

I am Marianne Thilmany-Nickels from Kaundorf, and I was born on 19 January 1949 in Wiltz. I grew up in Kaundorf and still live there today. My father was Jos Nickels. He was also born in Kaundorf, in the same house. That was in 1911. They had just moved there, as his family was originally from Bavigne. My mother was Nathalie Jans. She also came from Kaundorf. She was born in 1908.

I have no siblings as such, although I am the second-born. My sister died about a year before I came along. She was only a few months old. Unfortunately, there was no medication for babies with severe colds back then. So I'm essentially an only child. But I didn't grow up as one, because my parents always had foster children, even when my sister was born. They took in a girl from Paris at the time. And it continued over the years. So I kind of had an older sister, Claudie from Paris. And also a younger sister called Astrid, who was from Amnéville. They spent part of their childhood with us. My cousin, Leo Nickels, whose mother died in 1952, also lived with us for a year. They always came back to stay with us during the summer holidays. So I didn't really grow up as an only child. There was always lots going on in our family.

What childhood memories do you have of the time before the reservoir?

There were many children around. The street was always full of kids, and we played a lot. I was always the smallest, and the others would often make fun of me. I just had to deal with it, and it actually made me stronger. We went for walks a lot. In Kaundorf, we have the 'Runtschelt' scenic viewpoint, from where you had a great view over the Sûre Valley. We would play there a lot. But I was only 3 or 4 years old at the time. I also walked down to the Gefach mill a lot with our neighbour Liz, where she was from. She moved away from there in 1947, after her husband died. She rented out the mill and would sometimes go back down there to check on things. She would often take us with her, which we loved. It was impressive to see a house standing there all alone. I found it very beautiful and fascinating. And the walk there, past the rocks, was also nice. She was great with kids, and if we didn't feel like walking back, she would miraculously find some sweets or chocolate along the way. She would tell us that a rabbit had put them there. We always had a lot of fun with her.

The Gefach mill was already entered in the land registry as a flour mill in 1824. But it was only a flour mill until 1940, after which it became a gristmill, where animal feed was made until the owner died in 1947.

What was your own experience of the construction work and the flooding of the Sûre Valley in the 1950s?

It wasn't how you might imagine. People talked about having to leave their homes and give up their land, but overall, the mood was surprisingly positive. People didn't really know what would happen, but there were no protests. At least none that I know of. I expect this farmland wasn't really worth very much. A lot of it was in rocky areas where you couldn't really work. Gradually, tractors began to appear, but you couldn't really till those fields with them. As far as I know, people got a good price, and they needed the money after the war. After all, our region had suffered a great deal during the Battle of the Bulge. A lot of the damage wasn't covered by war compensation, and these houses had to be gradually repaired. People needed money for that. So this made things a bit easier for them. Those who lost their homes, such as the mills that were still in operation or the three houses in Lultzhausen, were hit a lot harder, of course. Liz was also sad to lose the mill, but since she no longer lived there, it wasn't quite so bad. She must have been well compensated, too, as she seemed better off afterwards. She lived her entire life off the interest from the payout she received back then. With that, she could afford her meat, bread and other essentials, as there was no survivor's pension back

then. A miller's wife didn't get anything. She earned a small income from the leased land, but that was it.

People didn't know what was in store for them. And for a long time, they couldn't believe what was about to happen. It was a case of 'Let them get on with it'. There was probably some deception involved as well. People were told that electricity would be produced, so electricity would become cheaper and the railway could be electrified, and so on. There have always been political lies. The benefits are emphasised, and the downsides are swept under the rug. At the time, no one mentioned that it was supposed to become a water reservoir. That wasn't important to people back then. Everyone had their own well and pump, so why would they need a water reservoir? Back then, there were no water pipes here in the villages. They didn't come until 1959.

The construction work got underway in 1953. That was the tunnel in Esch-sur-Sûre, which was dug into the hill below the castle. And this was done with a hammer and pickaxe, because machines couldn't be used due to the risk of collapse. After all, they didn't want to damage the castle. The tunnel was completed around 1955. I remember a wonderful family outing around that time, which has stayed in my memory because our lives became harder after 1956 when my father had an accident and my mother died in an accident the same year. That was a turning point in my life. It must have been in the summer of 1955, because Claudie, Astrid and her little sister were there. We went on an excursion, which wasn't easy, as we didn't have a car. But we did have a tractor with a loading platform and two side seats. There were five of us sitting on it, which would probably be considered irresponsible today. But that's how it was back then, and nothing happened to anyone. Of course, we didn't take the current road from Kaundorf to Esch-sur-Sûre, because it didn't exist back then. Instead, we drove down to the mill and took the path through the valley, passing by the other mills and along the Sûre. We even played in the river on the way. We could only get as far as the dam construction site with the tractor. They had already started the preliminary work, but there wasn't much to see yet. From there, we couldn't go any further and had to walk the rest of the way. It was interesting to see the tunnel. Back then, Esch-sur-Sûre was a small town with many shops. For us, coming from a village with just a convenience store and three pubs, it was something special. It was a very beautiful day.

That was in 1955. In 1956, my mother died and our lives changed completely. My father had already lost several fingers in a work accident with a circular saw in June. It was terrible for us. Before his accident, my father had worked for a food wholesaler in Wiltz. He stopped working there and applied for a disability pension. He tried to manage his farm as best he could. Whenever we felt a bit down in the evenings, we would go to the Runtschelt, a bit higher up than where the bunker is, and look down into the valley. From there, we watched the whole landscape gradually change. On the other side, a bridge was being constructed and trees were chopped down, which was a significant encroachment on the natural landscape. When the reservoir was filled in 1959 and the water level gradually rose, it was very impressive, of course. We witnessed it all. We often walked all the way down, including to the mill in the beginning. Like the other mills, it was demolished quite late on. It was always said that people were still living in the mills in Insborn and Liefrange when the sluices were first closed. Then, in early May, there was a terrible thunderstorm. I remember it well because there was a landslide on the hill behind our house. It is still said today that the residents of the two mills endured a terrible night back then, fearing that their homes would be flooded. They learned their lesson, and the sluices were opened again. After that, the water level rose slowly but steadily. Mainly to ensure that the dam was stable, but also to make it possible for the mills to be evacuated and decommissioned. The desired water level was finally reached in May 1960. So the whole process took a bit longer than expected. After our neighbour's mill was demolished, I never went back. On

the last day, my father was down there with Liz, but I didn't go because I was ill. She had the chance to say goodbye to her mill. However, it is possible that this demolition took place earlier than the others, I am not sure.

What impact did the reservoir project have on the village of Kaundorf?

Life changed. The reservoir marked the beginning of a new era. Strangers suddenly started coming up to the village from other places, which wasn't the case before in the villages uphill. Tourism had already existed down in the valley. It was always said that Liz and her husband got on well with many wealthy citizens from the capital who visited them as tourists. It's hard to imagine that tourism already existed in the valley in the 1930s. It didn't just start when the reservoir was created. There were weekend homes there already. That's also where the story of the church in the reservoir comes from. It is as simple as this: there was a weekend house with an oval terrace supported by columns. When the house was demolished, the columns fell over and have remained next to the terrace slab to this day. To divers, it looks like the remains of a church. So that's where the story of the church originated. After the reservoir was built, there was an influx of tourists. Belgians and Dutch people with their tents, who would also go to the local pubs. Life changed, especially for the young people in the area. Of course, the girls were interested in the boys who were suddenly appearing. But I didn't have that age yet at the time. More and more building plots were also sold. For the sellers, who were mostly small-scale farmers, this was often necessary to make ends meet. It was initially frowned upon, but it didn't last long. That's because the first zone was introduced soon after, and then, around 1968 to 1969, there was talk of a nature park for the first time. Construction then came to a complete halt. Those who had bought property earlier got lucky. More people came to the villages, but at the same time the houses gradually became empty. Many young people moved away, which was also bad for the villages. People from outside the area could afford to pay more for a farmhouse than the villagers could. The villages were essentially sold to outsiders, who came from the capital or the south. They used the houses as weekend retreats and didn't really participate in village life. But many houses were also sold to people who integrated well into the village community. They were regulars in the local pubs or became members of clubs. You tend to get both types. Some people become part of the village, others keep themselves to themselves. This happens everywhere. From 1970 onwards, many houses were turned into holiday homes, including farmhouses. And from then on, more people from other countries started arriving. Of course, many Luxembourgers also came here on holiday. We had holiday homes from a very early stage. My father retired early and his disability pension didn't bring in very much. He then remarried and wanted some extra income. Back then, you couldn't support a family with a small farm. He therefore created holiday homes, so he could give his second family a decent life. I got married in 1969, and in 1970, my husband and I also started converting the barn into a holiday home. We finished it quickly. After all, we were still young and could work hard. By 1971, we were able to rent it out. Our family had six holiday homes in total. We catered to a lot of tourists. Some families came back year after year for decades. In fact, it was only yesterday that I was in touch with people who first visited Kaundorf 20 years ago. Now they come to Nothum because there are hardly any holiday homes left in Kaundorf. My sister still has two holiday homes that are booked by guests who have stayed with us in the past. And now their children or grandchildren come as well. We have formed some great relationships over the years. This also influenced life in the village. A tourist association was even established. But the local one wasn't created for tourists. I was involved in it a lot myself, and for every project we wanted to carry out, we had to present arguments that had nothing to do with tourism. A tourist association focused solely on tourism wouldn't have worked, even though the entire village and region benefited from it. The changes brought about by tourism have left their mark on the inhabitants and that is still the case today. As I said, life changed a lot. However, the reservoir didn't create many jobs. Except, of course, during the period when the

dam was being built. Many people from the villages worked on the construction site at the time. But it was only temporary. The work had to be completed very quickly. It only took two years to build the dam. They worked on it day and night, which is why they needed so many workers. Many of them came from the surrounding villages, when they didn't have jobs or they worked as day labourers here and there. The work they were offered on the dam construction site was an opportunity for those people. Otherwise, the reservoir didn't have a significant impact on the local economy. The pubs maybe did a little better, but only one of the three ended up surviving. The hotel industry isn't well developed either, even though we would need decent hotels and restaurants. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer of them.

What impact did the reservoir project have on you personally?

As soon as we got married – my husband was 24 and I was 21, since I never wanted to marry before I was of legal age, although I actually went from one kind of dependency to the next – we started building the holiday home and have been involved in tourism ever since. It was funny at first. Most of the guests arrived on Saturdays, and we had to register them in the books in the evening. When my husband, who was still young, showed up, they would say they would prefer to speak to the father. They didn't believe we were the owners. That happened a lot. But, like I say, we were still young. We always were involved in the tourist association as well. When my children were a bit older, I worked as a chambermaid in a hotel during the high season. Unfortunately, that hotel has since become an eyesore. Back then, it was a wonderful and well-run establishment. It was always fully booked and hosted large numbers of guests. It's a shame what has become of it. Apparently, it will be demolished someday to make way for a roundabout. The tourist association was founded in the late 1960s to buy the old church. But attempts were also made to get involved in tourism, but it always had to be done under the guise of benefiting the local residents. Tourism could never be the main focus. My father was always very active in the village, including in the fire brigade. So it was only natural that he would also be involved in the tourist association. He was even the chairman for 10 to 15 years. We put in a lot of work behind the scenes. When the idea of a nature park came up, I happened to be in contact with the *Mouvement écologique*, the Ecological Movement. They were looking for opportunities to offer guided tours around the reservoir. This led to the first event, which took place under the banner of establishing a nature park, which was still SYCOPAN at the time. It was called 'On the trail of culture and nature in Kaundorf'. It was a great initiative that incorporated the culture and nature of Kaundorf and its surroundings. There were night hikes and various other activities. A lot of effort and experimentation went into developing it. On Ascension Day, there was always a hike with 100 to 200 people, with potato soup being offered. Virtually the whole village was involved in organising it. It went well for about ten years, but then the numbers gradually started dwindling. It's also difficult to organise these kinds of events now. But these are all things that came about because of the reservoir. However, there were also some downsides to the reservoir. We are a water reservoir, which means you can't just do what you want here. There have always been a lot of restrictions. But there are two sides to every coin. There are positive aspects and negative ones.

The reservoir was drained in 1991. Did you watch it?

In 1991, we went there often with the children. We were there on the very first weekend, when everything was still covered in ice. You could clearly see the remains of the mills. It was also impressive to see how nature responded. It is fragile but also resilient. After draining in January or February, it looked like a lunar landscape. A few months later, in May or June, everything was green again. That's how quickly everything grew back. During the summer months, you would find tall flowers in the Sûre Valley. We took some photos near Rommwiss. That must have been in September, because you can already see the autumn colours. Everything had to be mowed down because the

sluices were closed again in November. But this shows just how resilient nature is. The seed that lay there in the ground sprouted with the first rays of sunshine. It was very impressive. Everyone was worried about tourism when the reservoir was drained. But the exact opposite has happened. It turned out to be a great year because everyone wanted to see it. It is a special experience to walk through such a landscape and see the remains of the houses. You had to be careful not to stray from the path, or you would sink into the mud. That could have been dangerous. The mud was 1 to 2 meters deep, and it might be even deeper now, as that was more than 20 years ago.

What thoughts come to mind when you think of the reservoir?

I spend a lot of time on the reservoir because I work on the solar boat. So I can see how it develops and evolves. People often complain that visitors leave a lot of rubbish behind and damage everything. After nearly 60 years, it might be time to start thinking about how to re-channel the energy of tourists towards more positive activities, rather than just listening to loud music through speakers and lighting fires in the wrong places. For example, I hope the planned bridge will actually be built. That wouldn't harm the drinking water and would provide an extra attraction for the reservoir's visitors. Putting up some ropes, for instance, so that people could safely jump into the water without hitting rocks wouldn't harm the reservoir or the drinking water and would channel the energy of young people in a positive direction. Little additions, like a mini-golf course or a boules court, could provide a source of entertainment for the visitors and keep them out of trouble. Simply imposing bans doesn't work. There are many positive aspects of the reservoir that should be highlighted, not just negative ones. We have the reservoir, and we must live with it, which we gladly do. It was an intervention in nature that created a new natural environment and a different landscape. The nature before the reservoir was beautiful, and it was a wonderful time. But that's all in the past, and the area is still beautiful with the reservoir. Whenever I get back off holiday, I always love walking those few meters from my house to the viewpoint to admire the reservoir. And I always think "It is so beautiful at home". That also makes you feel a bit like you're on holiday. To me, going out on the solar boat is like a day on holiday.