

Rudolstadt – Freedom is the air you breathe

NARRATOR

François Mitterrand was born in 1916 in Jarnac, in southwestern France. Much later, he would go down in history as the President of France. At just 23 years old, Mitterrand served as a *sergent-chef* (staff sergeant) on the French Maginot Line during World War II. Mitterrand was taken prisoner by the Germans just a few weeks after Hitler's Germany invaded France, on June 18, 1940.

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND

I was a member of Commando 1515 in the village of Schaala. It was a very diverse group. It was made up of people who were considered intellectuals, strangely enough: Spanish refugees, volunteers from the French army, Jews, priests, teachers, and so on. I have fond memories of that commando in Schaala; there was a spirit of brotherhood there.

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Despite the relatively decent conditions in Schaala, Mitterrand had only one thing on his mind from day one: escape.

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND

To escape! It was almost an obsession. I could not bear to be constrained by blind forces. Linking my fate to the vagaries of a war whose duration I could not influence went against one of my deepest convictions: that a door should always be open to the unpredictable. I suffered the loss of my freedom as if it were a physical ailment. Yes, it was an affliction of the body just as much as an affliction of the soul.

I believe that freedom is like the air we breathe. I had to breathe. I missed France.

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Mitterrand spent nearly six months preparing for his first escape. In a corridor through which he had to pass regularly, several large maps of Germany were hanging. Every time he passed by them, he copied one or two square centimeters of the maps onto a piece of paper. From these fragments, he created a road map showing him the way to the Swiss border. Freedom lay 620 kilometers away.

In the early morning of March 5, 1941, Mitterrand and a fellow prisoner named Xavier Leclerc slipped through a section of the barbed wire fence where the mesh gave way slightly—and vanished into the countryside.

The fact that the Germans did not immediately notice their absence was thanks to two men in the camp: the work supervisor Bernard Finifter and the interpreter Jean Munier. Both men ensured that the fugitives' absence went unnoticed until the evening. This gave the two escapees a twelve-hour head start—a precious window of opportunity.

Since Mitterrand and Leclerc hardly spoke any German, they tried to avoid encountering anyone along the way.

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND

For the first three days, we walked across fields and hills. This was no easy task, as the terrain was steep and the ground was drenched. We marched only at night and hid in the woods during the day. We lived like this for three weeks.

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When the men made the mistake of venturing out during the day, they were caught—just a few kilometers from the Swiss border.

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND

It was Sunday morning, and we passed by the church in Egesheim, a small village in southern Württemberg. A few parishioners were making their way there. At that point, we took a wrong turn. After two kilometers, we turned back and once again passed the same village and the same church.

Daybreak had come by then. The worshippers, who were just leaving the service, were puzzled by our back-and-forth. Their curiosity grew when they

saw us climbing the hill, covered with snow and leafless trees, that towered over the village. The villagers were seized by a commotion, the reason for which we understood. People armed with sticks gathered and began chasing us. It was an uneven struggle. We were tired; they were not. They quickly closed in on us. Xavier Leclerc began fighting with the first of the pursuers who was trying to stop him. He called out to me: "Wait, let's give it a try. We'll see. We're almost at the border; all is lost yet." In fact, though, we were lost indeed.

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Mitterrand and Leclerc were arrested and taken to the prison in the county seat of Speichingen. They were then sent to Stalag IXA, a main prisoner-of-war camp in Ziegenhain, northern Hesse. Because the two Frenchmen were viewed with suspicion, they were not assigned to work outside the camp. They spent their time behind double rows of barbed wire, guarded by watchtowers equipped with machine guns and searchlights.

Shortly thereafter, Mitterrand and two other prisoners devised a new escape plan together. After eight months of preparation, he succeeded in escaping for the second time. This time, Mitterrand made it as far as Metz in the annexed region of Lorraine. There, he was captured again.

Mitterrand was taken to a transit camp in nearby Boulay. The border with occupied France was only about 30 kilometers away. He decided to make a third escape attempt before he could be transferred further.

FRANÇOIS MITTERRAND

I figured I should seize the opportunity. That was all I could think about. In the end, I escaped without much preparation. After seven or eight days, during which I could find no other way out, I volunteered to carry packages from the prison camp to the adjacent German barracks. These barracks were only separated from the street by ordinary fences. We were dressed strangely, in red jackets and wooden shoes. Two prisoners were escorted by a guard with a rifle slung over his shoulder. On December 10, 1941, at seven o'clock in the morning, it was still pitch-dark. I ran ahead and climbed over the fence. The

warning call was given immediately; I heard screams and shouts, but I was already on the street.

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Mitterrand's third escape attempt would be his last. With the help of French civilians, he managed to return to occupied France. From there, he made his way to the unoccupied part of the country. He was free.

Decades later, in 1981, shortly before he was elected President of France for the first time, Mitterrand recalled his first attempt to escape from German captivity.

Accompanied by Willy Brandt, he drove along the entire route by car—about 600 kilometers. During the trip, he also visited Rudolstadt.

In 1996, a commemorative plaque was installed at the former porcelain factory in Schaala near Rudolstadt. It commemorated Mitterrand's presence there during the war, but omitted the fact that he was interned as a prisoner of war. It was not until 2020 that it was replaced by four new plaques, which contextualize his forced stay in Rudolstadt.