

Cross-testimony by Uli, a German born of a French father (she is now living in the US) and Daniel, her French brother.



TESTIMONY OF ULI

In December 2009, I was in San Francisco, California helping my mother prepare for her move to Washington State, where I live. I picked up the San Francisco newspaper and saw an article about French people whose fathers were German soldiers occupying France during WWII.

The stories of Jean-Jacques Delorme and all the other war children of French mothers and German fathers moved me very much. I felt their pain - because it has been my pain. The article immediately sparked my hope that there might be someone in the organization “Coœurs Sans Frontières” who would be willing to help me find my French father.

This is my story - as I remember and as told to me by my Mother.

I was born Ulrike Madeleine Ficker, in Sebnitz, Germany, on August 12, 1945. Sebnitz is a small town situated directly on the border of the Czech Republic, about 40 kilometres east of Dresden.

My mother, Elfriede Ficker, was 18 years old when she met my father, Charles Lamiche, who was a 25 year old French prisoner of war being held in my home town. This was during the summer of 1944 and my mother had just returned home after having spent two years away.

She had spent one year as an apprentice on a farm in northern Germany, where she met foreigners for the first time in her life. There were 2 French and 1 Polish prisoners of war and a Russian woman who was a forced labourer. Also, some Russian prisoners of war came to work on the farm every day with a guard. They all worked together, but there were very strict rules preventing my mother from talking or congregating with them.

The following year, she worked on a large farm in Austria, where the situation was quite different. The man, and his wife, who owned the farm had travelled extensively before the war started. The wife had a Japanese mother and a German father. They had a very progressive outlook and treated all the workers on their farm much more humanely, including four French prisoners of war.



My mother worked and lived alongside these prisoners and was able to speak to them in French, which she had studied in school. As she got to know them, she began to realize that the propaganda she had been exposed to in Germany under the Nazis was false. These foreigners and prisoners were not second-class human beings and evil – they were people – just like anyone else.

These experiences all influenced Mom's views of the world. Her opinion of Hitler and his policies had changed completely, especially after having met and lived with people from other countries and learning from those who had a larger experience of the world.

There was a big factory next to my mother's old school, down the street from where she lived with her parents. Almost all the workers in that factory were foreigners. The most heavily guarded, and most poorly treated were the Russian prisoners. There were also forced labourers from different countries, who lived in mass quarters and were more or less free to move around. And there were the mostly French prisoners of war, who walked back and forth from their quarters to the factory and were locked up at night.

At this point of the war, there were not enough guards to watch all these people – all the men and even the younger boys had been drafted.

At noontime, there were often French prisoners outside the factory. As Mom walked by, they would call out to her and were quite surprised when she responded to them in French. My father was one of these prisoners and he became interested in her and asked her to come back and talk to him again. She tried to go by and see him every day, making sure no one noticed.



My Father

Mom must have been scared – she had to make very sure not to attract attention from other people. She may have decided these men were not her enemies, but there was still a war going on and fraternising with the prisoners was not tolerated. She was putting herself in serious danger; women suspected of having relationships with prisoners were often harassed – had their hair cut off – were even sometimes sent to concentration camps!

As it got to be fall and started getting darker earlier, Mom and Charles began to secretly meet once or twice a week – usually as the prisoners were walking back to their quarters in the evening. They would spend time in one of the little garden cottages people had built on plots of land that had been allotted to them for growing food. The other prisoners would lie for my father, saying he had to work late that night.

Mom said Charles was very depressed about his situation; he had been a prisoner for four years already. She said she was able to cheer him up with news that Germany was being defeated and that the war would be over soon. Her father and her older sister listened to BBC radio whenever they could, so had news from outside the German propaganda.

In January, Mom realized she was pregnant. She told Charles, but no one else. He talked about them getting married, saying he would take her back to France with him. Of course, Mom looks back now and realizes how impossible that would have been.....but at the time, these were just two young people in love who wanted only to stay together.

Later, she told her sister and mother about the relationship and that she was pregnant. They were very worried for her – and for their whole family. It was just so very dangerous because there were still so many fanatical Nazis around. It would also be impossible for them to ever meet Charles, which was heartbreaking, especially for her mother.



Mom and Ull in 1945

When my grandfather found out about her relationship and her pregnancy, he was very upset. He didn't scold her, but Mom said he wouldn't talk to her at all.

Meanwhile, she and Charles continued to find ways to see each other. On March 9, 1944, Mom made Charles a cake in celebration of his 26th birthday. That was the last time she saw him. The prisoners had been moved further west because the Russian army was advancing. She couldn't find out where he was – who could she even ask? My mother never saw my father again.

Of course, Mom was heartbroken that Charles was gone. She sent several letters to France but they were always returned. Still, she clung to the hope that he would come back for her.

I was born three months after the war was over. At that time, our town was occupied by Russian soldiers. Life during this time was very difficult with very little to eat and no medicine or other supplies. My grandpa and my mother's older sister spent most days scouring the countryside scavenging in the fields and trading valuables with farmers so that we would have something to eat. My aunt was able to save some of the rations she received for her baby, which helped to keep me alive.

My mother said, when she would take me out in the buggy, she would meet women who had been pregnant at the same time she was. They would burst into tears when they saw me - their babies had died because they couldn't get enough food.

In 1947, when I was 2 years old, Mom contacted the French consulate in Berlin and after some time received a letter from them. The letter said they were sorry, but they could not help her further because my father had married after he got back to France. Under French law, he could not recognise a child outside of this marriage.

Even though knowing Charles was alive was good news, Mom was devastated. She lost all hope for a future with him and said it felt like he had died to her. She later told me that Charles was her first boyfriend and has always remained the most significant love of her life



Uli the little Flower Girl at Uncle Herbert's Wedding

Growing up, I was told that my father was a soldier and that he had been killed in the war. But I soon started wondering about that story since there were no photos of him and no one I did not.

I realized there was some big secret everyone was keeping from me. An older woman who took care of me and had known my mother since she was a child got angry with me once and said: "Well, I hope you don't turn out like your mother did." I didn't know what she meant but I wondered why she thought my mother had done something very bad or made some big mistake and I sensed that it had to do with me.

When I was 9 or 10 years old, I started searching for information about my father when my mother was not home. That's when I found her diary. Inside the diary was a photo of my father and the letter from the French consulate. I don't remember much of what was in the diary, but this was where I first learned my father's name - Charles Lamiche - and was the first time I saw the Paris address, 100 Rue de Lauriston.

I also found a letter from Charles' wife which said that they had a son and not to contact them again. She asked how her husband could be sure that I was even his daughter. As a child, reading this hurt me very much. It made me so mad that someone would say something like that about my mother, insinuating that she was a bad woman.

Discovering this letter wasn't all bad, of course, because this was how I found out that I had a brother, and knowing that did make me very happy. Also, looking back as an adult and, as a mother myself, I realize that, in writing this letter, my father's wife was only trying to protect her new family – and no one can fault her for that.

Naturally, finding out all these things just filled me with even more curiosity and I soon found the courage to ask my Mom about my father. I wondered if he had siblings and I remember she told me that he talked about two sisters, Michelle and Denise. I also asked about his parents and she told me that they were no longer alive.

It was extremely difficult for me to ask my mother these questions. I knew this was a very taboo subject and I sensed that it caused my Mom great pain. I wanted to know so much more, but I was afraid to ask too many questions. Still, I dreamed about finding my father someday. So I made sure to memorise his name, his sisters' names and the Paris address, hoping that I could find him when I was older.



Meanwhile, in 1955, my mother married a man from West Germany and we left my hometown and moved to Cologne. Leaving my hometown was very hard for me. I was 12 years old and did not want to leave my friends and my family. I now understand how lucky we were – because we had gotten out of East Germany shortly before the Berlin wall went up.

In 1958, while we were living in Cologne, my sister Petra was born. This made me very happy and helped me get over the loneliness I still felt after moving away from our family.

It was during this time that I found my mother's diary again. She had torn out all the pages - it was now just a blank book. I was so glad I had committed the names and the Paris address to memory. I was still hoping I would one day find my father and meet my brother and my aunts.

Then, in 1961, after four years of living in West Germany, we immigrated to the United States - to San Francisco, California. My biggest fear about going to America was that I might never have the chance to find my father. I was afraid I might never get back to Europe again.



Adjusting to living in the US was very, very difficult for me. I didn't fit in at school and felt very lost, alone and depressed. I wasn't getting along with my mother and stepfather and was acting out in all kinds of ways, drinking too much alcohol, taking drugs - at one point I even tried to kill myself. I was a mess!

It's hard to say how much of my emotional trouble was due to not knowing my father and all the secrecy and shame that surrounded my birth.....many young people have difficulty finding their way. But I knew I needed to get away from my stepfather – we had a very poisonous relationship and I was beginning to hate my mother.

So, at 19, I married a young man I did not really love and moved away, hoping to find a place where I felt I belonged. One year later I gave birth to my son Kim. By the time I was twenty-eight, I had five children, one boy and four girls. We moved to the state of Washington in 1972 and in 1977 I left the marriage and moved with my children to Seattle, where I still live today.

I came out as a lesbian and I now have a loving partner, Candace, who has been with me for 24 years. Together we raised my five children and we now have 8 grandchildren.

All these years, wanting to find my father was something I always carried with me. I often wondered what kind of man he might be; and how my life might be different if I ever got the chance to know him.

But how do you find someone when you know so little about them? When you don't speak the right language and have no money to hire someone to help you?



Uli in Paris - 1979

I did try several times – once while in Paris I found the address I had memorized so many years before – 100 Rue de Lauriston. But no one with the name Lamiche lived there; nor could I find a Lamiche in the phone book.

I tried the Salvation Army – they told me since Charles and my mother had not married, they would not help me.

I tried the Red Cross, who help find relatives lost in war. They needed information I didn't have – like his date of birth. This time, when I asked my mother for help – she was much more forthcoming.

She sent me copies of letters – including the one from the French Consulate. And she sent several emails describing this time in her life – I learned so much about how hard things were for her – for everyone who lived during this war. Knowing these things went a long way to help heal my relationship with her.

She also warned me - she was afraid I might get hurt – afraid that if I found my father, he might reject me.

But I didn't let this fear stop me.

Unfortunately, a few months later I heard back from the Red Cross. They were sorry but they couldn't help me - because of the letter from the French Consulate with the news that my father had been released and was living in France. It seems my father was not lost in the war; he was just lost to me..... It seems I had given them too much information.

These disappointments would discourage me, but I could never seem to let go of wanting to find him. Time would pass and I would start looking again.

My next effort was to search on the internet. I found a French genealogist who did some initial investigation and said that my father was not born in Paris and in order to do more research I would have to send him 300 Euros. I didn't feel confident enough about this information and wasn't inclined to send a stranger that much money.

At this point, I did kind of give up, telling myself, as I had so many times before, that I just didn't really care. Part of me was afraid my father wouldn't even want to meet me if I did find him. Maybe if I just kept waiting before I looked again, it would be too late and he likely would have died. Maybe that was better than the continual pain my searching always seemed to cause.

But then; I read that article in the newspaper and I knew I would have to try again.

That day in December of 2009, I went right to the computer and found the CSF website. I sent a message to Jean-Jacques asking if he could help me. He responded by suggesting I join CSF, and said, yes, they would be willing to help me search for my father. Now my hopes soared again!

The paperwork process took a couple of weeks – during which time I found myself again struggling with all the mixed emotions I always had when I thought there might be a chance my searching would be successful.

The day I sent the last documents to CSF, I called my daughter Naomi, who had left me several messages to call her.

I told her about my new search and she told me the reason she had called was to tell me that she had been on a genealogy site (Ancestry.com) and had started a family tree. When she put in my father's name, there was a possible match.

This was almost too much for me – was I really going to finally find my Father? I gave Naomi his birth date to check if she had the right person and later that evening, she confirmed that this really did seem to be the right Charles Lamiche! The site listed dates of birth (and death) of Charles and his wife, Georgette Rose and their son – Daniel and his family.

I immediately passed this information to Marie-Jo Saint-Lô, my wonderful contact at CSF.

Meanwhile, CSF had started their own search and had also found Charles Lamiche on a genealogy site. When they asked for my permission to contact Daniel Lamiche, my answer was yes! Of course!

On February 13, Marie-Jo called to tell me that this Daniel was indeed my brother! And, he even knew about me! Our father had mentioned me to him only once, telling him about my existence, but nothing else. So Daniel had no idea how to find me. He was, however, the one who had registered on ancestry.com – so he did play a big role in our finding each other – and, the best news was that he seemed to be very happy that I had found him!

All this happened so fast! I had expected to have some time while CSF searched for my father. I certainly didn't expect that he would be found so quickly. And, even though I knew it was likely – it was a bit of a shock to find out that he had died 17 years ago. To know that he was alive when I visited Paris – that if I had been able to find him sooner, I would have been able to meet him. This news was so much to take in all at once!

I cried a lot that night – I had to let go of the father I had never met and would never meet. I had to let go of ever having him hug me and kiss me and love me like only a father can. I think this is what all of us war children are looking for, the love of our fathers. I had waited my whole life and it was not to be.

Not all my tears were from a place of sadness – I also cried because I was so grateful to have found my brother Dany. I know I am a very lucky person. I was lucky to have found my mother's diary and to have had the documentation I had. Maybe most of all, I was very lucky to have had a mother who was finally willing to talk about something that was so very painful for her to remember.

All this has changed my life – for one thing, I'm busy learning French. But really, I'm just trying to live every moment – not to relive the past, or to yearn for the better future, because I have learned that this moment is all we have. I am just in awe of every moment of this miracle that is our life.

And, I'm so glad I picked up that newspaper and learned of Coeurs Sans Frontières. I want to thank Jean-Jacques Delorme-Hoffmann, Marie-José Saint-Lô, Chantal Le Quentrec and everyone who helped me find my family. I will never be able to express my gratitude sufficiently to them.

To those of you are still looking for your family, I say don't give up on that dream – keep looking and keep hoping – and in the meantime, remember to live your life fully every single minute of every single day and be thankful for being alive.

Thank you



My family, partner, grandchildren, mother, sister with husband and sons.

TESTIMONY OF DANIEL:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In August 1945, in Sebnitz/Sachsen, near Dresden in Germany, a little girl, whom her mother called Ulrike, was born. This little girl was the fruit of love between a young German girl, Elfriede, and a French prisoner of war, Charles.

They had met during the summer of 1944 and were seeing each other secretly in the evening, after work. In January 1945, he learnt that Elfriede was pregnant but the chances of war made it that in March of that year because the Russian armies were advancing, all French prisoners were evacuated to the west. Elfriede was never to see her lover again. Ulrike or Uli never knew her father who had returned to France.

This man is my father, and also Uli's. Uli just spoke before you.

I'll try to give you a brief summary of the life of Charles Lamiche, our father, to whom, it is said I bear a striking resemblance.

Charles, our father, was born in March 1919 at Villiers-en-Bière, a village in the department of Seine-et-Marne, near Melun, about 50 kms from Paris. This very small village, which has nowadays about 200 inhabitants, is located on the edge of the domanical forest of Fontainebleau. The castle of Fortoiseau was the home of French Academician Philippe Néricault Destouches. Its chapel was destroyed by the Germans in 1944 for unknown reasons. Charles' parents were farmers and he was the ninth child of a family of eleven. In 1924, his parents came to settle in Haute Maison, a very small village near Coulommiers, in the northern part of the Seine-et-Marne district. Haute Maison was even smaller than where they lived before. It is close to where I live today and my kids went to the same primary school as their grandfather.

The Lamiche parents took over the management of the Aceries farm, which still exists. I often pass in front of it whenever I ride my bike, and I think about my father because that's where he spent his childhood and part of his youth. This is also where my grandparents lived, who unfortunately, I didn't know. They are buried in the village graveyard.

At 14, Charles brilliantly succeeded in his primary school certificate, and, like most kids of the rural environment in those days, he had to set to work and not think about his studies anymore. He therefore started to work on the farm with his parents but, later on, since there was not enough work for the whole family, he had to work in the neighboring farms. He became a carter and drove big harnesses of draft horses. At 18, he had had enough of that kind of work. He didn't want to be a farm worker all his life. He dreamt of another life and especially of leaving the farmland.

But, what should he do? Where should he go when all he ever knew was farming?

Together with his best friend Paul, who was, like him a farm hand, he decided to enroll in the fire brigade in Paris. However, at that time, one was drafted for five years in the elite corps. They thought that was too long and opted for the land forces where one only spent three years.

It was the wrong move because, as he liked to say, those three years became eight years, including five years of captivity. If he were a fire-fighter, he could have spent the same length of time but would not have known the hardships of the front and captivity... But, he wouldn't have known Elfriede.

In June 1937, he was posted to the 24th infantry regiment, based at the La Tour-Maubourg barracks, which adjoined Les Invalides, in Paris. This regiment, intended for the defense of Paris, was sent to the front during the offensive of the German army, and our father was made prisoner on 18 June 1940 at Noyer, in the Yonne department. After his five years of captivity, he was repatriated to France and demobilized on 4 June 1945.

He was alone and most of his brothers and sisters were married and scattered over the country, and they didn't give him any support. He had no one to turn to. Only one person came to his rescue: his wartime pen-friend. He soon moved in with her, married her quickly. As you probably have guessed, she became my mother.

In 1946, Elfriede wrote some letters, which she tried to get to Charles, but they were returned to her. Wrong address maybe, but also unwillingness on the part of the French authorities to reach the addressee. In 1947, Elfriede received a letter from the Mayor of the 16th district of Paris telling her that Charles was now married and that the legislation in place at that time forbade him to recognize a child born out of wedlock. (I can't explain why and how, even though I have a few ideas on the subject, which I am trying to clarify). Elfriede persisted and,

finally, a letter reached the addressee. She received a very dry response from my mother telling her to leave her husband alone, informing her that they now had a son and raising some doubts about what she had revealed.

What I am telling you here, I learned from my father, from Uli and those documents I've obtained from the Official Archives from Caen, or those already in my possession.

My father was one that you'd wish for every child. He was kindness itself and a jolly good fellow. I am sorry that Uli didn't have the chance to know him because I am sure that he would have been very happy to meet his daughter. Although he wasn't too keen on speaking about his past, particularly that period of his life, nevertheless he confided sometimes in me, speaking about his youth, his parents but not saying too much. One day, however, he told me that he had a little girl in Germany, who he knew about through a letter that he had received. But, he stopped right there and didn't say anything else. I think that, deep inside, this part of his life had a special place in his heart, which left him neither insensitive nor indifferent.

In June 1945, he was demobilized and worked at various jobs. However, he found his true calling when he became a shoemaker. A man of rare physical strength and very gifted in his new profession, he quickly became well-known and his work well reputed in Paris. In 1960, he set up his own business and created a small workshop where I used to come to help him every Thursday, when I didn't have school. After I passed my CAP in leatherwork (Certificate of professional aptitude), I went to work full time with him. His small business was working well but, alas, in 1966, I had to leave to comply with my military service for 16 months. He couldn't manage on his own and was forced to close down his shop and return to being a laborer again.

In 1979, even though the retirement age was 65 years old (a topical subject, indeed), prisoners of war were allowed to include the years they spent in captivity as annuities. That way, he was allowed to stop working at 60.

However, bad luck prevented him from fully enjoying his retirement. Shortly after he retired, he suffered a stroke and never recovered. During the following 14 years of his life, he underwent numerous operations, among which some very important.

On 16 January 1993, on a Saturday night, he passed away. He was watching a funny show on television and died in his armchair while laughing at a hilarious gag. He died while laughing!

I think I have told you as best as I could about the life of our father. Of this good, generous and courageous man, of whom I am very proud. Uli would have loved her father, whom she didn't have the chance to know, and I am pretty sure that he would have loved her too.

But, now let's talk about the present.

In February 2010, 17 years after the death of my father, I was out of my house when the phone rang at about 7 p.m... My wife picked it up and heard a charming lady, Chantal LEQUENTREC, asking her the following questions:

“Are you Mrs. LAMICHE?

Is your husband's name Daniel?

Was your father-in-law called Charles?

Did you know that he had a daughter when he was a prisoner of war in Germany? Etc.”

My wife Marie-Line answered “yes”. My father adored her and he used to confide in her more than he did in me. (My father had known Marie-Line since she was little because she was the god-daughter of his friend Paul with whom he had enrolled in the army in 1937. Paul is now deceased). We were aware of that, but that was all. No name, place, or anything that could allow us to start searching.

Chantal then announced that this sister had never stopped searching for her father. And, with CSF’s help, she was able to trace this father through a genealogy website where I had posted the Lamiche family. Unfortunately, our father had died 17 years before. Chantal wanted to know if my wife thought that I would agree to get in contact with Uli who lives in Seattle, on the Pacific coast of the USA.

My wife said she had no objection and that we would be happy to exchange letters with Uli and, in particular, to meet her one day.

So, Chantal put us in contact with Uli and Marie-Jo Saint-Lô brought us her precious help to translate our first exchange of e-mails. I express here my thanks to these ladies for their assistance, their kindness and unfailing support.

From then on, Uli and I have kept on exchanging e-mails thanks to the Internet and its translation tools, which helped us a lot at the beginning. I said at the beginning, because presently, and I give her much of credit for that, Uli has started to learn French. She speaks French very well now and has asked me to write to her in French. I think it’s wonderful because, as a good Frenchman, not gifted for foreign languages, I am trying to learn English, without any hope of succeeding. But, you never know...

Of this reunion, which is not really one because only 10 months ago we didn’t know anything about each other, the great merit goes to only one person: Uli. I can only admire her for her courage, perseverance and tenacity, which allowed her to find, not her father, but her brother... A brother who is very proud of this sister, who is with us today, because she has travelled all the way from the West Coast of the United States.

I congratulate her once again for her tenacity, which has been partly rewarded. And I say to those of you who still haven’t succeeded in finding your father, whom you missed so much, to take Uli as an example, who fought so many years, never gave up and finally saw her efforts being rewarded.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to “Coeurs sans Frontières”, its President, Jean-Jacques Delorme-Hoffmann, to Chantal, Marie-Jo and all its members. I highly praise that association for its work in helping the “children of war”, now in their sixties, to find their fathers, whom they missed so much, and know what kind of men they were.

