

*Chapter 10***A Leap into the Unknown**

Our jump from the train was a leap into the unknown, because we did not know where we were. After walking several kilometers we came to a small country road that showed very little sign of being traveled. It appeared safe and offered better walking than in the fields. We liked the beauty and quiet of the country all covered with snow, and yet we felt very much alone as we selected a direction and began walking on the road. We soon entered an area that was part of a farmstead and we were greeted by the barking of dogs. After more than 20 hours of traveling alone on and off of trains we tired and hungry. The barking dogs had announced our presence, so it was time to see if we could get either food or directions or both. As we approached the house we were impressed with its sturdiness and it appeared to be very old. There was much stone, and as we knocked on the door, we could see the walls were thick and durable. A lady answered our knock and stood erect as she watched, and listened to us, trying to identify ourselves and make a case for food and help. Then she invited us in and indicated we should sit down near the fire place. It was the largest fireplace I had ever seen and it was providing heat, as well as, being used to do some cooking in iron kettles.

It was evident that we had been invited in by the lady of the house and we were soon joined by a couple of small children and two young men. It appeared to be a family gathering that was focusing on a way to be of help to us. We were fed, and as one of the young men left the gathering we understood this family had no room for us. However, they knew someone who might have a place for us. At least they wanted us to be warm and comfortable in

the safety of their home while they did some investigating for us. They assured us that we were still in France in a rural area that was not swarming with Germans.

The young man, that had departed the house earlier, returned and presented an air of satisfactory results. Time wise, it did not seem that he could have gone very far to make the contact which they had anticipated would bring results. They indicated we should wait for someone who would be coming for us.

The wait was not long, but it was late in the afternoon, when a man a few years older than we were appeared. He invited us to follow him to his house. The walk would be only a few kilometers, but it seemed important that we complete the trip before dark. We had confidence in these people, because they were sincere in their behavior, and appeared willing to take the necessary risks to help us. The rural setting also served to remove our thoughts from some of the more hair raising experiences we had been through earlier.

The snow was still falling when we arrived at our new location just before dark. The walk had gone without incident, and even though we had apparently been following roads, our tracks would soon be covered with snow. At our new location, we entered the yard through a metal gate with stone posts on either side. The house was a beautiful stone home with steps rising to the entrance. It was clear that the stone and metal fence along the road in front of the house would make it difficult for anyone to arrive undetected.

Inside we found a home that was warm and inviting. It belonged to our guide, Rene Beffera and his lovely wife, Anne-Marie. No one could have given us a warmer welcome than they did. There were no children, but there was a family that lived in another house on the same farmstead. That family did much of the farming for the Befferas. Rene seemed to go and come when it was

necessary, but he maintained a rather low profile. We learned that he had been called into the French Army and was taken prisoner by the Germans during the fighting. He had escaped from prison and returned home where French officials released him from his military obligation. France had surrendered and formally they were not at war. While he had the necessary papers, and every right to be at home, I'm sure he didn't want the German soldiers who might pass through the area to become aware that he had been a prisoner of war who had escaped. However, he and Anne-Marie accepted responsibility for us without hesitating. We were, and still are, so thankful they did.

I have wonderful memories of that home, beginning with those first moments when we were led into a large room that was used for dining and sitting. For me the focal point was a large stone fireplace along the outer wall. It was every bit as large as the one in the house we had just left and there was a warm fire glowing in it. It was so large that they had built-in places to sit inside the chimney on both sides of the fire. Each seat was large enough to accommodate two people. Overhead in the chimney were hangers that could be used to hang and smoke meat. There were also swimming hangers and other facilities which made it possible to cook at the fireplace if they wished to do so.

We quickly accepted their invitation to sit beside the fire where we could be warm and dry out our wet shoes. To me it was unbelievable that the fireplace and chimney beside a warm fire without having it too hot for our faces. The fireplace provided an excellent center for many a warm and friendly conversation while we stayed with the Befferas.

With the very first meal we learned that Anne-Marie was a fantastic cook, as well as, a warm and caring person. With their own farm produce, food never seemed to be in short supply. They also had a good source of wine and cheese. With plenty of milk and her culinary skills, Anne-

Marie was even able to make ersatz coffee that tasted good. She brewed it from grain which had been parched until brown.

The excellent meal, sincere fellowship, and warm fire was a real blessing for a couple of scared Americans who had experienced standing on a train most of their previous 24 hours. We had seldom been in a real bed during the last weeks and the stress of the total situation in our faces. The Befferas were determined to make things more pleasant for us, and they did.

With the calming effect that comes from a full stomach, and the warmth of their hospitality, we were ready to retire for the night. However, they wanted to do one more thing to make certain we would sleep well. Therefore, we were provided with a night cap of warm wine. It was prepared on the stove, from their table wine, in a process I've never been able to duplicate. As Rene led us up the stairs to retire, Ken and I remarked that it would be a perfect night if we could be offered a bed as large as a double bed to sleep in. To our surprise, we were each given a double bed and separate rooms. To add to that luxury we were also provided pajamas to sleep in. It was all more than we could have wished for and we slept so soundly that it was mid morning before we awoke.

Everyone had been thinking of our comfort and not about the danger of our presence. In retrospect, it was a special risk for the Befferas to have provided us with separate beds. It turned out alright, and we had separate rooms as long as we were there. But, if the Germans had come while we were there and quickly searched the house a problem would have existed for all of us. The Befferas might have explained the use of two bedrooms, but it worked out ok the way Rene, and Anne-Marie, arranged it. The beds were good beds and the down filled the quilts were elegant and warm.

From our very first meeting and the first hours in their home, it was clear the Befferas would help us in any way they could. If we wanted to go to Spain they would help us. It was clear that they did not want us to make an unescorted exit from their place. It was evident to them we had demonstrated more luck than knowledge while traveling on our own in France.

We knew only a few words of French and the Befferas knew only a few words of English. While there, we found that sign language, facial expressions, and the use of some props went a long way in communicating with each other.

With a map, they showed us we were in central France between Mauriac and Aurillac. The train we had jumped off of was on its way to Aurillac. At Aurillac there would have been a connection for Toulouse, but we were probably fortunate we had not stayed on the train and tried to make the transfer.

The second day we were at their home Rene made a trip by train to Aurillac to see what he could do about getting some help for us. We also realized that Aurillac was probably the nearest location where some contact could be made which might be able to do something about verifying our identity. We were aware that the Germans constantly tried to infiltrate any group that might help escaping flyers. Therefore, it was important that we assist our helpers to establish our correct identity. To do this we gave Rene a minimum, but a necessary amount of critical information about ourselves when he told us he was going to Aurillac.

The distance was not great, but to make the trip by train, make the personal contacts he needed to make, and return meant a long day for Rene. Therefore, it was late when he returned from Aurillac and assured us there would be help. It would require some time and we should stay in his home where we could be safe and well cared for.

At the Beffera's home, our care was the best and in the weeks to come we gained weight from being fed so well.

We were very comfortable, even though we were not content with how long we had to wait to be moved on toward Spain. A number of things occurred while we were with Rene and Anne-Marie, which were interesting and helped to keep us from becoming bored. They had some visitors that were close friends or relatives who knew we were there.

One of the most regular visitors was an older man I thought at the time was Rene's father. He came by several times and on one occasion had a young black boy with him. I understood the lad's home was Marseilles. He was one of many children staying in central France where they thought fighting was less likely to occur.

One day, several people came to the house and were hosted in the parlor. Ken and I were invited to join them, and we were introduced to a drink called Calvados. It was clear and served in tiny shot-like glasses. With it, people were also offered lumps of sugar. Although I had never drunk much, the amount we were served seemed insignificant, so I followed the lead of the few who did not take sugar. When we raised the glasses to our lips, I drank all of it. Then I realized the wise ones were those who had taken a lump of sugar. My drink burned all the way to my toes. While I tried to carry it off as if nothing was wrong, I understood the wisdom of dipping a lump of sugar into the drink and sucking it from the sugar. Mine had been an experience I would not repeat.

With the small group that had gathered was a young French lady who spoke some English. Even though time did not permit a lot of conversation with her, it was nice to talk with someone who did understand our language.

In our stay of three weeks with the Befferas, we were constantly amazed at the excellent meals which Anne-Marie prepared and served. She introduced us to a number of new and delicious dishes. One was a fresh egg on a piece of cured ham cooked in a frying pan on top of the stove.

My wife and I have tried to duplicate the technique several times, but we have never succeeded.

Our differences in eating habits were noticeable at times, but the most memorable was the time Anne-Marie cooked and served freshly caught minnows. Rene had used a small minnow trap in a clear old mountain stream to catch a couple of dozen plump shiny minnows, each about one and one half inches long. These were brought to the kitchen while very much alive and poured into a frying pan containing hot butter. It was no small trick to catch those that kept jumping out. But Anne-Marie succeeded, and they were fried to a crisp and served with a dash of malt vinegar. This was a special delicacy, and they expected Ken and me to eat most of them. While our behavior was dictated by the etiquette of guests, I have to admit that putting manners over matter was a struggle for us. We finally finished the minnows as expected, but it was not easy!

When we expressed our need for more exercise, we were taken outside one nice sunny day and across the road for a long walk through the fields. Another man, who may have been their farmer, accompanied the four of us, and we saw the small mountain stream from which the minnows had been taken. Rene enjoyed fishing, and while he expressed a desire to take us fishing, we knew that involved too much risk. We could more safely be taken for other short walks in the fields, always being careful not to go far, and trying to make certain we were not observed leaving or entering the Befferer home.

One day we were informed that a carpenter was coming to put a special wall in the basement which would create a room that had two purposes – one, to provide a place where arms could be hidden, the other, to make a place where Ken and I could hide if necessary. When it was finished, Rene took us down the basement steps and showed us how to press certain vertical boards that would open to create a passageway. Once we were on the other side, these boards

could be closed and held shut to provide a solid wall. The false wall appeared as a protective cover for the foundation of the house, not as a wall for a room.

A newspaper would appear at the house once in a while, and we tried to read it. From the papers, we could figure out some of the events being reported, especially if there were some pictures. One such picture really got our attention. It was an artist's conception of a B-17. The drawing was being used to explain the great odds the German pilots were faced with when they attacked formations of American bombers. The drawing made the B-17 look as though it had at least twice as much fire power as it actually had. In all fairness, there had been some experimenting with a few B-17s. They were equipped with additional fire power by eliminating most of the bomb load. One of these specially equipped planes in a formation of regular bombers might be used to sucker the Germans into encountering to make the special B-17 out to be the right plane. Then to their concept they added plenty of exaggeration just for good measure. At this point in the war, the Allied forces had command of the air night and day. Germany was searching for stories that would help justify or explain what was happening. However, I believe most of the people, especially those in the resistance, saw the propaganda for what it was.

Ken and I had a feeling for what was and was not happening. Spring was approaching, and there was certain to be an invasion in the not too distant future. As much as we had appreciated our time with the Befferas, we felt our stay was becoming too long. Once, while discussing our concern with Rene, he expressed their expectation for an invasion in the near future. He also indicated that the resistance forces would need officers to help lead them once the invasion began. We got the message, whether our interpretation was right or wrong, that we were being detained to help lead resistance forces. That was not an

adventure we could look forward to, so we explained that we were trained for the air and not the ground and that it would be better for us to return to England and if necessary fight in the air. We also indicated we would again try traveling on our own to Spain if there was no help available.

Mr. Befferer made another trip to see what help he could get for us and returned with the message that we would be moved to another point in preparation for our trip to Spain. After three weeks with wonderful people who really made us feel at home, we would be leaving them with mixed emotions. We were going to be on the move again, but there was no way we could expect to repeat the feeling of safety and the likeness of home that we had experienced with the Befferers.

I had some correspondence with the Befferers after the war, so I knew they had survived. My return visit to their home came in 1985 with many regrets that it had not been sooner because Rene died 24 March 1985 at the age of 73, before my wife and I arrived there in July.

Anne-Marie was again the gracious hostess and excellent cook. We sat inside the chimney of the fireplace and slept in the same bedroom I had been in 41 years before. Their home escaped damage from the war and reflected the good care and improvements it had received. There is a family that still tills and cares for the farm.

We learned that Anne-Marie had taught school and Rene had been a sergeant in the French army when he was taken prisoner by the Germans. It was 1940 when he escaped and returned home. Anne-Marie and Rene were part of the resistance almost from the beginning of the occupation. They were in the Resistance Organization of the Department of Cantal in France. It was affiliated with the FFI (Forces Francaises de l'Interieur). Since the routes used to move evading Allied airmen did not cross Cantal, Ken Shaver and I were the only Americans the Befferers took in and hid. However, they did aid the resisters and

provided food and shelter on various occasions. One such incident came close to being fatal for Rene and perhaps Anne-Marie.

On 9 July 1944, which was some three months after Ken and I had left their home and one month after the invasion, Rene and Anne-Marie were housing two resistance leaders. One was Commandant Rene Gregoire, Chief of the Secret Army for the Cantal. Before the war he had been an engineer specialist in the building of dams to produce electricity and had lived at Aurillac. The other was Jean Lepine (code name Rene), Chief of the Civil Organization of Resistance in the Department of Cantal. Before the war he had been in a car seller Bordeaux. He came to Massie near Banille, where the Befferas lived, to participate in the resistance. These two men with top responsibilities had come to the Befferas' house after the disaster of Mont-Mouchet where many Maquisards were killed by Germans.

On this eventful date, there was an evening meeting held at the Hotel Dexpert at Riomes Montagnes, a little town about 40 km northeast of Banille. The purpose of the meeting was to organize the Resistance of the Departmental Police. The main participants were: Oswald, Arthur Athene (code name Greco), Commandants Chastang, Monier, and Rene Gregoire. The Germans made an attack on the meeting and killed three men, Rene Gregoire, Moneir, and Rene Laurent.

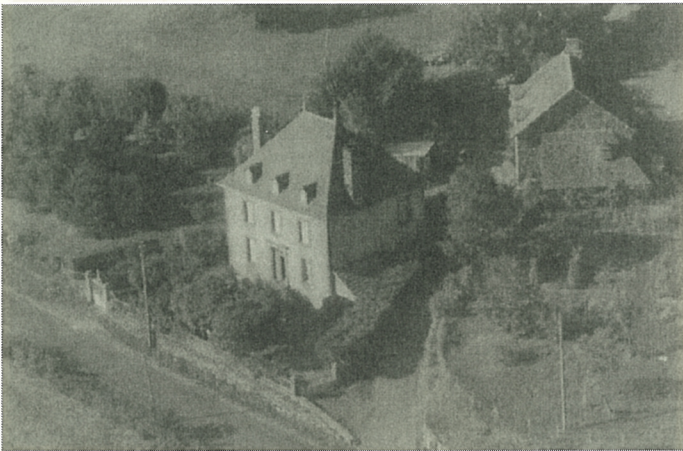
Rene Beffera had been scheduled to attend that meeting, but some emergency arose at the farm, and he was unable to go. Anne-Marie doesn't remember why Jean Lepine did not go, but other events of that evening are clear. A driver took Commandant Rene Gregoire to the meeting, and they were both going to return to spend the night at the Befferas'. The hour came and went when they were expected back. Then, well past midnight, there was a knock at the door. It was the driver. He had parked the car and hidden nearby but had not gone into the meeting. He saw

the shooting, learned that Rene Gregoire had been killed, left the car so not to be followed. Then walked and ran back to the Befferas' to report the incident.

The farm emergency had kept Rene Beffera from the fatal meeting, and the driver's caution had kept the Germans from being led to the Befferas. Jean Lepine also survived the war and died at Aurillac well after 1944.

Mistakes Kenneth Shaver and I made in our travels caused the Befferas to help us two airmen, but their resistance efforts went much further. This brief story also helps to give some little example of how the Resistance was organized to deter or to sabotage the German's occupational efforts.

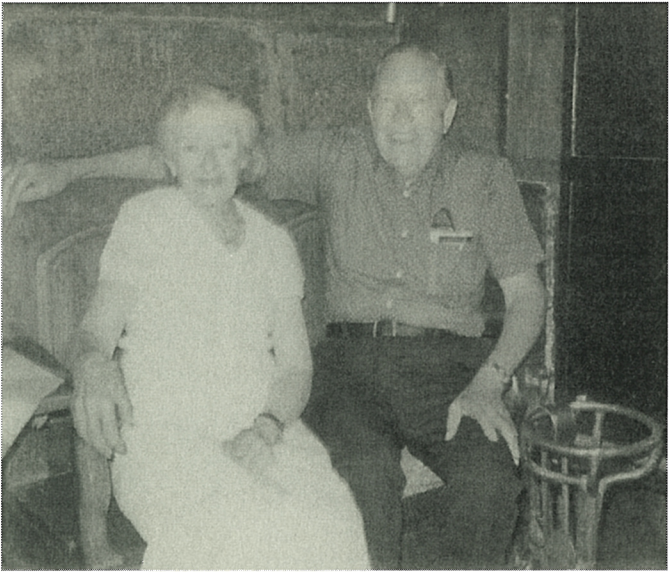
When I asked Anne-Marie why they chose to help Ken and me she said, "It was not a choice; we considered this helping as a natural part of our fight against the occupiers of our country." We're grateful for that attitude. And here I must also express my appreciation to Anne-Marie's cousin Jean Delery and his wife Marie-Catherine of Molhery, France, for helping us research the story.



Above: The Beffera home with their tenant house farther back from the road.



Above: "Scotty" and Clayton David with Anne-Marie Beffera in front of her home in 1985.



Above: Anne-Marie joins Clayton on one of the two seats inside the chimney of the fireplace in the Beffera home.