

## The Massacre At Oradour-sur-Glane

Written by Andy Owen



Oradour-sur-Glane was a charming picture-book French village. Very similar, in fact, to many Limousin villages you will find today.

Located on the side of a verdant hill, with nearby lakes, forests and pastures, full of russet cattle, it was a happy and peaceful place.

Oradour was prosperous, with a life and vigour that was infectious.

Most weekends, the people of Limoges, the nearest city, would visit, to enjoy the tranquil peace, breathe the fresh country air, fish for gudgeon in the well-stocked river Glane, picnic with the family - and be at one with nature.

The delightful little restaurants and hotels in the village, enjoyed the attention of the visitors and locals alike and there was healthy competition for business.

As was the case in every village in France in those pre-war days, there were many cafes in Oradour, some just consisting of a few chairs and a table. Locals would gather there, to chat, play pontoon and exchange the stories of the day.

The village was connected to Limoges by trams that made the return journey several times a day. These brought the 'townies' and their much sought-after custom.

In truth, the majority of adult villagers were not too keen on these people with their seemingly superior attitude, but the village children were always present and excitable at the terminus.

It was, as it had always been, a vibrant community. Most people knew each other by their first name, the village stores were always well stocked and a friendly gesture or welcome was always given.

The church in the village was striking and particularly notable for its superb Ogival vault, which rested on four columns, each of which was carved with figures.

The village had three schools. For boys, girls and infants.

But, in 1940, Oradour changed. France was now under the nazi jackboot.

The village had no strategic or military importance, Germans were not seen very often, so villagers tried very hard to live as normally as they could, given the very difficult situation.

During 1940, an additional school was opened, to cater for the refugees from Moselle, evicted from their homes by the Germans.

The head teacher of this school was Monsieur Gugeon, who had himself been evicted from Moselle.

Oradour suffered the occupation in stony apathy - and life went on.

On Saturday June 10th 1944, the sun was up early and the village was soon bathed in warm sunshine. Everyone was looking forward to a lovely weekend and many plans were already in place.

The village was its usual busy self, with people visiting the shops, getting their meat from the butchers and their bread from the bakery. Friends and neighbours met for coffee and the children played in the hot sun.

The war seemed a million miles away.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, it showed up with scarcely believable savagery.

Two hours before, led by the commander of the 1st Battalion, SS Major Adolf Diekmann, Waffen-SS troops surrounded the village. All roads in and out of the village were sealed.

Without warning, soldiers of the 2nd Waffen-SS Panzer Division (armoured division), *Das Reich*, advanced into the village.

At that point in time, the village population had almost doubled, to about 650 people, swelled by refugees, including some Jewish refugees, from other parts of France.

Loud hailer announcements were made, instructing all villagers, whatever they were doing, to make their way to the Champ de Foire main square.

The SS soldiers clinically and efficiently visited all the buildings and made sure everyone had responded and there were no stragglers.

The villagers were annoyed and frustrated. It was, after all, Saturday afternoon - and they all had plans. "Bloody identity check..."

The men were separated from the women and children.

"We were laughing," says Monsieur Darthout. "We weren't afraid. We were thinking of the next day's soccer match".

Sadly, that soccer match would never take place...

Members of the 1st and 2nd platoons took the 197 men to several barns on the edge of town and locked them in. The 3rd platoon locked up 240 women and 205 children in the village church.

Then, without warning, the SS men set fire to the barns and threw grenades through the windows of the church, shooting anyone who tried to escape.

The Germans were ruthless. They went around the bodies they could see and shot those who had not been killed by the shooting and the grenades.

They watched, as the fires burnt in the barn and the church - and laughed and joked at the screams of the dying inside.

After 642 inhabitants, including 205 children, were shot, blown apart or burned alive, the soldiers then spent hours in the village, looting their homes and shops, killing animals as they went.

They then proceeded to burn the village to the ground.

Around 8pm in the evening, the SS men withdrew from the smoking ruins.

Out of 649 men, women and children, only seven villagers survived the massacre - six men and one woman, all of them injured, some severely.

But, they were alive.

The six men survived by covering themselves with the corpses of their neighbours. Just one woman - Marguerite Rouffanche - managed to escape the horror in the church.

She told the court of enquiry later, *"Firing burst out in the church then straw, faggots and chairs were thrown pele-mele onto bodies lying on the stone slabs.*

*I had escaped from the killing and was without injury, so I made use of a smoke cloud to slip behind the altar. In this part of the church, there were three windows. I made for the widest one in the middle - and with the help of a stool used to light the candles, I tried to reach it. I don't know how but my strength was multiplied.*

*I heaved myself up to it as best I could - and threw myself out of the opening that was offered to me through the already shattered window. I jumped about nine feet down."*

15 other inhabitants of the village were able to escape the Germans before the massacre started, or evaded the round-up by hiding.

The Das Reich division considered themselves an elite group. They were battle-hardened and ruthless killers. They had arrived in France in January 1944 from the Eastern Front – and they brought Eastern Front methods with them.

They had been in combat in that horrific theatre for over two years and responsible for many anti-partisan actions.

The commander, SS-Major General Heinz Bernhard Lammerding, had served from July 1943 to January 1944 as the Chief of Staff for SS-General Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski.

Himmler had appointed him to command and co-ordinate anti-partisan operations behind German lines in the occupied Soviet Union.

Lammerding had ordered many retaliatory actions against Soviet civilians for real or perceived partisan activities or "sympathies." Such operations involved the murder of tens of thousands of civilians, as well as the torching and total destruction of numerous villages.

Soon after the 2nd SS Division was redeployed to Normandy, French resistance fighters harassed it. They had been pumped up by the D-Day landings and were growing increasingly audacious.

On June 9, 1944, the day before the Oradour massacre, Lammerding issued orders for the division to "cleanse" the area around Clermont-Ferrand of partisans. That same day, members of the division had displayed what "cleansing" of partisans would mean.

In retaliation for an attack, they hanged 99 Resistance fighters from buildings in Tulle. Similar executions were perpetrated in nearby towns and villages.



No one still knows why Oradour was chosen for the ultimate horror. Clearly, this bunch of cut-throat murderers, were keen to make an example of a French community – and Oradour was just down the road.

Oradour now stands exactly as it did when the Nazi fires went out.

I went there in 2015 and got there very early, so, for the first hour or so, I was the only person walking around the streets. The only sound was my own footsteps.

I saw or heard no birds. No natural sounds of nature.

When I stopped to look at fire-twisted lamps, a sewing machine lying in exactly the spot it had been left by the householder, pots and pans in what was once a happy French kitchen, the only sound was my breathing.



It was unbearably poignant and extremely hard to take.

It was like a 20th-century Pompeii. The crumbling façades, with windows like sightless eyes, totally wrecked shops and homes – the doctor's Peugeot 202, still where he parked it, before he was shot.



And then, there was the church. And a pushchair...



Few of the SS men responsible for this appalling war crime, ever stood trial. Diekmann died in combat three weeks after the massacre.

German authorities refused to allow Lammerding to be extradited to France, even though he was convicted and sentenced to death in absentia by a court in Bordeaux in 1953. The state prosecutor's office in Frankfurt re-opened the Lammerding case in 1961, but stayed the proceedings on grounds of insufficient evidence in 1964. Lammerding died in West Germany in 1971.

Finally, in 1953, a French military court in Bordeaux convicted 21 former members of the 2nd SS Division for the crimes committed at Oradour and Tulle. Fourteen of the defendants were ethnic Germans from Alsace.

Two were sentenced to death and the rest given prison terms between five and 20 years. However, within 5 years of the trial, all of the convicts received amnesties and pardons - including the two sentenced to death.

In 1981, authorities in the German Democratic Republic arrested and prosecuted Heinz Barth, a former SS Sergeant and platoon commander whose soldiers were among those who shot the men of Oradour.

An East Berlin court sentenced Barth to life in prison. Released in 1997, Barth died in 2007 at the age of 86.





A boys class from Oradour      *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Lydia Chagoll*

Not one of the boys above, or their teacher, survived the massacre.