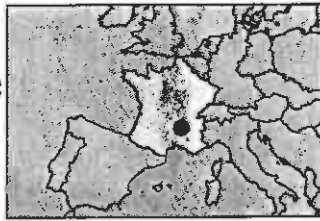


## SCENE

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France



# Marking a Blessed Conspiracy

*Almost all the local people were involved in saving 3,500 Jews during World War II, and no one said a word. They still don't like to.*

By ALEXANDRA TUTTLE

There was a time when Christian de Monbrison would break up his chocolate into small squares and store it in matchboxes. As a youth in Occupied France during World War II, he was keeping the candy for the day when he would be taken to prison—as, sooner or later, most Jews were. But Monbrison was fortunate: he spent the whole war in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, protected by the 3,000 residents of the Cévenne mountain village,

Yad Vashem gives to individuals who risked their lives to save Jews from Nazi persecution. The commemoration was also marked by the showing of a just-completed documentary, *Weapons of the Spirit*, which tells the story of what filmmaker Pierre Sauvage calls Chambon's "conspiracy of goodness." Sauvage, 46, was born in Chambon and as an infant was sheltered there, along with his parents, from Nazi persecution. "The resistance of the villagers showed just how strong people can be," he said during the ceremonies, "when they



Marie Brottes in 1942; with Sauvage and Hérítier today

**"Resistance to Nazi and Vichy authority came quite naturally to these people. They never agonized over it."**

which lies 140 km to the south of Vichy, and the surrounding plateau.

There is nothing in the closed faces of the villagers today to suggest the hamlet's extraordinary heroism almost a half-century ago. Inspired and organized by a Calvinist pastor named André Trocmé, the residents of the area saved the lives of some 3,500 Jews during the war. Mordecai Paldiel of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, says the village was unique in that "almost all the people of the plateau were involved in saving these Jews, and no one said a word."

In mid-October a delegation from Israel arrived in Chambon to award 40 villagers the Medal of Righteousness, which

know who they are and believe in their traditions."

On street corners, at cafés and in the churchyard after the Sunday service, surprises turned up in the crowd of faces that had softened and filled out with age. Recalled Monbrison: "I eventually gave my chocolate to a classmate as he was being led away following a Gestapo raid on the village in 1943. I thought he had died long ago. But I ran into him today, near the school where we first met." A number of the refugees were returning for the first time; others had been back before to see those who had sheltered them. "Many of these people must have thought we flew away like birds from a tree and forgot the welcome we found here," said Joseph At-

las, a Paris engineer who spent three years in Chambon. "Ours is a culture that never forgets. But the horror of the war had to be digested before we could return to our memories."

In the auditorium of the village hall, a group of historians, many of them too young to remember the Occupation, discussed exactly how many Jews were saved at Chambon. They also debated the suggestion in the documentary that a German officer in the area may have known of the quiet resistance of the Protestant villagers and tolerated it.

At the center of the celebration was the Cévenol School, which was built in 1938 to accommodate 14 local children. Its student body soon expanded, however, with the arrival of 220 Jewish refugees fleeing from the internment camps to the south. The children, like their parents and other adults, were welcomed without hesitation. They were housed on farms or in hotels and were hidden in the countryside whenever the Germans came through. "As soon as the soldiers left, we would go into the forest and sing a song," remembers August Bohny, 71, who ran a boardinghouse for Jewish students. "When they heard that song, the Jews knew it was safe to come home." Whenever possible, the refugees were sent via a well-organized underground network to safety in Switzerland or Spain.

In an ecumenical service held just before the awards ceremony, the local pastor, Alain Arnoux, watched Jews and Protestants file out of his church. "They have been resisting injustice for centuries," he said of the Huguenot tradition of his parishioners. "Resistance to Nazi and Vichy authority came quite naturally to these people. They never agonized over it."

In writing about Nazi war crimes, Hannah Arendt remarked upon the banality of evil. The people of Chambon are a reminder that goodness, as well, can be quite ordinary, if not exactly banal. They reacted to the situation so instinctively that, in the words of one old farmer, "we don't know what all the fuss is about." After the showing of the documentary, the Chambonnais filed quietly out of the auditorium, while the former refugees stopped to talk to Sauvage. At the Yad Vashem ceremony, Marie Brottes, who had scouted the area for people willing to provide sanctuary, and Henri Hérítier, who had sheltered Sauvage's parents and others on his farm, walked reluctantly onto the podium to receive their medals. Ely Ben-Gal, a historian with the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, apologized to the townspeople for "the violence we do in forcing such recognition upon you."

As if in reply, an old villager explained to a visitor, "We didn't protect the Jews because we were moral or heroic people. We helped them because it was the human thing to do." Then, characteristically, he declined to give his name. ■

## During World War II

# Chambon: The Town That Hid Jews From Nazis

By Jeffrey Robinson

**LE CHAMBON-SUR-LIGNON, France, June 18 (IHT)** — The village is not necessarily pretty. There is nothing quaint about it. It is grey.

Nor is it easy to get to. Trains stop at Valence, 72 kilometers east, but there are only two buses a day from Valence; the trip takes three hours. Even by car, it takes nearly two, because the roads through the forests of the Haute Loire are never straight for more than 100 yards.

About 3,000 people live here, in the fresh air of 1,000 meters — and they say they suffer through harsh winters to earn their livelihood in the three good-weather months when children's camps and convalescent homes and hotels are filled.

Until yesterday, if you happened this way, you probably never would have known that the Chambonnais are heroes — that more than 35 years after the war, thousands of Jews are alive because the community risked its lives to save theirs.

It is a Protestant village in the middle of a staunchly Catholic country. And, because French Protestants remember how their ancestors suffered, when the time came to help the Jews escape the atrocities of the Third Reich and the anti-Semitism manifested in the Vichy government, they did whatever they had to do.

### 'A Duty'

"What happened here," says Magda Trocme, widow of Andre Trocme, the wartime Protestant pastor here, "is nothing more complicated than Christians believing that to save a life is a duty. We never thought of ourselves as heroes when we hid the Jews. We thought of ourselves as people who were doing what we had to do because it was right to do."

Jewish children and adults were taken into the daily life of the village. They were hidden when the Germans came looking; they were given false identity cards, and names like Cohen were changed to Colin.

It is impossible to know just how many Jewish refugees came through the village, some to stay



Andre Trocme (right), two aides in internment camp in 1943.

couldn't have happened in any other part of France, because it didn't happen anywhere else. These people took us in because as Protestants they understood what it meant to suffer as a minority. We were all brothers."

According to Hallie, at one point, when Trocme was approached by officials who asked him about the Jews hiding in the village, he responded, "We don't know what a Jew is. We know only men." Another time, asked for a list of names of Jews in the village, he said, "Even if I had such a list, I would not pass it on to you. These people have come here seeking aid and protection . . . I am their pastor, their shepherd. It is not the role of the shepherd to betray the sheep confided in his keeping."

Trocme was aware that it wasn't happening anywhere else in the nation. At one point, Hallie quotes him as writing, "It is humiliating to Europe that such things [Nazi atrocities] can happen and that we the French cannot act against such barbaric deeds that come from a time we once believed was past. The Christian church should drop

to its knees and beg pardon of God for its present incapacity and cowardice."

As the plaque was unveiled yesterday, and as all sorts of people made all sorts of speeches, Mrs. Trocme said she had just read the Hallie book, and felt some clarifications should be made.

"It seems the Trocme family is being given so much credit. But so many other people here did as much. What happened here just couldn't have happened unless everybody worked together to make it happen. Again, we never thought of our acts as anything special. It was a natural act on our part, not something we considered heroic."

### Absentees

That's when someone quietly remarked that not everyone was here today. A lot of the old people who, as young people 35 years ago had taken refugees into their homes, stayed away. They preferred, it seemed, to wait for the crowds to go away before they came to see the plaque. It was, as one man pointed out, typical of the humility of these people.

At the same time, some high

school students took the opportunity to set up a display nearby, hoping to raise interest in the plight of today's refugees — South Americans, Africans, the boat people of Southeast Asia. None of the youngsters seemed to know exactly what happened here more than 35 years ago.

Hallie's book will not be out in French for some time, so these teenagers have relied on what little their grandparents have told them; according to the version they believed, the refuge here of the Jews had something to do with the fact that the local resistance was stronger than the German army, so that the Jews were safe. None of the youngsters had any idea how Andre Trocme and his followers had managed outright defiance, making this particular village unique.

But now there is a plaque. It is for them, because they should know.

It is also for someone who happens to be passing through, someone who never heard of the village and who is driving slowly enough to spot the plaque and is curious enough to stop.

And if that someone is the sort who might once have wondered where, during all those years of the French version of the Holocaust, did goodness hide, the plaque will serve to remind him, at least, that goodness was hiding right here.

# Heroic French Village Saluted for Aid to Jews

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

The French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where residents helped thousands of Jews escape from Nazi persecution during World War II, was honored yesterday at commencement exercises of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

At a ceremony of music, speeches and prayer in Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue, Prof. Bernard Galland represented the people of Le Chambon in accepting the college's Roger E. Joseph Prize. The prize included \$10,000 in cash to help build a historical museum in the village.

In awarding the prize, Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, president of the college, said, "In a remarkable example of courage and compassion, the people of Le Chambon made the village a sanctuary for thousands of frightened, weary Jewish refugees."

## 'Created Safe Houses'

"They provided shelter in their homes and farms," he said. "They provided food and clothing, false identity papers and ration cards. They created safe houses and hiding places for children. They shepherded groups across the mountains to safety in Switzerland. They did all this despite harassment by Vichy police and threats from the Gestapo and despite the fate that befell some of them."

Professor Galland, a Protestant minister who teaches history and geography at College Cevenol, a private school in Le Chambon, responded: "The news of this prize came as a great surprise. Who would think of getting recognition for doing the natural thing? People came in need of help, and of course they found homes where they could stay, places to hide, and help when necessary in getting across the border to freedom."

The Hebrew Union College celebrated the graduation yesterday of

its centennial rabbinical class. In 1883, four rabbis were ordained at the college in Cincinnati, where it was founded. Yesterday, 13 men and 8 women were ordained as rabbis, and 5 women and 2 men were invested as cantors.

The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the major institute of study for the Reform Jewish movement in the United States, gives the Joseph Prize to an individual or group "whose conduct or work encourages the ideas which are the foundation of our religious faith," Dr. Gottschalk said.

## 1981 Award in Absentia

Burton M. Joseph created the award with his sister, Betty Greenberg, in honor of their brother, the late Roger E. Joseph, a lawyer stricken with polio who was active in Jewish groups.

A previous Joseph Prize was presented to Victor Kugler, who gave sanctuary to Anne Frank and her family in the Netherlands until they were captured by the Nazis. In 1981 the award was given in absentia to Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews in Hungary during World War II and then disappeared in the Soviet Union late in the war.

The story of Le Chambon, a village of 2,000 residents in south-central France, was recounted in a 1979 book, "Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed," by Philip Hailie.

## Led by Local Pastor

For four years, the village — historically a refuge for French Protestants who were often victims of religious persecution by France's Catholic majority — helped French Jews fleeing the Nazi-dominated Vichy Government's anti-Semitic practices and deportations. An estimated 5,000 Jews were helped by the villagers, Mr. Galland said.



The New York Times / Fred R. Conrad

Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, left, president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, speaking with Prof. Bernard Galland, who represented the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, after ceremony.

The village's efforts were led by the local pastor, André Trocmé, and his wife, Magda. Eventually, the pastor was placed in a detention camp by the Vichy Government because of his activities, and after his release he was forced to remain in hiding until the war's end.

His nephew, Daniel Trocmé, was executed by the Nazis at the Malyanek camp, along with a number of

French Jewish children who had been seized in a raid in Le Chambon. In all, about 90,000 French Jews out of a total population of 300,000 were deported to Nazi death camps during the war, Dr. Gottschalk said.

"What is remarkable about the story of Le Chambon," said Burton Joseph, "is that it is the story of ordinary people."

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