

1. Anna Maria Werner and Mathias Woehrel in the storm of the French Revolution

Jean Stiegel the soldier who traveled half way around the world to free a country that had just emerged, never had a chance to share his memories from America with his family in Kertzfeld since he never made it back. The memory of his name soon vanished and in Kertzfeld life continued as usual, difficult and full of ordeals. Francis-Joseph Werner the weaver and Elisabeth Kuhn his wife had given birth to eight children of which only three survived, Anna Maria the eldest and two younger boys. Anna Maria was born in 1782, the very year when the letter from Major Ménonville reached Kertzfeld announcing the death of a soldier of the King called Jean Stiegel. As Anna Maria was growing up in Kertzfeld like her parents before her, in Paris a revolution was overwhelming the power that the kings had held for 13 centuries. This initiative was not welcome by the other European kingdoms and in 1793 as Anna Maria Werner was entering her eleventh year, most of Europe declared war on France's revolution and the Germanic Empire, now in the hands of Austria invaded once again. France's Republic responded by major counter attacks on its borders and by heavy repression inside the country to fend off potential upheaval. Suspecting the clergy to be siding with the royalists, the new government banished priests and forbid the practice of religion. The terror spread through the French countryside faster than the plague a few centuries before. Twenty miles north of Kertzfeld was a small village of 300 souls that will become important to our story. Its name is Hohatzenheim. In 1793, its mayor, a farmer named Nicolas Blaise was denounced as a royalist and beheaded before he had time to realize what was happening to him. The abbot of Hohatzenheim was hidden in a nearby farm and only managed to escape the police by dressing as a maid. Everywhere thousands fled across France's borders to avoid the terror. Lafayette himself, the old hero of the American War of Independence, was forced to seek refuge in Austria to escape a trial for treason. In 1795, the French Revolutionary Army was victorious on all fronts and the tension diminished. Priests were allowed back and the terror ended but the country would remain at war with the rest of Europe for another 20 years.

Toward the turn of the century France which was already at odds with most of Europe, lost its last ally. In 1797 a commercial dispute between France and the United States (The US wanted to trade with France's enemies, an idea that France did not accept) made the US suspend the treaty of alliance and commerce signed in Paris almost 20 years before. The great friendship born in 1778 and sealed after the victory of Yorktown was no more. The quasi-war between the two countries would last for four years to end with a settlement in 1800. As Napoleon seized power in France and Jefferson took over the American Presidency, the relationship between the two countries would meet a new start. Jefferson was unquestionably a friend of France where he had spent five years during the 1780s as a US ambassador. In his autobiography he recalled his departure from the country he had grown to love: "I cannot leave this great and good country without expressing my sense of its preeminence of character among the nations of the earth." Jefferson was also a good friend of Lafayette and when he drafted the world's first bill of human rights he asked Jefferson for his comments. As for Napoleon, he admired America, its revolution, its republic and its idealism. In addition Napoleon saw in America the long term solution to eventually counter England, France's eternal enemy. When in 1803 the emperor of France suddenly decided to sell to Jefferson the totality of the vast territories of Louisiana for just \$15 million, he made no secret of his reason: "this ceding of land will affirm forever the

power of the United States [and give] England a naval rival who, sooner or later, will best them."

Far from these political issues, in 1807 in Kertzfeld, Anna Maria Werner now 25 years old married a day worker from a neighboring town. His name was Mathias Woehrel. Mathias was referred sometimes as a day worker and sometimes as a carpenter. It can be inferred from this that when he was not participating in the construction of the town's houses, he was offering his services as a day worker. In those days, besides feeding their families, a man's main concern was to avoid the systematic draft that took away the villages' youth. The old tricks were used more than ever; faking mental illness, creating body infections, fleeing the town, some, the most courageous, even went as far as getting married to benefit from the exemption for married men. Mathias' drafting year was 1803 as he turned 20. Yet, thanks to a fake or real incapacity he was lucky enough to avoid enlistment and now that he was married he was permanently safe. In 1810, as Napoleon was at the zenith of his might, Anna Maria Werner, wife of Mathias the carpenter gave birth to my grand-grand-grandfather Michel. Two years later, in 1812, as America was now at war with the British and saw its capital occupied by its enemies, Napoleon met his own destiny in the snows of Russia where most of his army perished. Three years later he surrendered power for good to the allies. The revolutionary experiment was over and France was imposed by the allies the return of monarchy. At the treaty of Vienna (1815), the allies decided to let Alsace remain under French control except for a small portion on its northern border which was ceded to the kingdom of Bavaria.



A typical Alsatian village (ca1900)

The return of peace did not mark the end of the ordeal for Alsatians since in 1817 famine struck once again after the disastrous harvest of 1816. This time, rather than starving to death, many of the poorest Alsatians resolved themselves to leave town and emigrate to America, which was perceived as their last resort. In Hohatzenheim, the village already mentioned which suffered much from the revolution, the school teacher Joseph Eschbach "took the risk to leave France with his father, his wife and their seven children to join rich relatives established in Philadelphia" according to the remaining records. In a neighboring town, Philip Sager, carpenter like Mathias Woehrel, declared that he owned a house but was no longer able to support his family with his work and that his last resort was to sell that

house and leave for America where he would be able to make better use of his skills. Unfortunately Mathias Woehrel could not afford as much. He had to survive with his family just where he was. Out of the nine children the couple begot, five of them did not reach the age of thirty.

2. Michel Woehrel and Madeleine Denys in a time of struggle and emigration

In 1824, Michel son of Mathias the Carpenter was 14 years old. That year the old Marquis de Lafayette returned to America at the invitation of President Monroe. He traveled in all of the then 24 states where he was welcome in 182 towns. Everywhere Lafayette was acclaimed. He finally left the country in 1825 with rich memories and outstanding gifts (the congress had voted for him a grant of \$250,000 and 36,000 acres in Florida.) In Kertzfeld however, life was far from glamorous. For Michel it was time to learn a craft. Departing from his father carpentry, he decided to return to the old family tradition of weaving. Yet, if the old traditional craft of weaving flax was still common to make sheets and cloth for the family use, Great Britain had initiated its industrial revolution by spreading throughout Europe cotton products made in its mechanized workshops. In France, mechanized weaving looms started to appear in great numbers in the Northern and Parisian regions, in Normandy, and in Alsace. There, cotton was in great demand. It was in this context that in the villages of Alsace, many craftsmen such as Michel Woehrel started to spin cotton to feed this new booming industry. Like his father, Michel worked on a seasonal basis as confirmed by his status of daily worker.

In 1827, a new forest code enters into effect drastically limiting the ancestral habits for the poor to take advantage of the forest resources in terms of dry wood, dry leaves, and fruit. This measure hurt the poorest and sparked an increase of the flow of emigrants to America. Later, early immigrants called on to their relatives to join them and soon a massive wave of immigration spread throughout Alsace that lasted until 1837. In the counties that lost the most people the exodus typically involved between 200 and 1100 people per county which amounted to a few percent of that's counties population. Some villages would eventually lose up to 30% of their population.



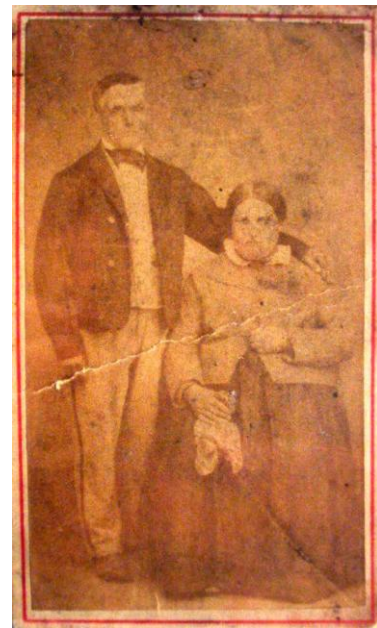
Alsatian emigrants by Théophile Schuler (1861)

In 1830, Michel was 20 years old and as such he was up for the military draft. After Napoleon's defeat the draft was no longer mandatory for all. Instead, a lottery was put place to designate each year the young men of 20 years of age that would be chosen to fill the army quotas. These men had to serve for a period of six years. Michel unfortunately, drew an unlucky number and he had to serve his term in the 59th Infantry Regiment. In 1834, while Michel was in the army, 25 miles south of Kertzfeld, a boy was born that would one day become famous as the father of an important symbol of Franco-American friendship, as we shall see later. His name was Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi. In 1837, as the wave of immigration to America waned, Michel returned from the army and resumed his former life in Kertzfeld. In 1839 he married Madeleine Denys, a girl from the town with whom he would have six children.

3. Theresia Denys, the Entrepreneurial One-Eyed Aunt

Michel's wife Madeleine had an older sister called Theresia. Theresia was born in 1797 and had left Kertzfeld in her twenties to set up shop 6 miles to the north is the village of Schaeffersheim. There, she opened a small deli business. This business grew quickly and soon she became wealthy by local standard. She bought a house from a local peasant, a veteran of Napoleon's "Grande Armée" who had taken part in the fateful Campaign of Germany in 1813 (his rifle was found in the house's attic a century and a half later by my great uncle and is still in the family). Thérésia hired a maid, she ordered from a local tailor an expensive hat with lace and even had her portrait painted by a local artist (the hat and the portrait painted around 1830-40 are now in my mother's living room.) Thérésia was a strong and heavy woman that knew what she wanted. At some point she lost an eye because the census of 1851 described her as "one-eyed". Yes, this lack of physical attraction did not keep her from marrying. In 1837 she married Martin Huck a servant at a local farm. A few years later, the two had their picture taken through one of the early photo processes called salted paper technique.

Meanwhile in the 1840s Alsace met another crisis. In 1846-48, a disease affecting potatoes created a huge famine across Europe. This famine so famous in Ireland touched Alsace as well where inflation soon skyrocketed. In Kertzfeld the daily workers who were already in dire straights were dying in great numbers. Michel who had just lost two siblings now lost his old parents as well. As during the previous crisis, the dream of America reappeared and the candidates to emigrate grew drastically. Among the most famous recruiter of potential immigrants was Henri Castro who had obtained a land grant in Texas from Sam Houston and the Texan government. Castro was especially successful in recruiting Alsatians and his first ship of colonists arrived in Texas in 1843. They founded the town of Castroville in 1844 and in 1846-47 Castro founded three other settlements in Texas. Authorities in Alsace were so alarmed by the loss of population that they attempted to sue Castro, but to no avail.



Theresia Denys (born in 1797) and Martin Huck in Schaeffersheim (ca1850)
picture taken according to the salted paper technique popular in the 1840-50s

4- The struggle for Survival of the Woehrel children

In 1852, Frédéric Bartholdi the young Alsatian born in 1834, set up his first workshop in Paris as an artist in sculpture and architecture. He would soon become a master in the design of monuments. In December of the same year in Kertzfeld Michel Woehrel died prematurely at the age of 42. His wife Madeleine was left alone to support a family of 6 children. She was a daily worker probably spinning cotton like her late husband. Soon the oldest daughter, Elisabeth was sent to Aunt Theresia in Schaeffersheim where in 1856, at the age of 16 she was working as a maid. By 1861, Madeleine's second daughter called Madeleine like herself was 19 years old and contributed to feed the family. She had also managed to place her third daughter, 16 year old Caroline, in a family probably also as a maid. So, the mouths to feed were now limited to 14 year old Julie, the 12 year old twins Joseph and George and the grandfather. In 1863 Madeleine Denys the widow of Michel Woehrel finally passed away at the age of 53. The remaining children had therefore to be sent away. 14 year old George was sent to the family Aunt Theresia who in fact passed away the same year while 16 year old Julie was hired as a maid by a rich merchant called Dérivaux who had a store in downtown Strasbourg.

In these difficult years, in spite of Michel and Madeleine Woehrel premature deaths, all of their children had managed to survive, thanks in great part to the help of Aunt Thérésia. In 1865, two years after Theresia's death, Elizabeth who had been working as maid in her aunt's deli for 10 years married a baker, Joseph Binnert. Since Theresia's widower Martin Huck was now 61 years old and childless he gave the deli business to the couple who turned it into a bakery. Elizabeth little brother George was now 16 years and he learned the bakery business with his uncle. As the business grew, Joseph Binnert bought land around the village.



"America" by 28 year old Frédéric Bartholdi (1862)

5- The Franco Prussian war

While the children of Michel survived as they could, the tension on the Rhine, the old border between France and Germany, was slowly rising again. Prussia's power was growing fast thanks to a systematic annexation of all German kingdoms and provinces. In 1866 the Germans had won a decisive battle against Austria for the supremacy of Central Europe and now German imperialism was once again eyeing beyond the Rhine in hope of recuperating the former German Provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. Emperor Napoleon III of course did not appreciate the danger of German power and was still entertaining illusions about France's former military might. Thus, both countries started to rearm.

In 1864, Julie Woehrel was likely working as a maid in Strasbourg. She could not guess that her future husband, Laurent Knobloch would be up for the draft lottery. Unfortunately for him, like Michel Woehrel before him, Laurent drew an unlucky number, the number 138 to be precise, and therefore he was supposed to complete a period of five years of military service. Yet he was exempted, probably on the basis that as the oldest son, his work was supporting his family (his younger brothers were 11, 7, 4 and 2 years old). Laurent probably thought then that that he had escaped the army for good. Unfortunately for him, in 1868, under the pressure of mounting tension with Germany, a new law was enacted assigning all men who had drawn an unlucky number and who had previously been exempted from military service to be placed in a reserve status for a period of eight years. Suddenly Laurent was back on the hook for a potential call to war until 1872. At the beginning of 1870, France and Germany were on the verge of war. In June, the army started to call back into service men from the reserve and sure enough that year Laurent was called to duty.

Laurent Knobloch is an important character in the history of the family since we owe him the oldest family memories. Before him only facts are known, written in town and parish records. From Theresia a few artifacts have traveled in time to us, but with Laurent it is actual memories that were preserved to this day. Laurent told his memories to his grand child Marius who in turn told them to his grandchild, me. When Laurent was called to duty in 1870, he was told to present himself at the garrison of Lille in Northern France where he would be assigned to a regiment. In those days such a distance (320 miles) represented a long train ride and for Laurent it was his first trip outside of Alsace. When he finally arrived at the garrison in Lille he likely underwent a basic medical exam that declared him fit to serve. Yet when he arrived in the uniform room he was in to a big surprise. The clerk noticed that there was no uniform left in his size (he was relatively big). Laurent was asked if he wouldn't mind being exempted for the second time from military service. My grand-grand-grandfather accepted hastily and before he realized it he was on his way home.

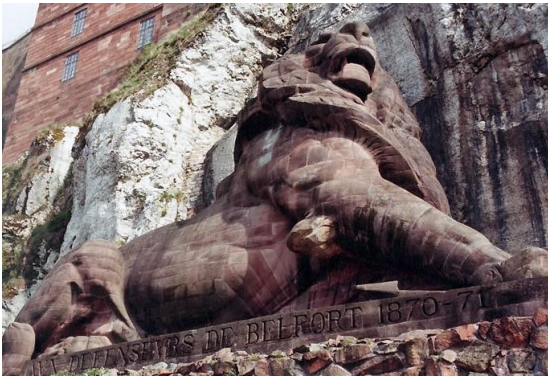


Laurent Knobloch and Julie Woehrel in 1916 in front of their farm in Schaeffersheim. Julie would die the following year.

In July 1870 Napoleon III finally gave in to one of German Minister Bismarck's provocations and declared war on Germany. Yet France's army was totally unprepared to face the powerful Prussian forces and in one month Napoleon was defeated. In Paris, a

government was constituted that declared the end of the empire and the birth of the Third Republic. The government then decided to continue the fight against Germany. Frédéric Bartholdi, the Alsatian artist-architect wanted to contribute to the protection of his dear native region. He first joined the national guards where he was appointed officer before entering in the staff of General Garibaldi and finally ending as a government agent. As the Prussians continued their advance, Strasbourg was besieged for almost two months during which it was struck with 193,000 shells from the German artillery. Finally the town surrendered and the region was occupied. It is not clear if Julie Woehrel was still in Strasbourg during that ordeal. What is known is that she survived and when the war ended she resumed her work in Strasbourg, which by then had turned to ruins.

The war ended in January 1871 with the signature of an armistice that sealed German's victory. The prize for Germany was Alsace and a portion of Lorraine. From then on Alsatians would be German. Those who were not happy with this fact could emigrate to France, to the Algerian colony or to the United States. Bartholdi was greatly saddened by the loss of his native land. As a consequence he decided to leave his bad memories behind and travel to America. Before he left he said to a friend: "I will fight for freedom, I will call on to the Free nations. I will work at glorifying the republic over there [in America], until the day when it will return to my homeland [Alsace]." As he entered the harbor of New York he had an artistic vision and imagined "liberty lighting the world". It would take years for his project to ripen.



Bartholdi was deeply saddened by the loss of his native province to Germany. The "Lion of Belfort" which commemorates the resistance of Belfort to the German invasion, "Switzerland tending to the misery of Strasbourg" and "the border post" are among the numerous statues that Bartholdi devoted to this reminiscent theme.

6- "The Malediction of Alsace" and "Liberty lighting the world"

For most Alsatians the new German rule over the province did not mean much. In spite of their attachment to the French way of life and to their patriotism born from the respect that the French government had always shown the province, the culture and the language of Alsace were Germanic and therefore adapted well to the new Reich. The only significant change for Alsatians lay in the heavily authoritarian regime that had had no equivalent in France since the days of the revolution. This change required some adjustment. Thus Laurent Knobloch who was a true admirer of Napoleon III could not forgive the French emperor for having made such an obvious mistake by declaring war on Germany. "he

should never have done that.” Laurent often repeated. As for the Alsatians exiled on the other side of the Vosges mountains, they thought with nostalgia about their lost homeland, that lay on the other side of the “blue line of the Vosges”. In 1872, Bartholdi designed a powerful sculpture called “The malediction of Alsace.” The same year he made another Statue for the French community of New York called “Lafayette arriving in America” (now in Union Square) and meant to thank the city of New York for its help to Paris during the siege of 1870.

In Schaeffersheim life continued as before. In December 1873, Elisabeth Woehrel, the wife of the baker gave birth to a boy. Unfortunately the birth did not go well and within a few days both the mother and child were dead. In those days families were not only the result of a love story; more practically it was also an economic entity on which rested the survival of all. With the death of his wife Joseph Binnert must have been in real need of help because within 6 months he was married to Elisabeth’s little sister Julie, who was recalled in haste from Strasbourg where she was still working as a maid. She would then replace her sister in the family bakery.

In 1875, on the other side of the border, in France, Bartholdi and some friends created the Committee of Franco-American Union whose purpose was to lobby the French government for the financing and construction of a symbol of Franco-American Friendship. For some time the French government had wanted to offer to America a powerful gift that would commemorate the alliance of the two countries during the War of American Independence. Bartholdi and his group would provide the medium for such a project. Thus, the Alsatian sculptor started to work on his “liberty lighting the world”. The same year he presented a fountain at the Philadelphia exhibition. This monument would finally be erected in Washington.

In 1876 Joseph Binnert the baker died. It was now his wife Julie Woehrel that needed help to operate the bakery. The same year the hand and the torch of Bartholdi’s “Liberty lighting the world” were exhibited in Philadelphia. As a model for the arm of the statue, Bartholdi chose his wife Jeanne Émilie.



The Hand and the Torch of Liberty at the 1876 Philadelphia exhibition. Standing in the torch is Bartholdi himself.

As in Paris the “light of the world” was slowly taking shape, in Alsace a small spark was warming Julie Woehrel’s heart. She was a 29 year old widow, probably married out of need rather than love. Yet, now she had just met a young man at a local fair. This man had written a beautiful love letter to her and now she was in love. She found this letter so beautiful that she promised herself to keep it forever (indeed it remained in the family for almost a century until a careless aunt destroyed it). Unfortunately this young man named Laurent Knobloch

lived in a village 15 miles to the south of Schaeffersheim. Thus, to see each other every week Julie would walk six miles to the south to the town of Benfeld while Laurent would meet her there by walking 9 miles to the north. After Laurent's military escapade, The dating days of Julie and Laurent are the second powerful family memory that passed on to this day. In 1877, Laurent and Julie were married and Laurent moved to Schaeffersheim.

7- Julie Woehrel and Laurent Knobloch farmers in German Alsace

Laurent Knobloch was a farmer, from a long line of farmers. He knew nothing about the bakery business. With a little investment and thanks to Joseph Binnert's land purchases, the bakery was converted into a farm. In 1878, the couple welcomed the birth of a boy that they named Leo. The same year Bartholdi presented at the World Exhibition in Paris the Head of his "Liberty". The faced is said to have been modeled after his mother Charlotte. In 1880, Bartholdi completed his "Lion of Belfort" to commemorate Belfort's stubborn resistance to the 1870 Prussian invasion (even the Germans acknowledged the courage of the people of Belfort and allowed this southernmost piece of Alsace to remain French.) After that, Bartholdi would focus exclusively on his "Liberty." It his clear from the different pieces that he completed during this period that the passion and the energy that the Alsatian sculptor put in the "Liberty lighting the world" was fueled by the sadness and the nostalgia for his lost homeland. The symbolism of the statue was meant to give him comfort and hope for better days; Bartholdi would be the first to be comforted by his "liberty" before millions of immigrants after him who once entered the New York harbor.



The face of Lady Liberty is modeled after Bartholdi's mother Charlotte (center picture). On the right "Liberty lighting the world" undergoes final assembly in Paris before its one-way journey to America.

In 1881, Julie Woehrel gave birth to a girl called Maria Elisabeth and in 1883 to another girl called Josephine. A few months later in 1884 Bartholdi's "Statue of Liberty" was completed and on July 4, it was officially offered to the United States Ambassador in Paris. It was then disassembled in 350 pieces and shipped to New York aboard the frigate "Isère". The statue was inaugurated in New York by president Grover Cleveland on October 28, 1886.

In 1896, Leo was sixteen years old. He suddenly fell very sick to the point that his life was in danger. During this difficult time the boy made a vow the Virgin Mary. He promised to build her a shrine should he ever recover. He finally did recover and as promised, he had a shrine

built by the road outside Schaeffersheim. The shrine is still visible today. Two years later, Leo left for Germany where he completed his two year military service. By 1900 he was back on the farm. As a proud German citizen he had completed his duty to the Vaterland. In 1904, Bartholdi died in Paris. Even though his Liberty had been lighting the world for twenty years, he would never see the liberation of his dear homeland that was by now fully integrated into the authoritarian German Reich.

8- Josephine Knobloch and Joseph Meyer in the whirlwind of the First World War

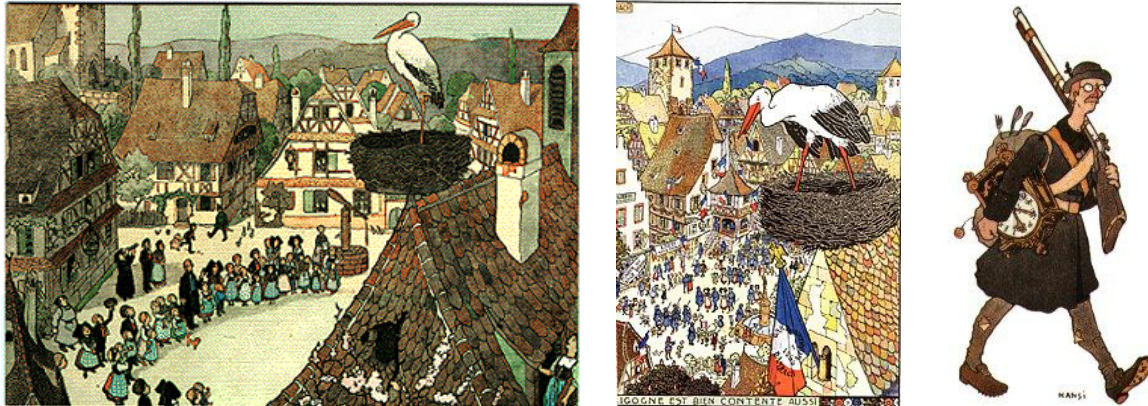
In 1906 Josephine Knobloch married Joseph Meyer, the son of a local farmer. It just so happened that her sister Maria Elisabeth, married Joseph Meyer's brother Charles. Thus the two families became relatively close. In 1907, Josephine and Joseph gave birth to a girl called Léonie and in 1909 to a boy named Achilles. By then Joseph was working as mechanic in a local car factory. Leo was therefore alone at home helping his parents on the farm. In 1914, the war was declared between France and Germany and both Leo and Joseph were drafted to defend the Reich. Joseph was sent to the Western Front in the Vosges mountains while Leo was sent on the eastern front to battle the Russians, via the antique city of Koenigsberg (now Kaliningrad). At home the women had to get organized to handle the farm work. By then Laurent was already 70 years old. Joseph spent all the war on the Western front. Sometimes he could come home on leave. In 1917, Josephine gave birth to a third child that she named Marius. That same year America entered the war on the side of France and England. As they landed in France the American Soldiers chanted "Lafayette, here we are!" As the Americans were now joining the fight to free Alsace from German authoritarianism, Leo Knobloch and Joseph Meyer were on the other side, fighting like ordinary German citizens. Laurent Knobloch in his days had considered himself French, loyal subject of Napoleon III. Yet for Leo and Joseph, France was a foreign land, a vague recollection in their fathers' memories. In fact deep down, they never really had strong opinions about who should control their province; in the end, they simply wished to be left in peace.



Left: Joseph Meyer (first from the right) in Belval, Vosges mountains in 1915. Center: Leo Knobloch during his military service (1898-1900). Right: in 1915 the three sisters of Joseph Meyer, Elisabeth, Antoinette and Josephine replace their brothers drafted in the army in the field work.

In the east, Leo Knobloch, now close to 40 years old built himself an outstanding reputation because he was often volunteering for dangerous missions with commando units. Yet he was not an adventurer; he was shy, good and just couldn't say no. At the end of 1917, the Russians revolutionaries settled with Germany and as a consequence the Eastern German

forces were moved to the Western front. Leo was sent to the Vosges where he was assigned to a logistics unit. Both Joseph and Leo participated in the campaign of 1918 until the ultimate collapse of the German government. When it was all over, and the allies had won, Alsace was returned to France and the French troops made a triumphant entry into Strasbourg and in all the surrounding villages. As for Leo and Joseph, they came back from the war safe and sound and simply returned to their business as if nothing had changed. They were now too old to learn French but it wasn't a problem since in those days everyone spoke Alsatian throughout the province. Alsace was free at last, the democratic laws of the would be bright and finally peaceful.



After the war, cartoonist Hansi became famous for his cartoons praising the return of Alsace to France and making fun of the “dumb” Germans (right). On the above pictures are represented Hansi’s village before and after the liberation with the stork, one of Alsace’s symbols. Hansi soon became a symbol of Alsace itself.



Cartoons from Hansi representing “L’Alsace Heureuse” (happy Alsace) after 1918.