

Five-year old Oisín Carson, looks at the Christmas display window of Bradburys Bakery in the town of Athy, County Kildare, southern Ireland on Dec 14. (AP)

Britain

Johnson goes north

Labour's Corbyn apologizes for British election debacle

LONDON, Dec 15, (AP) — Labour Party leader **Jeremy Corbyn** apologized Sunday for this party's crushing defeat in the British general election but defended his campaign, which failed to resonate with the party's working-class base, as "one of hope rather than fear."

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party won 365 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons in Thursday's landslide election. Labour took 203 seats, its worst total since 1935.

Corbyn, 70, has pledged to stand down as the decimated party's leader and the maneuvering to replace him has begun.

"I'm sorry that we came up short and I take my responsibility for it," Corbyn wrote in a letter published in the left-leaning Sunday Mirror newspaper.

But he also said his party's ambitious, big-spending policy platform was popular and blamed the British media for its portrayal of Labour. Corbyn was widely criticized for his perceived tolerance of anti-Semitism in his inner circle.

After coming under fire from within his own party in the aftermath of the electoral carnage, Corbyn said he will step down after a "period of reflection." The process of choosing a replacement will begin early next year, but some have called for Corbyn's immediate resignation.

"I remain proud of the campaign we fought. I'm proud that no matter how low our opponents went, we refused to join them in the gutter," Corbyn wrote. "And I'm proud that our message was one of hope, rather than fear."

Successor

At least one potential successor came forward Sunday. Labour lawmaker Lisa Nandy told the BBC she is "seriously thinking about" running to become the party's next leader.

Corbyn's policies failed to energize voters weary of more than three years of political wrangling over Britain's divorce from the European Union. Johnson's campaign, meanwhile, revolved around three words: His pledge to "get Brexit done."

Johnson's 80-seat majority means he is well placed to complete the first part of that Brexit process by pushing through legislation in time for Britain to leave the EU by the Jan 31 deadline.

Then comes the hard part for his government — completing a comprehensive free trade deal with Brussels by the end of the year. A transition period built into Johnson's Brexit deal means that Britain will remain closely aligned to Brussels until the end of 2020. But if no trade pact is ready then, the United Kingdom could still face an economically damaging departure from the EU.

Senior Johnson ally Michael Gove declined Sunday to outline the Conservatives party's detailed plans for the coming week, when the new House of Commons meets for the first time on Tuesday.

"We will have an opportunity to vote on the withdrawal agreement bill in relatively short order, and then we will make sure ... that it passes before Jan 31," Gove told Sky News.

He said investing in Britain's cherished National Health Service would be the government's top domestic priority. The government's plans will be laid out next week in a speech by Queen Elizabeth II that is written by Johnson's government.

One thing that is not on Johnson's agenda is Scottish independence.

Nicola Sturgeon, whose Scottish National Party made strong gains in Thursday's election, has been pushing hard since then to get U.K. government approval for a second referendum on Scottish independence, something Johnson has ruled out.

Gove was emphatic when asked if Johnson's government would allow a second referendum five years after Scottish voters rejected independence.

"No," he told Sky.

Johnson pledged Saturday to repay the trust of voters in the working-class heartland of northern England who rejected the Labour Party and helped give him an 80-seat majority in Thursday's election.

Speaking to cheering supporters at a cricket club in Sedgefield — the constituency once held by Labour former prime minister Tony Blair — Johnson acknowledged the seismic shift that helped sweep him to victory.

"I know that people may have been breaking the voting habits of generations to vote for us," he said. "And I want the people of the northeast to know that we in the Conservative Party and I will repay your trust."



Corbyn

History

Deep appreciation for what soldiers did remains

Battle of the Bulge memories bond people

THIMISTER-CLERMONT, Belgium, Dec 15, (AP) — As a schoolboy three quarters of a century ago, Marcel Schmetz would regularly see open trucks rumble past to a makeshift American cemetery — filled with bodies, some headless, some limbless, blood seeping from the vehicles onto the roads that the US soldiers had given their lives to liberate.

Sometimes, Schmetz said, there were over 200 bodies a day, casualties of one of the bloodiest and most important battles in World War II: The Battle of the Bulge which started 75 years ago on Monday and effectively sealed the defeat of Nazi Germany.

"It gave me nightmares," Schmetz said. It also gave the 11-year-old the resolve that, one day, he would give something back.

"I had to do something," he said. Fast forward to 2019, when memories are fading and relations between Europe and the United States deteriorating.

There's a rambling house and converted warehouse in the bucolic, verdant hills that were once among the worst killing grounds of World War II. Zoom in to the living-room table, where Marcel, 86, sits with his wife, Mathilde, and one of the many WWII veterans that have shared coffee and cake — and often a nip of something stronger — with them, telling stories that span generations.

"Well, I don't share them very often," said Arthur Jacobson, who was just 20 when he fought in the Battle of the Bulge. "Once in a while, somebody is interested and I tell them a little bit."

Gained

In Marcel and Mathilde's home, which also serves as the Remember Museum 39-45, "a little bit" doesn't count. Soon the former Bazooka operator was sharing stories of friends lost, ties gained, all between a chuckle and a moist eye.

For M&M, as the couple is known to fans from across the United States, remembering has become a mission in life, since memory brings understanding and friendship. They are not alone. From the shores of Normandy, where the allies first landed on D-Day, to the forests deep in the Belgian Ardennes, there remains a deep appreciation for what the soldiers did.

Yet, those people live on the scar

tissue of war, where battlefields, memorials and cemeteries lie just a few miles away. That memory fades quickly the more one moves from the old front lines to European cities, where peace and prosperity has reigned for the best part of a century. The voices of the last witnesses of the war's fighting, mostly in their 90s now, are also becoming frailer by the day.

And with the growing questioning of trans-Atlantic ties and trust, the challenge to keep those bonds across the ocean intact has increased.

It makes Marcel and Mathilde's mission to connect all the more vital.

"Whoever is your president, whoever runs the show, the boys who were on the front lines, who still go out and fight for our freedoms, they need to know we appreciate them," Mathilde said.

Border

Lt Col Jim Moretti of the 171st Air Refueling Wing knows it well, and whenever he is in Germany on a mission he always makes the pilgrimage to Marcel and Mathilde just across the border.

The first time he thought to spend perhaps half an hour in their small museum. Then he found out that the hardware sinks into insignificance compared to the software of the place — the stories which are linked to every item on show.

"We ended up being there for 3, 4, 5 hours," he said.

Mathilde connects a face in a photograph to a veteran she met years ago and still remembers the story that makes it all relevant to the families of the fallen.

"It gives me goosebumps. It's sobering, humbling," Moretti said.

It became even better when he was able to be part of such a story himself.

Softspoken local policeman Serge Fafchamps had something troubling him for a while. Through his family, he obtained a fist-sized bible that had been left behind by Pvt Millard Weekley in a local hotel during the war, likely in the rush to reach the front line.

Like so many locals, Fafchamps is strongly aware of the sacrifices US soldiers made during WWII and wanted to make a gesture, however small, to show that in the 21st century it was not forgotten.

"It was, I think, the smallest of

things, it was a friendly act that I hoped would deliver some happiness to the family," he said.

Even though he got close to finding the family, there was still a missing link, and he long thought he had reached a dead end. Then, by chance, he learned of Marcel and Mathilde. Soon, they were on the case.

"I began to make these searches with the help of American friends," Mathilde said. "Then, finally, someone found the daughter," Paula Ferrell.

Airbase

But they still needed someone to deliver the bible, in person. So in walked Lt Col Moretti, who saw, as luck would have it, that Ferrell lived close to his airbase in Coraopolis, Pa.

"Of all the places in the US, this could not be true," Moretti said.

And one Sunday on the airbase, Ferrell and her family were handed the bible.

"It was an amazing idea. I am so thankful for that," Ferrell said of Fafchamps' kindness. Now the bible sits on a night table next to her bed, the handwriting on the opening page a palpable memory of a father who was always taciturn when it came to war stories and memories.

"He never talked about it. He was a man of few words," she said.

A new bond had been forged across the ocean. "If he was here, I'd give him a hug," she said of Fafchamps.

The policeman himself said it gave him "a sense of mission accomplished."

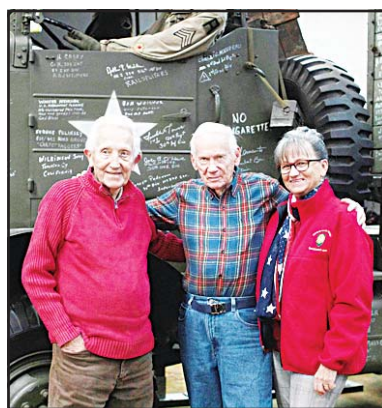
The mission though, is getting tougher by the day.

Perhaps the best part of the museum is a "Red Ball Express" army supply truck, on which countless veterans have written their names. Ever more though, the owners of the white-painted signatures are dying off. Just this week, Mathilde opened a letter informing her of yet another death.

Marcel, ever the optimist, is looking to a new generation of US troops, soldiers like Moretti, to carry on the torch.

"When I look at the young soldiers who are on US bases in Germany," he said, "it always reminds me of the arrival of the Americans in 1944," who had come to liberate him and his family.

"It is not to forget them. It is not to forget them, no?"



In this photo taken on Dec 10, US Battle of the Bulge veteran Arthur Jacobson (center), poses with Marcel and Mathilde Schmetz in the entrance to the Remember Museum 39-45 in Thimister-Clermont, Belgium. In the bucolic, verdant hills which were once among the worst killing grounds of WWII Marcel and Mathilde Schmetz have shared coffee and cake with countless veterans, telling stories that span generations. Veterans of the WWII Battle of the Bulge are heading back to mark, perhaps the greatest battle in US military history, when 75-years ago Hitler launched a desperate attack deep through the front lines in Belgium and Luxembourg to be thwarted by US forces. (AP)

Europe

Transport strike to worsen: There is to be no let up in the chaotic travel/computer conditions in France on Sunday and traffic mayhem is even set to worsen in the capital, Paris, as strikes spread to almost all metro subway lines, transport sources said on Saturday.

The RATP regional public transport authority said in a statement that all non-automated metro lines would be closed on one of the most important shopping days before the Christmas holiday.

In effect, 14 of the city's 16 lines will be out of service, with only lines 1 and 14 running as they are automatic, but they are likely to be totally saturated.

Key suburban services operated by the RATP will also be heavily affected, with no services on some lines and only partial services on others.

Only 60 percent of the 4,500 Paris buses are predicted to be on the road Sunday.

The impact for business and Christmas shopping is likely to be catastrophic, especially as December is the busiest month of the year.

In addition, some businesses have already been disrupted because of sometimes-violent "Yellow Vest" protests that have been taking place every Saturday for over a year.

Additionally, the SNCF rail operator indicated in a statement that only

25 percent of mainline, Intercity high-speed services would run on Sunday. Local and regional services will run at between 13 percent and 30 percent, depending on the region. (KUNA)

'Sardines' fill Roman square: Tens of thousands of members of the Italian anti-populist Sardines movement gathered in Rome on Saturday for their first national rally as people said disillusionment with traditional politics drew them to the fast-growing new group.

The movement born last month with a spontaneous rally in Bologna focuses on "inclusive" social laws and pro-migration and pro-environment measures. Its founders say they have no ambitions to become a political party but the Sardines have become a strong adversary for Matteo Salvini, the right-wing leader of the League, Italy's largest political party.

"We've filled the piazza. Mission accomplished," one founder, Mattia Santori, told the crowd. Protesters held sardine-shaped banners and chanted the traditional anti-fascist song "Bella Ciao."

"It's a spontaneous demonstration that aims to change this society, with all the consequences that this brings," said protester Daniela Mazzeo. (AP)

Austrian party expels Strache: Austria's far-right Freedom Party on Friday expelled **Heinz-Christian Strache**, its longtime leader and the country's former vice chancellor, months after a scandal

that ended the party's time in government.

The party said its local leadership in Vienna decided unanimously to throw out Strache, the Austria Press Agency reported. Local party chairman Dominik Nepp said Strache was removed for "behavior damaging to the party."

Strache was Austria's vice chancellor until May, when he became embroiled in a scandal that brought down the government. A video showing him offering favors to a purported Russian investor prompted conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to pull the plug on his coalition with the Freedom Party.

Strache, 50, later also came under fire for the alleged billing of private expenses to his party.

In an election in September, the party finished third with around 16.2% of the vote, 10 percentage points fewer than in Austria's 2017 election, as many supporters either switched to Kurz's center-right People's Party or stayed home.

Strache denied any wrongdoing but announced in early October that he was getting out of politics to protect his family and prevent splits in the party. His party suspended him the same day.

Strache's successor as party leader, Norbert Hofer, described his expulsion

Friday as "a relief to us" and said it allows the Freedom Party to look to the future.

Strache's wife, Philippa, was kicked out of the party in October after she accepted a seat won in the election. She now sits as an independent lawmaker in parliament.

A non-partisan interim government under Chancellor Brigitte Bierlein is currently running Austria. Kurz is in negotiations with the environmentalist Green party to form a new governing coalition. (AP)

Building explosion kills 1: One person died and 11 were injured in an explosion at an apartment building in eastern Germany on Friday, authorities said.



Salvini



Strache

The blast occurred in the apartment of a 78-year-old man, who police believe may have been the person who died.

Police said they found several containers of butane gas in the apartment in the town of Blankenburg, in a building that wasn't connected to the gas network, and that these may have caused the explosion. They initially said that military munitions had been found there, but later said they couldn't confirm that after a closer check and found no evidence of explosives.

Authorities initially thought as many as 25 people might have been injured in the explosion just before 9 a.m. but later lowered the number. Blankenburg Mayor Heiko Breithaupt said 11 people were injured, two of them seriously. A few rescue officers also were suffering from the effects of inhaling smoke.

Debris from the blast flew up to 60 meters (200 feet), police spokesman Uwe Becker told German broadcaster n-tv. Residents were evacuated from the building, which has 60 units.

The building is on the edge of Blankenburg, a town of about 20,000 people in the Harz mountains, west of Berlin. About 100 children at a nearby daycare center were taken to other facilities. None of them was hurt. (AP)