

READING

Le Chambon: A Village Takes a Stand

All over Europe, a small number of individuals tried to save Jews. But in Le Chambon, a village in southern France, the entire community became involved in rescue. Le Chambon was a Protestant village in a predominantly Roman Catholic region, which before and even during the war was a center of tourism. Now its residents turned their tiny mountain village into a hiding place for Jews from every part of Europe. Between 1940 and 1944, Le Chambon and other nearby villages provided refuge for more than 5,000 people fleeing Nazi persecution, about 3,500 of whom were Jews.¹ Magda Trocmé, the wife of the local minister, explained how it began.

Those of us who received the first Jews did what we thought had to be done—nothing more complicated. It was not decided from one day to the next what we would have to do. There were many people in the village who needed help. How could we refuse them? A person doesn't sit down and say I'm going to do this and this and that. We had no time to think. When a problem came, we had to solve it immediately. Sometimes people ask me, "How did you make a decision?" There was no decision to make. The issue was: Do you think we are all brothers or not? Do you think it is unjust to turn in the Jews or not? Then let us try to help!²

¹ "Le Chambon-sur-Lignon," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified January 2016, accessed May 17, 2016.

² Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers, *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 102. Reprinted by permission from New York University Press



La Guespy Children's Home

Jews living at a children's home in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France, with their director, Juliette Usach, 1941. The people of Le Chambon and surrounding villages hid nearly 5,000 people fleeing Nazi occupation.

CREDIT: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Jack Lewin

Almost everyone in the community of 5,000 took part in the effort. Even the children were involved. When a Nazi official tried to organize a Hitler Youth camp in the village, the students

told him that they “make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to Gospel teaching.”³

The majority of the Jewish refugees were children. The villagers provided them with food, shelter, and fake identity papers. They also made sure that those they sheltered were involved as much as possible in the life of the town, in part to avoid arousing suspicion from other visitors. Whenever residents of Le Chambon learned of an upcoming police raid, they hid those they were protecting in the surrounding countryside. The values of the village were perhaps expressed best by its minister, André Trocmé, who concluded his sermons with the words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Go practice it.”⁴

In February 1943, the police arrested André Trocmé and his assistant, Edouard Theis. Although they were released after 28 days, the Gestapo continued to monitor their activities. In summer 1943, the Gestapo offered a reward for André Trocmé’s capture, forcing him into hiding for ten months. Many knew where he was, but no one turned him in.⁵

Historian Marianne Ruel Robins notes:

The fact that an entire community participated (or watched and said nothing) is remarkable indeed. The silence observed by the people of the Plateau was an important condition for its success, not simply because it sheltered Jews from external threats, but also because it minimized internal dissent. To refrain from talking meant that one would not shame one’s neighbor for his lack of participation; it also meant that different rationales for behavior would not conflict with another, be they commitment to pacifism, nationalism, Christian charity or judeophilia. Silence did not necessarily imply that everyone implicitly agreed on the reasons for hiding Jews, but rather that most people came to agree that something ought to be done.⁶

The rescuers of Le Chambon also drew support from people in other places. There was an extensive network of sympathizers throughout the region who could be called upon for help with communication and organization. Jewish rescue organizations brought Jewish children to the area for protection. Church groups, both Protestant and Catholic, helped fund their efforts. So did the World Council of Churches. Also, a group known as the Cimade led hundreds of Jews across the Alps to safety in Switzerland.

³ Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979), 102.

⁴ Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979), 170.

⁵ “Le Chambon-sur-Lignon,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁶ Marianne Ruel Robins, “A Grey Site of Memory: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and Protestant Exceptionalism on the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon,” *Church History* 82, no. 2 (2013).

When Magda Trocmé reflected on her choices years after the war, she said, “When people read this story, I want them to know that I tried to open my door. I tried to tell people, ‘Come in, come in.’ In the end I would like to say to people, ‘Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances where you will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision on your own, not about other people but about yourself.’ I would not say more.”⁷

⁷ Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers, *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 107. Reproduced by permission from New York University Press.

Connection Questions

1. Draw an identity chart for the people of Le Chambon. What parts of their identity might the people of Le Chambon have drawn upon when they chose to act?
2. What do you think allowed the people of Le Chambon to act successfully and decisively to help Jews even though, as Magda Trocmé says, they had “no time to think”? Compare Trocmé’s description of having “no time to think” to that of the professor in the reading **No Time to Think**. He, too, says he had no time to think, but his response was very different from Trocmé’s. How do you account for that difference?
3. In the reading, historian Marianne Ruel Robins mentions other factors that may have influenced individual villagers’ choices to participate in the rescue of Jews, besides exceptional moral behavior. What were some of those reasons? Do they make the villagers’ actions any less admirable?
4. Elie Wiesel has said, “Let us not forget, after all, that there is always a moment when the moral choice is made. Often because of one story or one book or one person, we are able to make a different choice, a choice for humanity, for life. And so we must know these good people who helped Jews during the Holocaust. We must learn from them, and in gratitude and hope, we must remember them.” Why do you think Wiesel thinks we should remember these stories? What were the stories that might have inspired the people of Le Chambon to act? What stories do you know and value that could inspire you to act in a difficult time?