

Luxembourg Times

A story of true Luxembourgish heroism

07.11.2014

The incredible story of a Luxembourg woman's heroism spying for the allies during WWI is to be brought to life in an exhibition at the British Embassy.

The incredible story of a Luxembourg woman's heroism spying for the allies during WWI is to be brought to life in an exhibition at the British Embassy.



Lise Rischart's astounding role gathering information on German troop movements along the Luxembourg rail network, which she encoded for the British Intelligence Agency, will finally receive the attention it deserves after being lost for many years.



The fact that the story is known at all today is largely thanks to the efforts of Janet Morgan, who lives in Scotland with her husband, Lord Balfour of Burleigh.

The couple found the key to an old cabinet which belonged to Lord Balfour's father, Captain George Bruce.

Captain Bruce served with the British Secret Service during WWI and though he was asked to destroy all documents and evidence of this time, it was clear from the cabinet's contents, he did not. Finding a few pieces of the puzzle: files, letters, a menu from a Paris restaurant and a copy of the Dikricher Landwirt newspaper among other things, Janet embarked on what ended up being a nine-year investigation.

Her research began with an encounter with the descendants of Lise Rischard, Dr Charles-Edouard Rischard, who she found by visiting Luxembourg and pouring through telephone directories.

“There was a phone call at my parents' place. My mother took the phone. She said some English people were asking if they knew about the Rischards and spying in WWI. She said, this concerns my husband,” Lise's great-nephew Jean-Denis recalled the moment in 1995 when Janet first made contact.

Fear of Germans

Lise had kept her involvement in the spying ring a secret to all but her closest family, she finally confided in Jean-Denis' father before the German invasion of Luxembourg in 1940.

“She was afraid that as soon as the war started the Germans would come and take her because she had been a spy,” he said, adding that she destroyed all documents. Lise died in February 1940 and when the Germans invaded in May 1940, her fears appear to have been justified as soldiers tried to track her down, given that she was now a known spy from WWI.

But, the story did not die with Lise. Jean-Denis' father was now aware of the role his great-aunt had played and he even wrote an account for the family tree. And when his father met Lord Balfour for the first time, he asked in French “are you the son of Rose or Reseda (Rose being the code name of Captain George Bruce, his father)? It was a way to tell them straight away, you've found the right person,” explained Jean-Denis.

Jean-Denis acted occasionally as an interpreter, translating his father's account for Janet and Lord Balfour, and providing much of the vital details of the story, which was finally published for the first time in 2003.

“Everything that's personal from her experience they had no possibility to find it out. They couldn't have known this detail except through my father. You imagine a Luxembourger in her 40s, quite stiff at that time. Then what happened to her, just being absorbed into this system was absolutely fantastic!”

Spying on German rail movements

The story that unfolds is fascinating as the book helps readers get to know Lise more than 100 years after her actions and understand the dilemma she faced when she, the wife of a respectable Luxembourg doctor, was recruited as a spy during a visit to Paris.

Lise was the figure who convinced her husband, Camille Rischard, a doctor to staff on the Luxembourg railway, the CFL, to recruit workers to spy on German rail movements through Luxembourg.

Camille handed their reports to Lise, who then encoded them. A Diekirch schoolmaster placed coded sequences into inoffensive newspaper articles published by a brave woman and editor of the *Dikricher Landwirt*. The newspaper was sent to a French Jesuit priest in Switzerland who had been expelled from Luxembourg, who was able to pass it to British intelligence officers.

The impact of this valuable information being supplied to the allies cannot be underestimated. “Towards the end of the war, the German troops were weaker. But it remained crucial for the allied forces to be accurately informed about exactly what was coming over where it was coming and what was on the train,” Jean-Denis said, adding: “They could really focus on these and stop the war. I think it contributed to the end of the war. That's what I feel from the book.”

Another important element of Janet Morgan's book *The Secrets of Rue St Roch* is that it shows that there were pockets of resistance against the German invaders in Luxembourg, contrary to suggestions that the country had collaborated.

And since the book's release, more information about the characters and locations has been unearthed each year.

Making Luxembourg proud

Jean-Denis, who says that Janet and her husband Robert had become like family, said: “We've a very nice friendship with the Balfours. We've taken them to places where they (the spies) were probably watching the trains. They're still piecing the puzzle together.”

Sadly, though many English speakers are aware of the story because of the book, including British Ambassador to Luxembourg Alice Walpole, who keeps a copy in her guest room, as with so many WWI stories, it remains little known about among Luxembourgers.

“Luxembourg hasn't embraced the story. It should really be translated to have better distribution,” Jean-Denis lamented. “People would be more linked to WWI and it would make Luxembourg proud. It's sad they don't know and every time we tell people about the book, they say 'really, I have to read it!'.”

Visit the exhibition

The exhibition ‘Luxembourg-British Intelligence Operations in the Great War’ can be viewed by the public from November 12 to 21 (Monday to Friday) from 10am to 12 noon and from 2 pm to 4 pm by appointment only.



