

ONE LIFE IN LODI November 2006

A Brief Biography of MICHELINE SATKOWSKI by Artue Maglionico, Borough Historian

Lodi's Micky Satkowski was born Micheline Leroy Monge in Henin 'Lietard, France on September 29, 1926. She lived in the safe surroundings of her surroundings of her parents Louis and Emilie along with her two older brothers Pierre and Claude. In the spring of 1938, Micheline's father, a successful insurance salesman, was transferred to the city of Bethune, which is located just below the Belgium border. "My father took over for a man who was retiring," said Micky. "He saw it as a chance to prosper in a larger city."

"No sooner did Micky, now 11 years old, and her family settle into their new environs, when the Germans invaded Austria and were continuing north into Czechoslovakia. Louis, a veteran of WWI was immediately called back into active duty. Suddenly Micky's world of flower gardens and rosy faced dolls was in danger of being shattered by a monster whose thirst for death and destruction was yet to be fully realized.

"Hitler then made a promise not to invade other countries," recalls Micky. "With that my father was again discharged from the army."

Less than a year later Adolf Hitler and his Nazi war machine were marching into Poland. On September 3, 1939, France and England had no recourse but to declare war on Germany. Again the innocence of Micky's childhood was giving way to the experience of war. Louis was called back in the military.

"Luckily, my father was discharged in the spring of 1940," remembers Micky. "In May of that year the Nazi's invaded Belgium, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, and finally Paris, France."

That June, Louis and his loved ones, amid the distant sounds of war, fled for a cousin's house located in the coastal village of Campigneulles Les' Grandes. To add to the family dilemma, Micheline, now 13 years old, had only hours before being released from the hospital, where she was treated for a ruptured appendix. "Also," said Micky, "we had to leave our dog behind."

It was during that time when Micheline saw her first German soldier. "We just froze," sighed Micky as she relived the encounter. "They drove by on a motorcycle and side car as we played in the yard. They stopped and gave us a long expressionless stare, then drove off."

A few weeks later, sensing that it was safe to return to his home, Louis gathered his family and made his way back to Bethune. They approached the house cautiously not knowing what or who might be lying in wait. Once inside they noticed a machine gun on the kitchen table the barrel of which was facing the back window. The walls, riddled with bullet holes, gave evidence of the battle that took place only a few days before. "All of the windows and doors were gone," said Micky. "The Germans used them to cross the muddy streams."

Suddenly, from out of the hallway and wagging her tail crept the family dog, Poupette.

Micheline, in a moment of elation ran to the side of her black and white terrier, only to find a litter of lifeless puppies in the corner of the room. Unable to fend for themselves the puppies succumbed to the hostile conditions. Poupette managed to stay alive by eating the fat that was left to congeal in a frying pan.

"I saw her teeth marks in the fat," said Micky. "She managed to beat the odds and her barking kept the looters away." It became a vow of Micheline's mother to keep the dog and to share with her the family's lessening food supply. "Families couldn't feed themselves let alone their pets," said Micky. "Life as we knew it did not exist any longer." Still Micky's mom kept her promise. Poupette remained with the family for the duration of the war and then some.

In October of 1940, Micky's 21 year old brother Pierre, a high school teacher, was captured by the Nazis and was forced to work repairing rail road tracks. Realizing that his family had no clue s to his whereabouts, Pierre wrote on a small piece of paper his name, address and location. By a stroke of luck a fellow countryman noticed the paper fall from "Pierre's steady hand. Later, in the shadow of twilight the Frenchman retrieved the note and returned it to the Leroy Monge family. At last Louis and Emilie knew the whereabouts of their oldest son Pierre.

Until then, they faced a nightmare far worse than that of a dream. "My father went to where my brother was," said Micky. "He made sure that Pierre saw him just to let him know that the family was aware of his location."

Three months later, on Christmas Eve 1940, Pierre was released from the Nazi work camp and was allowed to return to the arms of his awaiting family.

Meanwhile the war in Europe was intensifying and so too the turmoil of Nazi occupation. "Our house was at the end of the street," said Micky. "The German soldiers used to park in our driveway and glare at us. How intimidating they were."

By mid 1940 the allied planes began dropping leaflets of hope to the French people below who were being held in the Nazi death grip. German soldiers perched themselves high in the church tower overlooking the town square. They served as an ominous reminder that anyone caught reading those flyers would be dealt with harshly.

"You could hear the Nazis climbing up the tower during our mass," remembers Micky. "This went on from 1940 to 1944. You didn't know how or when it would end." Micky and her friends read those flyers anyway. Even at the risk of being caught. It's better to live in the glimmer of hope than to die slowly in the darkness of despair.

By the fall of 1942, 20 year old Claude, the youngest of Micheline's two older brothers, was ordered by the German to work in one of their war factories. This was a dangerous job since many of these factories were being bombed by American and English war planes.

Rather than risk being killed for the Nazi cause, Claude joined the French underground. "I was 15 years old by then," said Micky. "My family trusted me with the secret of my brother's plight. Had it slipped out, Claude would have been shot."

It wasn't until August of 1944 after allied forces landed in Normandy that Claude was reunited with his family.

Those were anxious times for the Leroy Monge family. Overhead was the constant threat of bombing raids, usually by the American made flying fortress which was able to unleash its deadly cargo from 30,000 feet. One had to always be listening for the sounds of the allied planes in search of Nazi installations.

"If you were frying food," said Micky, "someone had to be outdoors listening for the planes." So as to protect his family from harm, Louis dug a trench in the backyard. It was deep enough so that the odds of surviving an attack were increased somewhat. "We were trapped between British and German planes," said Micky. "We saw many planes being shot down with pilots parachuting to safety or to their deaths."

The war as Micheline remembers it was a period of overwhelming anxieties, sacrifice beyond human comprehension and inconceivable risk taking. Each time that Micheline ventured from her home, she was never certain what would be waiting there upon her return.

Rationing was a way of life for those under Nazi rule. Whether it was food, clothing, tobacco, medical supplies . . . even wine, whatever. It all went to the German war effort. "If it didn't grow in France or could be purchased on the black market you did without it," said Micky. "We'd have to barter for goods, a bushel of fruit for a pint of milk."

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) had a free French station, which, of course, was frowned upon by the Nazi authorities. Listening to the allied forces giving messages of hope and of faith could have easily ended in disaster. "Yet we listened and we prayed," said Micky.

By June 6, 1944, "D Day", the bombings had become more frequent and with hellacious intent. The Nazis as well as the French thought that the allied forces were taking the short passage across the English Channel from the south east of England to Pas De Calais, which was near Micky's home. Realizing that the full impact of the invasion was taking place to the south in Normandy, most of the German troops were immediately sent in that direction. Suddenly, according to Micky, the once larger than life Nazis were now sheepish in their demeanor. "They were afraid of dying," said Micky, "just like us."

Finally, on August 14, 1944, English speaking Canadians entered the city of Bethune. From the center of town could be heard the joyous sounds of liberation. "We couldn't get to the center of town because of sniper fire," said Micky. "The next day the whole town was able to join in."

On the morning of August 15, the Canadian troops were camped out in the center square enjoying a breakfast of fried eggs and fried tomatoes. Where once citizens of Bethune were afraid to venture was now sacred landscape upon which all were free to walk.

"We brought a soldier home for dinner," recalls Micky. "In return he gave us a few bars of Lifebuoy soap." For the Leroy Monge family it was the first time in 4 years that they were able to wash with real soap. "All the good stuff went to the Germans," said Micky.

Soon, remembers Micky, prisoners of war and members of the French underground returned home including her brother Claude, who she hadn't seen for 2 years. "For us," said Micky, "it was joy without a shadow."

In October of 1944, Micky left for Lille France, where she enrolled in the local college. Forced to return home due to a respiratory illness, Micky remained in her mother's care until March of the following year. Once back in Lille, Micky took on a job as an interpreter for the American Red Cross. "I learned how to speak English as a child," said Micky. "I'm glad I did."

It was then that 18 year old Micheline met her soul mate. Lodi resident Corporal Henry Satkowski U.S. Airforce: "We met on May 19, 1945," Micky recollects. "He wanted to take me out the same day." Micky insisted that they be chaperoned.

Henry, smitten by this 18 year old beauty, talked a friend of his into coming along on their first date. What began as a chance meeting was now a budding romance. Blossom though it did, 3 months later the Red Cross said adieu to France, the town of Lille and World War II. Micky and Henry were forced to go their separate ways.

Later, on September 11, 1945, the love sick soldier pulled up in front of Micheline's Bethune home in an army truck. "He assured my mother that nothing happened between us in Lille," said Micky. "He was telling the truth of course." From there Henry left for Germany. The two remained in touch until 1946 when Henry returned home to American soil and his hometown of Lodi. "He wanted to get married before he went home," said Micky. "My mother disapproved."

Convincing her mother that Henry was a man of honor and integrity, Micheline said good-bye to her family and friends in Bethune, France and on March 1, 1947 made her first footprints in the sands of the United States of America.

Micky remembers it this way: "Late in February I went to Paris with my father. We called TWA, but because of heavy snow there were no planes. My father had to return home leaving me in Paris for 4 days with money," food and coupons running out. I found shelter in the warm subway. On Thursday I got to the station to board the bus to the airport only to find that I had been bumped! Next day I finally took off. 24 hours later I had arrived in New York's La Guardia airport. I called Henry and his brother Casmir to pick me up. They saw me waiting with another war bride who was all dressed up in furs and nylons. I had on a coat and bobby socks. Cas, thinking that I'm the one all dressed up, congratulated his brother Henry for having such great taste in women. Henry laughed and told Cas that I was the one in bobby socks. Boy, was Cas let down."

The couple were married on March 19, 1947 and moved in Washington Street in Lodi in 1952.

Henry was employed by the U.S. Post office until succumbing to cancer in 1990. Micky worked in Josephine's dress shop on Charles St. in Lodi. In the late 50's the Lodi war bride worked as a bookkeeper for a Maywood banking firm. After a short stint as a substitute teacher, Micky became employed by the Lodi Library as SR assistant in the children's section where she retired in 1988.

Micky also worked as an ESL teacher in Bergen County from 1988 to 1998. Today the French born 73 year old is an active member of the Saint Frances De Sales Church on Union Street in Lodi.

Her brothers, Pierre, 80 years old and Claude, 77, are alive and well in France. Her mom Emille died in 1982 at the age of 93. Dad Louis died in 1984 at 85. Poupette, the brave little terrier, lived a full and protected life until 1949.

"I hate war as does anyone," said Micheline. "But the irony is that had it not been for the U.S. involvement, I'd have never met my husband Henry and would never have come to America."

It's only fitting then that the Weekly News salutes Micheline in her native Parlance: "La vie est une aventure" - The Adventurous Spirit.
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