

Chapter 9

Traveling Alone on a French Train

It was mid-afternoon on Sunday when the three ladies walked us to the Bretigny train station, gave us tickets for Toulouse, and kissed us good-bye. When the train stopped, Ken and I were waiting beside the tracks and our benefactors were watching us from outside the station fence. This was our first train ride without the benefit of a guide, but we boarded the nearest car like a couple of seasoned travelers. We knew not to worry about giving a conductor our tickets. After all, I had learned in Holland that you turned the tickets in at your destination.

We sat down in a car that was not overly crowded and began thinking about a long ride to Toulouse. That was our destination, clearly marked on the tickets. The train left Bretigny and rolled along the next stop at Etampes. After some switching, we were soon moving again. The sun was beginning to set, and we realized we were moving west instead of south as we had expected. We took closer look at the train and saw that it was much shorter than it had been when we had gotten on at Bretigny. Though we were starting to feel some concern, we were not yet ready to abandon this train when it came to a halt and the remaining passengers got off and left us alone in the car.

Now it was time to try and get some information. Pretending to be a deaf-mute, Ken walked over to a trainman who was still on the car and displayed his ticket marked for Toulouse. Ken also pointed to the front of the car in a questioning manner to ask if this car was going on to Toulouse. The trainman shook his head “no” and pointed to the direction from which we had come, then indicated

that we should stay on the car. We were at the end of the line, and the train would be going right back to a junction where we could catch a train for Toulouse. For that train we would have to wait until the next day. We weighed our alternatives and followed the trainman's directions.

We never will know if the trainman had guessed our identity and was using a low-risk method of helping us or if he thought we really were as dumb as we acted. Regardless of his thoughts, he ignored us as the car began its return run with the fewer than six of us on it.

It was totally dark when the train finally stopped with all indications that it was being parked for the night. We left the train knowing we were back near where we had started, and we were determined not to expose ourselves by exiting through the station with tickets reading Toulouse and no money to replace them.

We took advantage of the rail's yard darkness and proceeded to a remote area where we found a fence. Without hesitation, we jumped over the fence and soon found ourselves on a road leading out of the village. We did not want to be too far from the station, and it would soon be curfew time, so our eyes began searching for a house we might try to get into for the night. We were looking at a large house when the comments from an escape briefing came to mind: "The Germans often take over the large houses for use by their personnel. Therefore, it is best to avoid the larger houses." This we did and walked on about 300 yards to a smaller house with a fenced-in yard.

We entered through a gate and walked down the sidewalk to the front door. When we knocked on the front door, it did not open, but we could hear movement and a door opening in the rear. We turned to the corner of the house and came face to face with a man and his son. Our efforts to identify ourselves and indicate our need for help soon evoked discussion between the man and his son. It was evident that the man saw the great risk in taking us in,

while the son wanted them to take the risk. I believe the father soon decided it might be safer to take us in than to continue the discussion where we were. They led us to the back door and into the house.

Once inside, we showed our train tickets and tried to explain how we had gotten into the wrong car. They understood and confirmed that there was only one train per day to Toulouse, the afternoon train we had just left. While they gave us food and said we could stay the night with them, they also explained the dilemma they were faced with. It centered around the fact that German officers who were attached to the nearby Bretigny air base occupied the large house we had passed before knocking on their door.

We were in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gabrield Guillon. Mr. Guillon farmed, and Mrs. Guillon was working away from the home during the day. The son George, who was 17 years old, was attending school. Grateful for their hospitality, we slept with our clothes on, ready for a quick exit.

Ken and I kept a low profile the next morning while Mrs. Guillon left for work and George went to school. Sitting at the kitchen table that morning, Mr. Guillon informed us he would walk us to the train station in the afternoon to start again our trip to Toulouse. He also attempted to teach us how to select the correct car on the train and where we would have to make transfers.

The night before, while we were all five together, Mrs. Guillon had had us write our names and home addresses on small pieces of paper. She wanted to know whom they were risking their lives for, but she wanted that information where it was least likely to be found. We watched as she rolled back a corner of the dining room rug, placed the pieces of paper on the floor and laid the rug back down. When Mr. Guillon decided it was time for us to leave for the train and we walked out the door behind him, I felt we were leaving our mark behind in safe keeping. Certainly it

was safer for them to have our names than it was for us to have their names on paper.

When Kenneth Shaver returned to France in 1972 and visited the Guillons, Mrs. Guillon retrieved those pieces of paper from that same hiding place and showed them to him. She also told of the fear she had experienced on her way to work the morning she left us in their home with her husband. That day, people on the bus had talked about two American fliers that were being hunted. A few days later, they learned that two other men had bailed out in the area and that we were not the ones they had been seeking. Nevertheless, it had created some very anxious days for the Guillons.

Even though we did not see any activity at the house occupied by the Germans, we left the Guillon home away from their possible view. We also walked down the road in the opposite direction from which we had arrived the night before. This meant we took a longer but safer route to the station. Before leaving the house, we had agreed to follow some distance behind Mr. Guillon with no contact to be made at the railroad station. We had our tickets, and if we were stopped or arrested, we would be strictly on our own.

The route Mr. Guillon had selected was good, and his timing correct. We arrived at the station with enough time to look the situation over, but with no time to waste. The train was on schedule, and as it stopped we were quick to look for and get on a car marked Orleans, just as Mr. Guillon had instructed. In Orleans we would have to get out of that car and wait several hours for a train with cars marked for Toulouse. As we made it past Etampes, where we had gone in the wrong direction the day before, we started to gain confidence in our ability to travel alone. We soon found, however that we had more to learn.

It was still daylight when we arrived in the station at Orleans. This was a larger station with a waiting room built to accommodate about 100 people. Knowing we had

several hours to wait, we strolled around on the platform, checked out the unisex restroom, and looked for an escape route in case we needed one. We wanted to avoid getting into a place with no easy exits and to avoid going through a gate where we would have to show or give up our tickets.

As darkness fell, we were forced more and more into the main waiting room of the station to avoid being too noticeable. A few German soldiers were going and coming, but they seemed to be concerned with themselves and not us. It was a long and precarious wait, so Ken and I separated much of the time, hoping we would be less noticeable alone than together. We also figured that by watching in more directions, we would increase the chances for one of us to get away if a crisis developed.

The curfew hour arrived, and we were still waiting. Now we had to stay in the waiting room because only there did people have the right to stay while waiting for a train. To wait elsewhere was to break curfew and be liable to arrest. With several of us in the waiting room, I saw a policeman enter the door and start checking each person. My first thought was that this must be a check for identity papers. While I still had the I.D. card I had used to go through customs from Belgium to France, I was in no way certain it would pass inspection at this point in France.

As the policeman moved from one person to the next and came ever closer, I began looking for some way to avoid him. I felt trapped, and actually considered getting out of the room. But I decided to sit tight and see what would happen. He was going to reach me before he would get to Ken, so we would not both be checked at the same time. Finally, he was checking people only about ten feet away. It was then that I was able to observe he was checking train tickets to see if the destination on our ticket warranted our being in the station past curfew. My level of anxiety lessened as he checked my ticket and moved on. Ken was watching very closely, and there was an

expression of relief on his face when he saw that I had passed inspection.

Soon after that scare, the train we were waiting for pulled into the station. We went out to the platform where we could select our car and get on board for Toulouse. Then the blackout, which had been so helpful to us the night before when we had left the Bretigny station by jumping over the fence, became a real handicap to us. As we walked up and down on the station platform, it was too dark to see the destination name on any of the cars. Since we could not ask directions, we went with the crowd into a car. We could only hope that they too were going to Toulouse.

There were not enough seats for all of the passengers, and as the train pulled out of the station, we were standing along with several other people. After a few hours there was some switching of the railroad cars and we knew the make-up of the train had changed. However, it was still too crowded in our car for us to sit down. By this time, we had become less certain about the destination of the car we were on, but we stayed on it and hoped for the best.

As the night passed, we surveyed the passengers on the train and saw no German soldiers, so we concluded that the train was not taking us toward the coast or to Germany, the two places we were certain we wanted to avoid. When the train began going slowly between stops of short duration, we concluded that we must be in mountainous country. When we were able to get onto the platform between two cars, we could see that we were indeed in mountains, and that it was snowing very hard. Several inches of snow already lay on the ground.

Unfamiliar with the topography of all of France, Ken and I began to wonder if these mountains could be the foothills of the Alps. If they were, our future was very uncertain. We whispered to each other and discussed our choices as we stood there between the cars and away from

the other passengers. Ken might have killed a German guard when he escaped from them on the train in Holland. My dog tags were around my neck, and they could serve to help me if we were captured. But Ken had no dog tags. They were in the pocket of his leather flight jacket, which he had left on the train in Holland during his escape. Since we were traveling together, we might both be expected to suffer the same uncertain fate if we were captured. With these thoughts in mind, and seeing no German soldiers or police on this train, we decided to ride it as long as we could. We also determined that if we should be cornered, we would not accept capture if there was the slightest chance for escape.

About daylight, a couple of men noticed our weariness and offered us their seats in a compartment. We accepted their offer and sat for an hour or so. However, we did not feel secure in a compartment with only one exit and traded back with them. We wanted to be on our feet near the end of the car.

As morning progressed, and the train continued on, the rural mountain area under a heavy accumulation of snow appeared more tranquil and less threatening. But we still did not know where we were, and there was no safe way of finding out. As we looked over the car more closely in the daylight, we concluded that, uncomfortable as we had been, this was actually a car for passengers with first class tickets. Our tickets called for second class.

About noon, the train stopped at a station which was isolated in the mountains with a few farmsteads nearby. We could see no village, and only a very few passengers got off or on the train at this stop. When the train started again, the conductor began to move about, so we went to the back of our car, the last one on the train. It was an uphill pull out of the station, so the start was slow. When the conductor started to check or take up the tickets, we decided it was time to jump off and let the train leave without us. As we

hit the ground and walked toward the station, we realized that the passengers who had gotten off the train had already left the area, and that the station agent was alone. He did see us, and when we hesitated about leaving through the station where the other passengers had passed and turned in their tickets, he entered his office.

We did not know if he was going to make a call to the police or if he was offering us a chance to move from his view. We did know we were not at Toulouse and therefore, that our tickets were not correct. Without waiting for the agent's next move, we quickly walked around the station instead of through it and started running through about a foot of snow. It was snowing heavily as we circled a hill or small mountain that kept us out of the view of the station agent. We ran across fields and over fences at a fast pace, expecting our tracks would soon be helpful if they tried to use dogs to find us. One of the more encouraging things about our movement was that we saw no houses or people. This looked like an area that could provide a safe place to hide.

The Guillon Family

Kenneth Shaver and I were only Americans to stay at the Guillon home during the war. They were not part of the organized resistance, and their location next to the home where the German officers were housed meant great risk if they did anything unusual. Therefore, they, like most people trying to survive under occupation, followed a routine that did not draw attention to themselves. Their small acreage provided much of their food, but little was left over. In spite of that, when we suddenly appeared asking for help for one night, they responded to our needs.

After the Allied troops had advanced to their area, following the invasion, the Ninth Air Force took over the airfield the Germans had been using. The Americans used it

as a fighter base. At that time, George Guillon was attracted to the base and did what he could to help, working there until the Americans left to return home. During that time, he was exposed to and learned the English language. A few years later, he was to serve time with the French army in Vietnam. From there he returned home to work for the French Government as an instrument technician. When we saw him in 1983 and 1985, he, his wife, and son were living at the home where we had stayed, and his job was nearby.

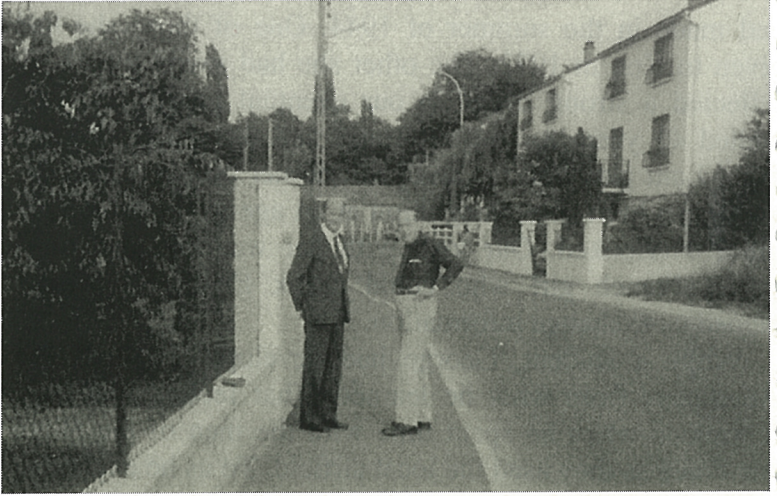
When George met us at the Bretigny railroad station in 1985, he drove us directly to his home. He was surprised that I identified the place as soon as it came into view and also pointed out the large house which the German officers had occupied. The picture of the Guillon home had remained in my mind. The house had been maintained as it was with the fence, gate and sidewalk unchanged. Surrounded by fruit trees and a large garden, the house and yard brought back memories of two young airmen in unknown territory seeking help from friendly people.

Mr. Gabriel Guillon was in failing health when Kenneth Shaver visited the family in 1972, and he died soon after that. He was always proud of the fact that he and his family had helped Ken and me. We are pleased that the Germans never knew they had helped us and that no harm came to them.

Before my wife and I visited in 1983, Mrs. Guillon had retired, turned the home over to George, and had moved to St. Astier near Perigueux, France. That is where we visited her in 1985. She was 91 years old, very alert, living alone, and tending her own garden. She knew from talking on the phone with George that we were in France and intended to see her, but at no set time and date. Yet when with the help of some neighbors we located her, there was no question that we knew each other. We both shed a few tears of joy. She had saved two bottles of clear cherry wine which she

had made in the summer of 1944. One of those she had given to Ken in 1972. The other she had saved for me. It reflected a strong belief in our eventual return. She had waited 41 years for me to return, and that required great faith. I am glad that we had justified her faith and that the visit gave her some recognition at an age when people are often overlooked. Our visit with her was enriched by a young French girl who could speak English and who helped us exchange information.

While a student, George had developed a liking for Americans from what he learned. That feeling had been reinforced when he spent time with the men of the Ninth Air Force as they used the local airfield. To us he expressed great pleasure in having true American friends. I know that he and his parents earned that friendship at great personal risk, and I am thankful that Ken got back to thank them while Gabriel Guillon was still alive.



Above: Clayton pauses at the yard gate with George Guillon, who was 17 years of age when the Guillons took him in 27 February 1944.



Above: George and Clayton at the spot where they first met in front of the Guillon home in Brétigny-sur-Orge south of Paris, France.