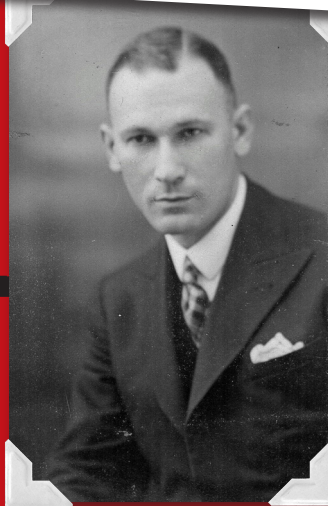


An Extraordinary Odyssey:

One Man's Fight to **Stay Free**

during World War II



Herbert
Schweich,
1939

by DIANE EVERMAN

The three of them stood at the guard booth in St.-Laurent—45-year-old Herbert Schweich, his wife, Henriette (unwell and prone to nervous breakdowns and outbursts, especially at Germans), and little seven-year-old Marlene (also known as Dedee). They boldly approached the German lieutenant on duty and asked for a pass to cross into the French Free Zone for “a few hours.” Speaking in German, Herbert told the guard that his 80-year-old mother in nearby St. Pierre was very ill, and they hadn’t seen her in months. Dedee wanted, indeed needed, to see her grandmother before she died. Of course, they didn’t have a permit from the German garrison headquarters to cross. The guard unexpectedly turned to Dedee and asked if she loved her grandmother. The little girl, whether from anxiety and fear or from the truth of the statement, suddenly burst into tears. The tension was palpable. The lieutenant slowly pulled out his watch. The time was 11:45 a.m. He told them that they could go if they were back by 2:00 p.m. The German took their identity cards (not a problem, they were forged anyway), saying he would give them back upon their return as he turned to lift the gate. Could it be that they were really going to be a complete family again, and free? Or would they suddenly be shot in the back? Slowly, the three walked out of the guard booth and crossed the demarcation line. The French guard on the other side greeted them—in French!—and opened the gate. They replied and just kept walking, ever fearful that they would be caught, that the Germans would realize that it was all a lie.

How did it come to be that this small Jewish family made it into Free France?

So, what brought the Schweich family to this point in the spring of 1941? How did it come to be that this small Jewish family made it into Free France? And how did they find themselves in St. Louis after the war with very few people knowing of their heroic past?

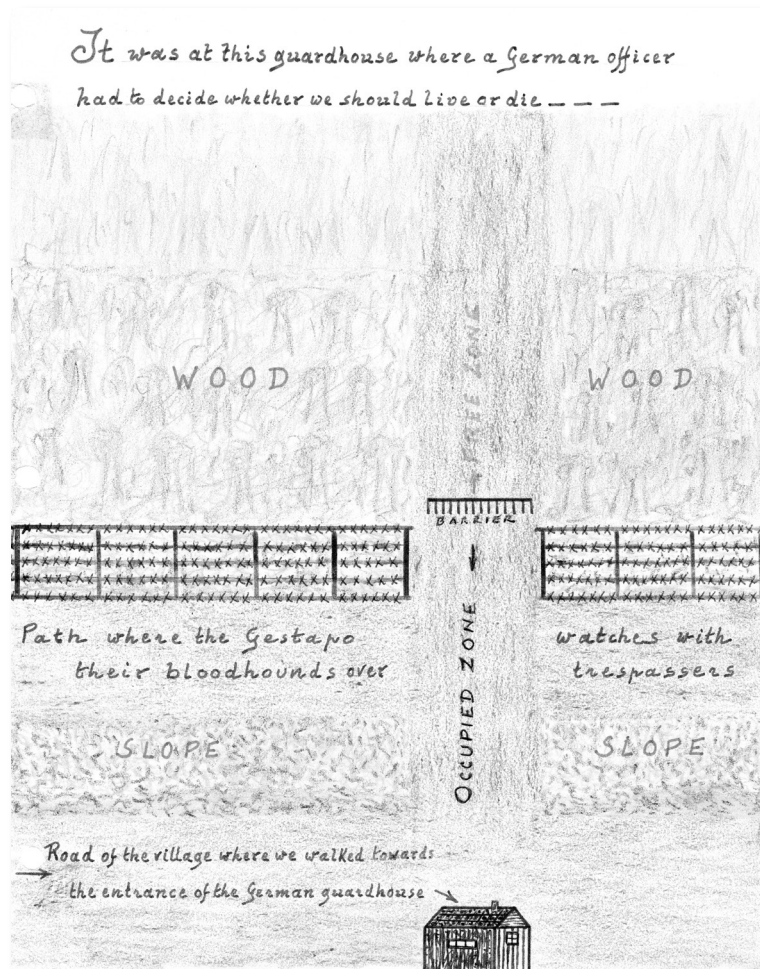
To answer these questions, it is necessary to go back to 1939, when the people of Alsace and Lorraine became the first victims of the German invasion into France. The Schweichs lived in Strasbourg, having moved there from a small Lorraine town right

after the Great War. Herbert and Henriette were married in August 1931, and daughter Marlene was born in 1934. Herbert and his father owned a small store that specialized in ladies' dresses, fine hosiery, and haberdashery. The family lived in a nice apartment with lots of space and toys for baby Dedee. Residing that close to the border with Germany, however, meant that they were acutely aware of the military build-up on the other side. In August 1939 the area became a "theatre of operations" and all civilians had to evacuate within

48 hours. Luckily, Herbert had withdrawn all his funds from the bank on the first of the month. Thus, they left their home with a few suitcases full of necessities, never to return. Because they had their own money, the family opted to go to Baccarat rather than to one of the locations provided by the French government.

Two days later, Herbert, who had served in World War I, went to the French recruiting office to enlist once again in the service of his country. Too old for the regular forces (he was 41 at the time) but believed to be of help to the military anyway, he was accepted—but not to serve in his beloved France. Instead, in February 1940 Herbert Schweich found himself in Marrakech, in the French Foreign Legion. He, and others of his age, were sent to North Africa to enable younger men in the Legion to return to France to serve in the regular military. To say the least, this was not what he had expected. But if it served his country, he would do it. After all, his family was safe away from the military zone.

Unlike in the movies and popular fiction of the day, service in the Legion was not glorious. In North Africa, heat was the primary enemy, although the dislike and harassment of the new men as well as the drunken debauchery of many of the Legionnaires was an equal problem. Receipt of news from France was delayed, but even in Marrakech they learned of the Germans marching into Paris in June of 1940, the armistice just days away, the cease fire, and then the partition of France into



Drawing by Schweich of where the family crossed in St.-Laurent. (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)



French Foreign Legionnaire Herbert Schweich, stationed in Marrakech, 1940. (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)



Herbert Schweich's new (forged) identity card in the name of Henri Savet. (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)

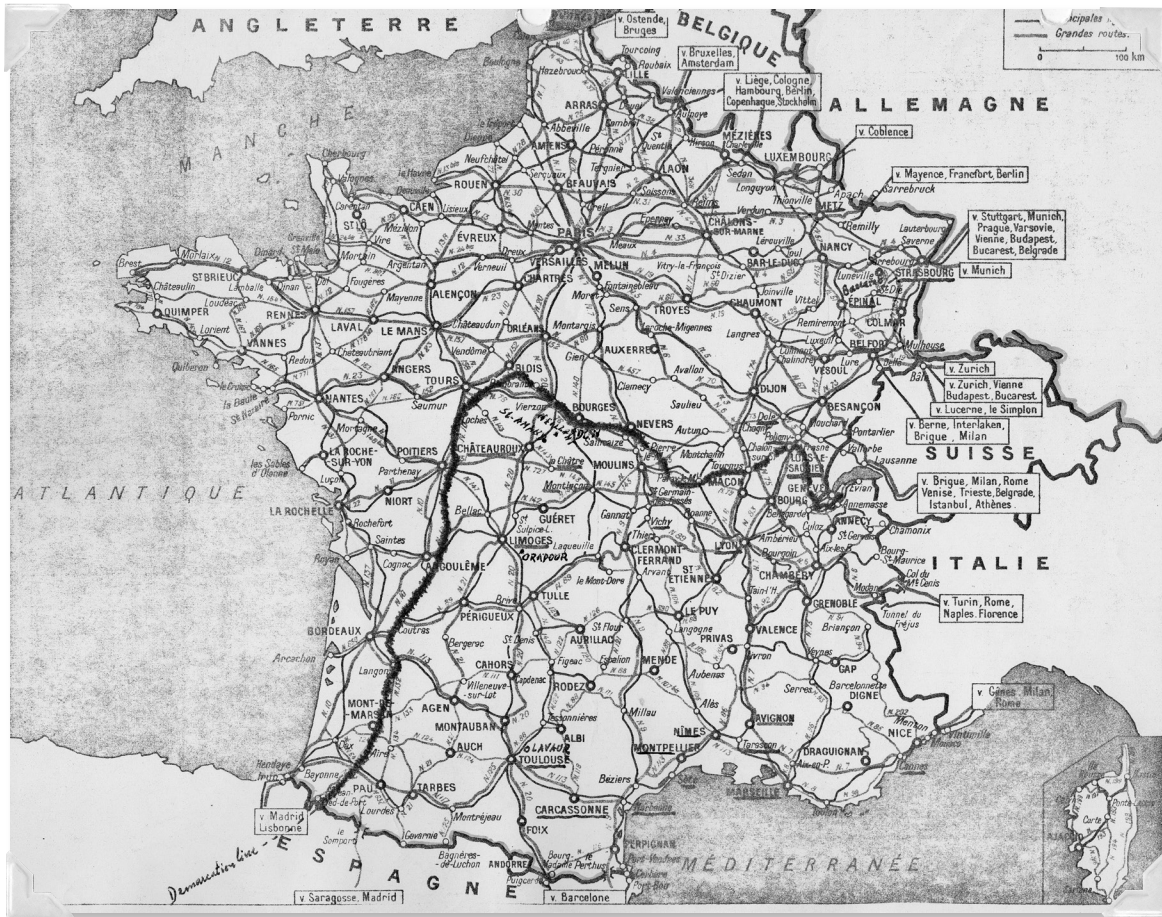
occupied and unoccupied zones. Slowly the Legionnaires were demobilized, and finally, in October, Herbert was discharged and could go home. Unfortunately, Baccarat, where his family lived, was under German occupation. Those Legionnaires who lived in the Occupied Zone were sent elsewhere, while those in the Free Zone could return to France. Luckily, Schweich's brother-in-law was in Lavour, under Vichy control.

In 1940 about 300,000 Jews were living in France. Approximately half that number were actual French citizens, with around 30,000 of them having come from Central Europe the previous decade and become naturalized citizens.

Two weeks after he left Marrakech, Herbert was a civilian once again, living in Lavour with a small monthly allowance, a bed with a straw mattress, and two blankets. He made friends immediately with Mr. and Mrs. Fidele and their son, Andre, and Mrs. Fidele's parents, the Escribes, a friendship that would last throughout the rest of their lives. But Herbert's wife and daughter, who he hoped were still alive, were miles away in a town under German control. So, he made a plan to cross into the Occupied Zone, retrieve his family, and get them to the safety of Lavour.

Through contacts, he found out the name of a town on the demarcation line and a place (the Café de la Paix) where he was to ask for "the captain." This man

would assist him in obtaining ID papers, contacts, and escorts. Thus, in late January 1941 Herbert Schweich boarded a train heading north to Lons-le-Saunier, a town close to the demarcation line. There he found the café, and after waiting until most had left, he approached the bartender to ask about seeing "the captain," who had also served in WWI. He was helping many individuals who, oddly enough, were trying to get into the Occupied Zone. It wasn't long before Herbert received his new identity papers—he was now Henri Savet (good that the initials were the same)—and information was conveyed about when and where to find the *passseur's* house to get him across the line. The only problem was that he also needed a new identity card for his wife, and he had no photograph of her.



Map on which Schweich marked the demarcation line that separated the Occupied Zone (north) from the Free Zone (south). (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)

After trying several photographers in the town, all of whom were “patriots” and willing to help, he still hadn’t found an image of a woman who looked like his wife. Strolling the streets in desperation, he saw a woman ahead who looked just like her! He followed her, trying to work up the nerve to ask her for a photo. The woman obviously realized she was being stalked, ran into a house, and slammed the door. Knowing she was his best chance, Herbert knocked on the door, only to be greeted by a large man who promptly punched him in the face and closed the door. Luckily, another photographer in a town nearby had an image of a woman

who looked enough like Henriette for it to work.

That evening Herbert found himself at the *passer*'s location with about 50 other individuals, all waiting to cross the next morning. Unfortunately, word soon came that a French traitor had given up the contacts on the other side of the line. They had nowhere to go, so the trip was postponed. Throughout the night, individuals and families slowly drifted away, losing their nerve to undertake such a dangerous crossing. By morning, only about half remained. A new person and place in the Occupied Zone had been secured so the trip was to go ahead—but in three days. Thus,

on January 28, 1941, only 18 people remained—10 men (including Herbert and a 90-year-old), four women, two children, and two babies. They had to walk 10 miles, eight of which were through the woods, arriving at the demarcation line before dawn. They were wet, muddy, and extremely cold. Before them loomed the barbed wire line with twelve German guards patrolling on bicycles on the other side. The patrols came through every 10 minutes. The *passer* told them they had six minutes maximum to get through the wire, cross the road, traverse the meadow, and get safely into the trees beyond. They were to go in small groups, and if one

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stumbled or was caught, they would all be caught.

Herbert was in the first group along with a woman and her baby. He carried the baby and took off running when the *porteur* said go. They made it to the trees in plenty of time, as did many others. However, the 90-year-old man was having great difficulty crossing the meadow, and time was slipping by. Out of nowhere, the smuggler came up behind him and literally pushed/carried the elderly man to the tree line. They had done it; they were now in the Occupied Zone, a place most were trying to get out of. They all met at the rendezvous location, cleaned up as best they could, and went their separate ways. Herbert, unlike the others, however, needed to talk again to the *porteurs* to arrange how to get back across the line. He estimated that they

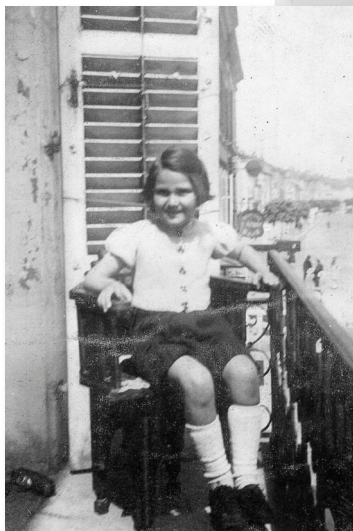
would be back in three weeks at most. He boarded a train for Baccarat and promptly fell asleep, only to be awakened by the sound of male voices speaking German. Opening his eyes, he found he was surrounded by German soldiers and officers. Fearing the worst, he closed his eyes again and pretended not to understand what was being said. Strangely enough, he fell asleep again, waking the next time to find the train car filled with French farmers.

After not having seen his family for 17 months, he stood before their house in Baccarat. Slowly, he opened the door only to find it occupied by German soldiers and prostitutes! Locating his former landlady, he found that after the Germans had requisitioned the family's apartment, she had found another one for Henriette and Marlene. And although the

Germans had begun deporting Jews, no one had turned his family in—yet. But she warned Herbert that his wife had suffered terribly. A drunken German soldier had accidentally injured Henriette when he furiously bayoneted the door while trying to get into the apartment. Since then, his wife hadn't left the apartment, leaving little seven-year-old Marlene to not only go to school but also to do the shopping, cleaning, and looking after her mother. Henriette's nervous condition was so bad that she didn't communicate much and often yelled out rude things whenever she heard that fearful sound of German boots.

Many things caused Herbert's planned three-week stay in Baccarat to turn into 12 weeks, with the journey becoming more perilous for the family daily.

Marlene (Dedee) in 1940 in Baccarat. (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)



Sweich later marked this photograph showing the demarcation line at Lons-le-Saunier which he, and others, crossed with the assistance of the *porteur*. (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)

While the family was now “safely” in Free France, the war was far from over.

Finally, arrangements were made, Henriette was well enough for him to convince her to leave the house, and in April they left for the train station with their forged identity cards. When they got to the appropriate café to contact the *passeur* to go back across the demarcation line, they found that things had changed greatly. Now the Gestapo patrolled the line with bloodhounds, and most of the *passeurs* had been killed, caught, or stopped working. Everyone they spoke with about crossing told them the same thing—don’t do it, it’s too dangerous, and go back to Baccarat. But Herbert Schweich didn’t see that as an option. Luckily, a kindly farmer who had stopped into the café told them that there was a crossing in the nearby town

of St.-Laurent where a certain hotelier might help them.

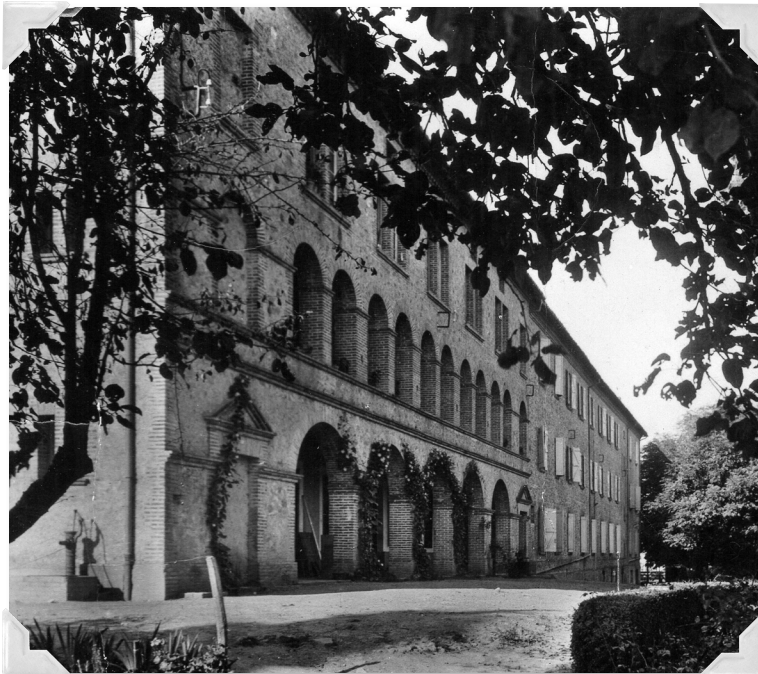
Not only was St.-Laurent a possible crossing point, but because of its location, it was also the site of a German garrison, about a half mile from the demarcation line. A permit was needed to cross into the Free Zone from this headquarters. People did it all the time, farmers and merchants among them, but not a small Jewish family. Then, Herbert had an inspiration.

Because he spoke German fluently, he would just go to the garrison and ask for the permit. The hotelier thought he was crazy, and perhaps he was. Thus, Herbert Schweich found himself inside the German garrison headquarters where he told the commanding officer a story about

his ill 80-year-old mother in St.-Pierre. The officer tried many things to trick Herbert, including asking questions about his ability to speak German and about Cologne, where Schweich said he had learned the language. In the end, the officer told him he had to have a signed statement from the local mayor to get the permit. That was not going to happen. This was the situation that had brought the family to the guard house where they crossed the border.

While the family was now “safely” in Free France, the war was far from over. After arriving back in Lavaur in the Free Zone, Herbert had his wife examined by a doctor, found a school for Marlene, brought his mother from the city of Vichy to live with them, and enjoyed the company of his good friends—the Escribes and Fideles. Unfortunately, in 1942 the Germans occupied all of France. The Schweichs, along with other Jews in what had been Free France, had to register with the police and wear the yellow star (which Herbert burned immediately upon returning to their modest home). Rationing was imposed, and along with it came a thriving black market. Most of all there was fear: fear of being deported or killed. Once again, Herbert had to design a plan for survival.

The nearby Convent of Massac-Sean, five miles away, admitted Marlene for free and recorded her under the name Madeleine Wendel, parents unknown. The convent even allowed Herbert’s mother, Emma, to live with an associated farm



Convent of Massac-Sean where the nuns admitted Marlene under the name Madeleine Wendel, parents unknown. (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)

LAVAU
Place de la Halle



- x The house where we lived
- o The warehouse of the grocery store
- F The grocery store
- K My escape through this street



← THE MARKET-HALL

Locations in Lavour associated with Herbert's escape from the local police in September 1943. (Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)

family, although she didn't stay long. It was his presence, however, that endangered the family, their landlord, and their friends. By this time, the Schweichs were living on the square, across from the market hall. Their landlord lived next door and ran a small store there with his warehouse nearby. On September 9, 1943, the local police knocked on the door. As per their plan, Emma knocked on the ceiling of her room to alert Herbert, who was hiding in the attic room above. The police told her they were there to arrest her son. As planned, she replied that he was off in a nearby village helping a farmer with his grape harvest. It was the right time of the year, so it was certainly possible for the story to be true. With that, one officer left to go to the nearby village while the other stayed and patrolled around the square, rounding the market hall every few minutes.

entered through his open window. He went downstairs to the store from which he would get to the warehouse, retrieve his bicycle, and flee. All went well until he got to the warehouse door and found it locked! He had only a few seconds to get back to the store and retrieve the key. When clear, he retraced his steps, got the bike, and rode to the Fideles' garden, all the while worrying about whether he would encounter the policeman who had gone to the nearby village looking for him along the road. Luckily that didn't happen. Once safe, Herbert took a train, then a bus, to the nearby village of Meillant.

The mayor of this small village, Mr. Bouillon, was a friend of Schweich's brother-in-law, so he welcomed Herbert and introduced him to his best friend, a carpenter named Niederlender. These families risked all by helping him and also became life-long friends. Unlike some in the village, they were all French patriots. They were also part of the French resistance. In a couple of months, Herbert got a new, forged identity card—one not stamped "Jew"—and once again in the name of Henri Savet. The mayor also gave him an employment card and obtained a "job" for him as an office clerk in a forestry industry. In April, against the wishes of his new friends, Schweich returned to Lavaur to gather his family. Marlene was quite safe in the convent, but Henriette refused to leave. Thus, Herbert and his mother (with her new, false identity papers under the name Emilienne Savet) returned to Meillant. It was April 1944. Herbert Schweich, former

store owner, French Legionnaire, and survivor, now found himself involved in the activities of his friends and neighbors. He too became a *maquisard* (resistance fighter).

While Schweich recorded some stories about his activities with the resistance, most were about the people rather than his fellow fighters' actions. He spoke of his neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Francois. Early in the war they had found themselves the substitute parents/protectors of a five-year-old Jewish boy whose father had shown up at their door and pleaded for them to take the boy in. He also told about the young man and woman, both members of the resistance cell, who fell in love with each other and decided to marry against the advice of others. Not long after their "forest wedding," the two were on a mission when the young man was killed. In her grief, the recent bride rushed to his side, firing her rifle, only to be killed herself.

The liberation of Paris in August 1944 brought new hope to everyone, and Herbert rejoined his family in Lavaur. Conditions were not great, but times had changed, and they didn't have to fear for their lives daily. Early in 1945 Alsace and Lorraine were freed from German domination, and all of France was liberated. Herbert celebrated by getting now 11-year-old Marlene a bicycle, something he had promised years before. That same year the family began to get letters from the International Red Cross that family members in St. Louis and Dallas were looking for them. They began to write, and packages

Henriette and Marlene in Lavaur after the end of the war.

(Image: Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center, Jewish Federation of St. Louis)



As per their contingency plan, Herbert exited the attic window, crossed the landlord's roof, and

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arrived. Although Herbert wanted to return to Strasbourg, two trips back to the city made him realize there were no jobs to be had there. Then, on Christmas day 1945, Emma died of a stroke. She would have been 78 the next month. With the tension of the war over, time seemed to fly. Herbert got a job in a local factory that produced men's shirts, and Marlene was in school. But immediate postwar France could not provide the life he wanted, nor the one he desired Marlene to have. Thus, in 1947, he decided to emigrate.

After several trips to and from the American Consulate in Marseille, gathering affidavits from family and acquaintances in the U.S., the Schweichs received their immigration status in March of 1948. Sadly, one member of the family, a little terrier named Bobby that Marlene adopted after the war, could not accompany them. So, the family packed up what few items they had, traveled from Lavaur to Marseille, then on to Cannes where they set sail on the SS *Sobieski* on May 27. Ten days later, they caught their first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.

Although many American family members on both sides had communicated with the Schweichs while in France, such as Henriette's sister and her great aunt, it was members of Herbert's distant family, Julius S. Schweich and Edward S. Schweich, who provided affidavits to help clear the way for the family to come to the U.S. Herbert, Henriette, and Marlene arrived in St. Louis on June 8, 1948.

There was much to do upon arriving in the city, including getting assistance for Henriette, whose condition had not improved over the years. She became a resident of the State Hospital shortly thereafter. In 1950, Herbert filed his Declaration of Intention to Naturalize and had a job as an "IBM Operator." By the next year, he was already the head of the French department at the Berlitz School of Languages in St. Louis, a position he held for more than eight years. In the 1960s, Herbert held many language-related jobs, including teaching at Forest Park Community College, the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the downtown St. Louis YMCA, Priory School, and Clayton High School. He also helped prep future French teachers during their coursework at Washington University and was a private tutor for those Ph.D. students who needed help with their language exams. The Holocaust Museum & Learning Center estimates that at least 300 Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, like the Schweichs, arrived in St. Louis in the years immediately after WWII.

Marlene finished school then went on to Washington University. She continued her love of art by becoming a commercial artist and married Dr. Austin Tashma, an optometrist, on December 24, 1958. The reception was at Schneithorst Restaurant. Upon her death in 1986, the family wanted her obituary to be not only a tribute to her and her short life (she died at age 51), but also a recognition of her father who had died 10 years earlier—the man who helped them survive against

great odds during the war, gave her a new identity, placed her in a convent in southern France, and was a fighter in the French underground. His was truly an extraordinary odyssey.

According to Yad Vashem, by 1940 there were at least 15 concentration and work camps in Unoccupied France, including Gurs on the French/Spanish border. The Occupied Zone had 26 camps, including the notorious Drancy outside Paris. Drancy, originally a camp for French and British POWs, became a camp for Parisian Jews in 1941 and then a transit camp for Jews deported to the east in early 1942. Of the estimated 300,000 Jews who resided in France in 1940, it is believed that approximately one-quarter of that number were deported and died in either concentration or extermination camps.

*The bulk of information about this extraordinary odyssey comes from the Herbert Schweich Collection, Holocaust Museum & Learning Center Archive, St. Louis MO.