

Between the lines

Charles, Alsacien-Lorrain

Between the lines

& En quête d'Isabelle

Translated by Sophie Amoros

*From the French book "Entre les lignes" & "En quête
d'Isabelle"*

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Nadine Amoros is the author of this novel based on the story of Charles.

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*This book is dedicated to Grandpa, and the
soldiers all over the world who suffered and died
in the Great War.*

*I dedicate this English translation,
to my sweet grandmother,
my mom,
and my daughter Caroline, gone too early.*

Prologue

Night fell on our small town in *Lorraine* on this Sunday, of December 6, 1970. The street lamps were lighting up the snow that covered the streets with a winter coat. The banks of the *Moselle* river were frozen. Everything appeared to be standing still and the town children put on their best behaviour as they awaited the visit in their home of St. Nicholas, who would be bringing them treat before Christmas. In the entrance of the houses, bundles of twigs cleverly placed by the adults were there as a reminder that Saint Nicolas could also be accompanied by the feared *Père Fouettard*¹. Emotions of both excitement and worry, at the thought of all the mischiefs of the year, were mixing up in the air.

I remember it as if it were yesterday. This fear, as I was sitting on the stairs of my grandparents' big house, where my parents, my sister and I also lived. As I waited, I couldn't yet decide between posting myself near the door, or far enough from it so that I would be able to hide. When the bell started ringing and the sound of chains clattering announced the arrival of St.

¹*Companion of St-Nicholas, "Krampus" in Germany*

Nicholas, I immediately ran up the stairs. I took refuge on my grandfather's lap. He was seating in his leather club chair and he embraced me in his arms. I can still hear his voice saying tenderly:

– Don't worry, nothing can happen to you, if the *Père Fouettard* comes this far he will have to deal with me.

Meanwhile, my much more courageous sister, older by one year, returned with hands full of sweets, which I did not refuse.

A few years passed and the little girl was no longer afraid of the *Père Fouettard*. Yet, I still sat on my grandfather's lap in this same chair to find comfort. But his gaze was no longer so sharp. He seemed sad, upset, lost.

My grandfather, born in an annexed *Lorraine*, a veteran of World War I who fought in spite of himself with a German uniform, was now haunted by the possibility of the return of the war and of the German imperial armies.

This fear pervaded him and pushed him to destroy all that he had accumulated as memories of this part of his life. Until his death in 1977, he would throw away objects relating to the war: books, photos and, above all, the memoirs he had written and kept throughout his life. In the 1950s and 1960s my

grandfather had collected his war journals in order to publish them one day, but he never managed to do it.

During that time, two little girls, my sister and I, watched with sadness as their grandfather's life went by and whenever they could, they saved an object or a book from the trash and hid it.

This is how, in the 90s, I found one of his stories in a drawer, at my mom's house. It was with a great emotion that I read it like a letter, a last message that he had conveyed to me. Memories came back to me, like the harmonica he kept in his bedside table, our Sunday meals when he would suddenly get up and sing to us with his big voice the "peasant's creed", the name Isabelle that I had heard him pronounce at the end of his life, this city of Laon which was so dear to him. I rediscovered my grandfather through the beautiful writings of a sensitive 19-year-old young man.

And in 2018, it was the commemorations of the hundredth anniversary of the end of World War I, as well as the loss of my mother that pushed me to resume my grandfather's work. The writings I had in my possession were not the last version of his work, that one had been lost decades ago, and so there was still some work needed to achieve a result that could be published.

It was also a project we undertook as a couple with my husband. We worked on it together sharing a lot of emotions and it took 9 months of work to get to the edition of the book in February 2019.

Now that brings us to your story, Charles, my grandfather, who held my hand when I was taking my first steps. Today I feel a little like I'm giving you a hand in your first step as an author.

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My name is Charles. I am from the Province of *Lorraine*² and I was a veteran of the Great War, 1914-1918. I want to share with you my experience during this period of my life. As I write these words, I am thinking particularly of all those soldiers from Alsace and Lorraine who were conscripted in the Kaiser's army

² *The French province of Lorraine was annexed by Germany after the war of 1870 and became a part of the Germanic Empire until the end of World War one, in 1918.*

in spite of their unwillingness to go. Throughout the pages that follow, I tell the story of this time when everyone just had to live out their destiny.

This is an authentic testimony, based on my writings during the course of the war, which I put to paper despite the risks involved. I carefully collected and compiled these writings several years later in order to someday write this book.

In order to understand this rather sad and courageous history of war, one must remember what the hostilities that began on August 2, 1914³ were really like.

It's in memory of all the men who were conscripted during World War One that I want to tell the story of their participation impartially.

Through these pages, you will relive this cruel time. As for the survivors of these campaigns, they will find in them an echo of their youth, along with memories of their exploits and of the whirlwind of emotions that came with them.

This book aspires to respect the patriotism of each of these soldiers.

May this book remind us of what this war was like, in order to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between every soldier who fought with dignity for their country, whatever their occupations and their origins.

If you have an interest in History, this book will allow you to learn about the experience of some of the soldiers from Alsace and Lorraine caught in this turmoil,

³ *The date of the mobilisation for war in Germany.*

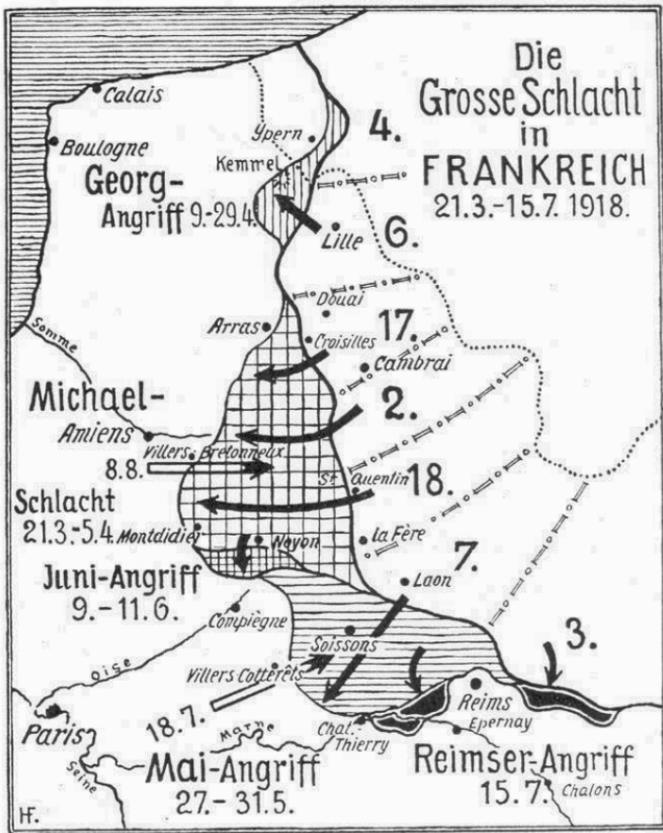
who were trying to survive their destiny⁴. These memories are not literature. I am not a writer but a modest man from Lorraine, who only wants to transcribe in a simple way the time he served with German soldiers during that time.

⁴ 380,000 men from Alsace and Lorraine were conscripted into the German imperial army.

"Cruelty brings nothing to humanity but worry, discord and division between peoples! There will always be dissatisfied and ambitious people, envious of what other people have! I don't think nations are meant to kill each other and this war proves that past conflicts have been useless!"

The Professor.

The "great battle", and the positions between March 21 and July 15, 1918:



Royalty-free map/Free of use, source Gescannt aus Geigr von Moser, Wikimedia Commons.

In spite of myself

August 2, 1914 - December 15, 1917

Cheppy (Argonne)

"When hunger and thirst threatened us..., only rats and lice mixed well in our ranks."

On August 2, 1914, mobilization and war began between Germany, France and their allies. At that time, Alsace-Lorraine, the *Reichsland*⁵, had been under German domination since the Frankfurt Treaty, after the infamous war of 1870.

This declaration of war was therefore welcomed in our counties⁶ with calm and resignation. Everywhere a shiver of hope was already running through the soul and heart of the Alsace-Lorraine population, whose intransigent but reasoned patriotism was well practiced, a resistance of sort.

History would later say that Germany had succeeded in conquering the land "materially", but had not been able to conquer the hearts of the people of *Alsace-Lorraine*.

Some of our young people, who could have been mobilized, had crossed the border to France at the last moment before it was closed down. Those of

⁵ German word that designates a territory of the Holy Roman Empire, in this case Alsace-Lorraine.

⁶ Alsace and Lorraine.

us who had not been able to cross over, for all sorts of reasons, were now caught up in the cogs of the German army and sent urgently to the Russian fronts.

Like so many other young men from the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, I had to join the German army with the class of 1918. For me, this meant leaving my hometown to be recruited into the garrisons at Haguenau in the 137th Infantry, and Bitche in the 166th.

By that time, war was in full swing. Starting in August and September 1914, hard battles had started taking place on the soil of *Lorraine*, from Sarrebourg to Morhange in Moselle, to the battle of "le Grand Couronné"⁷, which saved the cities of Nancy and Pont-à-Mousson.

On August 9, 1914, people had learned that French troops had entered Alsace two days earlier and had seized Mulhouse, Sarrebourg and Morhange, thanks to the "Iron Division" defence which was of all of the fights in this area. It had been a serious defeat for the brave German divisions.

However, the war had not been very favourable to France's allies from here on out. The German imperial army had crossed the borders of Luxembourg and Belgium by surprise and a stream of

⁷ *The Battle of the "Grand-Couronné" took place at the start of World War One, from September 4th to 13th, 1914, and pitted the 6th German army commanded by Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria against the 2nd French army of Edouard de Castelnau.*

Prussians raced down the entire region of Leuven, Brussels, Charleroi. German soldiers increased their efforts on Sedan, Charleville, the Somme and the North.

They had tried to cross the Marne through a first large-scale offensive, with limited success. That prompted a great reaction from the allies, and in particular the French army, which blocked the path of the German divisions on the Marne and violently pushed them back to a stabilized front consisting of more than 850 kilometres, from Belfort to the blue line of the Vosges, from Verdun to the North Sea.

This strategic reaction from the headquarters and the courage of the French army had slowed down the enemy's objectives, which had been to break through its defence and reach Paris in a few days.

This had marked the beginning of a new form of warfare, the cruellest one. The trenches, lined with barbed wire and underground casemates, were defended by artillery duels. From 1915 on, Verdun had been holding on, to the glory of the French army.

It was also the beginning of the submarine war and the blockade of the seas.

With the year 1916 had come the resumption of "trench warfare" and positions at Verdun and in the Somme had been relinquished. The world had entered the third year of the conflict, with all of its consequences.

In 1917, the Americans had strengthened the side of the allies and this had filled us, the people of Alsace and Lorraine, with great hope. But at the same time, following the revolution in Russia, Greater Russia and Germany had agreed to a ceasefire. This had enabled Germany to disengage its troops from the Russian front and to turn its forces towards the French front.

However, the allies held steadfast on the whole continent and the war followed its course with more "perfection".

*

From this point on, my destiny would take me on the path to war.

Against my will, I, Charles, 19 years of age, was a soldier in the German army. Now known as Karl, I joined the German divisions in France within the 462nd Cheppy Infantry Regiment in the Argonne sector.

In October 1917, we were scattered in the rear lines, in villages such as Saint-Juvin, Beffu, Grandpré, Champigneulle, and were waiting in reserve before being sent to the front lines

I became *Feldwebel*⁸ Baumann's orderly and sometimes even his local interpreter.

People were very welcoming once I allowed myself to showcase my good disposition in the local accent. The children of the village would come up to

⁸ *Military rank of Master Sergeant in the German army.*

me to reveal their secrets and the young ladies would smile when I told them that the uniform did not make the soldier, just as the clothes do not make the man. It was among these villagers that my peace-loving abilities developed, while others, less favoured by fate, were sent to the battle front.

*

One night, my *Feldwebel* sent me to the outbuildings of a farm to take care of three plump pigs, the detachment "mascots". But one of them disappeared from the stables I was supposed to be guarding. It was the officer who noticed it in the morning. I had fallen asleep peacefully and was awakened by his yelling.

— *Oh, mein Bastard! Ihr Fall ist gut, wenn Sie dieses Schwein nicht finden.*⁹ And someone also ransacked the trucks last night!

It was amidst his terrible screams that I returned to the headquarters to be sent off to a disciplinary company stationed in the Cheppy woods, in Argonne. The next morning, on December 10, 1917, we were ordered to get moving to provide reinforcement in an unknown direction. We had to go through a forest of dense trees, with only narrow muddy trails, heavily disturbed by our forced march.

⁹ *Well, you bastard, your goose is cooked if that pig is not found.*

No, that morning was not a cheerful one. There was no more smiling going on. And there was no doubt about the fact that, on the hill facing us, a deep roaring sound was calling for its victims.

Strafing was raining down on us, but this was nothing compared to the actual objective that was awaiting us.

However, artillery barrages were complicating our progression and large calibres were exploding all around us. An immense battlefield was opened before our eyes, an eternal still life where not even a crow could find shade. This was where, in a few camouflaged huts, the ordeal of a disobedient company began. All the reluctant, the undisciplined, the thieves and the deserters were waiting in line for turnips and jam rations.

My thoughts kept going back to the good times I had had in these villages of the rear. But here, in this camp, an iron discipline began for our eclectic group of untameable offenders of all ages, and all conditions.

And the following days, when hunger and thirst threatened us and barbed wire encircled us, only rats and lice mixed well in our ranks.

Young Soldier

December 15, 1917 - January 27, 1918

In the vicinity of Verdun

"Karl! This is bad! At least you'll know where I lay! My heart abandons me"

Every day the twelve hours of service began like clockwork, and other regulatory tortures awaited us in order to re-educate us: review of equipment, with shovels, axes, and peaks that shone like a fire brigade's parade. And then there were hours of "leisure" that consisted of running around the dressage camp until you were exhausted. Those were handed out as a punishment for a poorly articulated yes or no.

Yet, all of this would have gone over well for me if, one day, I hadn't smiled at some officers. For this simple reason, they gave me three days of platoon time. It consisted in running around and jumping walls and ditches on swampy ground. I can say that I had managed to carry out this task well, but at the last minute I stumbled into a pool of water. Covered in mud, with blood flowing through my nostrils, I was exhausted and I fainted in front of my comrades.

After watching this spectacle, an aspiring officer from this platoon took me back to the infirmary. That's where I recognized my dorm neighbour.

His name was Rodolph. We were the same age, 19 years old. He was from Mannheim, Germany. As a

university student, he was therefore an aspiring officer. He had been accused of falsifying a permission slip to his benefit. We were the youngest of the group. He joined his misery to mine.

We were just a few days away from Christmas. The whole world was preparing for this sweet event. As for our company, we were put in working order to join the front of the Ardennes. We arrived after a few days on a *Niemandslan*¹⁰ near Verdun where, already, large-calibre mines of the French forces were exploding in an unbearable crash. Then we marched towards the guts of the real front, following paths through the brush where the snow marked our steps. At one point, we went through barbed wire that hurt our backs. Our officers often slowed the pace of our steps as we approached all kinds of shell holes ravaging this advanced sector.

And then the real war began with all its cruelties. The vision that was before my eyes brought my childhood dreams to an end. Swarm of soldiers were entering and leaving these underground shelters, eagerly awaiting our relief team in an inextricable mess. Their faces were ravaged and their uniforms wrecked. A painful vision was offered to us: the presence in the foreground of unidentified corpses, some standing like mannequins in a window, barricaded for eternity in this impassable barbed wire. They were like sentries, crouched down, shivering in

¹⁰ *No man's land.*

the cold with all their belongings on their shoulders, their feet in the mud, mummified in their stupor.

An immense feeling of pity seized me, large tears rolled down my cheeks, I who still had a heart, a piece of soul that I compressed into my solid body.

— Let's go! exclaimed our leader as I recovered from my emotions.

Emotions were overcoming me at the mere thought of soon having to go up against the poor guys of my calibre who were on the other side of the trenches.

No, I wasn't that kind of zealous soldier and I was suffering at the thought of those who would have to die two days before Christmas. This is what was offered to all those men, those soldiers gathered in front of Verdun, a fortress known for its resistance.

On the way, one of our German-Alsacian comrades was hit. He cried out:

— *Mutter, Mutter es kann nicht sein*¹¹ ! Karl, Karl, Karl, my friend!

I took him in my arms, this brave little soldier who had just fallen for his country. Blood was spilling from his young body and I thought, at that moment, that it was mine. I took off my iron helmet in front of this companion - who just yesterday was telling me about his crushes on girls from his hometown, his plans for the future - before covering him with a bit of soil and leaving him to God.

¹¹ "Mom, mom, it's impossible."

This time we left at dawn, armed with eighty infantry men and a section of machine gunners to which I belonged. The aim was to strengthen the outposts scattered in this sector and it did not take much more for the French army to launch a complex attack targeting us.

Grenades were exploding around us like flower crowns, devices were slipping from all sides to explode on the ground. Caught off guard, our sections felt like it was struck by lightning. The dislocation was instantaneous. We scattered, without further formality, to find a mound of earth or a hole of some kind. We were hiding like hunted rats.

I had taken a chance to discover, in the light of the explosions, a vast shell hole. Unfortunately, gases were coming up from this hole. Yet, having no choice, I settled there as best I could. Not far from my hiding spot, I heard the command of some officers ordering the rally despite everything that was going on.

By chance, I saw my aspiring officer. He was crawling on his belly like a slug between barbed wires. Seeing his sad fate, I hastened to inform him of my presence, the right thing to do in such cases.

- Rodolph! Come this way, you'll be safe!
- Who is this?
- *Musketier*¹² *Karl!*
- Ah! It's you, it's awful out here! he said to me.

¹² *Infantryman in the German army.*

I had to throw a telephone cable at him to help him reach my hiding place.

– Oh, what an adventure for the first day of my appointment, Karl!

– Indeed, *Herr Leutnant*¹³!

– Do you see how we meet again? We are a few kilometres away from Verdun, on the way to this impassable fortress! Of course, the French will defend themselves, they're like us, they get killed on the spot!

Grenades were crashing around our shell hole, as if the devil was getting involved. Suddenly, shrapnel went through my helmet and almost knocked me out. I understood our situation and the ordeal offered to us a few days before Christmas 1917.

A vision of the end of the world appeared in front of us, as if we were on the edge of nothingness.

In that moment, I thought of the happy Christmas celebrations of my past, of the village of my childhood, of this good mother who, in these circumstances would open her arms to me. No, I'm not delusional, but I thought I heard a kind of supplication, a transmission of soul that invited me to be careful: "Charlie! Be careful, don't separate yourself from your faith, keep hoping, be patient and fate will be less cruel! Godspeed!"

¹³ *Lieutenant*

Finally, dawn came around and we saw a large sign a hundred meters away from us, written in German that read:

Kameraden, Die Franzosen schlagen vor Euch fur 24 Stunden zu verschonen, um Weihnachten zu feiern. Gebt Antwort¹⁴ !

This surprise was well received by the Germans.

Orders were given to retreat to the rear trenches¹⁵ in order to better engage in these festivities. Small fires were lit to signify our agreement. Friendly exchanges took place, casualties were picked up on both sides and not a single shot was fired.

Thanks to this truce, with some survivors, we were able to reach a friendly Alsatian non-commissioned officer who had been very seriously wounded. He was still breathing when I looked into his distress. His blood was spilling from serious injuries. I comforted him by restoring his confidence in life.

– The lieutenant will have you evacuated and, like the storks, you will rebuild your nest in Colmar, your family!

– Karl, you're a good comrade!

– You were a good man!

He died with my last words.

¹⁴ *Comrades, the French offer to spare you for 24 hours, in order to celebrate Christmas. Give response!*

¹⁵ *2nd and 3rd trenches.*

*

The day after Christmas, the position was recovered. Rodolph, our new Lieutenant, proud of his nomination, inspected our section and brought us together to explain the situation.

– Patience and perseverance will be useful to get us out of there!

Then he addressed me with a few words:

– Karl, still brave?

– *Jawoll, Herr Leutnant!* I don't have a choice, only obligations. But the worst part is that we don't even have time to eat, *Herr Leutnant!*

As I talked, I pulled from my bag a small parcel, that my parents had sent me a few days before. It was with joy that I had discovered so many sweets from home: nuts, prunes, Christmas cakes, as well as a few words of love from Mom.

It didn't take much more to break my heart. I also found something to keep me going, a small vial of brandy, an excellent plum from back home, which I shared with my comrades.

A few moments after that exchange, several large mines suddenly broke out on our trench, half engulfing us. And when we regained our senses, my precious bottle had broken its neck and lost its aroma to the four winds. Explosions were coming at us from all sides. We saw our Lieutenant lying on the ground. Blood was coming out of his boots.

– Damn it!

He had just started leaving to do his outpost checks. Unfortunately for him, sections of the French reconnaissance had noticed and were now coming up to us, with their bayonets fixed, in order to root us out. It was a confrontation that turned into a guerrilla.

Our young officer was having a hard time with his wounds but he had not lost his mind. He was writing his report when he called me.

— Karl! This is bad! At least you'll know where I lay! My heart abandons me!

He entrusted me his report with a long, saddened look.

— Be quick, I'm counting on you. Reach the front lines. It is a friend begging you!

— *Jawohl Herr Leutnant*¹⁶ !

Hand grenades were exploding from all sides, strong enough to rip our hearts out. Such was the cruel fate of so many combatants thrown into war.

Following the orders given to me, without precaution for myself, I retreated and threw myself through the bushes to follow lost paths intertwined with barbed wire. I ran at a desperate pace as stray bullets whistled near my ears.

My despair only grew when I suddenly got myself caught in lassos of barbed wire which, to add to my predicament, were trapped. I only had one option left in my distress. I left behind my equipment, my rifle

¹⁶ *Yes, my Lieutenant.*

and the bag that contained my most precious possessions.

It was by a miracle that I reached the front lines, in a state that can easily be imagined. Distaught, with my uniform ransacked, I came up to the officers. In my boot, I found the communication, stained with blood prints.

— I commend you, they said, for the courage you have brought to our cause! The report alludes to your conduct and in particular to the assistance and care you have had, for your officer and your wounded comrades! You really are a soldier who can be entrusted with a document of this importance!

I blushed under these praises, I, a fighter who was fighting in contradiction with my true feelings. It was for me an ordeal that one cannot imagine.

After a few moments I got a little of my spirit back, and I was already thinking about going back to get my Lieutenant, my friend.

I did not hesitate to voluntarily head back to our sector, accompanied by troopers. The way back was not without its challenges.

Finally, we reached our machine-gun nest, abandoned by our troopers.

The Lieutenant was lying in a large mine hole. We were able to retrieve him. The French soldiers of the outpost had left him for dead. They had planted a stick in the ground by his side and placed his helmet

on top of it. We saw that his identity plate and his revolver were missing.

But the heart of the wounded man was still beating faintly, to our surprise. After first aid was given, we managed to resuscitate him. He was taken to the infirmaries and a transfusion was attempted.

I did not hesitate to take part in this operation by giving my blood to the one who was my friend despite our differences of opinion.

After those events, I got greatly rewarded by my return to my company, where I joined the soldiers behind the lines in the region of Saint-Juvin in Argonne. It was January 27, 1918, the day of the Kaiser's¹⁷ birthday.

But my lieutenant did not escape death, I learned a few days later.

Surely, everything shall pass down here.

¹⁷ *The emperor Guillaume II.*

Nach Paris

January 27, 1918 - February 1, 1918

Laon

"They are only children, not soldiers"

Military operations were now at a standstill. However, the headquarters on both sides were reflecting on the operational continuation of the hostilities.

On our side, that is on the German side, they were trying to restore discipline. Through a reorganization of the military structure they sought to resume the offensive¹⁸.

To this end, all sorts of conferences were organised to demonstrate to German soldiers that 1918 would be a decisive and victorious year. To the rallying cries of *Nach Paris*¹⁹, the speakers assured us of our chances after the end of the war between Russia and Germany which would, of course, give resources back to the German forces, of men and equipment, in order to strengthen existing divisions in France.

¹⁸ *During the reorganization of the German army initiated in 1917, because of the huge loss of soldiers, the regiment format was reduced and generally included twelve companies divided into three battalions, each with a company of machine guns.*

¹⁹ *Towards Paris.*