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## my Life in France, 1939 - 1945 ★

by BBC LONDON CSV ACTION DESK

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Contributed by

BBC LONDON CSV ACTION DESK

People in story:

Yvette B Mckinnel (née Guillet)

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This story was submitted to the People's War website by Yvette B Mckinnel with help from Rebekkah Abraham on the behalf of London CSV. The story has been added to the site with the author's permission and she understands the site's terms and conditions.

### MY LIFE IN FRANCE 1939 - 1945

I have come to tell you about a little girl who found herself, with her twin brother Yves, one elder brother John (6 years older), and one sister Andrée (4 years older), trapped with her mother in Brittany from July 1939 to July 1945.

My father who was French, from Brittany, had come to London after the first World War, severely wounded as an 'Adjudant d'Artillerie', to work in a French bank in the City. He met my mother from Yorkshire ... but that is another story

As was the custom for many French families, we used to spend our Summer holidays in the country. For us it was in Brittany, where my father would rent some accommodation. In 1938 he bought a small bungalow at Quimiac, 30 kms from St Nazaire. This bungalow was very small, with a flat roof and stood alone facing the bay.

#### 1939

That Summer, we were there at Quimiac. There was talk of war. My father, intensely patriotic, thought it would be safer for us to stay in Brittany than to return to London, our home, in case of bombing, so he returned to London to his place of work.

3rd September, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Then came the period known as 'La Drôle de Guerre'. That Autumn, we went to stay with Cousins at Guenrouët, a small village, 36 kms from St Nazaire. My sister went to a boarding school in St Nazaire. John returned to his boarding school in Guérande, which he had joined the previous year. Yves and I went to the local primary school, not knowing any French apart from a few words spoken by my father, but we quickly learned! The British Expeditionary Force had reached our area, and my mother had made contact with them. Yves and I caught Impetigo and needed treatment. We moved 6 kms away to St Gildas des Bois, where the BEF was stationed. Their Doctor was very good to us and we recovered. Life went on ... and my father came to see us at Christmas (by plane from Croydon to Paris then train). The British soldiers spoiled us with chocolates. My father returned to England and we went back to

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Guenrouet.

### **1940-10th May - Germany invaded Holland, Belgium and Luxemburg.**

#### **26th May to 4th June**

The evacuation from Dunkirk took place and St Nazaire was bombed by the Germans. Refugees started pouring in, all of them tired, worried, apprehensive looking for accommodation. In fact, by June 1940 some 200 000 refugees had come to that area, mainly Dutch, Belgians and, of course, French people from the North East of France. The walls in the station of St Nazaire were covered with names of people who had arrived by train, some having become separated or lost their relatives on the way and the families tried to find one another.

We continued in our schools until the Summer when we returned to Quimiac. Early in June, my father came out again for a fortnight and decided that, on his return to London, he would request a transfer from his bank (Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris) in the City, to a branch in St Nazaire. Before leaving, he gave my mother 4 'Louis d'Or' just in case ... My sister went with my mother to accompany him to St Nazaire station where he caught a train to St Malo. Conditions there were chaotic, numerous people hoping to get on to the boat which proved to be the LAST boat to England. On arrival in Southampton, on about 16th June, he saw to his horror, headlines on the placards 'FRANCE CAPITULATES'. From then on we were cut off.

The situation was also chaotic where we were. Groups of soldiers, Poles, British and French were wandering, lost. Unknown to the civilians, Forces were retreating. British authorities before leaving had asked the 'Mairies' to collect their supplies so that they would not fall into the German hands, and asked for them to be distributed to the local population: food, bedding, cigarettes, motorbikes, etc.,. Some took more advantage than others - we got nothing. Much later, tins of tea, margarine and corned beef were given to my mother.

For us, still in Quimiac, a period of sinister calm reigned, until one afternoon, we heard lorries on the beach. At first we thought it was the coalman, but in fact, the Germans had arrived. (As children, having read storybooks and seen frightening pictures, we were TERRIFIED at the thought of seeing Germans), however, they conducted themselves very correctly, were polite, smart, and disciplined, no doubt thrilled to be in this beautiful part of France. They would march and sing, often in harmony, (of course, we were not supposed to watch or listen). They would also go horse riding along the beach. They took over the vacated holiday homes and took advantage of all contents.

Very soon they were looking for billets for their troops. Our house was too small. We were informed one day that all wireless sets had to be surrendered to the town hall to be checked by the authorities but, fortunately, they only wanted the transmitters, so we were able to fetch our radio back.

After a little while, a sentry was installed on our flat roof, with a cabin, siren and machine gun. He patrolled day and night, peering out to sea. He would call out to my mother: 'Madame, Bateau Anglais Kaput' On 14th June Germans had entered Paris. On 17th June the Lancastria was sunk in the Loire estuary, hit by a Henkel whose bombs went straight into the funnel. There were 5000 men on board, 3000 died in 15 minutes!

With all this patrolling, we found it difficult to sleep, so my mother plucked up her courage and, with a neighbour, went to the 'KOMMANDANTUR' to complain. As a result, some young soldiers came and put sand on the roof to deaden the sound. This improved things. A few days later, on his way back from the beach, the Commander saw my mother, and engaged her in conversation, enquiring if she were sleeping better and he asked about my father's whereabouts. During the course of this conversation, she tried to say 'NON' but it was a 'NO'. The German Officer immediately pointed his finger at her and said ' Vous, Madame, ENGLISCH!' and my mother replied ' Mon Mari FRANCAIS Moi FRANCAISE' He went and made enquiries at the 'Mairie' Strange that this woman was in this bungalow, on its own, so close to the sea ... However, he was assured that we were well known, had been coming here for several years.

Later in 1940, the authorities decreed that an area within 3kms of the coast would have to be completely evacuated (preparation of the Wall of the Atlantic - Le Mur de l'Atlantique). People were told to leave all crockery, furniture and bed linen but in view of our circumstances we were allowed to take our crockery and bed linen.

We moved first to a family a short distance away, for two weeks. In those early days the Germans were convinced that they would very soon be in England. One who was billeted in a house nearby, boasted to my mother that as sure as he was sitting there, talking to her, he would be in London at the 'Ritz' on 15th September. Later, our cousins came to fetch us with their big lorry and took us to St Gildas, 30 kms from St Nazaire, where a house had been found for us. It was situated on the main road of this village, had two bedrooms, a loft and one little main room downstairs with an open hearth. There was no bathroom. The toilet was in the garden. All water was from a well nearby.

Weeks, months went by. We all went back to school, Yves and I to the local primary schools, Andree to the local Convent Secondary School and John became a boarder at Redon, all these schools run by the religious orders. Rationing had started. Fortunately, our cousins were farmers and there was also a flour mill in the family so we had help with butter and flour. Black market and bargaining started to flourish.

Following the Armistice of June 1940, France was divided into four Zones of which two main ones. In the early days we were able to communicate with my father by sending letter cards via the Free Zone to an address in the

Ardeche and another address in Toulon. From there, news would be forwarded and returned from London. Life went on ... one source of difficulty was the fact that, politically, there developed two 'camps', one 'For Petain' one 'For DeGaulle' and we had cousins on each side, so my mother had to strike a very delicate balance, as she had to rely on both sets for money (We lived on borrowed money throughout the war as it was impossible for my father to transfer funds) and the 'DeGaulle' / 'Petain' issue was and remained a source of very strong feelings even long after the war.

Of course it was dangerous to speak English. We could not get help from the Red Cross as we had French nationality and my mother feared for John's safety.

Daily, and more often, the Germans would march up and down our road, singing, (very well) We, as children, would follow, imitating them, sometimes also singing - but very different words..! They sang 'Aili Ailo Aila'

#### **1941**

Life continued, my mother would cycle to Redon to take food parcels to John. Yves and I were at school, wearing the traditional 'sarrau' (overall) that all school children used to wear in France. We also wore our 'Sabots' (clogs) or galoches (wooden soled boots). At school we were all made to write a letter of loyalty to Maréchal Pétain and there was a song entitled ' Maréchal, Nous Voilà, devant Toi, le Sauveur de la France'. Needless to say, other words were soon used i.e 'Vendeur' instead of 'Sauveur'.

Patrols took place, two soldiers at a time, 2 hourly at night. They would bang on the door and shout if any light was showing. Air raids took place day and night on St Nazaire, the very important submarine base. During these raids, the RAF and Americans would drop 'Tracts' with the 'Real' news, also 'silver paper' (technical name Chaf or window) to confuse the German radar system; we would pick up these silver paper strips in the fields and keep them for paper chains! At any time, Germans patrolling could come into our house and check the radio on the mantelpiece to see which 'station' we were tuned into, BBC was a Serious offence; or to see if we had any 'Tracts', also a Serious offence.

#### **June 2 1st / 22nd - Germany invaded Russia**

We started to keep rabbits and chickens. It was usually my job to fetch rabbit food in the fields. We had a dog and later a cat. Milk was fetched daily from a farm one km away.

#### **1942**

A major event took place on 26th /27th March at St Nazaire: 'Operation Chariot', in which a little flotilla came into the estuary of the Loire by night, led by HMS Campbeltown and 17 little ships. The Main Dock was blown up, thus made useless for the remainder of the war. No longer could the Germans refit the big ship 'Tirpitz', but the submarine pens remained intact, protected by 30 metres of reinforced concrete. We were aware that something was happening, extra patrols, listening devices. At school, children said to me 'Ton Pere est là, On l'a vu. >'. Germans were on edge.

One day, a strange incident took place in a haberdashery. A soldier was buying socks to send back home. He asked the ladies their advice as to size. My mother gave her opinion, he looked at her and said: 'You are English' Amazingly, he went on to tell her that he had lived in the North of England, in my mother's home town: HULL! where his father had a Pork Butcher's shop. His Grandmother was English! Of course, again she must have been very worried, should he report this. Also, one day, two German officers drove through St Gildas, and were asking for the 'English lady'. My mother was away visiting John. Warned, Yves and I ran and hid in a field and Andrée took off on her bicycle.

11th November - End of Zone Libre. End of that particular means of communication with my father.

#### **1943**

20th January - Creation of 'La MILICE' - Police Civile au service de Vichy; in collaboration with the Germans.

17th February - The 'Service du Travail Obligatoire' was instituted.

One day in the Summer, my mother was told, in secret, of two British Airmen in hiding. She went to see them on her bicycle, took them some books, went again, cooked them egg and bacon! Some time later, she was told to look out on a certain day and time. She did and saw a car drive past with these two men; they were handed from one Resistance group to another and reached the UK via Spain. One of them went to see my father, explained that he had seen my mother, although not allowed to say where or when and that we were all well. After the war, he came to see my mother here in London. He was from Catford. I now know that the man who saved them was betrayed and caught by the Gestapo in December 1943 and spent the rest of the war years in BUCHENWALD. I met him in July 1994. He was a very sick man. His heroism in saving a number of British and American airmen was recognized by King George VI and the President of the United States. I have seen the certificates.

6th September - my birthday. Whilst on the back of a bicycle going pigeon nesting with my friend, I fell off into the ditch and a passing lady put me in her horse and trap and took me to the Convent in St. Gildas to which the hospital of St. Nazaire had been evacuated. An x-ray revealed that I had a fractured skull - yet another worry for my mother.

Life became increasingly difficult for young men who were expected to do the 'Travail Obligatoire'. This could affect John. Many hid in farms or joined the Resistance. If discovered, they would be arrested. I heard that a train load of such young men were taken at Redon.

By late July, the Allies had landed in Sicily. On 3rd September, Italy was invaded and surrendered on the 7th. We continued sending and receiving messages to and from my father through the Red Cross (London, Geneva, Paris, St Gildas and vice versa). These took at least 3 months or over. Once we were without news for 13 months. These messages consisted of 25 words. Occasionally, one would be cut out by the Censor. Otherwise, on two occasions, a radio message from my father, on the BBC radio broadcasts in London, was heard by other relatives. There was a radio hidden in the convent, to which my mother would listen and pass on the news. On a few other occasions, we received a letter from my father, which had been posted to us, in France, by a secret agent, dropped from London.

**1944**

#### **6 JUNE - DEBARQUEMENT - Great Excitement!**

We all imagined that we would be liberated very soon, and followed any news avidly. Also on the wall of our main room we had a map of Europe, upon which we had been following the progress of the war, especially in Russia, with wool attached to pins.

Shortly after this major event, a young man came to visit our cousin, Pierre Chaussé, who was out. He returned on several occasions, asking to speak to Pierre, saying that he was interested in joining the 'Resistance', of which Pierre knew 'something'. After repeated denials, Pierre finally agreed to help him. Result: A week or so later, a young man cycled 10 kms to tell him of several arrests - Pierre escaped immediately. The Gestapo had set a trap to capture him as he cycled to his factory. Thwarted, they entered our cousins' house, pulled out the telephone wires and started searching for evidence and photographs.

My mother who had been shopping at the Butcher's shop, called in as was her routine, to be met by a soldier with a gun ' Qui êtes vous?' 'Madame Guillet' 'Qu'est-ce que vous avez dans votre sac?' Showing him, She says 'De la viande' (I am told that she said: Mon viande!), She then said ' Je ne comprends pas' several times and was shouted at: ' Taisez Vous et Asseyez Vous, On Vous connaît, Vous êtes anglaise et votre mari est en Angleterre!...> They took Madame Chaussé away but decided to leave my mother. Warned, Yves and I ran and hid again. Madame Chaussé was released 3 days later and told us that she had been locked in a room at the KOMMANDATUR 10 kms away at Pont-Château and interrogated incessantly about her husband.

Pierre Chaussé had been betrayed by the young French man, who was caught after the war, tried and shot. The Americans had been advancing rapidly and we expected to be liberated any day. Flags had been prepared and hidden in drain pipes, paper chains made with the silver paper (window) and wild flowers picked lay in waiting in our enamel water jugs

At about this time, one Sunday after Mass, 12 young men had decided to swim across the canal (demarcation line) to see the Americans, known to be in Redon. Ten were caught by the Germans and made to kneel with their hands tied behind their backs in the boys school. They were told they would be shot at dusk. However, our priest pleaded on their behalf and they were released. The other 2, including my brother John, were missing for 3 days. They returned. John very proud of the fact that he had seen the Americans, had sweets to prove it hidden in his socks! My mother had been sick with worry!

#### **12th August**

We are bombed twice by the Americans. A convoy had passed through the night before. We had watched from behind the curtains. After the bombing, everyone in our village decided to leave as the situation was dangerous. So my mother packed whatever she could in Yves' little 'charrette' (the little cart he had made and in which he used to fetch firewood and pine cones for my mother). Then we walked away not really knowing where we were going. Our cousins joined us. We slept for the first 3 days on the dining room floor of a friend's house in a village 3 kms away. Then we were offered two rooms in another house. We settled and waited ... We could hear the nightly shelling across the canal. John made a crystal radio set, and he tuned in to the BBC by means of a very small needle. Germans confiscated all bicycles, even the children's bicycle belonging to Yves and me, any horses they could find and any form of transport possible. Some farmers were made to transport some German ammunition so that the 'Resistance' would think twice about blowing it up. At our friends' house one bicycle was completely dismantled and the various parts hidden in beds.

25th August - Paris was liberated

Nothing happened so, eventually we returned to our house in St Gildas. We went back to school. For me, it was in the stables of the convent - icy cold, no heating. Food was very scarce, there was no electricity. We would walk along the railway track to see friends or fetch food as the roads and fields were either mined or flooded. Bread was a brown sticky mess with maggots and there was, of course, a curfew.

One day, the Germans had left their camp and thinking that they had really gone, we went and raided their stores for food. We found very little ... Then they came back, angry and armed started searching each house for any of their stolen goods. I remember a young man speaking on our behalf. He was a kind young man who asked the German not to take anything away. BUT the Germans had spotted our chickens and rabbits and stole them a few days before Christmas. No food left, we lived on TURNIPS. It was a very cold Winter, no heating or lighting. Earlier my mother had made a little portable light by saving fat in a mug with a little wick stuck in it. As it was so cold and dark, we used to go to bed very early, half dressed and my mother would sing us English songs very

softly. 'Danny Boy' and 'the Minstrel Boy' will always bring back those memories to me.

Finally, a Truce was arranged by the Red Cross between the Germans, the Americans and the French 'Resistance' forces to allow an evacuation of civilians. Andrée and John left on 24th October 1944. The Germans supervising at the station, emptied all contents of John's bag on to the ground. On arrival in Nantes, John joined the American army as an Interpreter and Andrée went to live with a family and continued her studies at the Lycée.

### 1945 - January

Another truce was arranged. My mother decided that we should leave this time. A wooden suitcase was made for us by the carpenter opposite. As we left, money was given to my mother in books and balls of wool, because we were only allowed to take a limited sum of money. We had to go through a check at the station. There were Germans and Red Cross people. We boarded a train, into cattle trucks, I think, with straw on the floor and were closed in, with a German sentry. The train moved off. It was dark inside and I was very apprehensive. We came to 'No Man's Land'. The train stopped, the German descended, the train moved a little further, another soldier climbed in ... Who was he..?

He was a FREE FRENCH SOLDIER! Everyone sang the Marseillaise, tears flowed. We arrived in Nantes, were 'sorted out' and collected, taken to a little village called PUCEUL, to some very kind distant relatives. From there, (near NOZAY), I was taken to a boarding school, in a château (freezing cold!). The boarders slept in the loft and had to break the ice in the morning to wash. My twin Yves stayed with my mother and went to the local school. Americans 'discovered' him. He became known as JASPER and proved very useful to them as an interpreter. I met them when I came on holiday, and they called me 'Goldilocks' (my hair was Ginger then!). Letters came from my father. He came over via Paris in April. When he saw my brother John, he did not recognise him and said ' Bonjour Monsieur '!

The region of St Nazaire was finally liberated on the 11th May - 3 days after the remainder of Europe. We returned to St. Gildas, prepared for our return home and sailed on 25th July 1945.

Some memories and emotions remain painfully strong.

### Addendum

The gold coins given by my father to my mother in 1940: - After the Germans had arrived, one day; my mother told Yves and me to play a game, digging under the concrete in front of our bungalow; in the sand, while the soldier was patrolling on our roof - when he was out of sight, she hid the coins there in a tin (a navy blue Players cigarette tin) and retrieved them later when we had to leave. She then sewed them into her corset for safety and they remained there until the end of the war.

Soap : Soap became of a very poor quality (a cross between a stone and a pumice stone) My mother being a qualified Industrial Chemist, made some, using resin from the pine trees, collected by Yves, Caustic Soda, from the Chemist and calf or cows feet from the Butcher. This mixture was then poured into moulds made by our cousin's small cheese box factory.

Re: The Airmen - A coded message was transmitted to the Resistance, from London, indicating the safe return of the two Airmen. It was worded: Le vin d'Anjou est bon '. I believe that only one of these two Airmen is still alive and lives in Birmingham.

Re: Our Americans who were so kind to us in the early part of 1945 : Andrée finally traced one, called Jim SCHAMBACH. He lives in Pennsylvania. After 50 years we have met him again. He had not forgotten us. We (Andrée and I have had an emotional reunion with him in May 1996).

Sadly, my twin brother Yves died, in a road traffic accident, in 1982. John was also killed in a road traffic accident in 1978.

My sister, Andrée, lives near Valence in the French Departement of the Drôme, with her husband ex Royal Navy and United Nations official.

Part of my long nursing career was spent in the Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service. I married a civil servant in the Ministry of Defence who was born near Dumfries. Sadly also, he died in 1990.

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