

My name is Josette Maillet. I was born in Wiltz on 11 March 1934.

I still remember the beginning of the war. At that time, our neighbour rang our doorbell and said it was war. The Germans were in the country. We didn't think it was so tragic at the time. I remember them passing through our street with Belgian prisoners of war and my mother standing in front of the door to give them something to eat or drink.

Then came the occupation. How did you experience that as a 7-, 8-, 9-year-old? What impact did it have on your life? At school, for example.

At first we were still taught by the nuns, but then we had to go to the normal school because the nuns had to leave. We had different teachers, but we didn't really learn much.

Were the lessons in German?

Yes, in German. French was out of the question. When there was an air-raid alarm, we had to go down to the cellar. But we didn't find that very tragic at that moment. But what I found terrible was when the teachers were shot.

That was during the general strike. Three teachers and one town clerk from our street were shot. When the posters were put up, we were at break time. Someone came with a poster, on it the names of those teachers who had been shot. One girl saw on this poster that her father had been shot. I can't forget that.

What was everyday life like during the occupation? What did your parents do for work? How did you get through it as a family?

My father was a veterinarian and continued to practise his profession. My mother was a housewife.

So he went through the villages to the farmers, or what? Did you always have enough to eat?

We always had enough to eat. Instead of money, my father allowed them to pay him with food. We did not have to go hungry.

I remember that one day they came with a forced recruit, who had gone into hiding, to the gendarmerie, where he was severely beaten up.

During the Battle of the Bulge, there was a lot of impact around here. You were already 10 years old then. What do you still remember?

The offensive began on 16 December. We sat in the cellar until 20 January.

How many people? Was that in your house?

No, that was in the cellar of the Lambert family. In our street the houses had a lot of windows. We thought it wasn't safe enough there. So, for six weeks we went into a different cellar together with other people. I don't remember how many there were. Three of us went outside every day to get food. Bread, milk and meat. The men stayed in the background. They weren't keen on going outside. They were probably afraid of being drafted.

How did you - and Wiltz in general - make it through the Battle of the Bulge?

We never went outside. We only saw all this when it was already over. We were still supposed to go “heim ins Reich”, as they say. I remember that before St Sebastian’s Day two men came into the cellar and said that Sebastian had never let the people of Wiltz down before and that we would see that everything would be over on St Sebastian’s Day. And so it was.

And when you came out of the cellar?

That’s when you saw what had been going on. Wiltz was mostly in ruins. All the houses had suffered. The main shopping street was a carpet of bombs. A lot had been destroyed there. The “Scheergaass” also looked bad, you can see that in the photos of the time. There were dead horses in the streets. That wasn’t pretty.

At first we did not go back to school. The boys’ school had been destroyed and the girls’ school badly affected. Shortly before Easter, we went back to the castle with the nuns.

How did you experience the day of liberation, i.e. the end of the war?

All of a sudden you didn’t hear anything anymore. When we were sitting in the cellar, we heard the noise coming from Schumannseck. It was very bad there. But suddenly everything was quiet.

So that was the liberation?

Finally, we could wash ourselves. That was the first thing we did. You can’t imagine how dirty and lousy we were.

What was it like? Did Americans and tanks come? People are always talking about chocolate and chewing gum.

We got chocolate and they had fruit sticks. And chewing gum, of course. In the evening, the soldiers also came to church. They were quite devout.

In the post-war years, Wiltz was completely rebuilt. How did you experience that?

It was called “reconstruction”. Workers from the south of the country came to help. Because the boys’ school had been destroyed, so-called wooden barracks were erected. Classes were held in them. And in the clubhouse. And we went back to the nuns. There we finally learned French. We hadn’t learned French before. Those who were still allowed to go to school can speak French well today. But some had to stop early. Many people my age don’t know any French.

We were children then. We didn’t feel it was so bad. We played and went to school. That was it. German families came as well, and we played with their children. We only really thought about it later.