

INTERVIEW FOR THE KEMPER MEMORIAL ARCHIVES

Denise Sevean and Her World War II Memories

The initial interview was conducted on February 28, 2019 by Vicky Amon, and included photo/video by Jan Northrup and facilitating by Karen Bonaparte.

Revisions were made during April, May, June and July, with edits provided by Denise and Karen.

Background

We were delighted to meet and be able to interview Denise Vie Sevean, a long-time Larchmont resident who was a child in France during World War II; we will be honored to add her recollections to the archives of the Kemper Memorial Park in Mamaroneck, NY. We were introduced to Denise by Kemper Board member Karen Bonaparte, Denise's neighbor. Karen thought Denise's experiences of living through German Occupation and the subsequent liberation by Allied armies, would be fascinating. Indeed it is; Denise makes history come alive with a first person account recalling vivid images of the time, and specifically about what she and her family went through.

Denise is a spirited, energetic lady of 82, with bright cheeks, warm hazel eyes and beautiful curly dark hair. Though petite in stature, she projects a powerful presence; her soft but clear voice and charming French accent engaged us thoroughly. She is a sharp observer of human nature and was happy to share her story, not only for Kemper, but to preserve it for her much-loved children and grandchildren. She has answered their many questions over the years, yet has never written anything down, so it's time. Denise also looks forward to sharing this with her large family still living in France.

We had a list of topics to cover and the interview was wide-ranging, skipping back and forth across the years during our 2+ hours together, as well as subsequent conversations. These notes are now organized into relevant sections, in chronological order as to when they occurred in her life.

Her family and early life

Denise was born in July 1937; her family name was Vie, which means "life" in French, a felicitous coincidence given her, and her family's, life story. They lived in the La Beauce region of northern France, in the ancient village of Gallardon which dates from Medieval times. It is located between the Seine and Loire rivers, about 100km southwest of Paris and less than 20km from Chartres. So, the entire area was steeped in history. Her parents came from large families, and raised a large family themselves. Denise was the oldest, and she had nine other siblings: including Denise, three more were born during the war

years and the others came after. Her parents had deep roots in the environs as well; her father was born in 1917, one of six from La Loupe, a small village west of Chartres, and her mother was born in La Beauce in 1919, one of ten children.

They met on a nearby farm, where they had both started working at an early age (her father at only 9) to help their families. They married when her father was 19, in April, a bit in haste, Denise said with a smile, because she came along in July. During the war years, she marveled that her mother was only in her early 20s but already had four young children, and yet managed to protect them with intrepid grace. She set firm guidelines of behavior, cajoled them to stay safe, and gathered them calmly to hurry and hide, all as the situation required.

Neither parent had much schooling but they were intelligent strivers, with skills that served them well to raise and protect their children during those violent, turbulent years. Her father was a clever farmer who was gifted with horses while her mother was resourceful and wrote and spoke beautifully. They were adamant that their children be well-educated, always insisting they attend school, and study as diligently as they could.

The First World War impacted her family as well: her paternal grandfather, who lived until 1957, was a tall, gentle man who was badly injured while fighting at Verdun, losing his fingers. His wife died young, so he raised their six children basically alone; there were five girls and one boy (her father). This grandfather had a small house in the village near where Denise lived and they had a close bond; she smiled warmly when she recalled how she was his favorite. Her maternal grandfather died just before she was born.

Her earliest memories

Denise said she recalled many things from those times that “marked” her, and when she spoke of them in later years to her parents, her father would always be astonished that she had remembered, and observed, so much.

Her father was drafted into the French Air Force, and was based in the active airfield near Chartres during the years leading up to the war, during the Occupation and afterwards as well. Not surprisingly, their cohort was composed mainly of local men; one of his captains had a home near theirs. During her father’s war service, in addition to many other responsibilities, he drove truck convoys through Occupied territory, first to Marseilles and then to connect to the boats that supplied forces fighting in Algeria. Traveling this far from his home village made a big impression on him, and decades later he would still talk about how he had seen big cities and foreign lands.¹

Even though her father couldn’t stay full time at home, he would visit periodically when he had a few days leave to make sure the family was safe. Denise notes with a laugh that a new baby seemed to come in the months after each of his home visits, but as a little girl, she could only note the coincidence without understanding why.

She vividly remembers German soldiers walking through town during the Occupation, and could still see the loads of equipment they brought with them, drawn by horses; the roads were busy and dusty with the incessant traffic. In the skies above, there was the regular roar of planes, leading one of her neighbors to observe ominously: “See them? Those are the Germans trying to destroy the Americans and all the train stations.”

She observed all this while still staying close to their little home, which was across the street from where her paternal grandfather lived, allowing him to keep an eye out for them. Denise described their house as an ancient one room stone structure with a red rock floor, a very simple but cozy space that her mother kept scrupulously clean. It was located down a tiny “ruelle,” or little street, that ran between two larger houses. Denise said the street didn’t even have a name back then, but today it is called Rue des Miracles, or Street of Miracles, perhaps in tribute to how it sheltered all of them, and that everyone living along it had survived the War.

It was difficult to get news because there were no radios or telephones in their village, and no formal newspapers. But, she smiles, fondly remembering that due to the cleverness of her mother and efforts of her father, they always had food and so never went hungry. Her mother even breast fed another child on occasion, to help a fellow mother who had health problems.

When there was intense fighting nearby or the fear of bombing, they had to hide in a tunnel dug into a nearby hill. Denise doesn’t remember if had been dug out by her parents, grandfather or the villagers working together, but nevertheless its sturdy walls were lined with hay and protected them. Sometimes in the middle of the night they had to run there from their beds, past the little kitchen space and on to the shelter. One time she carried a plate of beans that her mother urged her not to spill, and another time, she remembers her mother hurrying them to nestle under a large, very old apple tree instead, when she thought they couldn’t reach the tunnel in time. There at least, they could be hidden by the tree’s spreading branches.

Despite all these frequent incidents and disruptions, her mother insisted that they still go to school. Although it was a mile and a half away, she reminded them how and where to walk safely and required that they come right home afterwards. Her mother carefully supervised them at night while they did their homework, their small room lit by oil lamps. Indeed, long afterwards, when Denise had been living in America for years, on a trip back home she happened to meet her first teacher (from when she was only 3) in the street. The teacher was now 101, but she had a prodigious memory, and recognized Denise as one of the children who had been in her long-ago classes.

On a side note here, Denise said that school was not always perfect: She is a natural lefty, but this was discouraged by her teachers, who actually tied her left hand to her body to force her to use her right. Beyond this, one of her brothers also had great difficulty in learning to read in that traditional, very regimented, system. But he had a natural intelligence, so Denise was able to help him at home; her parents assigned her to work with him patiently to improve.

Her mother was also very religious (her father was not), insisting, as with school, that they still go to church services despite the war around them. This was no doubt in part because she sincerely believed, but also because she was a strong woman who wanted her children to have as normal a life as possible.

The most horrifying moment that Denise recalls occurred after D-Day in June of '44. As the Americans started moving through their area, the Germans all left hurriedly, and not in any organized fashion. When her father heard this news, and also saw what was happening around his air base, he rushed home to be with the family. As he approached their door, Denise opened it to greet him happily, but saw with horror that he had been stopped by a German soldier who materialized by his side. The German pointed his pistol directly at her father's head, and seemed ready to shoot him. Denise called out "Don't do that to my father!!" and started crying. The German looked slowly from her father to her, lowered his gun and told her father to go into the house but not to venture out during this time of chaotic departure.

Denise noted other aspects of the German Occupation – how the Germans treated the local population, at least in their village: her mother was never harassed or molested by any soldier, despite the fact that she had to roam regularly, and all alone, into the fields in search of cows to get milk for the children. She was never touched, so Denise commented that this fact, in addition to the scary incident above, reassured her in later years that not all Germans were evil.

We asked whether she was always very afraid during these difficult years ... how did she process the life-threatening situations that went on around her? Interestingly, Denise doesn't remember feeling much fear at the time at all, aside from the almost tragic encounter with the German soldier and her father in '44. She thinks this is largely because they were always kept very busy doing regular day-to-day things and that overall her parents maintained a calm sense of purpose and optimism. It was only years afterwards that Denise realized she must have been traumatized in a profound way, because in her twenties (and even later) the sound of plane engines flying overhead could frighten her and bring back flashbacks of the war.

Was there dissent or strife in the village, as the local population struggled to survive?

Yes, sometimes the French fought with each other, but Denise remembers the disagreements were mainly between those living on the farms versus those who owned businesses in town, as everyone struggled to get food or other advantages. This strife was also due to class consciousness; Denise was aware that her family, in comparison with those in town, was very poor and lived on a street with many children who were also from poor families. While most of the wealthier store owners looked down on them, some were kind. In particular, she remembers a fish merchant who would tell her when he had something, perhaps small scraps that were still edible and tasty but hard to sell, and gave them to her to take them home to her mother for the family.

At one point Denise said her mother thought some of their provisions were stolen by neighbors, and would notice when people sold their extra food instead of sharing it with other villagers. But they were desperate times: Denise also recalls that once her parents had carefully raised a pig, and thought they had kept its existence well-hidden. However, when it was nearing the time to be slaughtered, someone found out about it and warned her parents that if they didn't share some of the meat, this person would tell the Germans.

Beyond this, Denise also recalled how one family became very aggressive, beating up others in an attempt to score points with the Germans.

Was she aware of the Resistance? Did any friendships change as a result of the Occupation?

Yes, Denise now knows there were such people who worked in the underground and the cause of the Free French, but as a little girl she didn't really notice those kinds of activities, or hear talk of them.

People could be very suspicious of outsiders, and grudges could be held against nationalities regardless of individual circumstances. For example, while there were many large families around them, one in particular was Italian. Her father didn't want her to associate with them because he called them "traitors," or turncoats, probably because of Mussolini in their native Italy and his alliance with Hitler.

What was the village's reaction to Liberation?

As the Americans moved in, they came in huge numbers and with big trucks, camping out with all their equipment in a soccer field nearby. The Germans by and large left the village quietly and quickly, even though there were still pockets of fighting in the woods and open areas around her home. They also burned fields and the trees by the river to make foraging more difficult for both the villagers and for incoming Allied troops.ⁱⁱ

By 1945, when the war was clearly close to ending, there were many, many more Allied soldiers coming through and Denise remembers everyone was so very happy to see them, lining the streets, and jumping up and down to greet them. The villagers marveled at the many people who had fought to free them. Denise remarked that this was the first time they had seen a black American soldier among the ranks and that he was very kind. She told how the village made a huge feast for everyone, to celebrate their Liberation.

During these months, every family was asked to bring the Allied troops fresh food; she remembers a lot of their tomatoes being given away and of course bread. The Americans in turn passed out candies to the children, although it was a type of mint, not the chocolate mentioned in so many other wartime accounts. The little ones were excited to get the sweets, but her mother very frugally traded in the candies, when she could, for ration coupons so the family could get more nutritious food, clothes and shoes.

Indeed, relating to these candies, Denise had an interesting experience long after the war in a local dentist's office here in the US: a patient in the waiting room heard her accent and they got to talking. He had been an American soldier in France during WWII and was with De Gaulle as he walked into Paris to liberate it. Amazingly, the man still carried a similar type of candy in his pocket, and gave her one in remembrance.

Denise recalled that those perceived as collaborators were forced to move away after hostilities ended. She also spoke of how people gathered in the squares to watch women getting their hair shaved off as punishment for being with the Germans; they were never forgiven for these transgressions by the townspeople. Scenes like this were repeated many times, in many villages, all over France after the war ended.

There was also of course much sadness as people realized all their losses. Most families in the village seemed to be spared from death, although Denise does remember one uncle who disappeared, presumably killed. She also was largely unaware at the time of deportations or of Jewish families being taken to camps, as most lived in other parts of France, in cities.

Now as an adult, Denise's wartime experiences are a deep part of her and she is very grateful to America and all the American soldiers who helped free her country. She talked about the statue of Patton in one of the villages near her home, and of the many other statues of thanks throughout France today. She noted that even German bunkers have since been repurposed for other uses, to help the area heal.

What about the 1950s/early 60s post-war era, and what did they think of De Gaulle?

Her parents loved De Gaulle because he wanted to rebuild France and helped the poor families like her parents get homes of their own. His government also required all children to go to school, although in Denise's family, her parents had already made sure of that!

After the war, they all went back to their regular lives, and her family increased by six more children. Denise spoke with great love and pride of their mother during these later years as well, reminding us of her great natural intelligence despite little schooling. Again, as a result of what she herself wasn't able to get, both she and Denise's father were strict with all their children, insisting upon the importance of a good education. They were expected to work hard, and bad grades were not tolerated. Denise remembers skipping class one day to play when she was 12. Her mother found out and was very angry, insisting she promise never to do it again ... she never did. Denise devoted herself to her studies, and was diligent with history, memorizing poetry and the daily *dictées*, the classic French dictation exercises that were excellent for improving comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar.

Denise related one sweet family incident when she was 13. Her parents had been married in a simple civil ceremony, but after Denise's 1st communion in 1950, they went to church very early that morning and in their best clothes; they asked Denise to stay home

to watch her younger siblings. They came home a while afterwards in great spirits, bringing a huge celebration breakfast. Denise learned that they had gone to get married again, but this time in a formal church service. She smiled with the memory that her father had done it just for her mother, and just because she had always wanted it.

When Denise was 14, her father was looking towards her future and hoped she would become a teacher. But, she very much wanted to become a nurse instead and fought to do so, despite the fact that her formal schooling ended at 16. A problem developed in her local school because its new head was a Communist who didn't like Catholics, making it very hard for them to remain in the system. Nevertheless, she continued her studies "by exchange" and sent her homework in to administrators outside the village, while working at a retail store.

At age 21, Denise passed a test and it allowed her to enter the nursing school of Dreux, without telling her father. He found out later and had to accept Denise's decision. Denise later met her husband John while working as a nurse.

Unfortunately, Denise was never been able to practice as a nurse in the U.S. She had wanted to get a degree also in America so she could continue in nursing after she married, but this was not possible with her family situation. She had heavy responsibilities: in the restaurant that she and her husband owned, at home with their children, and in helping care for his mother who came to live with them for a number of years. Nevertheless, Denise takes pride in her passion for the field and how her interest in it inspired two of her younger sisters, one of whom was 22 years younger than she. They were, in part thanks to Denise, finally able to overcome their father's resistance and became nurses in France. Indeed, once Denise told her father, "You're my baby sister's father and you're my father, but you're not the same man."

On a final note about the lingering wounds of the War era: for a long time her father held a deep hatred for the Germans, of course due to his own experiences, but also to that of his father in WWI. So much so that in the 1960s, when Denise's sisters were starting to be courted by young men, her father didn't want them to "bring one of those home ..." Yet, her baby sister once brought a German boyfriend to meet the family, but by this time her father fortunately had mellowed a bit. He only let his anger come out on certain occasions, such as in 1984 when German Chancellor Kohl and French President Mitterrand came together to build a memorial in Verdun to jointly honor war dead from both countries. Her father was "livid" to see this and was opposed to Mitterrand ever after that.ⁱⁱⁱ

On coming to America

Denise met her late husband John Sevean in France; he was born in New York but raised with his family in Brittany. They fell in love quickly, and she married him at age 26, agreeing to come back to the US with him, initially for only two years. But those two years turned into an indefinite stay and she's lived here ever since.

She arrived in America on November 9, 1963, just before the Kennedy assassination shocked the nation; Denise was so new here that she didn't really understand what was going on. Over time she learned English by watching television and by listening to people talking in stores.

She loves that America is a melting pot and is adamant that those who come to the US now should learn English. She believes they can keep their own culture and customs in the privacy of their homes but otherwise should fully take part in society here, and adapt.

For many years, Denise and John together owned Larchmont's Colony Restaurant, a long-standing and very well-regarded French restaurant on Chatsworth Avenue, right next to the train station. Here's a picture of it from a Westchester County Historical Society publication: <https://westchester.pastperfectonline.com/photo/873809E9-926A-4375-838B-231783811120>. It was also next to the office of Philip Severin, the realtor, developer, planner, landscape architect and writer who played a key role in the evolution of our present-day community. He became a good friend and helped them buy their first house.

Although Denise initially did not know how to cook (she was more eager to help her father plant vegetables in their fields than to learn by her mother's side in their little kitchen), she became an excellent cook here. She worked in the restaurant often, especially on Sundays and Mondays when their other staff had time off. She took on many roles ... chef, sous-chef, pantry helper, anything to help them be successful.

Denise and John had two children, a boy, Francis, and a girl, Sylvia, and she cherishes them. Both learned French (although her four grandchildren do not speak it) and they went to our local schools. The family joined the congregation at Sts. John and Paul, and both children were married there. Today, Francis lives with his family in Mamaroneck and they see Denise often. Sylvia lives in California with her family, yet Denise visits her for several weeks at a time during the year.^{iv}

On staying rooted to her family back in France

Denise's parents were not happy that she left France for America and that it turned into a permanent stay. Indeed, she never told them that she became an American citizen. But despite the distance, both in miles and in culture, Denise remained close to everyone and went back to France regularly over the years. All her siblings are still alive.

Her schedule was to write weekly letters home, call home twice a month, and also visit for a month each summer. These trips were especially wonderful as Francis and Sylvia were growing up so they could get to know their heritage, as well as their many aunts, uncles and cousins. Sometimes Denise's French family visited here, but never for a long time, and they had no desire to strike out and live elsewhere as she had.

She showed us pictures of the new house she and her siblings had built for her parents, and she was especially delighted about the wonderful family celebration made for her

parent's 60th wedding anniversary in 1997, just before her father died in '98 and a few years before her mother's death in '01.

After more than two hours of listening in rapt attention ...

... our interview drew to a close. Our many questions were answered, and Denise urged us to look around a bit in her cozy home, to see all the French touches throughout that still link her to her native land. Indeed, we lost count of how many depictions of the Eiffel Tower we saw, in addition to beautiful photos, maps and decorative pieces.

Denise reminded us, with a faraway look in her eye, that as she thought of those difficult war years, she realized again how lucky she was to have had such strong and loving parents who guided their children physically, as well as emotionally. Because of her mother's strength and her parents' devotion, today neither Denise nor her siblings have any major psychological scars from what they saw during World War II.

Denise also stressed again her love for America and all its blessings, and with a smile said we could ask her more anytime ...

FOOTNOTES & ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

ⁱ More relating to Algeria: during the late 1950s, one of Denise's brothers went there to fight in that bitter war for independence between France and her former colony. The experience traumatized him and he bore psychological scars from it for a long time; it was far from the adventure of seeing exotic foreign places that his father had during WWII.

ⁱⁱ Despite how close Denise and her family were to the town Chartres, wartime communication was spotty, and villagers rarely traveled beyond their rural area. So, they probably weren't aware of how the magnificent Chartres cathedral was initially protected leading up to the war, then barely escaped destruction in the months after D-Day.

This website contains this miraculous story:

https://francetravelplanner.com/go/chartres/see/history_of_the_cathedral.html

“In 1939, when it became clear that Chartres could be subject to battle during World War II, all of the precious stained-glass windows were removed and packed for storage. Some were stored in the cathedral crypt (largest in France), others were shipped by rail to the safety of southern France.

This preservation work was completed in an astonishing ten days.

In August 1944, American forces approaching Chartres believed the cathedral's towers and steeples were being used by the enemy for artillery range-finding, and thus the building must be destroyed. Before the bombardment was ordered, Colonel Welborn Barton Griffith, Jr. volunteered to sneak through the German lines to see if this was true or not. He and his driver successfully evaded the enemy, climbed the towers of the cathedral, and confirmed that there were no enemy spotters. The bombardment order was rescinded.

Sadly, Colonel Griffith was killed in action later that day.”

ⁱⁱⁱ This was a controversial incident in which Mitterrand extended a hand to Kohl during a ceremony honoring war dead; both men stood there silently acknowledging their hideous past and their hopes that the enmities were buried for good.

Denise's father was not alone in his fury; this incident did not sit well with many Frenchmen. Here's the web link that provides details: <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/kohl-mitterrand-verdun-1984/>

^{iv} As a side note re St. John and Paul church, Denise mentioned that one of the long-time priests there is also French by birth, and he too was a child there during World War II. He was interested to hear that Denise was transcribing her memories of the time, and told her that he had many stories to share as well. However, Denise says we'd have to hurry, as he plans to retire soon and return to Nantes, where he grew up.