

Le Chambon

If Auschwitz and the other Nazi concentration camps were the midnight hour of human evil in the twentieth century, most responses at the time to the horror were a tragic exercise in turning a blind eye and passing by on the other side of the street. Among the rare beacons of light were the extraordinarily courageous citizens of Le Chambon, a small town of three thousand located in German-occupied Southern France. These brave townspeople sheltered and saved more than five thousand Jewish children otherwise bound for the death camps.

What emerges in this moving saga is the secret of the stubborn courage of the Chambonnais—character. They were Huguenots (French Protestants living in a dominantly Catholic country), fired by their faith and three hundred years of persecution following the Edict of Nantes. Certainly they were led, taught, and encouraged by their indomitable pastor, André Trocmé, and his equally heroic wife, Magda. But what comes across repeatedly as Philip Hallie investigates the story is the down-to-earth, no-nonsense quality of their faith. Their faith shaped their character, and their character counted—they simply did what had to be done.

*Philip Hallie (1922–1994) was a professor of philosophy who taught at Wesleyan University. The following excerpt from his *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* is an inspiring reminder of the importance of the character of ordinary people in an extraordinary time.*

Tears of Moral Praise

"I was trying to be 'objective' about my studies, when I was succeeding in being indifferent to both the victimizers and the victims of these cruel relationships. I became cold; I became another monster who could look upon the maiming of a child with an indifferent eye. . . .

"And then one gray April afternoon I found a brief article on the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. I shall not analyse here the tears of amazement and gladness and release from despair—in short, of joy—that I shed when I first read that story. Tears themselves interest me greatly—but not the tears of melancholy hindsight and existential despair; rather the tears of awe you experience when the realization of an ideal suddenly appears before your very eyes or thunders inside your mind; these tears interest me.

"And one of the reasons I wept at the first reading about Le Chambon in those brief, inaccurate pages, was that I had discovered an embodiment of goodness in opposition to cruelty. I had discovered in the flesh and blood of history, in people with definite names in a definite place at a definite time in the nightmare of history, what no classical or religious ethicist could deny was goodness."

Philip Hallie

The Secret Lies in the People

ONE EVENING, ROGER Darcissac, now the official historian of Le Chambon, saw a television program that pictured the liquid-crystal Lignon [River] racing through Le Chambon, the thick pine forests in and around the village, and the vast mountains and extinct volcanoes surrounding it. At the end of the program, the announcer mentioned the wartime activities in the commune, and then ended with the sentence: "You must not forget Le Chambon." A few weeks after the program, Darcissac and I were eating in the sleepy village of Le Mazet. Suddenly, in his impetuous way, he seized my arm and said, "You know, they should not have spent so much time on the scenery. The reason people should remember Le Chambon lies in the people there. Ah! During those years they were completely wonderful. . . ."

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We Know Only Men

And then it happened. A dozen of the older students of the Cévenol School, some of them future theologians, walked up to the handsome Lamirand [The Minister of Youth for Vichy France], handed him a written document, and begged for an acknowledgment of it on the spot. In his notes Trocmé quotes the message:

Mr. Minister:

We have learned of the frightening scenes which took place three weeks ago in Paris, where the French police, on orders of the occupying power, arrested in their homes all the Jewish families in Paris to hold them in the Vel d'Hiv. The fathers were torn from their families and sent to Germany. The children torn from their mothers, who underwent the same fate as their husbands. Knowing by experience that the decrees of the occupying power are, with brief delay, imposed on Unoccupied France, where they are presented as spontaneous decisions of the head of the French government, we are afraid that the measures of deportation of the Jews will soon be applied in the Southern Zone.

We feel obliged to tell you that there are among us a certain number of Jews. But, we make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teaching.

If our comrades, whose only fault is to be born in another religion, received the order to let themselves be deported, or even examined, they would disobey the orders received, and we would try to hide them as best we could.

Black and white. The manoeuvring between the two obligations to be "subject to the governing authorities" and to "love your neighbour as yourself" was past. The moment had come for the people of Le Chambon to pass their ethical judgment publicly, unequivocally, but without hatred or violence.

At last, the colourful Lamirand wilted and turned pale, *chic* as he had been, and said, "These questions are not my affair. Speak to the prefect of your department." And he hurried into his auto, away from these smouldering-eyed Protestants.

Prefect Bach was angry, and he knew exactly where to turn to express his

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anger. Instead of addressing the young men, he said, "Pastor Trocmé, this day should be a day of national harmony. You sow division."

Trocmé did not shirk the responsibility of having planned the confrontation. He said, "It cannot be a question of national harmony when our brothers are threatened with deportation."

Prefect Bach replied, "It is true that I have already received orders and that I shall put them into effect. Foreign Jews who live in the Haute-Loire are not your brothers. They do not belong to your church, nor to your country! Besides, it is not a question of deportation."

Trocmé asked, "What, then, is it a question of?"

"My information comes from the marshal himself. And the marshal does not lie! The Führer is an intelligent man. Just as the English have created a Zionist centre in Palestine, the Führer has ordered the regrouping of all European Jews in Poland. There they will have land and houses. They will lead a life that is suitable for them, and they will cease to corrupt the West. In a few days my people will come to examine the Jews living in Le Chambon."

Trocmé replied, "We do not know what a Jew is. We know only men."

Then, at this moment of full awareness on the part of both sides, the prefect tried to impale Trocmé and Le Chambon on the other horn of the dilemma that was draining the power of the French to tell right from wrong: now that the mental fog of doubt was gone, he threatened Trocmé, even as those lucid ones in the Occupied Zone were being threatened by sheer force. "Monsieur Trocmé," he said deliberately, "you would do well to take care. If you are not prudent, it is you whom I shall be obliged to have deported. To the good listener, warning." And the prefect left.

At this time, the existence of extermination camps such as Auschwitz and Maidanek, where millions of Jews and others were being humiliated, tortured, and killed, was unknown to the people of Le Chambon, including Trocmé. As a matter of fact, the extermination of the Jews (as well as of the Gypsies) was going on, but all Trocmé and the people of Le Chambon knew was that "it is evil to deliver a brother who has entrusted himself to us. That we would not consent to."

Trocmé did not know much beyond this, but he *realized* what was at stake. The *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog) policy of the Germans regarding the death camps was successful. And part of the fog the Nazis had created around those camps were stories like that of a Polish Zionist state for Jews. As Trocmé accurately put it in his notes, "Many French let themselves be deceived in 1942."

This is a psychologically penetrating statement. The Chambonnais under Trocmé, on the other hand, would not let themselves be deceived. Trocmé knew enough about Nazism and cared enough about its victims to realize that what the Germans were doing—whatever it was—was not for the good of the Jews. Perhaps he did not *know* more about Nazism than many other Frenchmen—Hitler's anti-Semitism was no secret in Europe—but he *cared* enough about its victims to realize what giving the Jews to the Germans meant for the Jews. That caring had to do in

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part with Saint John's commandment to love one another, but it also had to do with stubbornness, if you will, fortitude, a refusal to abjure—this crucial word again—a commitment. The Chambonnais were committed to sheltering the Jews. They would abide by that commitment despite all threats from the governing authorities. . . .

The Pastor Under Arrest

The pastor and his wife had been invited to dinner by parishioners, the Giberts. After Trocmé had been home for about a half hour, the daughter of the Giberts came to remind them of the dinner engagement (they often forgot such invitations). When she entered the dining room, she saw the police arresting her pastor. She turned and rushed out of the house. In a little while, not only her parents but many of the other villagers in this tightly knit Huguenot community knew that André Trocmé had been arrested.

After the pastor and his wife rejoined the police in the dining room, Magda Trocmé invited the two policemen to have dinner with them. Later, friends would say to her, "How could you bring yourself to sit down to eat with these men who were there to take your husband away, perhaps to his death? How could you be so forgiving, so decent to them?"

To such questions she always gave the same answer: "What are you talking about? It was dinnertime; they were standing in my way; we were all hungry. The food was ready. What do you mean by such foolish words as 'forgiving' and 'decent'?"

Magda Trocmé was not the only citizen of Le Chambon who scoffed at words that express moral praise. In almost every interview I had with a Chambonnais or a Chambonnaise there came a moment when he or she pulled back from me but looked firmly into my eyes and said, "How can you call us 'good'? We were doing what had to be done. Who else could help them? And what has all this to do with goodness? Things had to be done, that's all, and we happened to be there to do them. You must understand that it was the most natural thing in the world to help these people."

Often moral praise is an interpretation, a grid laid upon the facts by an outsider's hand. An outsider may see goodness or decency as something "in" an action, as an integral part of, say, Magda's invitation to the police to join them at the big dining table, but the doer of the deed, who often acts on the spur of the moment, sees nothing "moral" or "ethical" in that deed. For Magda Trocmé and most of the other people of Le Chambon, words of moral praise are like a slightly uncomfortable wreath laid upon a head by a kind but alien hand.

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Questions:

1. What does the letter to the Minister of Youth reveal about how closely these student writers followed public affairs? In appealing to the prefect directly about the Jews, were the students being naïve or courageous? What rationale do they give for their plan of action?
2. What does the prefect say in response to the students' letter? Where does he go to place blame? Why? Prefect Bach accuses Trocmé of divisiveness. Who are and are not the "brothers" of the people of Le Chambon according to the prefect? According to Trocmé?
3. When Trocmé does not fall for the prefect's rhetoric about Hitler's good intentions, what other tactic does the prefect try? Why does this tactic fail, especially given the Chambonnais' background of persecution as Huguenots?
4. What do you think of Trocmé's statement: "Many French let themselves be deceived . . ."? What do his words suggest is the real difference between those who fell for the "Night and Fog" policy of the Germans and those who didn't?
5. When the police come to arrest the pastor, his wife Magda invites them to dinner. What is your first reaction to this gesture? What was Magda's response to those who considered her actions virtuous or noble? Why do you think it was so natural a response for this woman to care for her neighbours?
6. For Magda and most other people of Le Chambon, Hallie says moral praise was like a "slightly uncomfortable wreath." What does he mean by this? In interviews with Hallie, how did the Chambonnais explain their sheltering of the Jews? How does their attitude differ from the modern use of "character" and "charitable works" as self-promotion for political candidates, celebrities, and other public figures?
7. How can institutions achieve this "just do what is right" ethos in today's multicultural world?
8. In the box "Tears of Moral Praise," Philip Hallie describes his depression in researching the Holocaust. What was the effect when he stumbled across the story of Le Chambon? Why do you think his response was so intense? Which are more powerful—stories of human evil or human goodness? When have you had a similar experience encountering "goodness"?
9. What specific elements add up to the extraordinary heroism of the townsfolk of Le Chambon?

Always at Least Two Perspectives

"I have read your book, and I believe that you mushy-minded moralists should be awakened to the facts. Nothing happened in Le Chambon, nothing of any importance whatsoever.

"The Holocaust, dear Professor, was like a geological event, like an earthquake. No person could start it; no person could change it; and no person could end it. And no small group of persons could do so either. It was the armies and the nations that performed actions that counted. Individuals did nothing. You sentimentalists have got to learn that the great masses and big political ideals make the difference. Your people and the people they saved simply do not exist . . ."

letter from Massachusetts to Philip Hallie

received a few months after the publication of *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*

"Never was there a question that the Chambonnais would not share all they had with us, meagre as it was. One Chambonnais once told me that even if there was less, they still would want more for us. . . . It was indeed a very different attitude from the one in Switzerland, which while saving us also resented us so much.

"If today we are not bitter people like most survivors it can only be due to the fact that we met people like the people of Le Chambon, who showed us simply that life can be different, that there are people who care, that people can live together and even risk their own lives for their fellow man."

Jewish girl rescued by the Chambonnais