
STRASBOURG DISTRICT

West German Mission



At the outset of World War II, there were no organized branches in the province of Alsace-Lorraine, France. The territory was located on the west bank of the Rhine River and also bordered Germany's Palatinate and Rhineland provinces. The provinces changed hands between Germany and France several times and since 1918 had belonged to France. Most of the residents in the area spoke German, and both the Catholic Church and Protestant churches were well represented. In order to protect the region (and their entire nation, for that matter), the French had constructed a sophisticated line of defenses known as the Maginot Line. Located just a few miles from the German border, it was designed to stop any German attack. In May 1940, the German military disregarded the Maginot Line and simply moved around it, attacking France across the Belgian border to the west and conquering the Maginot Line from behind. The territory of Alsace-Lorraine was then placed under German military and political occupation authorities.

During the first few years of the war, reports regarding branches in Alsace-Lorraine arrived in the mission office in Frankfurt. Mention was made of Latter-day Saints in the capital city of Strasbourg on the Rhine River and in Mülhausen (French: Mulhouse) to the south. The general minutes of the Bühl Branch (Karlsruhe District) report a number of



Fig. 1. The Strasbourg District consisted of Alsace-Lorraine in German-occupied France and a small portion of southwest Germany. It was the only district to be established in either German mission during the war.

activities undertaken by members in Bühl and across the Rhine in Strasbourg.¹ The first such report was dated March 3, 1942: Anton Huck (first counselor to the mission supervisor) conducted a funeral for a sister Maria Kuester in Strasbourg and two members of the Bühl Branch attended the service. On April 26, 1943, eleven Bühl Saints and eight from the Strasbourg Branch had a party at the home of the Paul Kaiser family in Grüneberg, near Strasbourg.

The arrival of Kurt and Charlotte Schneider in Strasbourg in 1940 was the decisive factor in making the Church better known in Alsace-Lorraine. Brother Schneider had served a full-time mission in the Swiss-German Mission a few years earlier and was a devout Latter-day Saint who never tired of telling friends and acquaintances about his beliefs. It appears that he also enjoyed a close relationship with mission leaders at the time. It is very probable that the Schneiders used Kurt's company automobile (with a chauffeur) to facilitate religious and social interaction with the members of the Bühl Branch (just twenty-five miles northeast) and the Mülhausen Branch (fifty miles to the south) as well as with Latter-day Saints scattered among towns on both sides of the Rhine River. In every regard, Kurt Schneider was the right man to serve as the first (and only) district president.

The fact that Kurt was the director of the Thyssen Company's Strasbourg division did not mean that he was immune from suspicion under a government that kept close tabs on its citizens. Kurt had a radio hidden behind a secret panel in his company office and used the radio to listen illegally to enemy broadcasts. One day, he was prompted to change the dial to a German station just before turning it off. He recalled what happened next:

About the time I was ready to leave my office again, two tall Nazi SS men in black uniforms with the swastika on their sleeves and guns in their belts entered my office. One leaned against the wall and touched the exact spot in the paneling which opened the secret compartment hiding the radio. They acted surprised, but I could tell that they had been tipped off. One of them reached over and turned on the radio, which began playing music from the German station in Stuttgart. Had the "Voice of America" still been on, they would have taken me away to be executed without further delay. . . . An answer to our prayers and exercises for protection? Yes!²

In August 1943, a new meeting place for the Strasbourg Branch was dedicated under the leadership of Anton Huck. Eleven members of the Bühl Branch were in attendance, as were forty more members from

the branches of Frankfurt, Saarbrücken, Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Pforzheim, and Freiburg. Paul Kaiser was the branch president in Strasbourg.

On December 12, 1943, Anton Huck presided over a meeting in which a new Strasbourg District was established, which included the neighboring branch in Bühl.³ The only Alsace-Lorraine branches named in the record were those in Strasbourg and Mülhausen.⁴ For the next year, several more activities involving Saints in occupied France and Bühl were reported in the Bühl Branch minutes.

In his company car, Kurt Schneider was able to visit the Saints in and around Strasbourg. His wife's diary notes excursions to such places as Mülhausen, Saarbrücken (in Germany), and Saarburg. Brother Schneider also used the car to drive to conferences in several cities in Germany, such as Frankfurt, Mannheim, and Karlsruhe. Due to the close relationship the Strasbourg Saints enjoyed with the members of the Bühl Branch, the Schneiders also traveled to that town and to Biberach and Lahr, where Bühl Branch members lived. They also visited isolated Church members in Zebelnheim and Freiburg in Germany.

On January 20, 1944, Kurt Schneider founded the newest branch of the Church in Germany in the city of Freiburg. The events of one week in February 1944 give a glimpse into the Church service rendered by Kurt Schneider and his family. On Tuesday, February 22, Anton Huck came from Frankfurt for a discussion with President Schneider.⁵ On Thursday, the Schneiders drove their car north to Saarburg. According to Sister Schneider, "We were in the Schmidts' home this evening for dinner and for the night. We slept on the sofa because there was no bedding in the hotel. Late in the evening huge squadrons of airplanes flew over the city. I was scared because there were no shelters [close by]." The next night, enemy planes returned to Saarburg: "We sat in a shelter for awhile and heard bombs and saw illumination flares." Her diary entry the next day shows that they were already home again. The report was more encouraging: "We had a baptism

today in the indoor swimming pool: Herr Dietlin and his wife. Then sacrament meeting; afterwards seven members from Mülhausen came to our apartment.” It was a happy ending to a busy week.

* Tante Ida

12. März

So. 1944 Morg mit Kü, Ruth, Elfa, Fritz in SS.
Nachm fuhr Kü, Elfa u Fritz nach Bühl.
Abends 7^u kamen sie zurück. Sie nahmen
auch Frau Röcklin u Sohn v. Sand mit nach
Bühl in d. Hess. Fritz gewann einen guten
Eindruck v. d. Kirche in H. a. B. Schwan nach
in der Klinik. Abends im Film.

Fig. 2. Charlotte Schneider made this entry on March 12, 1944: “This morning to Sunday School with Kurt, Ruth, Elfriede [Recksiek], and Fritz. Kurt drove Elfriede and Fritz to Bühl this afternoon. They returned at 7 p.m. They also took Mrs. Röcklitz and her son from Sand to the meetings in Bühl. Fritz was impressed by the Church in Strasbourg and Bühl. I went to the hospital [with Werner] and went to a movie this evening.” (C. Bodon Schneider)

During the spring and summer of 1944, President Schneider visited several branches in both Germany and Alsace-Lorraine, sometimes accompanying Anton Huck, who by then was functioning as the mission supervisor. On the first weekend of June, the Schneiders hosted a two-day district conference. Charlotte did not indicate in her diary how many persons attended, but it appears that the conference was a success. Some Saints came from as far away as Stuttgart to participate in the event.

Kurt Schneider was a tireless worker whose influence spread over an ever-increasing area during the last year of the war. In July, Richard Ranglack (supervisor of the East German Mission) visited Strasbourg, and President Schneider soon reciprocated with a trip to Berlin. He met with the leaders of the East German Mission and attended meetings in several branches in the Reich’s capital city. According to Charlotte, Kurt was very impressed with the Saints in the other German mission.

When the American army advanced toward

Strasbourg in the late summer of 1944, Kurt Schneider received permission from his company to move his family to the town of Schönwald, in Germany’s Black Forest. The move was not very far (forty-five miles), but it took them back into Germany and made it nearly impossible for him to maintain contact with members of the Church on the other side of the Rhine. The reconquest of Strasbourg by the Allies returned the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine to France and made Germans like Kurt Schneider unwelcome there.

The Schneiders arrived in Schönwald on August 26, 1944.⁶ For the duration of the war, President Schneider devoted his efforts to his employer and to his family. Contact with the Saints became a rare event, but Kurt Schneider found many opportunities to discuss the gospel with people everywhere he went.

On November 6, Kurt received a telegram indicating that he was to report for military duty by November 8 “at the latest.” Another telegram arrived on November 9 with instructions to report immediately. He disregarded both messages, but nobody inquired about his lack of obedience.⁷ Two months later, he became quite ill and had to be admitted to the hospital in Triberg (three miles north of Schönwald). While there, he was visited by his wife and August Flad, of the Bühl Branch, who came to give him a priesthood blessing. Although seriously ill, Kurt was able to write a missionary tract, which his wife edited for him.

In early May, Kurt was arrested by French authorities and incarcerated for more than two weeks under (at times) harsh conditions. Once the French had collected sufficient evidence to determine that he was neither a soldier nor a dedicated National Socialist, he was released and sent home to his wife and his son in Schönwald.⁸

Of the three branches of the Strasbourg District, only the Bühl Branch in Germany was definitely holding meetings at the end of the war. It is not known whether the same was true of the Saints in Strasbourg or Mülhausen.

NOTES

1. Bühl Branch general minutes, 144, CHL LR 1180 11.
2. Kurt Schneider, *Imagining Success* (Salt Lake City: Schneider, 1977), 276.
3. Bühl Branch general minutes, 150.
4. No reports have been found regarding the branch in Mülhausen.
5. Charlotte Bodon Schneider, diary (unpublished); used with permission.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. See the details of his sixteen days as a prisoner of the French in the Strasbourg Branch chapter.

BÜHL BRANCH

At the onset of World War II, the Bühl Branch was part of the Karlsruhe District. Located twenty-four miles southwest of Karlsruhe in the Rhine River Valley, Bühl was about the same distance from Strasbourg on the west side of the River. When the Strasbourg District was established in late 1943, the Bühl Branch and the Freiburg group of the Karlsruhe District were included under the leadership of Kurt Schneider of Strasbourg.

Bühl Branch ¹	1939
Elders	3
Priests	2
Teachers	0
Deacons	1
Other Adult Males	0
Adult Females	5
Male Children	0
Female Children	1
<i>Total</i>	12

The city of Bühl had about six thousand inhabitants in 1939. Only twelve of those were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A very rare characteristic of this branch was the fact that three (one-fourth) of those members were elders (Karl Josef Fetsch, August Friedrich Flad, and August Friedrich Haug) and three more (their sons) were holders of the Aaronic Priesthood. As it turned out, this branch enjoyed fine leadership and unity during the difficult years of the war.

The only other leader listed in the branch directory in the summer before the war began was Frieda Fetsch, president of the Relief Society.² The meetings were held in rented rooms at Grabenstrasse 5. Priesthood meeting began at 9:30 a.m., followed by Sunday School at 10:00. Sacrament meeting was scheduled for 7:00 p.m. The only other gatherings were MIA on Wednesdays at 7:30 p.m., Relief Society on Thursdays at 5:00 p.m., and a genealogical class on the first Wednesday of the month at 7:30 p.m.

Franz and Frieda Mussler lived in the spa city of Baden-Baden, just six miles from Bühl. Their children, Ursula (born 1929) and Hans Karl (born 1934), both recalled making the trip to Bühl on Sunday mornings to attend church. According to Ursula,

The branch met at Grabenstrasse 5. The rooms were part of a one-family house. The Church rented five or six rooms. First, we held Sunday School in two separate groups—the adults and the children. Sacrament meeting followed. There weren't many of us in attendance (maybe twenty-five) but it was still enjoyable.³

Hans Karl Mussler described how they took the streetcar to the railroad station at Oos, then the train to Bühl, after which they took a short walk to the home of the Fetsch family. Simple chairs were the only seating, but a pump organ lent an air of formality to the setting. Hans Karl recalled a very small group of people meeting in the Fetsch home, “because there wouldn't have been enough room for very many people in their living room.”⁴

This was an excellent example of a tiny branch functioning in all aspects of the gospel with only rare interruptions during the war. Karl Josef Fetsch

was the branch president. In the absence of a branch clerk, he kept meticulous records of meetings, including contents of talks given. Those records show that most of the branch members gave a talk in one of the meetings each week. The minutes suggest that this was a close-knit group of Latter-day Saints.

On February 24, 1940, the letter sent to all branches in the West German Mission by Thomas E. McKay was read aloud in the Bühl sacrament meeting. The members knew that the mission leadership had been transferred to local Saints and that communications with Church leadership in the United States would be difficult if possible at all. Nevertheless, it is clear from the records that Karl Josef Fetsch was determined to sustain all of the programs of the Church in Bühl.

The minutes for the sacrament meeting on January 26, 1941, are typical of the years from 1939 to 1945:

The branch president presided over the meeting which was conducted by his first counselor. The invocation was given by Brother August Friedrich Haug and the benediction by Sister Annamarie Haug. The sacrament was blessed by Brother August Friedrich Flad and passed by Brother Günther Flad. Speakers were as follows: 1 August Friedrich Flad and 2 Karl Josef Fetsch. Four priests and four members attended.⁵

Minutes were likewise kept for Relief Society meetings and genealogical classes (both were usually held monthly), as well as for special gatherings such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, or when members sought healing blessings. For example, on August 17, 1940, Irmgard Bühler of Biberach was baptized in the city swimming pool. Alice Fetsch was baptized by her father at the same location on August 3, 1941.

During the war, two weddings were celebrated in the branch meeting rooms (in each case following the official ceremony in the presence of the civil registrar at city hall). On March 30, 1941, Georg Schröder of Schierstein by Wiesbaden married

Annamarie Haug. Eleven members and four friends attended the ceremony in the church. On September 15, 1942, Friedrich Heinrich Richard Haug (a sergeant in the Luftwaffe and only recently a Latter-day Saint) married Marianne Grüner (possibly from the nearby Strasbourg Branch). On the latter occasion, the church rooms were decorated. Anton Huck from the mission office in Frankfurt then ordained Brother Haug an elder. Alice Fetsch played the pump organ.

One of the highlights in the lives of these few members was the semiannual trip to Karlsruhe and other cities to participate in district conferences. For example, the 1940 fall conference was attended by “four priests and five members of our branch.” Ten branch members and one friend attended the spring conference of 1941.

Sunday, July 13, 1941, must have been a very important day in the Bühl Branch: mission leader Christian Heck came from Frankfurt accompanied by Richard Ranglack and Paul Langheinrich (counselors to East German Mission supervisor Herbert Klopfer). All three attended Sunday School and spoke. Elder Heck visited the branch again on February 22, 1942, with his counselor Anton Huck.

The small Bühl Branch could hardly afford to lose any members, but such was the case when Rosa Maria Flad passed away on March 3, 1942. Anton Huck came from Frankfurt to preside at the funeral. On the other end of life’s spectrum was the birth of a child in the Georg Jakob Schröder family in April 1942. Although the branch membership included only a few women, the Relief Society centennial was celebrated in 1942, as was the case all over the West German Mission.

Mission leaders in Frankfurt were aware of the small branch, as is clear from the meeting minutes. On September 9, 1942, Anton Huck presided over the baptism of Georg Jakob Schröder (a soldier) and Karl Fauth (of the Karlsruhe Branch) in Bühl. After the baptism, the participants “walked to a huge pear tree where Anton Huck gave a talk about baptism.” Other noteworthy events of the year 1942 include the

ordination of Karl Bühler of Biberach (in the Black Forest) to the office of elder. Christian Heck came to Bühl again on November 22 and sang a solo for the branch (“Noch Nicht Erfüllt”). The Christmas program that year was attended by six persons.

With the establishment of the Strasbourg District of the West German Mission in late 1943, interaction between the Saints in Alsace-Lorraine (German-occupied France) and Bühl increased in frequency. For example, an exchange outing took place on April 26, 1943, when eleven Saints from Bühl met with eight Saints from the Strasbourg branch at the Paul Kaiser family home in Grüneberg. When the Strasbourg Branch held a dedication of its meeting rooms on August 1, eleven members of the Bühl Branch made the short trip to Strasbourg. More than fifty persons came from other branches for that occasion, including Frankfurt, Saarbrücken, Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Pforzheim, and Freiburg.

The Bühl Branch minutes include the following entry dated March 15, 1944: “We travelled to Mülhausen [in Alsace-Lorraine] to meet with the new members there; they have no priesthood holders.” Two weeks later, branch members traveled to Biberach (thirty miles to the south) to hold a meeting in the home of Karl Bühler. It is apparent that Bühl’s location along the main north–south railway line (which connected Karlsruhe with Basel, Switzerland) was most advantageous to the Church.

Twelve members of the Bühl Branch attended the district conference in Karlsruhe on April 23, 1944. The branch minutes contain this comment: “All meetings were conducted in good order, but there was one interruption when an air raid siren (impending danger!) was sounded. All attendees were able to leave for their homes in time, filled with the spirit to continue the fight against sin.”

Due to his political attitudes, in late 1944 Karl Josef Fetsch attracted the attention of the police, was taken into what was euphemistically referred to as “protective custody,” and was removed from Bühl. According to the branch minutes, August Friedrich

Flad, his substitute as branch president, responded to a request of Frieda Fetsch to find her husband; he traveled to Mannheim and Ludwigshafen to inquire as to the whereabouts of Brother Fetsch. No further details are available, but Brother Fetsch was home again by September 13, apparently unharmed by the experience.

Bühl was not a large or important city during the war, but every city in Germany was threatened by the Allies, who enjoyed superiority in the German skies during the final months of the conflict. It comes as no surprise when one reads that no church meetings could be held on October 4 and 10, 1944, due to air raid alarms. The same was reported on November 19 and December 6. The entry written on January 7, 1945, is interesting and reflects the fears of Church members as the invading Allied forces neared their city:

Following a recommendation made by Brother Karl Josef Fetsch, all attendees of our fast and testimony meeting desired to receive a special blessing from the elders for special protection against the attacks from the air and the approaching enemy. We wished the blessings of the Lord in health and strength, and that we might continue to enjoy the Lord’s continued blessings and have our lives and our property preserved. Friedrich August Haug blessed Karl Josef Fetsch, Klara Haug, and Gisela Hess; Karl Josef Fetsch blessed August Friedrich Flad, Friedrich August Haug, Frida Fetsch, and Alice Fetsch; August Friedrich Flad blessed Anna M. Haug, Emma Distelzwey, Rota Fauth, Erika Fauth, and Heinz Fauth.

The meetings were again interrupted by air raid alarms on February 11, 1945. Despite the many ways in which life was complicated in Bühl from 1939 to 1945, the attendance at branch meetings remained remarkably consistent. During the sporadic absences of branch president Karl Josef Fetsch, August Friedrich Flad functioned very dependably as the leader of this small group of faithful Saints.

The final entry of the war years in Bühl was written on April 15 and reads as follows:

On the day after the entry of the French army into Bühl, there was still a very great deal of unrest. The entire population was held in check as everybody wondered what the conquerors would do. We brethren therefore decided that each family should hold their own sacrament meeting in their apartment and to see that talks were given. This was possible because there was an elder in each family. In our branch we are all thankful to our Creator and our Redeemer that all of the members are still alive and have suffered relatively little property damage.⁶ Even Brother Günter Distelzwey has returned from military service in good health and is already back at his civilian employment. We members of the Bühl Branch have been so blessed that we can hardly consider ourselves worthy. We continue to hope for blessings if we can remain faithful, endure to the end, and use wisdom in all things.

The members of the Bühl Branch continued to hold church meetings as regularly as possible after the Third Reich collapsed. The following was written on June 20, 1945:

Because our branch president, Brother Karl Josef Fetsch, will now be in Bühl on a permanent basis, he today assumed the official leadership of the branch in all respects. He thereby relieves Brother August Friedrich Flad, who since 1941 has been his substitute, which he will remain.

These few Saints had performed their church duties with great dedication during the challenging years of World War II. With so few losses in life (and apparently none in property), the branch membership had grown through births, convert baptisms, and marriages, and the future looked bright in the summer of 1945.

IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Bühl Branch did not survive World War II:

Friedrich Heinrich Richard Haug b. Bühl, Karlsruhe, Baden, 24 Apr 1918; son of August Friedrich Haug and Klara Koch; bp. 8 Aug 1927; conf. 8 Aug 1927;

ord. deacon 4 Jan 1931; ord. teacher 18 Jun 1933; ord. priest 20 May 1934; ord. elder 15 Sep 1942; lance corporal; MIA 9 Jun 1943 (FHL microfilm 68785, no. 11; CHL CR 275 8 2441, no. 211; IGI)

Anna Maria Uber b. Freudenstadt, Schwarzwaldkreis, Württemberg, 17 Aug 1857; dau. of Lorenz Uber and Elisabeth Bohnet; bp. 17 Jul 1923; conf. 17 Jul 1923; m. Freudenstadt 11 Nov 1883, Jakob Friedrich Haug; 10 children; d. heart attack Bühl, Karlsruhe, Baden, 1 Oct 1942 (FHL microfilm 68785, no. 7; CHL CR 275 8 2441, no. 208; IGI; AF)

NOTES

1. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," 257, CHL CR 4 12.
2. West German Mission branch directory, 1939, CHL LR 10045 11.
3. Ursula Mussler Schmitt, telephone interview with Jennifer Heckmann in German, March 31, 2009; German summarized in English by Judith Sartowski.
4. Hans Karl Mussler, interview by the author, Preston, Idaho, November 22, 2008.
5. Bühl Branch general minutes, CHL LR 1180 11. All quotations from the branch history were taken from this source.
6. This statement does not reflect the fact that one elderly sister had passed away during the war and that soldier Friedrich Heinrich Richard Haug had been missing in action since June 1943 and would never return.

FREIBURG BRANCH

An LDS branch had existed in the city of Freiburg in southwestern Germany from time to time since 1927. Karl Becker and his wife had watched the branch thrive and decline several times by 1939. In his short history of the early years of the branch, he wrote that "from 1936 to 1938 I [branch president Becker] with my wife and my daughter, Rosemarie, were the only members in Freiburg. I used this time to collect data for the redemption of the dead in my family."¹

Even as the only LDS male in Freiburg, Karl Becker was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. He spent a good deal of time with a Mr. Schuppiser, a printer who produced the Church's

German-language publication, *Der Stern*. The printer and his wife were converted and were baptized into the Church in Basel, Switzerland, on May 7, 1939. There were thus five Saints in Freiburg when the American missionaries left and the war began.

The city of Freiburg is located seventy-five miles south of Karlsruhe, but was closer to the office of the Swiss Mission in Basel (only thirty-five miles to the south). After 1943, the area of southern Baden was added to the newly established Strasbourg District under the leadership of Kurt Schneider.² President Schneider enjoyed the use of a company car and a chauffeur and was thus able to drive to Freiburg on several occasions to visit the Beckers.

Karl Becker listed these events in his history of the Freiburg Branch during the war years:³

January 20, 1944: District president Kurt Schneider declares the Freiburg Branch to be an official unit of the Church.

February 7, 1944: Cottage meeting in the Becker family home; Sister Stapperfend was our visitor.⁴

March 23, 1944: The Beckers visited Mrs. Maria Huber, a widow, in her home.

April 14 and 20, May 7 and 18, 1944: Cottage meetings in the Becker home.

May 18, 1944: Elder August Flad of the Bühl Branch visited us.

June 3–4 and June 10–11, 1944: We attended district meetings in Strasbourg.

May 23, June 17, 20, 27, and 30, and July 11: Meetings in the Becker home.

June 18 and 25, July 9: We attended the meetings of the Mühlhausen Branch.⁵

July 25 and August 1: Meetings in our home.

August 3, 1944: District president Schneider spoke in sacrament meeting.

September–October: [Eight cottage meetings were held.]

November: [War conditions prevented the holding of meetings.]



Fig. 1. Members and friends of the Freiburg Branch in about 1944. (C. Bodon Schneider)

The following lines describe the personal tragedy suffered by the Becker family on November 27, 1944:

November 27, 1944 was a black day for Freiburg. During twenty minutes of brutal violence, large portions of our city were destroyed and thousands of people lost their lives. Among the innocent victims was my wife. My home was reduced to rubble. I believe that during the exploding of the bombs, the burning of the buildings, and the crash of structures collapsing that night, I went through the greatest trial of my faith that I ever had to endure. With a broken heart, I knelt before the wreckage of my home and prayed to my Father in Heaven to help me recover the body of my wife from the ruins intact. I wanted to find and identify her among the sixteen persons killed in that building. A great effort was made and my purpose achieved. Along with many others, she was buried in a mass grave at the Freiburg cemetery. From that time on, I have endeavored to preach the gospel with greater energy.⁶

On December 12, 1944, Brother Becker pronounced a dedication on the mass grave containing the body of his wife and those of 191 others. He recorded the prayer:

We two brethren of the Church of Jesus Christ stand at this grave and beg for Thy blessing, that the earthly body of Sister Elisabeth Becker may be preserved from any damage and that no power [under] heaven will disturb her. We beg

Thy blessing that this sister may continue to serve where she is now, as she had begun to serve on this earth. Please grant her the strength and ability to continue this work and to accomplish even greater tasks.⁷

The following entries are found in the branch history recorded by Karl Becker:

November 27, 1944: Sister Elisabeth Becker was killed in an air raid.

December 1944: [War conditions prevented the holding of meetings.]

January 9, 1945: Elder Flad came for a visit.

January 11–12, 1945: Sister Rosemarie Becker visited Brother Schneider in the hospital in Triberg.⁸

January 14 and 21, 1945: Cottage meetings.

January 28, 1945: Brother Schuppiser was ordained a deacon.

February and March, 1945: [War conditions prevented the holding of meetings.]

April 21, 1945: The city of Freiburg is occupied by Allied troops. The church records were kept hidden from April 19 to July 1, 1945.

April 23, 1945: Brother Becker gave priesthood blessings to the Schuppisers.

June 6, 1945: President Schneider received the first letter from Brother Becker and the answer was received on June 21; thus written communication was reestablished.

July 22, 1945: Brother Schuppiser was ordained a teacher by President Schneider and Brother Becker. . . . The branch can be considered recreated as of this date.

July 24, 1945: Elder Wilhelm Kenneth Firmage from New York visited us. He is a lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He brought greetings from the First Presidency and the prophet, seer, and revelator, Heber J. Grant.⁹

The LDS branch in Freiberg began the post-war period with four members. By 1948, there would be twenty-one baptisms as a strong branch emerged.

IN MEMORIAM

Only one member of the Freiburg Branch did not survive World War II:

Maria Magdalena Elisabeth Gaebler b. Leipzig, Sachsen, 27 Jul 1893; dau. of Gottlieb Bernhard Gaebler and Luise Auguste B. Goldhorn; m. Karl Friedrich Becker; k. air raid Freiburg, Baden, 27 Nov 1944 (Karl Becker; NFS)

NOTES

1. Karl Becker, *Gemeinde Geschichte der Gemeinde Freiburg/Brg* (unpublished), 1, CHL LR 3026 11.
2. See Strasbourg District chapter.
3. Becker, *Gemeinde Geschichte*, 2.
4. This was likely Berta Stapperfend of Pforzheim, the district Relief Society president.
5. The town of Mühlhausen was across the river in occupied France.
6. Becker, *Gemeinde Geschichte*, 1–2.
7. *Ibid.*, 3.
8. It would seem that Rosemarie and her father were not with her mother in the basement of their apartment when Elisabeth Becker was killed. However, Brother Becker wrote that his wife “was praying aloud to God when she was killed and remained a loyal member of the Church to the very end.”
9. Heber J. Grant died May 14, 1945.

STRASBOURG BRANCH

Strasbourg, the capital city of the historic province of Alsace-Lorraine, had been a cultural center for centuries. When Kurt and Charlotte Schneider moved from Stuttgart, Germany, to Strasbourg, France, in 1940, the city had just been conquered as a result of the war. “My husband worked for a metal products company, Thyssen Rhestahlwerke. He was the director of the new Strasbourg division of the company. They made pots and pans out of aluminum.”¹ They had married just weeks after the war began and were looking forward to a happy life together.

The move to Strasbourg as the new director may not have taken place had Kurt not suffered a small

accident in Stuttgart just after the war began. In the dark of the blackout, a German soldier running down the street hit Kurt and broke his ankle. When informed of the accident, Charlotte expressed delight rather than sorrow. She realized that the accident might well delay or prevent Kurt's call to the Wehrmacht. Indeed, his promotion to director soon came through, and his war-critical employment exempted him from military service during the entire war.²



Fig. 1. Members of the Strasbourg Branch gathered for this photograph in 1941. It appears that the branch was renting rooms in a nice downtown neighborhood at the time. Charlotte and Kurt Schneider are at the far left. (C. Bodon Schneider)

There had apparently been a small group of Latter-day Saints in the city for several years, and the Schneiders lost no time in seeking them out. Over the next four years, the diary of Charlotte Schneider includes hundreds of entries featuring the branch. The following names are prominent: the Georg Müller family, Sister Feister, the Kaiser family, the Hechleiter family, Sister Staperfend, and Brother Renk.³ As she recalled, “The Saints spoke German but nearly everybody could speak French also. We met in rented rooms.”

“We had such a beautiful apartment in Strasbourg,” recalled Charlotte Schneider. Indeed, Kurt's company put the couple up in a fine apartment near the downtown area. This setting is consistent with his position as director in a large corporation. Charlotte (called “Lotte” by her family and friends)

soon fell in love with that beautiful old city, and her diary reflects the attachment: they attended the theater and the cinema and became acquainted with the city's beautiful parks.

Kurt Schneider apparently became the leader of the Strasbourg Branch soon after his arrival, but the exact date of the call cannot be determined. Nothing is said about this in the mission records, and the branch records did not survive the war. However, Charlotte's diary includes many references to leadership functions, and the fact that Kurt was allowed to use his company automobile for church activities likely made him the primary traveler among the Saints on the west side of the Rhine.

The Schneiders became parents in November 1943 with the birth of their son Werner. As befitted an upper-class family of the era, they sent out a formal announcement beginning with the line, “We are thrilled to announce the birth of a strapping little boy.”

That the Strasbourg Branch was still in its infancy in early 1944 is clear from the diary entries of Sister Schneider. The entry dated February 14 reads, “Founded the Relief Society today; the leaders are [Sisters] Abogast, Grob and Kaiser.”⁴ Discussions on the founding of that society in the Strasbourg Branch had begun earlier that year. There is no indication of when the meetings were held nor how many sisters attended. From various entries in the diary, we learn that Sunday School was held in the morning and sacrament meeting at 3:00 p.m. Primary meetings were held on Mondays.

Some entries from Charlotte's diary from 1944 are indicative of the ongoing activities of the branch and the family during a time when it was becoming increasingly clear that Hitler's armed forces were not sufficient to contend against enemies on several fronts. Her diary comment of June 6 (D-day) is interesting: “Great excitement! The Allies have succeeded in their invasion.”⁵ She shared the excitement of the people of Strasbourg, who were waiting to be liberated after years of life under German occupation.

Back in Strasbourg, conditions for the remaining Saints were deteriorating. A terrible attack against that city took place on September 25, but a Brother Eyer called the Schneiders to report that the branch members were spared.⁸

Elfriede Recksiek (born 1925) of the Bielefeld Branch had been living with the Schneider family for some time as a domestic servant. She decided to return to her parents in Bielefeld for the Christmas season and departed Strasbourg on December 24.⁹ Charlotte wrote the following in her diary: “This morning Elfriede left for Bielefeld. I cooked a pork schnitzel. After our dinner I sat in the sun with Kurt behind the bath house. This evening we celebrated Christmas Eve with the Dold family. Werner saw the Christmas tree. We exchanged small gifts and played games until 11 [p.m.]”¹⁰ Elfriede returned to Schönwald on January 2, 1945, to resume her duties in the Schneider household, but she left for good at the end of the month. She was fortunate to be at home in Bielefeld before the American army arrived there in March.

Life in the beautiful Black Forest would have been more pleasant for Charlotte during the winter months of January and February 1945, but Kurt was hospitalized, and their son, Werner, then fifteen months old, was constantly ill. Several times, Sister Schneider had to carry the little boy through the snow to the hospital in Triberg for treatments and shots. Amid the health trials, she was also asking herself serious questions about the German leaders. The following diary entries reflect this:

Saturday, February 24: I heard Hitler speak today [on the radio]. He prophesied a German victory this year and said that history will take a turn for the better.

Wednesday, February 28: [propaganda minister Josef] Goebbels spoke on the radio: we have to do more with less. There will be no new weapons.

Tuesday, March 20: I am really unhappy about the current political situation. What the [German] people have to go through now is terrible!¹¹

By mid-April 1945, life in little Schönwald was becoming chaotic for the Schneider family. German troops were moving through town, retreating from the approaching French. Russian and Polish POWs were being moved out of the area. French artillery and German antiaircraft fire were making it too dangerous to be outside, and the Schneiders spent much of the time huddled in their basement. Military vehicles were moving through the streets in every direction. On Sunday, April 22, Charlotte wrote, “We got up early. Great excitement. We are surrounded. The traffic has come to a stop on the roads. We heard shooting and Kurt saw two vehicles that looked like tanks.”¹² The French troops had conquered the area around Schönwald and were moving farther north and east.

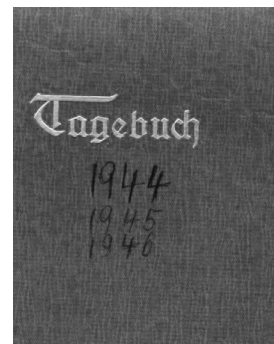


Fig. 4. The cover of Charlotte Bodon Schneider's second diary. (C. Bodon Schneider)

With the fighting over and the war only a few days from its official conclusion, Kurt Schneider likely thought that the family's greatest troubles were behind them. However, this was not to be the case under the French military occupation forces, as the Schneiders learned firsthand. The events of the next sixteen days were

recorded in great detail in a new post office savings account book Kurt somehow acquired. With paper almost impossible to come by at the time, Brother Schneider was fortunate to have anything to write on. The following are excerpts from that diary:¹³

Wednesday, May 2: Arrested at 9:30 a.m. in front of my house. I didn't know that there was a curfew. We stood around in the snow in front of the church until 10:30. We were searched for weapons twice and they checked our papers. Then they took me and four others to the city hall. We were allowed to have somebody bring us something to eat. Searched again for weapons and papers at [4:30 p.m.], then loaded into

a truck. The major (a coward!) didn't do anything to help us. Somebody told Lotte what was happening and she came by just in time. I gave her some money and kept 65 Marks for myself. They drove us through Furtwangen to Villingen. During the trip each of us was given two crackers. The only thing we were allowed to keep were our personal ID and our wedding rings.

Friday, May 4: [Terrible sleeping conditions] Very concerned and sad.

Saturday, May 5: A very pleasant period began in the camp.

Sunday, May 6: They marched us on foot to Rottweil (13 miles). We had hardly anything to eat: 8 pieces of bread, margarine. Three rest stops. In Rottweil the civilians were separated [from the soldiers] and released immediately. They were loaded into trucks. Then they drove us back to Schweningen and put us into the Gestapo prison. The cells were in the basement. . . . I tried to stay happy by thinking about being released.

Tuesday, May 8: Read a novel by Dora Holderich.

Saturday, May 12: My stomach couldn't tolerate a piece of bacon. I'm not accustomed to such food any more. . . . There is nobody here to represent us [in getting out]. . . . Spent an hour in the yard this afternoon. Had a conversation with a comrade about the gospel—a long, intense conversation.

Sunday, May 13: Very bad night. Hardly got any sleep. The snoring was intolerable. . . . Very worried about my family. In general very depressed. . . . Studied French this evening. Read a novel.

Monday, May 14: Wrote cards to inform Lotte of my status (to be passed along from person to person).

Wednesday, May 16: Had a very long discussion in our room about the gospel. I bore a powerful testimony. H. Warner had become acquainted with the Church in Zürich [Switzerland]. Hogwash! The usual stupid rumors. I was able to dispel them. About 10–12 persons in attendance.

Thursday, May 17: It is so sad to see how the people stand around waiting for a bite to eat. Like a zoo. It is shameful that when some food is brought around, they won't share with others.

. . . . Another interrogation: occupation, party affiliation, family status, what I plan to do now [for work]. Still very intense and exact. It's hard to remain positive. Finally I was released. . . . I preached the gospel to two comrades.

One day, Kurt and several other prisoners were loaded onto a train to be sent to France. He knew that such a move might mean that he would never return. Agonizing about how to escape despite the many guards surrounding the prisoners, he suddenly recalled two verses from the Bible: Joshua 1:9 and John 14:27. He knew what to do and recalled the situation in these words:

The spirit commanded me to jump from the car. It was as if I were pushed by a higher power. Soldiers with machine guns came running from all directions. I stood straight and unafraid. Then I pushed them away. They lowered their guns, which had been pointed at me. My actions stupefied those grim-looking soldiers. The looks on their faces indicated fear and respect. I spoke English to them, I don't know where it came from: "I am in the service of America. I am on an important mission." One of the officers understood my English and called the station commander. I told him my story in a more forceful manner, with strong body language. He released me! Then I was escorted into the town where the French captain in charge was stationed. I related my story to him and I was set free immediately.¹⁴

The rest of the adventure is told in his diary:

Friday, May 18: [On the way home] I wasn't used to walking so far anymore and my body was weakened. The sight of us caused quite a stir in the village. Mrs. Dold was in her garden and nearly stared herself blind when she saw us. . . . Lotte and Ruth were beside themselves with joy. Sometimes I can't believe it myself—that I'm free and my trials are over.

During Kurt's absence, Charlotte Schneider had been in perhaps a worse situation. With French soldiers on the prowl for loot and female victims, she had to hide herself while caring for two little boys. Even such simple tasks as hauling water from a local well could be very dangerous to her at the time.

Watching her husband be arrested and taken away for no apparent reason was painful to this young wife. She made the following entries in her diary during his absence:¹⁵

Wednesday, May 2: Very unlucky day. Kurt went to the tailor. While he was gone an order was issued regarding curfew. On the way home he was caught by three French soldiers and hauled away. They first put him in the church and then in the city hall. Then they put him on a truck with three other men to be taken away. Where to? I saw him as they drove away and he was very discouraged.

Thursday, May 3: Kurt is still gone. I think he is in Villingen. I fasted for him this evening.

Friday, May 4: Kurt is still gone. I went to the city hall to ask where he is.

Sunday, May 6: We heard today that there is a cease-fire [the war is over].

Sunday, May 7: I asked Mr. Scherzinger if he would walk to Villingen with me [to search for Kurt] but he said no.

Tuesday, May 8: Mr. Brucker came back from Villingen and said that Kurt is not there.

Tuesday, May 15: I spoke with the [French] commandant and gave him a letter for Villingen. He will try to forward it.

Friday, May 18: Kurt came back from his imprisonment at 7 p.m. He is in very good spirits and even took a bath. He talked about [his experiences] until midnight.

It can hardly come as a surprise that Sister Schneider was unable to find somebody who could penetrate the French POW system to rescue her husband. In the confusion that reigned during the last days of the war and the ensuing fragile peace, soldiers and civilians alike were incarcerated and interrogated by the invaders. Kurt Schneider was not a soldier, but as a member of the National Socialist

Party he was automatically suspected of contributing to the misdeeds of the fatherland.

On July 23, 1945, Charlotte Schneider was walking to Triberg. Instead of taking the main road, she chose to walk a small path by some waterfalls. It was there that she was attacked by a Moroccan soldier. "I had seen dark-skinned people before, so I was not particularly scared. . . . [but this time] I was attacked by a Moroccan. I was scared to death and screamed for help." Fortunately, somebody came by in time to intervene on her behalf.

The Strasbourg Branch had never been particularly strong during the war, but in May 1945 the prominent family was miles away in Germany, and the prospects of a return to Strasbourg (again part of France) were bleak. As of this writing, there is no information regarding the members of this branch in the early postwar years.

No members of the Strasbourg (France) Branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are known to have lost their lives in World War II.

NOTES

1. Charlotte Bodon Schneider, interview by the author, Salt Lake City, June 25, 2009.
2. Kurt Schneider, *Imagining Success* (Salt Lake City: Schneider, 1977), 130.
3. Charlotte Bodon Schneider, diary (unpublished); used with permission.
4. Charlotte Bodon Schneider, diary.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Elfriede Recksiek Doermann, interview by the author, Salt Lake City, May 4, 2009.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Kurt Schneider, diary (unpublished); used with the kind permission of Charlotte Bodon Schneider.
14. Schneider, *Imagining Success*, 140.
15. Charlotte Bodon Schneider, diary.