

My name is Nicolas Feider. Actually, it's Joseph Jean Nicolas, but people have always called me Nicolas. In Luxembourgish, it's 'Nickla' or 'Néckela'. The name has evolved over time. I grew up in Liefrange, and I only left my home village to go to school. My parents were Jean-Pierre Feider and Mathilde Majerus. My father was also called 'Jhamper'. He was a farmer and spent his whole life in Liefrange, where he also died. He was the second youngest of nine children. My mother came from the neighbouring village of Mecher. They got married in 1927. My mother was 23 years old at the time and my father was 30. She also came from a large family. There were eleven of them. We were seven siblings, of which I was the eldest. I was born in 1928. My late sister Mariechen was born in 1932, as was my brother Willy. Then came my brother Josy. They too are no longer with us. Aloyse, Aline, Tony and I are still alive.

What memories do you have of your childhood in Liefrange and the Sûre Valley?

I had a wonderful childhood, and I have many memories of growing up in Liefrange. Every year in spring, we did the big laundry wash – not at the village wash house, but in the Sûre! In the morning, the horse would be harnessed and all the bed linen and anything else that needed washing and bleaching was loaded onto the cart. We children always went along and played in the water barefooted. The water wasn't very deep at that spot, because the horse-drawn carts also had to cross the river there. We occasionally had to sprinkle water over the bed linen, which lay in the sun to bleach, with a watering can. But we sometimes ran over it with our feet, so it had to be washed again. We always had a lot of fun. We also had meadows and farmland in the valley. Some were near the Liefrange mill, others a bit further away. When hay was made near the mill in the summer, no one went home for lunch, because it would have taken too long. We children had the task of taking a basket of food down to the valley after school. The Hemmer mill, also called the Liefrange mill, and the Loutsch mill were down in the valley. We worked there, too. The Feiders had two farmsteads in the village: the Maarjashaff, and my father's farm, which was called 'A Matëssen'. The two brothers worked together a lot. For instance, the cows from both farms were driven down into the valley, where they were shielded by the rocks, and only one road led through the middle. It was just a meadow and a road. All we had to do was make sure the cows didn't wander into the road. Otherwise, we had plenty of time to keep ourselves amused and play by the water. There was also a building called 'Larei', where my grandfather's siblings used to operate a tannery. The building was abandoned, so we could take shelter in it when it rained. We also played there sometimes. We passed our time well, using the sun as our guide to know when it was time to head home. Across from our field was a slope, and depending on the sun's position, we knew when we had to take the cows back. Some of them would be ready to leave, while others were still grazing, but we had to get going. We then made the whole journey back up, where the cows of the two brothers would head to their barns. They knew the way, as well as their place in the barn. The Liefrange mill was a modern one. The Loutsch mill was a bit further away on the stream in Bavigne. It was a grain mill and a sawmill. They also had a convenience store. I once bought some cigarettes there with two friends. We smoked them and felt so sick afterwards that we never bought any again. It wasn't our brightest idea! The owners of this mill were distant relatives of ours. One of them, who we called Loutsch Kett, was very easy to tease. In Liefrange, there was a spot where you could look down on the Loutsch mill. Whenever we saw her there, we would shout all sorts of nonsense down at her, and she would shout back. One of the boys in the family ran the mill, while the other lived in the south. Both worked on a perpetual motion machine, an automatic device. They always said it was just one wheel short of being able to run the entire operation. The daughter was a trained midwife. She helped deliver my youngest brothers. After the war, when the Americans had left, there was still a lot of ammunition scattered in the fields. One day, someone was sitting by the stove in the mill when there was suddenly an explosion and the whole place went up in flames. The daughter suffered burns to her

face. The man had put the ammunition in his pocket, and when he sat by the stove to warm up, it exploded. The daughter never really recovered from this tragic incident and developed mental health problems. She ended up in a psychiatric hospital, where she later died. Another story about the Loutsch mill is of a man who always came to fish during the war. He was taken there by the Germans and shot. My father and another man from the village had to bury him there. The other mill was operated by a slightly more typical family, who were also related to us. Although the mill was located on the territory of Liefrange, it belonged to the Insenborn parish. Liefrange celebrated its fair on a different day than Insenborn did. One person from each house would visit the other family on the Sunday of the fair. During Holy Week, we children also went there with the wooden rattles before the procession through the village. We would get up at the crack of dawn for this. The children from Insenborn would always come as well, so there was a bit of rivalry to see who could get there first. Later on, we would be given some eggs by the mill operators. Because they also had geese, we also got goose eggs, not just chicken eggs. Sometimes, they would tell us that the children from Insenborn had already been there before us, which we weren't happy about, of course! On our way back up to the village, we could hear the Insenborn kids from the other side and would shout insults at them. There were never any fights, but we were always afraid they might ambush us from behind a hedge. It was a bit like 'War of the Buttons'. But let's get back to talking about the Hemmer mill. It had a generator that produced electricity. At the time, there was no public power supply in our area. But the mill provided electricity for the two villages of Liefrange and Insenborn. So we had electricity before the CEGEDEL company came along. The miller had an agreement with the villagers that he would send out a light signal before turning off the generator in the evening. This way, people would know they needed to light their kerosene lamps or candles. In winter, we could ice skate on the frozen dammed section of the Sûre near the mill. In the spring, when the ice broke up, it created a tremendous noise throughout the whole valley. I once witnessed this myself. Just down from the mill, there was a pedestrian bridge between Liefrange and Insenborn. As the chunks of ice fell on top of each other and piled up, they tore the bridge away. There were also some weekend houses in Liefrange that were later flooded. One of the weekend houses belonged to the Cohen family, who were merchants from the capital. They had a clothes shop called 'Maison Moderne' at the top of Côte d'Eich, opposite the Mohren Pharmacy. The family loved the valley so much that they went to see the mayor, who was my uncle and lived with us at the time. I can still picture Mr Cohen asking for permission to build a weekend house. There was also another weekend house that belonged to an English teacher. Those houses were flooded, too. The English teacher's house was never rebuilt, but the other one was dismantled and rebuilt a bit higher up. When the houses were still standing, the Cohen family would often come here with friends in the winter to ski. Behind their house was a slope that you could ski down. But there was no ski lift to take you back up, so you had to go on foot. We would watch them on our way back from evening prayer in Mecher.

At the spot where the Bavigne stream flows into the Sûre, there was a field that was used as a football pitch. This was all before the war. The field belonged to my uncle. In summer, we would stop off here too on the way back from church in the evening. Sometimes, I would go down to the field to watch the games. Because the pitch was so close to the stream and the Sûre, the ball would occasionally end up on the other side of the water. Someone always had to go across to get the ball back, and the game would have to be stopped. There was lots going on back then.

The government decided to create the reservoir in the early 1950s. Can you briefly explain the political reasons behind this?

This was in the 1950s, but the idea of an Upper Sûre reservoir had already been discussed in 1912. The then head of the agricultural administration had drawn up plans to create a reservoir at a place

called 'Burfelt', just up from Esch-sur-Sûre and about 1 kilometre further than the Liefrange mill. Had it materialised, then no buildings would have been flooded, as the reservoir would have started further upstream and ended around Arsdorf. But the project fell through when the First World War broke out. It resurfaced again after the Second World War. The project formed part of the reconstruction of the country, since it was intended as a means of supplying energy. The idea from before World War I was therefore revived, mainly for energy production. The controversy surrounding the reservoir was also debated in Parliament, and a law was passed. This was on 24 June 1953, and the construction work began in 1955. The reservoir was then put into operation in 1959. The primary goal of the project was electricity production, but the Rosport facility was also constructed at the same time for the same purpose. Sometime later, an agreement between Germany and Luxembourg was reached to build a pumped storage power plant in Vianden, which would produce a lot more energy than the dams in Esch-sur-Sûre and Rosport. Electricity production suddenly became a secondary concern. But from the outset, the project was also intended to serve recreational purposes. And water regulation as well. This included preventing floods and droughts, as the water flow below the dam remained more or less constant throughout the year. Those were the reasons for building the dam.

What impact did the project have on Liefrange?

The project had a big impact on Liefrange. Although Liefrange was not flooded, it was among the closest villages to the reservoir, along with Insenborn, Esch-sur-Sûre and Lultzhausen. Boulaide and Bavigne were a bit further away, so they weren't affected as much. The construction of the reservoir led to several buildings being flooded. These included the two mills of Liefrange, and the weekend houses that I mentioned. Some mills further downstream were also hit, and part of Lultzhausen was flooded as well. While the village of Liefrange itself was not flooded, some of the farmland and meadows belonging to the residents of Liefrange and Insenborn were affected. All of this had to be negotiated. Experts from the administration were tasked with calculating the compensation. The road connections were very important for Liefrange. Liefrange only had one road linking it to Kaundorf, Wiltz and Insenborn. This road was also flooded. Everyone was aware of this, so the residents of Liefrange started to worry that they would end up being cut off from the outside world and lose touch with the neighbouring villages. They wanted assurances that something would be done about it. A ferry or a bridge were potential solutions. At the time, a bridge was already being built between Lultzhausen and Insenborn to connect the two separated villages. A bridge could be built there easily. So why couldn't a bridge be built between Insenborn and Liefrange as well? After all, the existing bridge would be gone. And the residents of Liefrange would no longer be able to reach Bavigne and Boulaide either. There was a lot of arguing and debating, and the residents of Liefrange began to voice their complaints. That's where I came into the picture. Suddenly, anonymous complaint letters were being written, questioning why a bridge could be built in one place but not in another. This back-and-forth continued, with the authorities responsible for the dam's construction and the Minister for Public Works responding with increasingly absurd arguments against the construction. They said they would respond, but they wanted to know who was writing the anonymous letters. It was me. I had written several. Then my father got involved and said he would take charge. Thus, he became the spokesperson for this citizens' movement. We formed a delegation consisting of my father and other notable people from the village. But no one from the municipality was involved. Nobody heard a thing from the municipality, and they showed no interest in the matter. So they were met by the minister's officials, who presented them with a few arguments, of which I will only mention the two most ridiculous ones. First, they claimed that the distance between Liefrange and Insenborn was greater than the distance between Lultzhausen and Insenborn, and that ships would need to pass under the bridge, meaning it would have to be built higher. So it wouldn't be as strong

as the other bridge. If a bridge is in stagnant water, it must bear the same load regardless of its position. They basically took us for fools. Nothing changed in this regard, though a compromise was eventually reached. The second dam, which shielded the Bavigne section to prevent it from flooding, had initially been planned as a narrow wall that only pedestrians could cross. However, it was expanded so that vehicles could cross alternately from both sides. Thus, a connection was eventually created that even buses could use. The residents were happy with the solution.

Can you briefly describe the mood of the residents of Liefrange, and has it changed over the years?

For the residents of Liefrange and the neighbouring villages, it was a big deal. No one knew what to expect, but it seemed like something entirely new was unfolding. The scent of change was in the air. When people used to ask me where I was from and I told them Liefrange, no one knew where that was. They thought I meant Livange in the Gutland region. So I would always say Liefrange near Wiltz. Now, when people ask me where Liefrange is, I always say 'by the reservoir'. Almost every Luxembourger has been there at some point. The reservoir is now more famous than Wiltz. It seemed like something amazing was about to happen, and tourism was about to flourish. We had never experienced anything like this before, the emergence of tourism and its subsequent development. We thought it would become so big that we might not be able to keep up with it. But after a while, people also began to see the potential downsides. Land and mill owners had to accept that they needed to adapt, as they could no longer cultivate their fields or manage their forests in the same way as before. They had to face financial losses and see how this could be settled. A points system was introduced to calculate the value of each individual parcel of land. This also caused some friction, of course. Some people felt they were being treated unfairly, and it took a while for everything to be resolved. The situation eventually calmed down once the points system started to work properly and it was confirmed that the secondary dam could be crossed so that Liefrange could stay in contact with its neighbours. Another issue that upset the residents of Liefrange was when it later became clear that the reservoir would be used mainly to supply drinking water. This meant efforts had to be made to keep the water clean. Any pollution of the water had to be avoided. Measures were therefore introduced to prevent the population from expanding. This put an end to the dream of tourism. Hotels, inns and restaurants... all of that was no longer conceivable. People gave up on the visions they once had. They had to accept that this change was inevitable and they would be the ones who get the short end of the stick. Tourism did manage to take hold, but only on a small scale. It revolved around activities like hiking and enjoying nature, rather than regattas, water battles and folk festivals. All of this was forbidden, so people felt they were unable to fully thrive. Especially when it seemed that population restrictions were being enforced by calculating the number of residents in each village based on equivalent values. Some villages fared better than others, but ultimately, it meant everyone was worse off. The regulation restricting activities at the reservoir was determined by legal decree each year. Once, they forgot to renew the regulation on time. The mayor of Insborn was shrewd enough to use this oversight to issue building permits. No one could contest these permits, and construction went ahead. As a result, more new buildings sprang up on the Insborn side than on the Liefrange side, where they had missed this opportunity. This was one of the reasons why the residents of Liefrange were frustrated with the administration.

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

I saw the walls being erected. Sometimes, I would drive to Esch-sur-Sûre with my wife and our eldest child to watch it. We also witnessed the reservoir gradually filling up. The first tourists started coming to see the construction, and the first rowing boats and sailboats also started appearing. But this period also saw the first drownings. I remember a couple from Liefrange who were out on a boat when the water level hadn't yet reached its peak. The man drowned. More and more people started

coming, and a yacht club was formed. Yacht owners whose boats had previously been based abroad got together and organise themselves, but there was still no proper infrastructure in place. So the local tourist association of Liefrange built the first landing stage at its own expense, allowing boats to dock and depart from there.

You were a founding member of the local tourist association. What goals did you have besides the regatta?

There were two tourist associations in the region that were already active in tourism. Of course, there was the one from Esch-sur-Sûre, which was a tourist destination anyway, and then the one from Boulaide, which also had some tourists because there was a hotel there. Over time, it became necessary to establish another association. After all, if more tourists were to come, we would need to provide the necessary infrastructure for them. At the very least, some hiking trails, because there weren't any at the time. There were a few field paths, but not enough to cover the large areas and reach everywhere. Space was also needed for cars. Back then, there were no parking spaces on the banks of the reservoir, so the tourist association took care of that. They also looked to make use of the accommodation in the various villages. Some residents had rooms or even entire floors that they could rent out to tourists, whether for a few days, a week, or the entire summer holidays. Hiking maps were also created, and benches were installed. We even published the first hiking guide, so people knew where they could hike, how long the trails were, how steep the various routes were, etc. This was all part of our work, and we kept improving to meet the growing demand. In the beginning, the demand was quite high, and many visitors also came from abroad, especially from Belgium and the Netherlands. They felt very welcome. We even hosted families in our home who came just for the reservoir. The tourist association also wanted to set up a campsite, which would have been a good source of income. After all, we needed funds for the ongoing development. But the issue of population equivalents then arose. When calculating how many people could live in each village, it was found that the campsite would attract too many visitors, potentially leading to more water pollution. It wasn't considered that waste from Insenborn and Mecher also flowed into the Sûre and the reservoir, not just waste from the residents of Liefrange. There was no sewage treatment plant in those areas. The sewage treatment plants came later and were also calculated based on these population equivalents. We kept pointing out that it would be possible to install a sewer line around the reservoir. But that was not considered. Similar facilities exist abroad, and recent developments here at the reservoir are seeing us follow suit. The large sewage treatment plant is now located at the bottom of the dam rather than the top. This has virtually solved the problem of water pollution.

Instead of the campsite, you had another idea. 43:18

Yes. We had another idea to attract foreign tourists. We built a residential complex with holiday apartments. It worked very well in the beginning, and many visitors came. But those managing it gradually lost interest over time. It involved a lot of advertising and administrative and cleaning work. It took a lot of effort, and eventually, problems arose with the management of the apartments, so they were gradually sold on the private market.

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

Of course. A few times, even. I could see where everything used to be. Some things were the same, others were different. I could see the turbines of the two mills. And the paths we used to walk along. The spots where we swam and played in the water. And the bridges that remained as emergency bridges. The bridge between Insenborn and Liefrange was blown up during the Battle of the Bulge and later rebuilt temporarily. It was still standing when the water came. And it was still standing even after the reservoir was drained. I could remember many things. It was both beautiful and sad. My

youngest son was working in New York for ARBED at the time and happened to be here on holiday when the reservoir was drained. He had been too young when the reservoir had been finished. He hadn't witnessed the construction of the dam. So I walked with him through the valley and showed him the places he had never seen. It looked like some of the big national parks in America. Dry and desolate. There's also a huge reservoir in the USA, where it's so hot. I went there once on holiday.

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

Strange ones. Liefrange was a small, quaint village back then, with just under 100 inhabitants. There were about 20 houses. Some big and many small. A couple of well-to-do families and a few very poor ones. The school had no more than 20 pupils, and all classes were mixed. From preschool to seventh grade. There were four of us in our class. There was a grocery store that was open around the clock. And a carpentry shop that was also always open. If you needed anything, he even worked at night. If you wanted a coffin, he made one. It was cosy and homely. We always left our front door unlocked. Even at night. No one ever came in. Except for this one man who had no legs. He moved from village to village, on his knees. From house to house, begging. We were sitting in the living room and suddenly heard someone praying in the hallway. It was the beggar, who was saying the Lord's Prayer. From our house, he then moved on to the neighbour, and from there to the pub, where he got drunk and later ended up in a ditch outside the door. We thought he was dead. Suddenly, he got up and dragged himself off down the street. That was life in the village. Everyone knew everyone, and you could borrow things from each other. We had a water pipe leading into our house from the well in the pasture. My uncle's family also had a well, but the water was undrinkable. So they came to us to fetch water. It was a lost village. I mentioned earlier that no one knew where Liefrange was. It was very homely. Then, suddenly, it all became so big. Almost like a big city, in some ways. I felt comfortable in little Liefrange. It's still a small village, but it has moved with the times. It had the chance to preserve its natural beauty. Tourist numbers need to be managed to keep the countryside pristine. That's my wish for Liefrange. For it to stay just the way it is now. We don't want progress to lead to changes that can no longer be controlled. It should remain a place where people feel comfortable, where people can still find secluded spots, and where they don't step on each other's toes.