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50 years ago

The Tragedy of St. Gingolph

Fifty years ago St. Gingolph, a picturesque border village, nestling in the Alps and overlooking the waters of Lake Geneva, was engulfed in flames. Villagers still refer to the event as the tragedy of St. Gingolph when, during the dark summer of 1944, German SS troops burned half the town to the ground reducing the French side to ashes.

Over the narrow river which flows through St. Gingolph, three bridges link France and Switzerland. St. Gingolph has two mayors and municipal councils but only one church and one cemetery, both of which are located

Charles A. Bénet

on the French side of the town. The village bakery, which is also on the French side, has been run by the Bénet family for generations.

Because townspeople move freely from one side of St. Gingolph to the other, there is often a mix of nationalities within the same family. The first generation baker in the Bénet family was a life-long resident of French St. Gingolph. His son Joseph who succeeded him, was born across the border in Switzerland. Charles, Joseph's eldest son, was born in Geneva. But of his three younger children, all from St. Gingolph, two were born in France and one in Switzerland.

In the early stages of World War II, when the Germans occupied only part of France, the daily life of St. Gingolph continued nearly unaffected. Following the complete occupation of France, however, three nationalities, German, Swiss and French, watched over the border. The single community of two nations caused problems for the border guards. When a person on the Swiss side of the village died, mourners were required to stop at the bridge and turn the casket over to the French for burial in French soil.

In 1942, difficulties forced Joseph Bénet, who then ran the bakery, to close the shop. One night, he took his horse and carriage up into the mountains and crossed into Switzerland where he joined the Swiss Army. His mother, wife and children remained in their home in French St. Gingolph. Occasion-



Two people crossing the frontier out of the German-occupied part of St. Gingolph. (Photo: Archives)

ally, under the cover of darkness, Joseph slipped back for a family visit. By the winter of 1943, as Hitler continued his blitzkrieg, conditions worsened all over France and throughout most of Europe. One night Joseph, eluding a German patrol, returned home and led his family over the border into neutral Switzerland.

A few days prior to June 6, 1944, when a massive armada was on the verge of landing on the shores of Normandy, the Maquis (the French underground) was ordered to disrupt the German troops. The men and women of the resistance cut telephone lines, blew up railway yards, tunnels and bridges. On July 23, 1944, the Maquis, emerging from their hideouts in the Alps, attacked a band of German soldiers on the outskirts of St. Gingolph. The noise of

machine guns alerted the German garrison, and in the fighting that followed losses were sustained by both sides.

That night, while some sympathetic German border guards looked the other way, most of the residents of French St. Gingolph crossed the border into Switzerland. Four villagers refusing to abandon their homes remained. The next day German SS troops retaliated. While friends watched in horror from the opposite bank of the river, the four townspeople were lined up before a firing squad. The SS then set fire to the town. For two days flames and smoke billowed into the sky as the fire spread through St. Gingolph. When it appeared that the church would be engulfed in the flames, Swiss authorities crossed the river to warn the Nazi soldiers that if the church were burned the Swiss would intervene. As a result the church and a few nearby buildings were spared.

After the war the French government gradually made reparations to the townspeople of St. Gingolph for the damage. With one exception: Joseph Bénet. Although the baker was a life-long resident of French St. Gingolph, being Swiss made him a «foreigner» in France. And because his house was on French territory he was ignored by Switzerland. After reopening his bakery, Joseph lived with his family of seven in three small rooms above the store. It was ten years before he was able to finish rebuilding his house himself.

Life goes on. The family bakery, which is known as «Au Four Neuf», is now operated at the original site by François Bénet, the third generation baker. Of Joseph's two daughters, Josette, born in France, married a Swiss; Rolande, born in Switzerland, married a Frenchman and now lives in Hendaye on the Spanish border. Charles, an aerospace engineer, and his Swiss-German wife, Elsbeth, made their home in Maryland, USA. And their son, American-born Eric, met a German girl in Princeton, New Jersey. Now married, they reside in Hamburg, Germany.

For the Bénets, the expression «global village» is kind of old hat. But not so reminiscences of the tragedy of St. Gingolph. ■