

PART II

Marius Meyer

The Amazing story
of the Teacher of Hohatzenheim

1938-1946



In 1938, Marius Meyer young teacher of 21 years old received his first assignment. He was sent to teach in the small village of Hohatzenheim, located at the heart of the hilly region of Kochersberg in the middle of Lower Alsace. Marie-Louise Birg, his fiancée and future bride, still remembers her feeling as she learned of the assignment. “Hohatzenheim? But where is this lost dump?” In fact, in spite of its famous pilgrimage at its ancient church, the town of 300 souls could hardly be found on the map but the couple was resolved to stay only a few years in this remote location. Marius was from a larger village called Schaeffersheim located further south in Alsace near the Rhine. His family moved there in the 1860s to help out one of their aunts who owned a prosperous convenient store. This strong woman had initially bought a house in Schaeffersheim in the 1830s from a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars (his rifle was found in the attic in the 20th century and is still in the family) and started alone a small business that grew rapidly, providing her wealth and recognition. She had her portrait painted by a local painter and in the 1840s had her picture taken via one of the early photography processes. The town records noted that she was one-eyed but that did not keep her from making money or even getting married. Soon the children of her sister came to Schaeffersheim to help out in the business that became a bakery and later a farm. Prior to Schaeffersheim, the family had spent 200 years in the neighboring village of Kertzfeld where generation after generation they were all weavers and daily workers. Of course Marius knew of his roots in the village of Kertzfeld but he never suspected that one of his remote grand-uncles had left it in his early twenties to enlist in the army of the king which ended up on the shore of America. Yet, the course of event that Europe was taking in this year of 1938 was slowly bringing Marius closer to his own American experience.

Marius still remembers his arrival in Hohatzenheim at night, the eve of the first day of school. Villagers were already convinced that they would have no teacher to start the new school year. This period coincides with a major crisis between France and Germany. As the German troops invaded Czechoslovakia, France and England prepared for war by drafting certain age categories. In Hohatzenheim the first to be drafted include Antoine Muller, Eugène Kuhn, Antoine Zahn, Eugène Jost, Alphonse Goetz, Eugène Moebs and Alphonse Moebs. They were finally sent back home after the crisis but the men born between 1914 and 1917 were kept on duty (these included Antoine Risch, Joseph Penner, Antoine and François Schneider, Théophile Nonnenmacher, Nicolas and Alphonse Moebs).

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Marius and Marie Louise realized that the war was imminent and they decided to advance the date of their marriage. Two days later on September 3, Marius and Marie-Louise exchanged their vows just a few hours after France (at 9am) and England (at 11am) declared war on Germany. In Hohatzenheim, the first to be drafted is Franciscan friar Martin Mertz. Elders such as Antoine Muller, Eugène Kuhn and Laurent Freund had to participate during a week to the transport of horses toward Epinal in the Vosges Mountains. Later, the three men and Antoine Hoenen were called to dig trenches. Eugène Jost is redrafted too. After the German advance of May-June 1940, his unit stopped in Nancy, Lorraine to pickup trucks before retreating to the south of France where he would finally be discharged after the armistice. Yet, due to the interruption of communications with the north, he would only be able to head back to Alsace several months later. Marius Meyer is drafted on September 16, 1939 as a trainee officer placed on reserve for the period of military training. In fact Marius would never see the front since France surrendered before his training was complete! As a Trainee Officer and later as a

Senior Officer Cadet, Marius passed through the cities of Orléans, Souppes-sur-loing and Fontainebleau. The main memory that he kept from this period is the training session of motorcycle driving. The instructor had explained to his students how to start the engine, shift gear and drive but not how to stop. These were therefore bound to drive in circles until the gas tanks were empty. At the time of the overall retreat of the French army, Marius saw the brand new motorcycles being piled up and set on fire so that they would not fall in German hands.

After the collapse of the front in May, Marius was sent south to Tulle where he taught at the military school. It is in this town that he saw Marshal Pétain, the new head of state, visiting the area, and heard in June on the radio the famous appeal of General de Gaulle calling on all French soldiers to join him in London to resume the fight. Marius was finally discharged in August in the town of Périgueux. At this time, Marius was not really interested in going back to Alsace. He was actually ready to consider a temporary exile in the new “free zone” of Southern France that the Germans had accepted not to occupy. This solution was chosen by many Alsatians such as the Joseph Schall, Marius’ colleague in Wingersheim. On the other hand his wife Marie-Louise didn’t feel strong enough for such a long trip across the demarcation line, especially since she was now pregnant. Needless to say that she wanted him back as soon as possible. Seeing Marius coming home was also the wish of Franciscan friar Henri Diehly who was in charge of Hohatzenheim’s parish and who needed help to ready the school and the parish for the school year starting in September 1940. As the birth date of his child was getting closer, Marius decided that it was time to go home. Since the communications between Free France and the occupied territory were still interrupted, Marius found a woman guide specialized in smuggling people through the demarcation line. After the crossing, Marius agreed to her request to write letters for people separated by the line and he spent a full night writing. Marius found out later that this woman was caught by the Germans and sent to the concentration camp of Struthof that the Germans had set up in Alsace, where she finally died.

Occupation

In September 1940 Marie-Louise gave birth to a little girl that she named Simone. The life of the couple resumed almost normally under the new occupation authorities. After the birth of their child Marius and Marie-Louise went to city hall to register their daughter. When the German clerk heard the name chosen for the child, he was stumped: “Zimoôn?! Shouted the German, Das ist ja ein Knabe Name! Wir haben doch so schöne Mädchen Namen, Inge, Trudel...» (i.e.: Simone?! This is a boy’s name! We have so many nice girl names, such as Inge, Trudel ..”) Eventually the German agreed to a compromise: Simonette. This original name remained the official name of Miss Meyer after the war.

In 1941, Marius has to go to Karlsruhe in the German state of Baden, to complete a teaching training mandatory for all Alsatian teachers. It is during this assignment that Marius got his first real scare. One of his students was like him a great fan of track and field sports.

One day, as he entered his classroom, Marius saw a large French flag spread over the desk. In those days such a provocation was punishable by deportation to a concentration camp. The school's headmaster heard about it and Marius was immediately summoned to his office. Fortunately for the young Alsatian teacher, the guilty student stepped forward and with his father testified of Marius' innocence. He explained that he had only spread the flag in the spirit of sport brotherhood! Marius was cleared without consequence. Upon his return in Alsace Marius was reassigned to the primary school of Hohatzenheim with occasional replacements in the neighboring villages of Gougenheim, Gingsheim and Mittelhausen.



Marius in Karlsruhe in 1941

On August 25, 1942 a decree from the Gauleiter Robert Wagner (the governor of Alsace put in place by the Nazis) ordered the draft of all Alsatians into the German army as a consequence of the province's annexation to the Reich. Eventually 130,000 men from Alsace and Lorraine would be drafted and sent on all fronts, with the great majority being assigned to Russia. 40,000 of them would never come back and Marius à Karlsruhe en 1941 led. The draft started with the call of a few age groups to the KAD (Reicharbeitsdienst), which was a paramilitary organization for the teenagers before their transfer into the Wehrmacht. In Hohatzenheim Jacques Reeb was sent to Denmark and Antoine Schneider to Weimar, Germany. The draft included even a few women such as Florentine Lang. For those who such as Marius had already worn the French uniform, the draft started in April 1943. The gauleiter announced proudly that this draft was his birthday gift to the Führer (April 20).

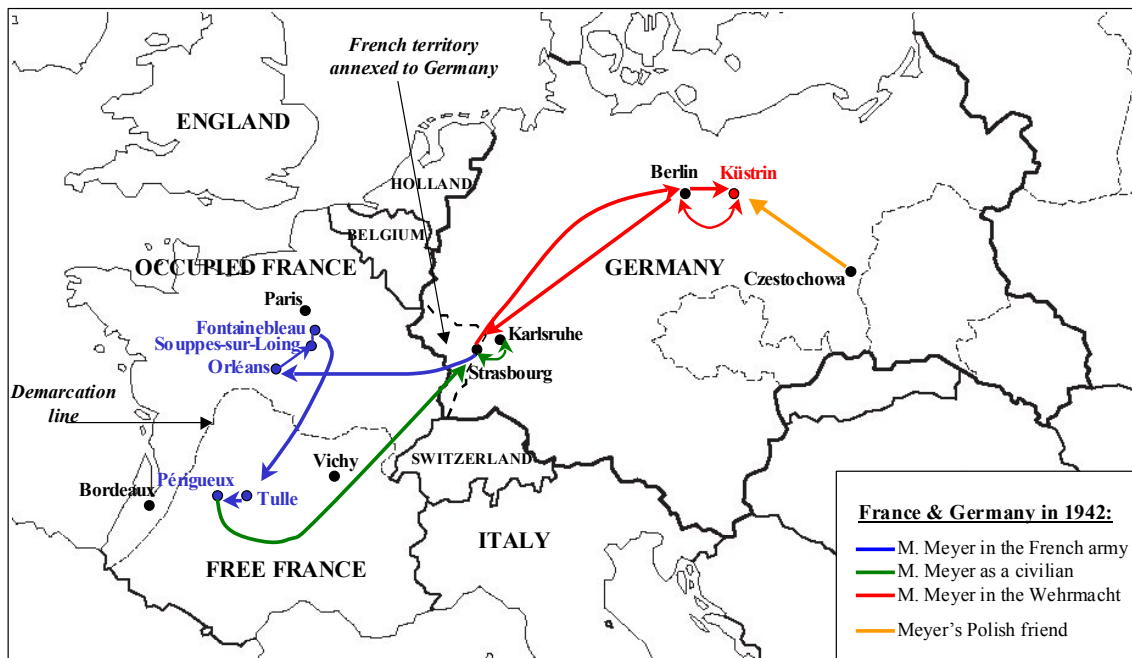


1941: Alsace under occupation. On the left, Strasbourg's main square (Place Kléber) is renamed Karl Roos Platz. On the right, Gauleiter Robert Wagner and his associate Röhn.

Marius departed on April 16, 1943 as the age groups of men born between 1914 and 1919 were drafted on April 18. Subsequently the draft would be progressively extended to include the age groups of men born between 1908 and 1926. In Hohatzenheim were drafted

Antoine Adam (to be a sailer on the battleship « Prinz Eugen »), Antoine Kuhn (campaign in the Balkans) and his brothers Joseph (eastern front) and André, the brothers Eugène and Alphonse Moebs, Marcel Muller (Holland), Théophile Nonnenmacher, André Lang, Ernest Lichtenthaler, Jacques Reeb, Antoine Risch (wounded as a French soldier in Dunkerque in 1940, hospitalized in England and finally discharged by the Germans), Antoine Schneider son of the former mayor, Antoine Schneider (S'Grode farm) and his brothers François-Joseph, Albert, and René (one of the Schneiders would end up POW in an American camp and sent as such to North Dakota), Joseph Penner and his brother Emile. An ordinance from October 1, 1943 set the measures that would be taken to sanction draft resisters and deserters as well their families. These measures ranged from imprisonment, confiscation of all family assets, deportation of the whole family to a remote region or to a concentration camp, to the death penalty.

Marius still remembers his train ride across most of Germany to the city of Küstrin located at about 30 miles east of Berlin. As he came down the train car, the Alsatian draftee had a happy surprise. He was expected by a lady called Johanna Boehm, married to Erwin Boehm of Küstrin and niece of Father Célestin, the Franciscan priest of Hohatzenheim. The Boehms lived with their parents in a nice house beyond the River Oder. Marius remembers this welcoming family to be devoted Christians and resolutely anti-Nazi. Through a second coincidence it just happened that Johanna's sister knew Marius's wife Marie-Louise as they attended boarding school together. No doubt that our Lady of Hohatzenheim (to whom the pilgrimage of Hohatzenheim is devoted) was watching over her dear teacher exiled so far from his home!



The itinerary of Marius Meyer from 1939 to 1944

Marius had been discharged from the French army with the rank of Artillery Senior Officer Cadet. Since this rank did not exist in the German army, he was immediately promoted to non-commissioned officer in the Wehrmacht. It didn't take him long to notice significant differences between the French and German armies. He often recalls: "In France,

a soldier on leave hurries to remove his uniform to wear his civilian clothes. In Germany on the other hand, the soldier on leave is proud to show off his uniform which raises admiration around him.” In his situation Marius knew that if he wanted to avoid the front he had to do everything he could to remain in Küstrin. Surprisingly, it was initially due to his involvement in sport organizations that he managed to stay in place. Later, as the pressure to send more men to the front became stronger, he had to use more drastic methods. During a leave in Alsace, Marius made his first attempt at disabling himself, under the supervision of Doctor Hans of Brumath, his family doctor; Marius had his friend Joseph Ambs hit his shoulder with a bat in hope that it would break and thus save him from the front. Unfortunately, in spite of Ambs hitting several times as hard as he could, the shoulder did not break. In the military hospital of Brumath, Marius explained the marks of his back by a fall from an apple tree. Unfortunately a suspicious S.S. doctor gave him an injection of the so-called “serum of truth”. Marius talked and was immediately recalled to Küstrin for further investigation. At his arrival, it was this time an officer and two soldiers who awaited him at train doorstep and escorted him to Küstrin’s military hospital. He was placed under military watch for the duration of the investigation. Marius was now in a critical situation, yet once again he avoided the worse, thanks to a telegram from doctor Hans and a testimony from the Boehm family. He was finally cleared and the investigation was closed without consequence.

In Küstrin’s military hospital, Marius befriended a fellow draftee from Poland, from the region of Czestochowa, famous for its pilgrimage known as the “Black Madonna”, and which like Alsace and Lorraine had been annexed to the Reich. His new friend talked to Marius about the Polish resistance and gave him another recipe of disablement. After some time, the pole wanted Marius to join the resistance effort and to meet a Polish underground organization. To allow him to do so, he gave him the secret sign to be used as pass code to the next meeting. Yet, Marius was hesitant. At the last moment he decided not to go. He found out later that a leak had allowed the Gestapo to localize the meeting. All participants were caught and shot. Marius would never know if his friend was among them.

During this period, life was not easy in Alsace. In Hohatzenheim’s neighboring town of Wingersheim, the Gestapo harassed the Priest Foesser for his refusal to submit to the Nazi salute and for his historical books on Wingersheim and Meistratsheim qualified as anti-German. The Gestapo tried to destroy all copies of the book and to seize the manuscripts. Later on, his sermons were qualified as “contrary to the Nazi ideology” (he had criticized the draft of the youth in the Hitlerjugend organization) and he had once again to undergo interrogation. Several people from Wingersheim were sent to the Struthof concentration camp for anti-German demonstrations, including a group of young draftees who started to sing the French national anthem on their way to the station. In spite of these demonstrations of resistance, the Nazi infiltrated all towns and villages and appointed trusted individuals at



Secret sign given to Marius to access a meeting of the Polish resistance.

Note: Marius showed me a drawing of the sign more than 10 years ago. I drew this copy from memory and it can therefore be partially incorrect.

all key positions. Many teenagers joined (voluntarily or not) the Hitlerjugend, where some hoped to gain respect from the community. Thus, Eugène Jost, farmer in Hohatzenheim, recalled how one day he was stopped on the road to Wingersheim by a parade of the HJ with all its flags, banners and uniforms. Of course he knew very well all the participants. Yet, to his surprise, Eugène was ordered on a martial tone to give them the Nazi salute in order to be allowed to walk on.

For Marie-Louise life was not easy either with her child, far from her husband. After Marius' departure, she returned to her parents in the town of Fegersheim. Her father Xavier Birg was in charge of the town's small train station. Xavier had issues with the new Nazi order, especially considering that during the First World War he had directed train convoys to Russia for the Reich (Alsace was German until 1918). At this occasion he had brought back an extraordinary photo collection of a country that was in the middle of a revolution. Xavier found little in common between the Germans he knew then and the ones who arrived now. Thus, he was told that he was no longer allowed to wear his old beret, qualified as too French. He had to replace it with a German hat. Xavier had then the bad idea to give his opinion about the German hat: "such a hat is only good to go to the bathroom!" A neighbor heard him and reported him immediately. Such a comment was enough to be sent to the concentration camp and it was only thanks to a counter-testimony from one of his relations that he avoided this fate.

Simone too, came very close to a lethal end. She used to go wander at a neighbor's house. Once she entered the house, and she asked the neighbor to help her remove her apron so that she could show off her new dress. Worried that the little girl might stain her dress, the neighbor refused and Simone got annoyed. "Ok, fine, she said, then I'm leaving!" No sooner had Simone passed the doorstep, that a huge explosion occurred behind her. A bomb had just fallen on the house and all inside were severely wounded. The Fegersheim train station was in fact a primary target for the ally bombers, especially when trains were parked nearby.

Marie-Louise took the habit of coming to Hohatzenheim to find milk for Simone as well as other goods among the farmers that she knew. One day in the bus, a soldier walked in and started to check IDs and luggage. Marie-Louise was carrying a suitcase full of goods from the black market and she suddenly felt her heart beat faster. As the soldier came to her, Marie-Louise tried her luck: "Sir, I have to tell you, my husband is a soldier and I have in this suitcase some goods for him." Without any hesitation the man shouted: "Soldier? No problem!" and he just walked on. Marie-Louise would remember for decades the scare of her life. Of course when Marius managed to come back home on leave, he would help out a great deal in transporting the goods that they found in Hohatzenheim. One day the couple transported the meat of a whole pig under the mattress of Simone's carriage. At the train station, as they struggled to get the carriage over a step, a man stopped by and insisted to help out. As he carried the load he shouted: "My god, what a heavy baby carriage!"

During his leaves in Alsace, Marius always managed to get some home made liquor (schnaps) from Hohatzenheim, which was particularly valued by the soldiers back in Küstrin. His favorite supplier was Alphonse Goetz (S'Valdes farm) and Marie-Louise still remembers several lengthy tasting sessions; she noticed that as the session drew on, the two spoke

louder and louder! The leave of course was always too short and it was with sadness that the couple would part again.

Before his last departure to Küstrin, Marius met one of his friends in Strasbourg. His name was Alphonse Adam and he was from the town of Schiltigheim. Adam was part of the Front of Alsatian Youth and was involved in operations of resistance, such as the sabotage of the Gauleiter's car. Before parting from his friend, Marius remembers warning him against the danger of such operations. "Don't worry, he said, we are very careful." Back in Küstrin Marius learned the fateful end of his friend. He had been arrested by the Gestapo and shot in Strasbourg on July 15 1943 at the age of 24. Today, a street in Shiltigheim bears his name.



Marius was a big fan of sports before the war (track & field, soccer.) It would later save him from the worse.

In the spring of 1944, Marius was still in Küstrin. He was in charge of a sports team that was granted the privilege of attending the final of Germany's soccer cup in Berlin's Olympic Stadium. There, the group enjoyed reserved seats just across from Hitler and the other Nazi dignitaries. The team Schalke 04 was playing the S.C. Dresden. Yet, this entertainment was only a temporary pause in the struggle of the day. In this spring of 1944, the military operations on the Russian front turned sour for the German army which was now frantically enlisting any men they could. In Küstrin, Marius knew that he had little time left and he had to act fast. Still firmly resolved not to be caught into the German war machine, he prepared his second escape attempt. During his last leave in Alsace he tried a second time to disable himself by following the instructions given to him by his Polish friend. He injected in his knee a saliva-based substance whose purpose was to create temporary swelling. Unfortunately the operation did not go as planned and the quick deterioration of his knee required immediate hospitalization. The abscess was open and his leg was saved. When he left the hospital, Marius decided to desert thanks to the complicity of his friend François-Antoine Roos. As a precaution measure, he sent a postcard to his family telling them that he was taking the train back to Küstrin, so that the German would think that he disappeared in a train bombing and would not retaliate against his family. Roos first hid him in his apartment in Strasbourg and later in the shed of his garden on the bank of the Ill, the city's river. On September 24, 1944, one of the city's hospitals was hit by a bomb that killed three nuns. Soon afterwards it just happened that Himmler, chief of the SS came to Strasbourg on inspection. There were soldiers everywhere and Marius had to leave the city the same day. Dressed in the uniform of a German paratrooper, Marius left Strasbourg on a bicycle borrowed from Roos. His friend came along as far as the town of Dingsheim and from there Marius continued on alone in the direction of Hohatzenheim's convent. Due to the presence of soldiers in the area of Mittelhausen, Marius had to walk across the fields, while carrying his bicycle on his shoulder. When he finally reached Hohatzenheim's rectory, he was welcome by Father Marcel Bonhert, a Franciscan from Luxembourg taking refuge in Hohatzenheim.

Marius stayed hidden in the rectory for two months. Of course his own family had no idea where he was. There, he spent his time writing and spreading pamphlets to the Alsatian draftees in the German army, filing the 18,000 addresses entrusted to the pilgrimage of Our Lady of Hohatzenheim, drawing landscapes of the pilgrimage site, and sometimes in the evening playing cards in the kitchen with Father Marcel, Friar Martin and Joseph Ambts. From the convent window Marius would sometimes see his wife Marie-Louise going to church or to the cemetery, without her suspecting in the least bit that her dear husband was so close to her.

Along with Marius there were two other men hiding in the convent: Edmond Scheid from St-Louis-les-Bitche, brother of the Franciscain friar Gabriel and Joseph Merckel from Marlenheim. On Sunday, the three men would hear mass from the underground tunnel that circled under the church. To the insistence of the head priest of the convent, and upon the directions of a dowser with a pendulum, the three men dug the tunnel in search of a mysterious golden grail that was supposed to have been hidden underground during the French revolution. Yet, their search yielded nothing.



Marius Meyer drew these pictures of the Church of Hohatzenheim as he was hiding in the rectory in the fall of 1944. On the right drawing one can guess the location of his room in the attic.

From the convent the hiding men were in contact with the resistance of Lower-Alsace of Major François also known as Kieffer. A native from Upper-Alsace of the name of Luttringer was shuttling between the resistance and the convent. It was him who brought Marius his appointment at the head of the local section of the F.F.I (French resistance movement unified by de Gaulle). During these two months underground, danger was never far for Marius; one day a German sympathizer received the pamphlet from Hohatzenheim and reported it to the Germans. Soon after the Gestapo arrived in Hohatzenheim and stormed into the rectory. Marius was in the kitchen and had just the time to run to the attic. The Gestapo arrested Father Célestin, the head priest of the convent and took him away to its Strasbourg headquarters on Sellenick Street for interrogation. This location near the "Palais des Fêtes" has remained infamous for all those who such as Georges Wodli were tortured there to death. Fortunately the favorable testimony of Michel Diemer, the Bürgermeister of Mittelhausen-Hohatzenheim (Mayor in the German administration) allowed the return of the priest on bail. By an incredible turn of luck, the Gestapo did not search the convent which would have undeniably discovered the three clandestine men. It

was during one of those critical moments that Marius made a vow to Our Lady of Hohatzenheim to stay in the village after the war should he make it alive.

Liberation

On November 23, 1944 Stasbourg was finally liberated by the 2nd Armored Division of Free French General Leclerc. The next day Marius was at his window in the rectory's attic, watching the horizon with Father Célestin's binoculars. Suddenly on the road from Gougenheim he saw an American armored vehicle approaching the village. With great joy, Marius ran down the stairs screaming full heartedly through the convent: "They are coming, they are coming!!!" Hohatzenheim was about to be liberated. The neighboring village of Wingersheim would also be liberated on November 24 by a US patrol including two jeeps and an armored vehicle coming from the northern village of Waltenheim.¹



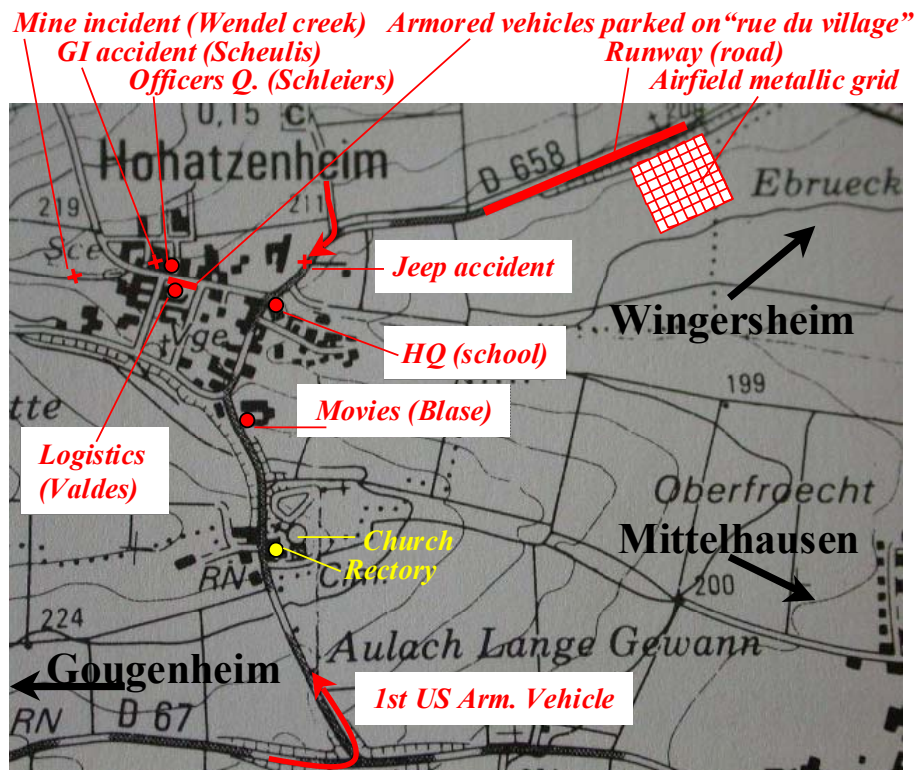
November 24, 1944: A US patrol coming from Waltenheim liberates the village of Wingersheim, 0.7 miles northeast of Hohatzenheim.

The first contacts between the Americans and the villagers were cordial, but communication appeared immediately to be a problem. None of the soldiers spoke French or German and of course no one among the Alsatians had any knowledge of English. Therefore Father Célestin acted as an interpreter by speaking in Latin to the American priest accompanying the troops! Thanks to this channel, Marius was cleared of suspicion given that the Americans typically sent away to an internment camp in Besaçon all men suspected of being German soldiers in hiding or Nazi collaborators. In fact Marius had hardly left his hiding place, and already he had to intervene at the village school where the soldiers were about the break down the door.

Of course the reunion of Marius and his family was a moment of great joy. Marius and Marie-Louise believed that they were now safe and yet one last ordeal was waiting for them. At the beginning of January 1945, the Germans launched their last wide-scale counterattack with the goal of capturing Strasbourg. Taken by surprise, the Americans were considering retreating to the Vosges Mountains leaving therefore Alsace temporarily undefended. Without any hesitation, Marius decided to immediately leave the village with his family. Under awful weather conditions, the three of them accompanied by Joseph Schneider, the future mayor, left Hohatzenheim for the town of Marlenheim located about seven miles west. Eugène Jost fearing retaliations as well disappeared for several days. Eventually, the lobbying of Strasbourg's Mayor and General De Gaulle succeeded in convincing the Americans that the region had to be defended and Marius' family would be saved for good.

In 1945, several American units passed through Hohatzenheim and its surroundings. The officers settled in the former farmhouse of the Jost family (known as the Schleiers farm). The logistics was set up at the Goetz's (Valdes farm) and the ammunitions were stored at Blase farm. The village school (which included also the mayor office) quickly became a military headquarter off-limits for all civilians. As the village teacher, Marius and his family moved back into their former apartment located on the second floor of the school building. One day, as the temperature dropped to incredibly cold levels, Marie-Louise became worried for the officers gathered in the classroom and decided to bring them a bucket of coal so that they could turn on the coal heater. Thus, with her bucket, she shyly knocked on the classroom door. An officer came out, immediately closed the door behind him and took Marie-Louise away from this sensitive spot. To the woman's surprise, he explained that they didn't need any coal. By then indeed, the US army was already equipped with gasoline heaters, a wonder never seen in Alsace before. The other American novelties which greatly impressed the villagers included the jeep of course and the military equipment but also the ball-pen, the chewing-gum, filters cigarettes, slice bread and even oranges. The Americans quickly won the reputation of great kindness, especially among the kids to whom they gave large quantities of chocolate. Four year old Simone knew that very well; she was the only French citizen who managed to break into the Yankee headquarter based in the classroom. From her expeditions there, she brought no military secret but only pockets full of chocolate. The Americans had nicknamed her "The little girl with blond hair".

From this period Marie-Louise also remembers the passage in Hohatzenheim of the Free French troops, but paradoxically these men left a less enthusiastic memory. She remembers them to be rather arrogant in their requisitions and also to "keep their chocolate for the ladies!" Nothing in common she pointed out with the kindness and respect shown by the Americans.



1945: Hohatzenheim under American occupation.

Yet, the relations between the US Army and the population were sometimes strained. One day, Marius was urgently summoned at the US Headquarters. A soldier found flame-throwers hidden in his garage. "Flame-throwers in my garage? Impossible!" he said to the suspicious officers. They all walked to the garage to check the fact. When he saw the

equipment Marius burst in laughter. The alleged weapons were in fact crop sprayers provided by the Germans and intended to destroy nothing else but beetles. At the Jost farm, the Americans left a few mixed feelings. The troops broke a bed, stole the sheets and a few “ham-legs”. In the old farmhouse there was an old coal heater. Since they had no coal, the Americans had the bad idea to load it with gasoline and to light it. The old heater exploded immediately. This was hardly a problem for the soldiers; soon afterwards they brought in a new heater found God knows where. Finding supplies and equipment was not a problem for a conquering army. Thus, Marius who had resumed his function as mayor-assistant (a task traditionally carried out by the village teacher) told the Americans that he needed a typewriter. Soon afterwards, a soldier dropped on his desk a brand new typewriter that Marius has carefully maintained to this day.

When the allies arrived in Hohatzenheim, the administration put in place by the Germans was obviously removed and Eugène Jost was appointed provisional mayor until the elections of October 7, 1945. Before and during the war, Eugène had hired two Polish couples to help him out with the farm work. The Poles left at the liberation and Eugène was now again in need of help. As the village mayor, he went to the town of Mutzig where the ally POW camp was located and requested to be entrusted with a dozen German prisoners of war (it was customary in those days to use POWs for farm work; Thus after 1940 many French POWs were used in German farms and after 1943 German POWs were sent as far as North Dakota to work in the corn fields.) Eugène was obviously seeking men with farming experience. After a few questions he quickly realized that most of the prisoners were peasants. He chosen a dozen men and distributed them among several farms of the village. He kept two prisoners for himself; Willy a young man in his twenties and Wilhelm an older soldier about 40 years old. The two Germans helped with the farm work in exchange of room and board. The prisoners were initially supposed to be gathered every night at the restaurant “Zum Burgritter” where they were to spend the night but this constraining measure was progressively forgone. One night of September 1946 a small ball was given at the restaurant and the next morning half of the prisoners escaped. Willy was among them. They stole a little food and fled in the direction of the Rhine. They crossed the river in groups of two. The last groups which included three men, was spotted by the border patrol and all three were shot. The tale was told to the Jost Family by Willy himself when he came back to Hohatzenheim several years later to visit the family. As for Wilhelm, he patiently waited for his discharge papers to go back home. Those only arrived in 1947. By then he had grown attached to 6 year old Hubert, the third of Eugène’s five sons, to whom he liked to tell stories. From Germany Wilhelm kept in touch with the family for a while.



The two German prisoners who stayed with Eugène Jost in 1945-47:

On the left: Willy (2nd from the left) in the middle of the Jost family during a visit around 1955.

On the right: Wilhelm in his Wehrmacht uniform. Willy escaped in 1946 and Wilhelm was discharged in 1947.



Let us return to the beginning of 1945 in Hohatzenheim. In addition to the headquarters located in the school and to the occupation of several farms, the local infrastructure of the US Army included a small airfield for reconnaissance planes set up on the road to Wingersheim (across from the old cross). Since the planes used the road as a runway, troops had cut off all the trees that bordered it, including the pine trees around the cross. On the same road, near the village entrance took place an accident; a US army jeep missed the turn and crashed into the ditch by the road. Unfortunately one of the three men onboard had grenades on his belt, which detonated under the choc, killing all three. The troops in Hohatzenheim had one more casualty; a GI killed himself while cleaning up his weapon. Another accident was barely avoided as children were caught playing with mines that the US Army had dumped near “Wendel” creek located a hundred yards west of the village.

In spite of these incidents, the region around Hohatzenheim was quiet during these last months of war. To entertain its troops, the US Army set up a movie room in one of the buildings of the Blasé Farm, on Church Street. At the time the farm is home of two old maids. One day, the two maids ventured out toward the movie room to see what the soldiers were watching. No one ever knew what was the Hollywood production that was playing there but it probably included some hot “Hollywood” kisses, since the next day, the two maids spread the rumor all around town that the Americans were using their building to watch pornographic movies!

I managed to find the trace of one of the American units which stayed in Hohatzenheim during this period. From February 21 to March 4, 1945, the 141st Infantry Regiment of the US 36th Infantry Division established its command post in Hohatzenheim. This regiment from Texas had initially landed in Algeria before crossing over to Italy, Corsica and in August 1944 it participated to the ally landing in Provence, in southern France. The regiment moved then north with the front, arriving in Alsace in late 1944. After the passage in Hohatzenheim, the regiment would cross the Rhine at the end of March 1945. I also found the written testimony of one of the soldiers of this unit (whose name unfortunately is not identified) which mentions the passage in Hohatzenheim:

“On the 21st of the month [of February] the French made their appearance and informed us that they were taking over our ponds and booby-traps [in the Area of Herrlisheim, near the Rhine River]. Our new destination, we learned, was the glorious rear.

For the duration of February and four days of March we trained and paraded and used our headlights at night in the country area around Hohatzenheim about ten miles in back of Brumath. The weather cleared for the most part and stayed warm. It was nice to know that a barrage shaking a hillside a few fields over was merely Charlie Company fulfilling the S-3's demand for 0930 — 1030 hours.

There were movies almost every night, and if they didn't appear or if the generator went on the bum, there were parties, beer assemblies and small jam sessions. In addition to our training during the day we were honored with the presentation of individual awards for outstanding heroism during the past periods of combat.

Probably the most unique and thoroughly enjoyable part of the interlude was the accuracy in the estimation of time allowed for these things. Most of our previous programs of rest and training were suddenly interrupted by an unexpected thrust of the Germans or a hasty full strength attack that would carry us, blankets flying and

kitchens trailing, back into the lines. But this was slated to last ten days, and happily enough it was ten full days. On schedule, March 4th, we moved into Haguenau and opened another chapter in the regiment's long history.'²

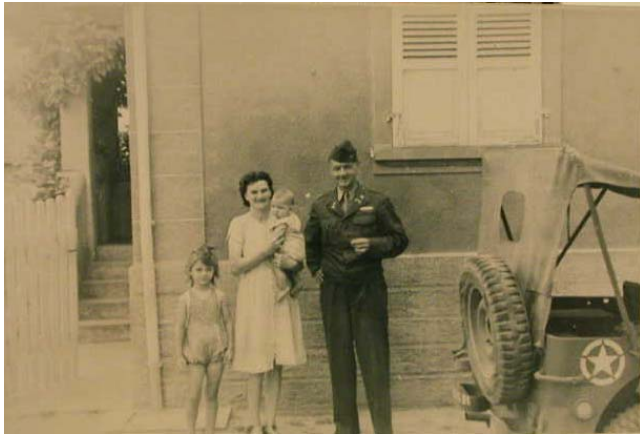
After the liberation, Marius resumed his activity at the parish, at the mayor office and at the village school. Within the county of Hochfelden he collaborated to the local office of the FFI and later to the Battalion of the Rhine Volunteers (resistance organizations.) Among other things, he was asked repeatedly by families to testify in favor of people suspected of collaboration with the Germans. During this period, his activities put him in contact with a US superior officer, Colonel Vernon Evans. Evans spoke French fluently and the two soon became friends. Evans often gave Marius a ride to Hochfelden where the US command staff for the county regularly met. Since the exact location of the meeting was classified, Evans would leave Marius at the entrance of the town and continue on alone. It was only after the war that Evans showed Marius the location where the US officers used to meet. During his visits in Hohatzenheim, Evans often had dinner at the Meyers. At one occasion Marie-Louise asked him what he would like to eat and the American officer did not hesitate a second: "Eggs! I'd like to have Fresh eggs!" Evans explained that army food was based on powder milk and eggs. During his visits Evans never forgot to spoil little Simone. At one of the dinners, he told the Meyers that along his campaigns he had seen good and bad people on both sides except for the Japanese who were all extremely cruel.

After the war Evans became General and for a while he remained stationed at the US embassy in Paris. In 1946, he came back once to Hohatzenheim to visit his Alsatian friends. He was accompanied by Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, head commander of Free France's Navy, and General Gamelin, commander in chief of the fateful 1940 campaign (Gamelin had been subsequently condemned by the Vichy regime, deported to a concentration camp in Germany and finally freed by the US Army.) This impressive party simply showed up for dinner at Marie-Louise's house! Evans was carrying a huge box of goodies for Simone. Admiral d'Argenlieu made a comment to Marie-Louise about it: "You know Mrs. Meyer, General Evans is very fond of your family. During the whole day he insisted on keeping this huge box near him, so that he could give it to your little girl." The following year, Marius went to Paris once with Simone to visit his American friend.

When he had finally returned to the US, Evans did not forget his Alsatian friends. He sent them a huge box which included clothes and shoes. Marie-Louise admitted much later to her great shame that one pair of shoes happened to be too small and that she had the nerve to mention it in her thank you letter. To her surprise a second box arrived soon after from America containing a larger pair of shoes! As years passed the families lost touch. Marius believes that Evans was sent to Korea during the 1951-53 war.

Yet, Marius and Marie-Louise never forgot their American friend and always talk with Nostalgia of the days when the Americans were in Alsace. What remains of their ordeal is an indefectible support for de Gaulle, "the Frenchman who never let Alsace down" and a special attachment to America, the country of their liberators.

This account like many others will remain as a testimony of the debt owed to America by the people of Alsace, France and Europe, so that we shall never forget.



Above: Colonel Evans stops by Ichtratzheim in 1946 to visit the Meyer family. He is here with Marie-Louise, Simone and the new born Jean-Marie.

On the right: Marius and Simone with Evans and his wife around 1947/48 in their home in Neuilly near Paris.



The duty of Remembrance

Hohatzenheim, like many other Alsatian towns paid a heavy price to the madness of that time. Thus fell on the eastern front Antoine Schneider (born in 1915), Ernest Lichtenthaler (1920), René Schneider (1921) and Joseph Kuhn (1924). Jacques Reeb (1920) fell near Aprilia in Italy on February 19, 1944, André Kuhn (1925) died suddenly at the train station of Metz, as he was returning home from captivity (early 1945). As Marius says it very well in his memoirs of this period:

“Let us not forget the unfortunate victims who lost their lives in the middle of their youth, far from their native region, and who found their burial place in a foreign land. May they rest in peace!”

Today the visitor who wanders towards the church of the pilgrimage of Hohatzenheim, will see the hundreds of ex-voto of all those who after the war wanted to thank the Madonna for her protection. The first of them to be established there after the war (on the left wall when facing the chapel of the Madonna), is the one of the three clandestine men who wanted to express in this fashion their gratitude to our Lady of Hohatzenheim. In the back of the church, on the right from the entrance, the visitor will see the hatch of one of the entrances of the underground from where in 1944 the three men heard mass. Marius of course, respected his vow and stayed in Hohatzenheim as teacher, mayor assistant, and organ player in spite of the parish abbot's offer to free him from the vow. He retired in 1977. Marius and Marie-Louise, now 86 years old, still live happily in Hohatzenheim after 64 years of marriage.

1944
Reconnaissance
à
N.D. de HOHATZENHEIM
Pour sa protection maternelle
Ses enfants
M.M. – Schaefersheim
SCH.E. – St. Louis-les-Bitche
M.J. – Marlenheim

The first ex-voto sealed in the church of Hohatzenheim was that of the three clandestine men hidden in the rectory in 1944. The text says simply: “Thank you, Our Lady of Hohatzenheim for your maternal protection. Her children Marius Meyer, Edmond Scheid and Joseph Merckel.

This paper is dedicated to my grandparents Marius and Marie-Louise Meyer, to Colonel Vernon Evans and to all the victims of this terrible war.

Based on the War Memoirs of Marius Meyer and the numerous memories of the Meyer couple gathered along the years as well as the memories of Philibert Jost, son of Eugène Jost of the S'Schleier's farm.

¹ “Eté/automne 1944 – Témoignage d’un ancien” Wingersheim Info

² “Five Years, Five Countries, Five Campaigns. . . with the 141st Infantry Regiment” First Published in Munich, Germany, 1945, by the 141st Infantry Regiment Association.”; chapter 12: “Winter in Northern Alsace” (<http://www.kwanah.com/txmilmus/36division/141con.htm>)