

## **2016 Kellerman Lecture for Victoria**

### **LODGE LIBERTY CHERIE**

**The Story of a Masonic Lodge Established in a Prison Camp during World War II**  
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The story I am presenting today is one of inspiration and courage in the face of extreme adversity and danger. It is a tale of a small group of brave Belgian Freemasons who aimed to maintain their commitment to Masonic principles and dignity in an environment where severe punishment, or even death, was the likely result of their actions if they were discovered. It is the story of a Lodge established by political prisoners in a Nazi prison camp on 15 November 1943. The Lodge was named *Liberte Cherie*, or *Cherished Liberty* and was organised in the Esterwegen prison camp. The Lodge only operated until early 1944, but its legacy has existed to this day by being officially recognised by the Grand Orient of Belgium as a regular lodge within its jurisdiction and with a memorial, in memory of those Freemasons who took a stand for liberty and freedom being established on the camp site.

During my research, I found references to other Masonic lodges and activities in other Nazi camps. Lodge *Obstinee*, another Belgian Lodge, was established in a German prisoner of war camp for military personnel. References are also made to Masonic activities in Dachau, Buchenwald, and Mauthausen concentration camps, but at this stage, I have not been able to locate any detailed information on them.

One aspect that makes Lodge *Liberte Cherie* unique is that three of its members survived the war and were able to relate their experiences and promote official recognition of the Lodge by the Grand Orient of Belgium. A fourth survivor of the camp, who became a Freemason post-war, has also written extensively on the Lodge's existence. In this respect, as the most documented story of Masonic activity in a Nazi prison camp, I see the story of Lodge *Liberte Cherie* as being a testimony to all those Freemasons who took a stand against oppression by the Nazi regime.

Esterwegen camp, where the Lodge was established, was one of the original concentration camps established by the Nazis soon after their ascension to power in 1933. Early concentration camps were quite haphazard and usually involved securing prisoners in existing buildings and facilities. Dachau, for example, was originally established in old factory buildings, being run by the German police until taken over by the SS. Esterwegen was different, in that it was purpose built as a concentration camp for detaining political prisoners and was one of fifteen camps established in the Emsland district of Germany, near the German-Dutch border. The camp was initially run by the SA, or Brownshirts, until 1934. At this point, the SS, under the auspices and influence of SS Reichsfuehrer Heinrich Himmler, instigated a takeover of all concentration camps. An Inspectorate of Concentration Camps was established under the command of Theodore Eicke, the original SS Commandant of Dachau, and specialist SS garrisons of concentration camp guards, the Deaths Head units, were deployed across the camps.

In the early years of the Nazi regime, Esterwegen was at one time the second biggest concentration camp after Dachau. It had its fair share of notable personalities, both notorious camp guards and high profile prisoners. Karl Koch, who later earned an infamous reputation as commandant of Buchenwald and Majdanek concentration camps was commandant for a time. Koch's sadism and corruption eventually grew too much, even for the SS, who executed him themselves in 1945 for his crimes. On the nobler side, Esterwegen was used to detain Carl von Ossietzky, who was awarded the Noble Peace Prize in 1935, while in custody, for exposing clandestine German rearmament - much to the annoyance of his captors. The camp was also used to detain Hans Litten. Litten's story is quite fascinating. In 1931 he took Hitler and the Brownshirts to court over stabbings committed by the stormtroopers. Hitler at the time was trying to promote himself as a moderate politician, but Litten progressively proved that the

would-be Fuehrer promoted the violent policies of his subordinates. Hitler was so rattled by his court appearance that Litten's name could not be mentioned in Hitler's presence without provoking a rage. Unfortunately for Litten, this reputation earned him the enmity of the Nazis and he was immediately arrested after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. After a period of detention, torture and abuse across several concentration camps, he eventually committed suicide in 1938 while in detention.

In 1936, there was a further re-organisation of the concentration camps. Esterwegen was actually closed as an official concentration camp and its prisoners moved to the Oranienburg camp. The camp, however, continued to exist and became a prison camp for those convicted by civilian and military courts.

Some sources speculate that this change in status to a prison camp may have assisted with the establishment of Lodge Liberte Cherie as it created more favourable conditions. The camp no longer came under the jurisdiction of the SS Inspectorate of Concentration Camps and SS Deaths Head unit guards were replaced by ordinary prison guards. It is possible that this may have made life in the camp a little less severe than a regular concentration camp. However, I feel it would be incorrect to say that lives of prisoners would have become significantly better. Prisoner abuse and appalling treatment were still commonplace. This is emphasised by the fact that a number of former Esterwegen guards were prosecuted for war crimes in 1947. Rations were kept at starvation levels. It has been estimated that prisoners would lose 4-5kgs of body weight per month while in detention. Slave labour was also instituted. Prisoners were employed in making radio parts for Messerschmitts, which being an indoor job, was preferable to the alternative of hard outside labour in the peat bogs surrounding the camp.

From 1941, the nature of Esterwegen changed yet again. It was used to hold prisoners arrested as part of the Nacht und Nebel Decree issued by Hitler. Nacht und Nebel, literally translated as Night and Fog, was a Fuehrer directive which gave the Gestapo authority to arrest resistance fighters and opponents to the regime and have them disappear without a trace, as the name suggests, into the night and fog. Families, friends, and colleagues would have no idea what happened to the prisoners. It was designed as a scare tactic against resistance activities.

It was as Nacht and Nebel prisoners that the founders of Lodge Liberte Cherie found themselves in Esterwegen in 1943. They had all been Freemasons pre-war but were arrested for resistance activities against their Nazi occupiers. I am unsure as to the extent that their Masonic beliefs influenced them in their resistance activities – perhaps Masonic resistance to the Nazis could be the topic of another paper.

At this time, Esterwegen was divided into two main sections - the northern section of the camp which was reserved for the German criminal prisoners, and the southern section which held the "Night and Fog" prisoners. There was strictly no communication between the two parts of the camp, and a gallows in the central square, in addition to armed watchtowers, emphasised the fate of those who broke the camp rules.

In the southern section of the camp, 80% of the resistance prisoners were Belgium, with smaller percentages from northern France and the Netherlands. In my opinion, I believe this assisted with the establishment of Lodge Liberte Cherie as a common heritage and language would have established a greater atmosphere of trust and support, necessary for any clandestine activities to be conducted in relative safety.

Of the seven founding members of Lodge Liberte Cherie, three had known each other well prior to their arrival in Esterwegen. I have not been able to establish how the other members identified themselves as Freemasons, but one survivor of the camp, mentions in his memoirs that the prisoners did not hide their Masonic affiliations. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that fellow Masons were able to identify each other and form a common fraternal bond.

There are differing accounts of who the exact founding members of the Lodge, and later joining members, were. In the sources examined, the founding members are mostly referred to as:

- Luc Somerhausen: Somerhausen was a journalist and arrested for resistance activities in 1943. Franz Bridoux, a survivor of the camp, described Somerhausen in his memoirs as a Jewish, Communist Freemason – all the necessary attributes the Nazis would look for to make an arrest! Somerhausen would appear to have taken the initiative in establishing Lodge Liberte Cherie, which would not be surprising as pre-war he was a Deputy Grand Secretary of the Grand Orient of Belgium.
- Paul Hanson (elected as the Worshipful master): Hanson was a judge who courageously in 1942 made a judgment in favour of farmers who refused to make contributions to the Nazi-controlled National Corporation of Agriculture and Food, declaring the Corporation as not having legal existence. This did not impress the Nazi occupiers and he was arrested one month after issuing the judgment.
- Franz Rochat (appointed as Secretary of the Lodge): Rochat was arrested for espionage and had been active in the underground press, contributing to “Voice of the Belgians”.
- Jean Sugg: Sugg was active in the Belgian resistance, and like Rochat, worked in the underground press printing “Voice of the Belgians” He also helped airman escape occupied Belgium.
- Guy Hannecart: Hannecart headed the “Voice of the Belgians” underground newspaper and was arrested in 1942.
- Amadee Miclotte: Miclotte was arrested for espionage in 1942.
- Joseph Degueudre arrested as a member of the secret army in Belgium in 1943

These members were later joined by:

- Henri Story: Story was a member the local Belgian resistance, worked in the underground press, and as a well-known businessman resisted Nazi attempts to deport Belgian workers to Germany. He was arrested in 1943.
- Jean De Schrijver: De Schrijver was arrested for espionage and keeping secret weapons.

There was a further member who was initiated into the Lodge during its short existence, Fernand Erauw, arrested in 1942 for “aiding the enemy”.

The Lodge held its meetings in Hut 6 of the camp, where the prisoners were housed. There are differing accounts of how the name of the Lodge, Liberte Cherie, was decided on. Some sources claim it is a reference to “La Marseillaise”, the French national anthem. However, the name may also have come from the lyrics of a song composed by camp prisoners known as “The Song of the Marsh” –a reference to the prisoners being used as forced labourers in the peat marshes surrounding the camp.

The founders of the Lodge developed short versions of Lodge statutes and made minutes and notes of each meeting conducted. They also developed their own logo or symbol - a drawing which symbolised their struggle for freedom in captivity. After the Lodge stopped working in 1944, all these documents were placed in a metal box and buried in the vicinity of the barracks. Unfortunately in 1946, when survivors returned to locate the box, they found that the camp had been completely overturned and the box could not be found. This included losing the symbol of the Lodge, and disappointingly the drawing does not seem to have been recreated.

It is interesting to note that the Lodge was not the only clandestine activity in the camp. Catholic priests conducted secret Masses for inmates as well. Due to the close confinement of the prisoners and the need to avoid detection by the guards, these activities required the collaboration of other prisoners, whether Masons or Catholics or those of other affiliations.

Prisoners would need to co-operate in providing privacy for Lodge meetings or Masses, acting as lookouts to warn of approaching guards, and importantly, not informing on the activities going on. It is here that I believe the common link of predominantly Belgium and western European prisoners made a difference. The Nazis were particularly adept at exploiting political and nationality differences between prisoners in the camps (for example, granting favours to one group of prisoners over others) and creating distrust between prisoner groups. Such a strategy encouraged informing and prevented prisoners from banding together against the camp authorities. In Esterwegen, however, it would appear that a common humanity between the prisoners overcame any other differences. The activities of Lodge Liberty Cherie were not discovered by the guards, and I have not uncovered any evidence that the Masses conducted by the Catholic priests were likewise discovered.

In regards to the Masses conducted, it has been noted that a look-out would shout “22” and the nickname of a guard as a warning if a guard approached. The Mass would then stop and the prisoners would go about their normal business. It can be reasonably speculated that a similar warning would have been used to warn the Lodge of an approaching guard. Indeed, it may have been the same warning as survivors of the camp mention that Lodge meetings were held at the same time as the Masses.

Some references mention a Catholic priest acting as a look-out when the Lodge was working – but this has been disputed by one of the survivors who point out there were only two Catholic priests in Barrack 6, one of whom was blind. Additionally, the priests were most likely to have been conducting Mass at the same time when the Lodge was at work.

Differences in survivor recollections, however, should not overshadow the fact that collaboration and support would have been required by all prisoners in Hut 6 for Lodge meetings and Masses to occur. This spirit of co-operation and mutual support was emphasised by one of the imprisoned priests, Abbe Froidure, who stated, “The spirit of understanding and tolerance of non-practitioners allowed the Mass to be said aloud and partly sung”. I would also put forward the proposition that this spirit of understanding and tolerance was also extended to Lodge Liberty Cherie.

It is important at this juncture to emphasise the risks being taken by the members of Lodge Liberty Cherie in conducting a Lodge. After restrictions being placed on Freemasons taking positions in public life, the Nazis banned Masonic Lodges in Germany and confiscated their property in 1935. Special sections of the Nazi security agencies were established to deal with Freemasonry and this anti-Masonry policy was carried through to the occupied countries. It is estimated that 80,000 to 200,000 Freemasons may have been murdered by the Nazis. For existing inmates to establish a banned organisation within a prison, placing their already endangered lives at an even greater risk of execution, is a truly amazing act of courage.

As previously mentioned, one Brother, Fernand Erauw was initiated into the Lodge. The ceremony was based on the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite and was described by Luc Somerhausen as simple but meaningful. I consider this to be one of the most inspiring acts of the Lodge – that its members did not just meet in name only, but chose to conduct work as a regular Lodge. This is even more meaningful given that they had none of the furniture and symbols in a regular Lodge room to undertake the work, but had to impart the ritual and its meaning through their own experiences and thoughts.

Other meetings conducted were focussed on discussing specific themes, including discussions on:

- The symbol of the Great Architect of the Universe;
- The future of Belgium; and
- The position of women in Freemasonry.

The lifespan of the Lodge was, however, interrupted in early 1944 and it effectively stopped working. The main reason for this being that the members were split up and sent to other prisons and camps.

Their fates were as follows:

The Worshipful Master, Paul Hansen was moved to a prison in Essen in Germany and died during an allied bombing raid in March 1944.

Henry Story died in the Gross-Rosen concentration camp in December 1944.

Amadee Miclotte also died in Gross-Rosen concentration camp in February 1945

Jean De Schrijver was another Gross Rosen victim, dying in February 1945

Franz Rochat died in an Untermansfeld prison of tuberculosis and heart disease in January 1945

Guy Hannecart died in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in February 1945.

Jean Sugg, died in Buchenwald concentration camp on 6 May 1945, tragically as the camp was being liberated.

However, this is not the end of the story of the Lodge, as there were three survivors.

Joseph Degueldre survived detention but apparently remained fairly quiet on his Masonic activities. He died in 1981 and it was only towards the end of his life in 1975 that he related his experiences in Lodge Liberte Cherie.

Luc Somerhausen and Fernand Erauw were the other survivors. After being shipped from Esterwegen they met up by chance in Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1944. They became inseparable until the end of the war in April 1945. Both wrote of their experiences with Lodge Liberte Cherie and promoted the formal recognition of the Lodge by the Grand Orient of Belgium.

Another survivor also wrote extensively on the Lodge. Franz Bridoux was not a member of the Lodge at the time but was also imprisoned in Hut 6 of Esterwegen and was an eye-witness to its events. He became a Freemason after the war and wrote on the operation of the Lodge, including publishing his biography entitled "Lodge Liberte Cherie- The Incredible History Of a Lodge In A Concentration Camp".

At the end of the war, Luc Somerhausen appeared to waste no time in writing a report to the Grand Orient of Belgium, informing them of the establishment of the Lodge and seeking official recognition. He first wrote to the Grand Orient in August 1945, only 3 months after his liberation. Unfortunately, it appears that his original report has been lost. Fernand Erauw recounts that when the document was sought from the archives of the Grand Orient it could not be found. Somerhausen also appears to have not kept copies of his report.

In response to Somerhausen's report, The Grand Orient of Belgium administratively recognised Lodge Liberte Cherie in 1945. However, for some reason, the Lodge was not included on the register of the Grand Orient's established Lodges.

Very little in regards to the remembrance of Lodge Liberty Cherie subsequently occurred until 1975, when Somerhausen wrote a further article on the Lodge for the Grand Orient of Belgium, commemorating 30 years since the liberation of concentration and prison camps.

Somerhausen passed away in 1982 aged 79. It is at this point that Fernand Erauw took up the cause to seek more than administrative recognition of the Lodge.

In May 1986, following discussions with Erauw, other Belgian Freemasons took the initiative to request the Grand Orient of Belgium to rule on the official recognition of the Lodge. This occurred in October 1987 after a vote conducted by the Grand Orient. At this time, Lodge

Liberte Cherie was added to the list of established Lodges, without a number, but listed between Lodges 28 and 30.

It is unfortunate that Luc Somerhausen, as both the founding force and a primary keeper of the Lodge's memory, was not alive to observe this recognition.

In December 1989, a new list of Lodges was drawn up and Lodge Liberte Cherie was included as Lodge number 29. To an outside observer, this appears to add a measure of confusion as the Grand Orient now has three Lodges officially numbered as 29 – Lodge Liberte Cherie, the previously mentioned Lodge Obstinee, and Lodge Simon Stevin (which is the original holder of Lodge 29).

I do not have an official explanation for there being three Lodges numbered 29, but on examination, it would seem that the Lodges are recognised according to the date of establishment – for example, the oldest established Lodge on the register being number one. As Lodge Liberte Cherie was established in 1943, but not inserted into the list until 1987, it had to be retrospectively allocated its appropriate position between Lodge 28 and Lodge 30, along with other Lodges established in the same period.

Fernand Erauw lived until 1997 when he died at the age of 83. As the Lodge's only initiate and its ongoing supporter for recognition, it is fitting that he was able to witness its official listing in the Grand Orient's register.

The legacy of Lodge Liberty Cherie, however, did not end there.

In November 2004 a memorial was created by Belgium and German Freemasons and placed on the site of the cemetery of the Esterwegen camp. The memorial specifically commemorates Lodge Liberty Cherie as an example of freedom of thought and resistance to oppression.

It is appropriate, therefore, that the last words should go to Wim Rutten, the Grand Master of the Belgian Federation of Le Droit Humane who said during the dedication

“We are gathered here today in this Cemetery in Esterwegen, not to mourn, but to express free thoughts in public ....In memory of our brothers, human rights should never be forgotten”.