

My maiden name is Marie-Elise Weiler and my husband's name was Leisen.

When were you born?

On 04/09/1929.

Where did you grow up?

Here in Tarchamps.

Can you briefly introduce your parents?

My parents were farmers and my father was called Dominique Weiler and my mother was Marguerithe Delhez. I was an only child. I spent a lot of time with the neighbours, they had 6 children. The youngest was 2 years older than me. The others were already out of the house and in service. In the old days, you went into service in Brussels as soon as you could work. With so many children in the house, people were poor.

Can you remember 100 years of independence being celebrated in 1939?

Yes. The Freedom Tree is still down there. The tree in the schoolyard is the Freedom Tree. And I was the patroness. The patron is already dead, he was also from here. There was a beautiful marble slab there, and in 1940, when the war came, my father - he was an alderman - took the slab away and hid it for the whole war. In the Rundstedt Offensive it was broken nevertheless.

How was that celebrated?

Like a village festival. People came together and celebrated. That was in 1939, and in 1940 the war started.

How old were you when the German Wehrmacht marched into Luxembourg? Can you remember that day yourself?

Yes, I was 11 years old. Not quite, ten and a half. I can still remember it well. I was on my way to the grocer's shop with my neighbour, who was 2 years older than me, and when we were down in the village they came with a motorbike and sidecar. We ran into the shop and told the grocer we were scared. He tried to calm us down. Then they came with the horses. One horse after the other. They didn't have tanks then like they do now. The field guns were still pulled by horses. Also, the farmers in the village who had 2 or 3 horses were allowed to keep only one. They took the horses away from the farmers.

What specifically changed in your everyday life as a result of the German occupation?

People were no longer free. People were constantly under pressure, under duress. If they said "yes", you were not allowed to say "no". Otherwise you were blacklisted and then... A family from the village was relocated. They were sent to a concentration camp.

Did anything change at school?

Yes. At school we had to say "Heil Hitler" in the morning. Our teacher was not German at all, he came from Troisvierges. He was a professor and had been transferred to us as a punishment.

What about the food supply?

For the farmers it was no problem. We had meat and bread. Every month we got food stamps for sugar and the things you didn't have yourself. Then every month someone from the food office in

Wiltz came to the village and distributed the stamps to buy sugar, oil and vinegar. "Ration coupons", they called it.

Did you notice anything about resistance or collaboration in your everyday life during the war?

Not much. I was too young for that. You don't notice it when you're 10 or 11 as you do when you're 14 or 15.

You told me a story about a man who wanted to go to Belgium to see his girlfriend.

Yes, they shot him. They thought he was spying. But that wasn't true.

Can you tell me again what exactly happened?

The man used to go to Marvie – that's just before Bastogne - and there's a path through the forest here, and they thought he was spying, and they shot him. First he had to dig his grave, and then they shot him and buried him there. Nobody knows where.

You had also told me that someone was hidden in the village? Could you tell the story again?

There were several. When things got risky, they took them to Belgium. We're right on the border. One kilometre. There was a man here in the village, and they watched when the customs officers were on duty. When they were finished, they quickly ran with the boys to Belgium. It's only one kilometre. Once they were on the other side, they could go wherever they wanted. There were also people there who took them in.

How did you experience the liberation in September 1944? Can you yourself remember that day?

Yes. The Americans were there. The Germans were all gone. We walked through the forest towards Marvie to the hut to see the Americans. We walked for an hour, and after that we had more Americans in the village than we liked.

Can you remember anything in particular when the Americans came?

Everybody was happy. The Americans handed out chewing gum to the children. Nobody knew what it was. "Hello baby", they shouted. And then we got a piece of chewing gum. We didn't know what chewing gum was when we were children. And chocolate. They were obsessed with the children. They only gave out chocolate, chewing gum and sweets.

How did things go for you after the liberation in September 1944?

After that, everything was back to normal. People were working again and were free. They were no longer under duress and pressure.

Then the Battle of the Bulge began. Where were you then?

I was at boarding school in Bastogne. I went to boarding school in Bastogne because we hadn't learned French during the whole of the war. I could speak French because my mother was Belgian. But I couldn't write it. And during the war, French was not allowed to be taught in schools. That was the first thing: no French. So my parents sent me to boarding school in Bastogne to learn to write French.

And when you were at boarding school, the Rundstedt Offensive began?

Yes, that's when the Rundstedt Offensive took place. I couldn't go home. The Germans were there immediately. I then went to my mother's sister, who lived in Bastogne. So I was in Bastogne for the whole Rundstedt Offensive.

Where did you stay in Bastogne? With your mother's sister?

Yes, in her cellar. My uncle had put up thick poles and beams on the ceiling to support the cellar. They had put the mattresses in the cellar and that's where we slept.

Can you describe your life there in the cellar in more detail? How long were you there, did you have a daily routine there, where did you eat?

They had a "cellar kitchen". In the summer they always cooked in the cellar because it was too hot for them upstairs. Next to it was the cellar. My cousin and I went to the seminary every day. That was on Route de Marche. There we got bread and meat. You got food there every day.

Did you notice anything of the war that was going on above when you were hidden in the cellar?

When there was firing. We heard when the bombs fell. Certainly. We could hear the shells flying.

Can you describe the moment you were liberated by the Americans in Bastogne in 1945?

Yes. It was always bad weather, and suddenly it got light. Beautiful weather. That's when the Americans came with their planes and parachutes. It was beautiful. It looked like confetti falling from the sky. My uncle used to go up to the attic and look out the skylight. From there he could see the little chapel on the road out of Bastogne towards Arlon. Suddenly, he came downstairs and told us that the Americans had arrived at the chapel. Bastogne was surrounded. But when Patton came, it was quick. People sat there and waited until the first Americans drove through the town with their tanks. They were very fond of children. They came with chewing gum and chocolate. We hadn't been given any chocolate throughout the war. It was in packets sealed with wax. And there were also packets of tinned meat. It was a small meal. I worried about my parents, and my parents worried about me. I used to tell my uncle, "That's in Tarchamps." Then he said that it was further away. He tried to talk me out of it. As soon as Tarchamps was liberated, my father came to Bastogne on foot. He was happy to see me and I him. My father told us to come to them on Sunday, and my uncle, my cousin and I came through the undergrowth. But we did not go back through the undergrowth. The dead soldiers lying there. That was terrible. They were already completely black. He then went with us via Lutremange and Lutrebois on the main road. That took an hour longer, but he didn't want to go back the same way with us.

You had told us that you prayed a lot.

Yes, very much. Even those who were here in the Rundstedt offensive sat on their potatoes for days and prayed.

So faith played a big role during the war?

Yes, certainly. Faith helped. And some undertook to go on a pilgrimage if they survived it all.

What memories do you have of the immediate post-war period? Can you describe what your hometown looked like after the war?

Everything here was destroyed. My parents were still in the house, but the water was running out the front door from above. People were happy to be free again. They had nothing left, but they had their freedom again. Wooden huts were built where people who had nothing any more could live.

We had a lot of damage, but we were able to repair the roof with roofing felt. Later they rebuilt. The church was destroyed. There was a wooden hut to serve as a church and next to it another one as living quarters for the priest.

Were there also families living in wooden huts?

Yes, down in the village there were 3-4 families, and up here the huts are still standing, they were made of concrete. But the man keeps cattle in them now. He made stalls out of them.

How was the solidarity among the people during the reconstruction?

It was wonderful. Everyone was there for everyone else, and they helped each other. Some had fled. They came back. We lived here on the corner. Every day people came back who had fled to the south of the country.

After the war, Grand Duchess Charlotte visited the villages. Can you remember when she was here in Tarchamps?

Of course, I remember that well. She talked to the people and comforted them. She also promised them help. That was not immediately afterwards, because she was in America. They were in England, and from there they went to America. When she was back, she visited all the villages to comfort the people a little and promise them help.

Did that comfort the people at that time?

Definitely. That was a comfort. When the Grand Duchess talks to you, that's something different than when just anyone does that.

After the war, there were still many explosive devices lying around in the meadows and forests.

Yes, but they removed them later. Many collected the shells. They were made of copper. Then they sold them. We had a farmhand back then who spent all his free time in the woods collecting shells. Then a scrap dealer came and bought them.

Your husband was also a conscript. Was the topic, i.e. your story and his own story, often discussed later? Or was it a taboo subject for a long time?

My husband didn't like to talk about it. Not at all. He was in Russia for two years. He went through the entire march back to Berlin. No, it was Frankfurt an der Oder. From there they went to Berlin. There were Belgians there, one of whom knew English. He could communicate with the Americans. The Americans didn't know Luxembourg. Afterwards they went to Brussels and from there they went home by train.

So he told you his story, but he never liked to talk about it.

He didn't like to talk about it later.

What do you think about when you think back to the war from today's perspective?

I don't like to think back on it. It was not a nice time.