although I was there, I don’t remember anything about it. I had a sister nine years older, my second-born brother was seven years older than me, then I came in 1931 and my last brother was born in 1935. We were not a small family, but not a big one either. We did our work as farmers. My brother went to agricultural school, my sister to boarding school. I stayed at home. I was not asked, but actually I would have liked to learn something. But since my little brother said he wouldn’t stay at home, I had to stay. I had a nice youth. There were many children in the village and I had many friends. We played a lot together.

**In 1939, Luxembourg celebrated its 100th anniversary of independence in a big way. Do you remember that?**

Yes, we modelled Luxembourg as a country and everyone had a canton. Me too, but I can’t remember which one. We put them together. There were celebrations. Unfortunately, I don’t remember the details. We went in a procession up to the water tank, the lime tree there had been decorated. We boys were glad when it was over and we could do what we wanted again. I remember that patriotic songs were sung in the large party room. We did that well and with pleasure.

**The German army marched into Luxembourg in March 1940. Do you remember that day?**

The news spread like wildfire in the village. People were upset. We were impressed, these horses, these soldiers. They had luxurious machines, clad in chrome. The roads weren’t all asphalted here then, so they took the earth and dirtied the machines with it. Thus they were camouflaged. “In so and so many days we’ll be in Paris,” they said. People thought they would never get to Paris. But in the end they were right. One man was still shouting from above, “Watch out for the Maginot Line!” But they crossed it, they didn’t care. That’s what I remember. When you’re around twelve years old, you already think about these things. What was going to happen? We had a barn at the back, they had spun a rope there and tied the horses. That impressed us, of course. They also came with cars and tanks. Then it was quiet from a military point of view. We were an occupied region.

**Let’s talk about school. What do you remember from your school days in Eschdorf during the war?**

I remember that we went to school and had books. We had the French book for the 4<sup>th</sup> class and we liked learning that. But shortly after the invasion, French was banned. Our teacher was not happy about it but we were happy about everything that we had to learn less about. Still we would have liked to be able to continue. The books were simply collected and thrown away. We sang many German songs, we learned arithmetic and geography and, of course, German. We had to do their syllabus, sports and so on. Then we were caught off guard with the Hitler Youth. An Oberführer or something like that came from Mersch to teach us, but no one joined the Hitler Youth. One of the more sly pupils, Jang Bierchen, volunteered to join. When asked his name, he replied, “Heinrich Dickstoff!” The German wrote that down too, but there were never any consequences. We still laughed when we saw him. After all, we had been brought up with anything but the German way at home. We had to black out. At the early service there was only a small light on in the church. We went to church every day, and as altar boys even a quarter of an hour earlier. We also had a special blackout at school. Our teacher pulled out the film projector on several occasions, showing us a film in the morning. Documentaries etc. The most beautiful film was “Horse Breeding in Arizona”. We kept asking him to show us this film again. That was the programme at school at that time. We collected beechnuts and raspberry leaves during school hours. We had tea lying all over the attic where the music room is now. The tea was collected by the Germans. I suppose we had to do that.

Our teacher accompanied us, we sang and collected the beechnuts. They must have had a use for them. To make tea? I don't know.

**Back then, food supply was problematic in many places. On a farm, perhaps not so much. How do you remember that?**

People came to the farm and had neither eggs nor butter nor bacon. Sometimes a ham. After all, one had compassion and gave the people that. They were also happy to pay for it, with marks. At that time there was the famous *Zocker-Jang*. He was a broom-maker who always went to Luxembourg City. The traders had fabrics and clothes, which they gave him in exchange for eggs or bacon. He then had a big sack on his bicycle.

**He was from the neighbouring village, wasn't he?**

Yes, from Grevels. He drove with it to Luxembourg City. He had so many marks in his pocket, he could have started a fire with them. The more he brought, the more money was given out. He went to those who had money.

**So there was also bartering and smuggling?**

Yes, I still remember that. A cousin of my father was a policeman in Wiltz, and he had a big bag like that. When he came, my father sometimes put a pound of butter in it. That was solidarity, even during the war, among the "real" Luxembourgers. We had many of them here in the village. We couldn't complain.

**In 1942, forced recruitment was declared by the German administration.**

Yes, that was Gustav Simon. If the Luxembourgers had caught him, everyone would have stabbed him at least once. He was the biggest bastard in the world. Forced recruitment was declared and we had no lessons. The leather workers didn't go to work, none of them. They couldn't arrest them all, so they fished out individuals. All the people were in tears. That was terrible. If that Simon had been caught, he wouldn't have had long to live, everyone would have given him the death blow. That was when the real misery of the war began. When the young men were drafted. That went on for a while, they were all distributed. That was the labour service. Those damned Germans had organised everything very well, they were given a rifle. My brother was also in the labour service. He was born in 1924. They got the rifles and were drafted into the Wehrmacht 3 weeks later. Some said they would go and then never came home again. They didn't even get any leave. My brother's turn came right after the first draftees. My father made an application because we were farmers, so he was spared a few months. He received the draft several times, and in the end nothing anymore. My grandmother was from Grumelange, near Martelange. The house was full of young men, so my father sent him there. They made their way there on foot. There were German customs officers in the house. They went in and out of the house picking up the milk and so on. They made sure they stayed out of each other's way when my brother was accommodated there. Nobody asked about him. They had others in the house who were in the seminary. When the hay was brought in, he unloaded the hay with them. The Germans didn't care.

**You said that because your brother was housed there, you as a family were afraid that you would be relocated? That was a possible consequence of it.**

Yes, the people were usually relocated in these cases. However, this happened towards the end of the war. My father said, "We're not going anymore. We'll hide as well. I'll see that we stay with the family. One here, the other there." It was foreseeable that it was only a matter of months. An end was in sight, the Allies had landed in Normandy. There was a sense that things could only become different. There was an underground movement, with the *Unio'n* and others. They said that *Autos-Tun*, the driver of the Walisch family, had been summoned at 3 a.m. to drive. But they didn't know where to. It was then that relocations took place.

### **That is, he was given the job of picking up people?**

The outsiders never really knew. They said, "Be careful, it could be possible. *Tun* is gone, it could be that they are coming." We hid behind a high hedge. We were woken up at 3-4 o'clock at night. We were 12-14 years old at that time. There we were lying watching the stars. It was not very warm, we had a blanket with us. When it got light, my father checked whether everything was all right. Then we went home, had breakfast and went to school. We were not relocated. It didn't come to that.

### **You thought that you had the German policemen here on several occasions?**

Yes, they met us on the way to school and stopped me. My brother was four years younger than me. They asked us if we knew where our brother was. We weren't so stupid that we didn't know anything, but we still pretended to know nothing. It had been drilled into our heads not to say anything if anyone asked. I can still see the heavy policeman standing next to me, I almost sank into the ground. There was no end to the tensions back then. Until the Americans suddenly came in September. My brother threw a broom at the window in the evening, he had come home in the dark from Grumelange. Those boys wanted to go home. Our family was annoyed, he should have waited another day or two. He also met others on the way home. The people who were active in the underground came out at night, like wild animals. I still say today that the Germans were sometimes just stupid back then. Otherwise they would have caught even more.

### **How did you feel about the atmosphere in the village during the occupation? What did the people think and feel?**

Everyone was downhearted. The first refuge at that time was religion. People ran to mass, to the rosary. When Jos Theis played the harmonium, he sang "Consoler of the Afflicted" three times and almost everyone in the church was in tears. People were depressed. There was constant news that this person had fallen, then this one, then that one, ... It was a bad mood. But it wasn't that you couldn't trust anyone in the village. To have one from our village, they took Mr Dichter. They had to have one. He was not a stupid person, he had worked his way up well. But he couldn't write or anything. They had appointed him local group leader or something like that. The others didn't give him everything to read. They just had him sign stuff and then everything was fine.

### **As a child, did you notice acts of resistance, e.g. hidden men, or collaboration, i.e. those who stood by the Germans? As a child, you certainly didn't see everything and you certainly weren't told everything.**

I can't really speak to that. If you asked me whether I could name one person in the village who wore a lapel badge, I wouldn't know of anyone. There were some in the village who were forced. Block leaders, or whatever they called them. They were given a yellow uniform by the Germans. There was a meeting, they had a kind of memorial day. They had to wear uniforms. The people concerned were ashamed to wear the uniform. But there was no other way. I know that someone from Merscheid said, "What has become of us?" They organised everything, air-raid protection and so on.

### **Those were the ones who were forced to stand by the Germans. But then there were also people who hid young men who resisted in this sense. What did you see of that here in the village?**

I suppose that even some adults didn't know everything, and we children didn't know anything. I don't remember anyone telling me at school, for example, that someone was hiding somewhere. But once I noticed that there was something in front of a house that I didn't know where it came from. There was a very nice kennel outside. I wondered who had

built it. There were two young men hidden inside. I suppose they must have gone mad in there. I assume that my parents or adults knew where the kennel came from. We didn't know, and they wouldn't have told us.

### **Do you remember September 1944, the first liberation of Luxembourg by the Americans?**

Suddenly we were told that the Americans were in Petange. It took another day, then they were here too. People were jumping for joy, singing and felt happy. Everything would be all right now. At the top of the road, at the back, there was a fir wood. There were the first Americans to arrive, with their jeeps and trucks. They made a fire and ate there. Of course, all the children and even adults ran there to see the Americans. We were given a piece of chocolate, this dark chocolate wrapped in wax paper. For us at the time, that was like giving someone 10,000 euros today. The owner of the fir wood knew English because he had been in America as a young man. He spoke to the soldiers. We were also given chewing gum and didn't even know what it was. When it got dark, we went home again. They also went on their way again. They had only stopped at this place for a short time. After that, more Americans came with their trucks. They were billeted and slept here in the houses. We slept in the kitchen, they in the living room. That's how it was until the terrible news came that the Germans were back in Bleesbrück.

### **In December 1944, the Battle of the Bulge began and the German army returned. What do you remember?**

My brother Jean was there. I don't know if he also had a mission and had to help in some way. But he came back and said, "They're back in Bleesbrück, what should we do? They're coming back." "That can't be! The Americans have come with so many machines, the Germans have nothing left!" We saw the headlights and they came. At the main crossroads in the village, the Americans had set up an anti-aircraft gun. One day we saw them load it on the truck and drive off. The Germans came and billeted themselves everywhere. Then came the Volkssturm. They were frail people, old bearded men, young men with prams on which they carried their rucksacks. People threw their hands up in horror. "They are supposed to go to war? But then they would have to be back here still the day after tomorrow." But that was not the case. After them came the Germans with their trucks, etc. We know from history that they had this Volkssturm. I saw them, you really didn't have to fear them. They had drafted everyone who was still there. At the most they were able to block the enemy's way, but that's all they could do. I don't know if they also shot, they had rifles. But then came the elite. Some of them had torn the sheets off their beds, because there was snow then, so they were dressed in white. That was their SS or whatever. They did a lot of damage. They were actually well equipped, otherwise they wouldn't have been able to cause so much damage. There was a bang, then a whistle, then another bang. We met outside with the neighbours. No one stayed in bed, that was around 9 or 10 at night. One of our neighbours said he knew what to do, he had been in France. These were grenades, which would explode. "That one flew in the direction of Schumann," he said, when they whistled longer. If it didn't whistle that long, he said, "That one only flew as far as Kaundorf." He estimated that and knew where they were flying to. Or at least thought he knew. We talked - as was the case in those days - about the war, the Germans, this bunch of bastards, etc. Suddenly there was a crash and earth flew over our heads. No one said good night, everyone quickly fled into the houses. There was some snow. The next morning we looked around. Pieces here, pieces there. There were black patches everywhere, bigger than the table here, where the grenades had landed. We were lucky that no one died. A woman from the village lost her life like that. She wanted to go to the toilet which was outside as was the case in many houses at that time. She said she was getting so warm and already she was dead. She got a piece of shrapnel in her heart. That could have happened to us too. Sometimes you have to be lucky.

### **After that, things got really bad here in Eschdorf. How did it continue here?**

Really bad. We went to the cellar. Some of our neighbours were there too. The cellar was full of potatoes and there was a passage past the potatoes. And then we were lying on the potatoes. It was not nice. There was banging, there was shooting. Then Germans came - by then the windows in the front were already broken - and they said that we shouldn't stay here under any circumstances. We should go down to the village. The "Amis" - that's what they called them - would come from here. This is where the fight would be, this is where the action would be. So we had a family council. My father said he would see if we could get accommodation somewhere down in the village. He went to his friend who had a sturdy cellar. There the bread was on the table, ready in the baskets to be put in the oven. But there was no one at home. There was still an old aunt living with them in the house. I don't know exactly how old she was, but certainly over eighty. They had fled in the direction of Esch-Sauer. People were hiding in the meadow grounds. This family too, with the aunt. He left the house again, wondering what to do now. He met a woman who wanted to know where he was going. He explained to her that we wanted to go to his friend's cellar, so she offered him to come to her place so that she and her family wouldn't be alone. So we went there. There were others too. The Germans came again and sent us away from there too. My father said we would not go. If we went to the open field, we would be exposed to every piece of shrapnel and bullet. Here we would be safer. A bomb would have to fall right on us, and then it wouldn't matter anyway. So we stayed. They warned us at least three more times. He refused each time. They had a machine gun at the back of the cellar. He went up to them and told them to leave with this machine gun if they wanted to do him a favour, because there were children and families down there and it would be dangerous for them with a machine gun nearby. They actually packed up and left, they were reasonable. We put up with everything. There were sandbags and dung lying there and I was scared. Nobody in the village was as scared as I was. Suddenly we saw many houses burning, and the church tower. What was going to happen to us? We would burn here. I think there was concrete overhead. My father and someone else disappeared. The barn was on fire and the fire soon spread to the house. They went to extinguish the fire. During the war, for air raid protection, you had to have a tub of water, sand and a pump with a hose in the attic. There were no water pipes, so they pumped. One was pumping, we don't know who, and the other one was extinguishing upstairs. In a hail of bullets. How lucky they were. They managed to put out the fire. A bucket of water wouldn't have been enough, but a hose was sufficient. My father said to the other man: "I wish I knew if our house was on fire too. We could put that out too." The other one didn't want to say no, but if the women had known anything about it, they would never have let them go. But they were both gone, nobody knew where. Suddenly they were back. My father said, "We've put ours out too. But what a mess it is! There's a tank on fire with a half-burnt man hanging out of it. And an impassable heat. But we put out the roof. The stalls burned down. The Germans said the cattle got out. They extinguished what was absolutely necessary, and then it was back down to the cellar. The women were crying and angry. My mother was also crying. Then another woman, whose son was in the Wehrmacht, said she had no reason to cry, after all she still had her children. One was in Petange, the others here. But she did not know where her son was.

### **How long were you in the cellar altogether?**

I was in the cellar for 8 days in a row. I didn't know what time it was, we didn't have wristwatches then. We were told, but we didn't know whether it was Tuesday or Wednesday. There was a terrible tension. There were bangs and crashes. When the bombs fell, it was dusty. That's when you get scared. Some of the older villagers said we should leave, but they would stay. They would sit in front of the stove and nothing had happen to them. The son of a family who had fled here shot himself in the knee and bled to death. 17 years old. When one

rosary was said, the next was started immediately. It was annoying. Time went by, but it was always the same. At the back, with our neighbour, was the barkeeper. He was a bit of a rough fellow. He said enough of this gibberish. Now it was time to drink. It was a small inn. He fetched the schnapps, they took one and suddenly there was a loud bang. Then someone put down the glass and said, "Let's pray again!" People were clinging to something. Even if they hadn't prayed, it probably wouldn't have been worse.

**That means there was prayer in the cellar all the time?**

All the time. There was another man from Bourscheid. I don't know how he got there. He was demented. Maybe he was talking nonsense. We didn't always listen to him, but sometimes we had to laugh. We prayed all the time. This man did not understand what was happening. It was sad for the children too. It was an oppressive time. But you forget such an experience with time. Nobody wanted to think about it any more. When you experience such things, you want to draw a line and never experience anything like it again. Another woman was hit in the eye. She was immediately taken to the military hospital and kept her eye. A man lost his arm, many people died. None of them deserved it. But there were also places where it was much worse than here.

**Do you remember people who tried to escape?**

That is also a chapter in itself. At the back of our threshing floor there was a cart with a chest on it. How they got it up there, I don't know. There was food in it. We had blankets too, the wagon was well loaded. Then a man from the village came and asked my father where he was going. "I don't know," he replied. No one really knew where to go. They argued until my father agreed with him at some point and said we had better stay. They unloaded part of it again, the rest burnt later.

**Do you remember when the Americans came back to the village?**

The Germans did shoot back. But it wasn't that violent. We stayed in the cellar for a few more days. But it was much better after they arrived. We put blankets in the kitchen. They lay on one side, we on the other. We lay next to each other so that no one got cold. The beds and windows upstairs were destroyed. And it was dripping through the roof. There was snow. My father had to put out another fire. Many came back and had no home. Nothing. One still had a shed, the other a horse stable.

**Afterwards, everything had to be repaired, even if only in a makeshift way. How do you remember the time of reconstruction?**

My father and my older brother - and sometimes an uncle - first cut down fir trees to repair the roof. We still have photos where everything is full of trees. They came - it wasn't like today back then - and set up a saw. They cut the trees, although not always so accurately, but they repaired the roof. They had cut many things too thin. It was not like today. At the back of the woods in front of the village, there were fir trees along the road, and they were all cut down. Those from Esch helped with that. A sawmill had been set up near the school. There they cut boards and trees. It was torn down a few years later. We were very lucky that there were no lessons. There was a military hospital in the school with a big red cross painted on the roof. We had no lessons until early summer.

**You mentioned "those from Esch". They were ARBED workers, weren't they?**

Precisely, they worked at ARBED. There was probably very little to do at that time, so they came by bus on Mondays and went home on Saturdays. They shovelled the rubble away and loaded it up. They were used to this shovel movement. Once we had to laugh when a rung of a ladder was broken. They just put the ladder down and nailed a board over it. When they put the ladder back up, the board was on the wrong side. It has to be fixed in such a way that you

don't kick the nail out when you step on it. So they took the ladder down again and reattached the board on the other side. However, all they had to do was take the board off again and nail it to the right side without moving the ladder. We laughed our heads off, even as children. They were certainly good at their job at the blast furnace, but they were not qualified for such work. There was a tank at our place. It had poked a hole in our gable wall. They left the stones hanging there until the bricklayers came. They took out the bricks, put in a frame and put on a door. That was then a cupboard. That was the story of the tank. In this tank there was a little doll that had been burnt. There was also someone hanging from this tank who had not made it out and had burnt to death. I didn't see it myself, but my father told me. It was one of those big Tiger tanks. When I was in agricultural school, in 1947, they took it away.

**Reconstruction also included putting the farm back into operation. What was the situation with the livestock?**

We built a temporary roof, the workers from Esch also helped. We got thick sheet metal from Esch. It was so heavy you could hardly lift a plate, but it wasn't galvanised, it was black. It only lasted 10 years, before rusting away. But it was good first aid. We could store some hay. My father bought hay and straw. That's how we bridged the time. In spring, the cattle went out to pasture early. We had only 12-15 cattle and two horses. It was not like today.

**When the war was over, the forests and meadows were full of ammunition that had not exploded or had been left lying around. What did this look like? What do you remember?**

I was not one of the people at that time who gave commands. An army truck came, including Luxembourgers I would say, and they collected all the shells and powder from the places where there were cannons and in the trenches. They were lying everywhere. They were long things with a fuse at the front and a propeller at the back, flares. Many had a sort of net, a parachute. They loaded the grenades and took them to a quarry between Merscheid and Heiderscheid where they were to be blown up. All Sunday long one or two truck loads were lying there. I didn't see them, I didn't go there to have a look. But boys will be boys. As I said I was one of the cowards so I was not with them. There were three boys, from Hierheck and from the village who happened to be going there together. They opened the grenades, took out the parachute and handled them like a mechanic who knew what to do. We were at Vespers when someone came and said, "Good thing you weren't there. Three boys died in the quarry." Instead of going to Vespers, they had run to the quarry and were taking apart grenades. One exploded. The story goes that they were some distance from the hole. So they didn't die immediately, they ran that far and then fell down. That was a terrible event for the village. Three young men. They should have put up a fence around the quarry or blown up the whole lot on Saturday. Or the place should have been guarded. Those boys shouldn't have been allowed anywhere near the area. I wouldn't have gone.