

## **Sample Translation**

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### **Last Paths to Freedom**

French Girl Guides in resistance to  
Nazi Germany

with an afterword by Pierre Kretz

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## **The escape route in the north**

The fourth escape route in the north is the last one to be opened up by the girl scouts of the "Équipe Pur-Sang". The routes across the High Vosges proved impassable at times during the snowy winters. And down in the valley, things are getting tight. In the Breuschtal and the Münstertal a number of escape companies are now operating. That means more risk. Because there are not only helpers along these routes, but also quite a few German informants.

A number of Alsatian priest candidates who had previously studied at the University of Freiburg are fleeing through the Münstertal valley. One day, they simply take the train that crosses the Rhine Bridge, which has connected Freiburg and Colmar near Breisach since the 14th September 1871. Shortly afterwards, they meet their escape guide in the Münstertal. Destroyed shortly before the end of the war in 1945, the Breisach railway bridge has strangely enough never been rebuilt during the decades of prosperity.

The girl scouts see the need to research a flat escape route. It should cross the Vosges as low as possible north of the mountain range and via the Lorraine taking the refugees to the railway trains heading towards freedom. So the girl scouts scout out the route over the Col de Saverne, west of Strasbourg which is only 413 metres high.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had already described the comfortable journey for travellers in a carriage over the Col de Saverne, the Zaberner Steige. Rich in words, of course. A prince of poets as a travel reporter. Goethe noted in his diary: "Illuminated by the rising sun the famous Zaberner Steige rose up before us, a work of unthinkable beauty.

Snakelike, walled up over the most fearsome rocks, leads a Chaussée, wide enough for three cars, leads uphill so quietly that you hardly feel it. The hardness and smoothness of the path, the flattened elevations on both sides for pedestrians, the stone channels for draining the mountain water, everything so clean and artificially and permanently prepared ..." In the years from 1728 to 1737, the Col de Saverne had been expanded.

In the 1940s, a railway line crossed the lowest pass and even led to the small Lorraine town of Sarrebourg. From there, it is a few hours on a level path across the fields to the small village of Landange. Antoine-Marie Krommenacker, born in 1910, lives as a teacher in the village to the south-west. The courageous and prudent man has long been a successful escape helper. How did Lucienne Welschinger get to know the marvellous village schoolteacher Monsieur Antoine? That can no longer be clarified. It probably happened through the confidential co-operation and exchange of information between the groups of escape helpers.

In Landange, a lonely place in the plain, the refugees can warm up, eat, drink and rest a little. Antoine-Marie Krommenacker takes care of this. Because of this the teacher was to be sentenced to death a year later, together with Lucienne Welschinger, at the show trial of the People's Court in Strasbourg.

The official state "Musée de la Résistance en Ligne" remembers the teacher: "He was part of an escape aid organisation and was in contact with the Strasbourg residents René Brecheisen and Lucienne Welschinger. Antoine-Marie Krommenacker was responsible for the refugee movements towards Neuville-devant-Nancy in the department of Meurthe-et-Moselle.

He was arrested by the Germans on 9th February 1942. Interned in Strasbourg; transferred to the Schirmeck camp, then again to Strasbourg. On trial as a defendant before the First

Senate of the People's Court. Sentenced to death on 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1943 for high treason. Deported to Stuttgart prison. Then to the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp, to the Schörzingen subcamp on the slopes of the Swabian Alb. Then to the Dachau concentration camp. Liberated by the US Army on 29th April 1945 and returned home to France."

From Landange, the journey continues on foot across the fields to the south into the increasingly mountainous landscape in the valley of the small river Vezouze. The destination is a small working-class town called Cirey-sur-Vezouze. The Gedenkorte-Europa portal explains: "Cirey-sur-Vezouze was the destination of fugitive prisoners of war, Jews, opposition activists and conscientious objectors from the annexed Alsace and Moselle region." At the beginning of the 1940s it was a place where it was reasonably safe to spend the night and receive the best possible care. Cirey-sur-Vezouze has, among other things a hospital and was something of a permanent staging post for those travelling across the border. Also for Résistance fighters travelling in the opposite direction to the east, into annexed Alsace.

Responsible for this in the small town of about 3.000 inhabitants is a railwayman. Emmy Weisheimer remembers well the courageous and caring man, but his name is missing from her memory. He was also responsible for transporting the refugees to the railway line to the south. "In the end, the Germans shot him dead for helping so many refugees," Emmy Weisheimer reported almost a lifetime later. Marcelle Faber-Engelen remembers the surname of the stationmaster: "His name was Roslay."

Several monuments in Cirey-sur-Vezouze today commemorate the resistance. At the gendarmerie, a plaque commemorates the murdered gendarmes Pierre Math and Pierre Haxaire. The "Stèle des Fusillés" at the shooting site in the grove lists the names of the eight men of the local Resistance killed by the Germans on 14th October 1944.

Finally, the Résistance memorial bears the names of the 47 men and women in the resistance. They were murdered during the manhunt led by the Gestapo, the Wehrmacht and the French National Socialists as part of the extermination campaign "Waldfest" in the autumn and early winter of 1944.

The first two "Guides de France" to take this new escape route from Strasbourg via Landange and Cirey-sur-Vezouze were Lucie Welker and Lucienne Welschinger.

Marcelle Engelen, the youngest member of the "Équipe Pur-Sang", was a high school graduate when she took the northern escape route to avoid being drafted into the Reich Labour Service in Germany. In 2007, the then 84-year-old wrote down in detail what she experienced as a young woman on this escape route, for her grandchildren.

"It was early January 1942, a freezing cold winter. When we arrived at the teacher's family in the village of Landange, the Krommenacker family first gave us something good to eat. Then Antoine Krommenacker took me with him to show me the landmarks for the day ahead in

the fading light of the afternoon in the direction of Cirey-sur-Vezouze. There was no path, just countryside, woodland and fields whose soil was thankfully frozen.

We set off at midnight, after a large slice of Gugelhupf and a glass or two of Vin Chaud, mulled wine. A full moon night was waiting for us outside. Marvellous. Good visibility. We were happy - to have been so well received. It gave us strength.

Just as warmly as in Landange, we were welcomed by the stationmaster Roslay and his family in Cirey-sur-Vezouze. I still remember the family's cheerful children very well. They jumped on our knees and played with us.

From Cirey, I accompanied my fugitives on a slow train to Épinal, from where our railwaymen in resistance would take them to Lyon, to freedom."

But the escape came to a halt in Épinal: "We arrived after eight in the evening, it was night. As the stationmaster in Cirey had advised us, we looked for a small shed on the large, confusing railway yard. But there were already many refugees. So I, a young woman, spent the night among 40 young men, most of whom were smoking incessantly. At least we continued the next day."

### **Survival – In whatever way**

Everyday life was full of constant hits by the National Socialist administration. In October 1940, it expelled the Jesuits from Alsace, according to the historian Marie-Joseph Bopp. Shortly after coming to power, the National Socialist administration had ordered in the leaders of the Reformed, Lutheran and Catholic churches and informed them of the end of the Napoleon Concordat of 1801. This, historian Marie-Joseph Bopp explains, meant that there would be no more subsidies for the salaries of pastors and priests, no more religious schools and theological faculties, the end of religious education at state or municipal schools. This removed the business basis for a large part of the church's day-to-day activities and presence.

The more than 1500 nuns of the community of the "Sœurs de la Divine Providence" community, the Sisters of Divine Providence of Ribeauvillé, were deprived of their religious status in October 1940, a quarter of a year after the start of the National Socialist Regime. The sisters were forbidden to continue working as primary school teachers, social workers and kindergarten teachers. This was the fate of all women's orders involved in Caritas work. The many nuns forced into unemployment do not receive a pension. The congregations of sisters now became increasingly involved in helping refugees and resisting National Socialist rule. For this, the Congregation of the Sisters of Divine Providence in Niederbronn was awarded the Order "Médaille de la Résistance" on the highest level: "avec rosette", on 24th April 1946.

The Patres of the "Frères de la Doctrine Chrétienne", who run a flourishing seminary and secondary school for young men from the countryside in Matzenheim, a so-called "priest's forge", were all deported to the Schirmeck camp and subjected to particularly brutal torture and torment. There they wear the blue rectangle on their backs, a strip of cloth from the neck to the buttocks. The blue prisoner colour is reserved for homosexuals, prostitutes, pimps and priests.

"The Nazi authorities tried to organise a series of trials against the Patres in Alsace for alleged child sexual abuse. Just as they had done in the Reich in the years before 1939," reports historian Marie-Joseph Bopp. The intention is obvious. The goal in the early 1940s is to destroy the public reputation of the hated nuns and clergy in annexed Alsace. Certainly, nothing should be confused: Of course, the National Socialist attacks, about which the historian Marie-Joseph Bopp writes, are more than 50 years removed from today's profound work of clarification and debate on sexual violence by priests and church employees in the past in the Catholic Church in France and Germany, which is becoming a question of survival.

The two theological faculties at the University of Strasbourg were immediately closed. The new "Reichs University of Strasbourg" is National Socialist through and through – and one of the suburbs of the Reich for murderous medical experiments on human beings. As "material" for this served the prisoners from the Auschwitz concentration camp and from Struthof. Meanwhile the National Socialist professor of constitutional law and "crown lawyer" of the Third Reich, Ernst Rudolf Huber (1903-1990) shined under the new professors at the so-called "National Socialist Battle University of Strasbourg". Among other things, he legally justified the "complete elimination of Judaism".

What to do with young theology students? There is no longer a place for them in Alsace. The Lutheran students move to Tübingen. Some transfer to the University of Leipzig.

The French-speaking Catholic theologians go to Clermont-Ferrand, which is located in Vichy France, while the German-speaking students go to the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. The Archdiocese of Freiburg in Baden and Hohenzollern covers all the costs. In the summer of 1941, 127 Alsatian students live at the Collegium Borromäum. This is the name of the archbishop's convent near Herrenstrasse in Freiburg, below the Schlossberg and just behind the cathedral. The local cathedral, like its larger Strasbourg sister, is dedicated to "Our Lady". In this spiritual fraternity under the sign of Mary, an unplanned, new, even friendly chapter begins between Baden and Alsace, which had been broken by Baden National Socialists such as the hard-nosed Gauleiter Robert Wagner.

The reception for the young Frenchmen on 10 October 1940 by Archbishop Konrad Gröber was warm. "There was coffee and cake afterwards," reports Alsatian church historian René Epp. In democratic elections, the National Socialists had never won a majority in the episcopal city of Freiburg, which had traditionally been dominated by the SPD and the Catholic Democratic Centre Party. After the start of the war in 1939, there were only a few local theology students left. Some were wounded in the war. Most had long since been

drafted into the Wehrmacht and were at the front. The lectures are classical and traditional in philosophy and theology. The hosts make an effort: all Alsatians, Badenians and Hohenzollerns are treated equally. No allusions to the German victory and the defeat of the French. No mockery from German theology professors or repetitors at the Konvikt against the "Wackes" (a not exactly friendly term for the neighbours on the western side of the Upper Rhine).

There are even signs of cautious sympathy, symbolic actions. René Epp reports: "On the evening of 13th July 1941, one day before the French national bank holidays, the organist improvised the ascending tone sequences of the Marseillaise melody at the end of the evening Eucharistic adoration... And on the feast day of Our Lady of Orleans Joan of Arc, the national saint of France, which was celebrated in 1941 on the second Sunday in May, the kitchen sisters at the seminary placed a bottle of wine on each of the tables of the French. Small signs of encouragement, certainly. But the young priest candidates who experienced this, remembered this in their old age."

Wednesday afternoons were time for excursions, for example to the nearby pilgrimage site of St Otilien, a popular eye saint who is venerated in Alsace and Baden alike. Or to the Schauinsland. From the 1284 metre high Freiburg's local mountain, the view glides far over the Rhine plain and the Kaiserstuhl into Alsace and France. Again and again young Alsatians disappear. With escape helpers, the theology students reach Vichy France. This loss of students caused massive problems for the rector of the convent, Wendelin Rauch. René Epp reports how the imposing, tall man Rauch pinned his Iron Cross First Class and the Iron Cross Second Class from the First World War at chest height on his cassock, visible from afar. Then he walked with an emphasized upright posture through the small episcopal town to the interrogation about the fugitives at the Freiburg Gestapo.

With firmness and diplomacy, Wendelin Rauch, later Archbishop of Freiburg from 1948 to 1954, managed to ward off most of the Nazi pressures from the young Frenchmen at the convent. Nevertheless, compromises with the state power were unavoidable. For example, the more or less perfunctory obligatory Hitler salute at the beginning of the lectures at the university. Quite a few of the students responded by shouting "three litres", thus avoiding the hated "Heil Hitler".

René Epp lists the names of the professors and tutors, who were fair, respectful and generous towards the Alsatians. Among the latter, he mentions Eugen Seiterich (1903-1958), a cousin of my father. He succeeded Wendelin Rauch as Archbishop of Freiburg in 1954. Seiterich's first trip abroad took him to the neighbouring diocese on the Upper Rhine, to Strasbourg. There Bishop Jean-Julien Weber appointed his friend as an honorary canon of the Alsatian cathedral in 1954.

In the episcopal city of Freiburg, the NSDAP had only become the strongest party in the March elections of 1933. During the Weimar Republic, the Freiburg Centre provided the Reich Chancellors Constantin Fehrenbach (1852-1926) and Joseph Wirth (1879-1956).

The latter was a fervent opponent of National Socialist ideology. After emigrating and returning home in 1949, Wirth was pushed to the fringes of political events and forced into poverty by the CDU in Adenauer's Federal Republic of Germany as he was a critic of the complete westernisation of the Federal Republic.

As the liberation of Strasbourg approached in autumn 1944, the remaining Alsatian theology students set off for home. They did not celebrate their farewells in Freiburg. The circumstances were too threatening. Until shortly before Strasbourg was liberated by the 2nd French Armoured Division on 23th November 1944, a train ran over the Rhine bridge from Kehl to Strasbourg. The young theology students used it.

All in all the young French candidates for the priesthood had a good experience during their studies in Freiburg. This has laid the foundations for one of the first bridges between Alsations and Badenens, French and Germans after the Second World War. René Epp lists the most committed among the Baden pastors: Bernard Bigott, later parish priest in Baden-Baden-Oos, Franz Huber and Helmut Ziegler, a political resister from the very beginning. The first political connections in the post-war period were made by the mayor of Colmar from 1947 to 1977, Joseph Rey, and the Freiburg CDU politician Anton Dichtel. The committed democrats knew each other from their time in prison. In the months following the assassination attempt against Hitler on 20th July 1944, both were imprisoned in Freiburg as opponents of the regime.

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