

A German soldier's glance at World War II

In 2006 in Germany, a man finds a collection of photographs taken by his recently deceased father, a former Wehrmacht soldier. The photographs depict the soldiers' lives during World War II. There are camps, moments of rest, destroyed cities and, which is worst, bodies of wounded and dead soldiers. Since the man has up until then not been aware of the fact that his father could have witnessed such moments or be even responsible for such acts of violence, he at first considers throwing the pictures away. Encouraged by a French colleague, however, he becomes more and more convinced that they could serve as historical documents. As he deciphers the name of Orléans on the back of some photographs, he decides to give most of them to the City, always aware of the emotions they could evoke within the community of Orléans. In 2012, the Municipal Archives receives 102 pictures, either the original or as a copy on CD-ROM.

The photographs show an unarmed military unit of the Reich Labour Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst) based in Losheim (Saarland). The donor's father was conscripted into this unit in 1938. The photographs also depict the campaign in France, e. g. the passage through Orléans, as well as in Russia. The donor's father participated in both campaigns. After being injured during the second he was repatriated.

Of course, the collection is of great historical interest, above all for local history, as it shows the city of Orléans during the first days or weeks after the German invasion. Of particular interest to our city are the unique pictures of the troops' entry into the city across the bridge "pont de Vierzon". However, the pictures are of national interest as well. There is for example the everyday life of the young German soldiers. The photographs representing the handing over of medals and the daily life in the camps during the campaign in France can almost make forget that there is a war going on. They contrast strongly with those representing escape routes, destroyed cities, French soldiers who were probably held prisoners, or even wounded or dead soldiers. The pictures show the war through the eyes of the German soldiers who both witnessed and caused the events. Several photographs have notes on their back. Like in a diary, the author sometimes indicates where he is and, above all, what he sees.

Several photographs depict the so-called French Colonial Forces. In any case, the young Germans did not remain unimpressed by the presence of the African soldiers whom they have maybe never had the opportunity to meet before. Thus they took pictures of them in order to keep them in their memory. On one of the pictures there is a note that gives us an idea of how the Germans felt during the encounter: "A guy like this can be frightening." In fact, the African soldier fixes his gaze on the camera and does not seem the least bit impressed. This encounter has actually led to some amazing photographs of soldiers from the Maghreb region and other African countries which are of national significance to the history of France.

The donor's wish being for the pictures to serve as a testimony, the Municipal Archives presents a selection of the photographs on this page. The whole selection is available for consultation in the reading room of the Municipal Archives. The inventory of the photography collection will soon be available online under "instruments de recherche".