

READING:

The following reading is from The Eye of the Hurricane, a collection of essays on ethics by Philip Hallie. Philip Hallie was a philosopher at Wesleyan University for thirty-two years. During W.W.II Hallie served in the U.S. Army.

As I reached out toward the wall on that cool evening my hand fell on a book with some essays about the Resistance. The book happened to open on an essay called “Chambon-sur-Lignon.” I had been trained by the army to know the centers of the French Resistance, and since the name of this town had never appeared in my information sheets, I was going to turn the page. The village could not have been important, or the story was a lie or an exaggeration. The army knew the centers of resistance in France. But by the time I had glanced at a few paragraphs I knew why I had not heard about the town: it was a center for nonviolent resistance against the Nazis, and the army had taught me only about violent resistance.

When I got to the bottom of the third page of the article my cheeks started itching, and when I reached up to scratch them I found that they were covered with tears. And not just a few tears — my cheeks were awash with them.

For a moment I thought that the tears came from my despair and my near insanity. Then I realized that the itching had started when I began to read a story about two boxy khaki-colored buses coming into the gray granite village square of a French mountain village on a Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1942. The buses had twenty policemen in them;

they had come to this little village perched on a high plateau in order to pick up the Jews whom the Protestant villagers had been sheltering. The policemen were from Vichy the center of the French puppet government that was trying to live cozily with the German conquerors and occupiers of France.

The two buses parked in the wide village square, and the police captain called on the head minister of the village and demanded that he give him a list of all the Jews in the village. The Huguenot pastor refused. Then the police captain ordered the minister to sign an official poster that told all the Jews in the village to turn themselves in to the police in order to avoid risking the lives of the families who had been sheltering them. According to the eighteenth article of the armistice between France and the conquering Germans, the French had to “surrender on demand” any foreign refugees. Again the minister refused. The police chief warned the pastor that if he did not sign the poster within twenty-four hours, he and his fellow minister would be arrested — by noon of the next day, Sunday

The police slept in their buses all Saturday night, and on Sunday morning they raided the houses of the village looking for Jews. But during the night the Jews had been evacuated into the woods around Le Chambon, and the police could find only one Jew to put in their big buses. While he sat in the bus the villagers shoved gifts — mainly food — through the window by his seat. Soon there was a heap of gifts beside him. Later the buses left, with the one prisoner and his precious gifts.

On Monday morning he was released, because he had documents to prove that half of his grandparents were non-Jewish. At this time being only half Jewish could exempt people from arrest. He reentered the village square, pulling a double wagon with the gifts on it. As soon as he entered the square the villagers appeared and stood around him greeting him with affection. He tried to give back the food the poverty-stricken villagers had given him, but they refused to accept it. They felt he had earned it by his suffering. And they rejoiced in his return to the safest place in France for refugees. They sang him a song of greeting.

TO HELP & NOT TO HARM: A TALE OF GOOD & EVIL

Do you ever wonder what was happening in the world at the time you were born? In our earliest years our horizons are very limited - we're focused on play and family - not on what's going on in the world.

This story is one thing that was taking place at the time I was born - in 1941.

THE VILLAGE OF LE CHAMBON

It takes place in France, in south-central France, in a village called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, population (in '41) less than a 1,000. The village of Le Chambon is a farming village, on a pine-studded plateau, in the mountains of south-central France. It's uniqueness is that since the 16th century it has been a stronghold of French Protestantism. From time to time in course of French history French Protestants have been the target of persecutions and forced conversions by France's Catholic majority. Since the only access to Le Chambon is through mountain passes, the Chambonnais were able to resist. The region remains a Protestant enclave, and a preferred summer retreat of France's Protestant families. (André Gide and Albert Camus used to vacation in the area. In 1942 Albert Camus spent about a year in the region of Le Chambon, writing his novel, The Plague.)

The citizens of Le Chambon, back around the time I was born, were busy saving the lives of thousands of refugees. They did this between the years of 1940 and 1944. The first refugees to find their way to Le Chambon (in 1940) were refugees from fascism in Spain. Next came people from the east, Germans and Austrians, opposed to Nazism. Last came Jewish refugees, especially lots of Jewish children. Le Chambon welcomed them all, provided them hospitality, and guided most to safety in neutral Switzerland. The women of the village would sneak their guests through the surrounding mountain passes to safety. Some refugees stayed on in Le Chambon. The village received financial help from outside — from the Quakers, the Salvation Army, the Congregational Church in the U.S. and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

By 1942 the village of Le Chambon had become an important way station on what was an underground railway. Refugees would arrive in Le Chambon on the afternoon train, receive false identity papers and ration cards, and be quickly distributed to boardinghouses and farms in the area. By an agreement between the town's Pastors and the Quakers, Le Chambon came to specialize in the long-term housing of refugee children (children whose parents had been deported to the death camps.)

The Chambonnais paid a price for helping refugees. The village was repeatedly raided first by the Vichy police and later by the Gestapo. Most of the time the villagers received anonymous advance warning of these raids and the refugees had time to hide in the surrounding woods. But over the years some villagers were arrested, imprisoned, detained, deported, and some were killed. Some children were captured and taken to death camps.

WEAPONS OF THE SPIRIT

The Chambonnais conducted their resistance with what their local Pastor called "*weapons of the Spirit,*" which included secrecy and deception.

The citizens of Le Chambon not only gave sanctuary to Jews, they also engaged in other acts of defiance. They resisted by refusing to salute the Vichy flag of France or the German flag. The Chambonnais also refused to take oaths to the French chief of state, Marshal Pétain.

ANDRÉ AND MAGDA TROCMÉ

The pastor of the town, André Trocmé, was nicknamed “the soul of Le Chambon.” He, his wife, Magda, and another Protestant minister, Edouard Theis, inspired the entire village to let “goodness break out” in a time of horrible human cruelty and fear.

But the goodness that happened there was not just of the Pastors doing. As Bill Moyers said about Trocmé and Le Chambon: *“Leaders don’t create communities. Communities raise up leaders to express and manifest their character.”*

Although deception and lying were being practiced by everyone in the village, Pastor Trocmé, found, it difficult to lie.

Trocmé was on the Gestapo’s “wanted” list, and at one point, he was detained for questioning. But the Gestapo didn’t know who they had detained. His identity card had a false name on it, and Pastor Trocmé had decided — if the Gestapo had asked him if that was his name he would have to say “No.” Pastor Trocmé felt saving the lives of others — and even saving his own life — with false identity cards was one thing, but standing before another human being and speaking lies to them only for the sake of self-preservation was something different. Luckily he was released without having to answer any questions about his true identity.

During 1940-44 the population of Le Chambon increased from 1,000 to 3,000. Only about 100 of the population were

Catholic: the majority were Huguenots. The village's religious homogeneity helped create a strong ethic of mutual support.

Why did the Chambonnais do what they did? Another Protestant village nearby had been indifferent to the plight of the refugees. Others in France took up armed resistance to the Nazis, but in Le Chambon the citizens chose "nonviolent altruism." Why?

Many feel the major factors were the personalities of pastor André Trocmé and his wife, Magda.

One Sunday, while I serving our U.U. congregation in Greensboro NC, I gave a talk on non-violence and mentioned André Trocmé. After the service, two of our dearest members, Nan Allen and Betsy Very, who had lived and taught for a number of years in France after the war, came up to me and shared with me that they had known the Trocmés. At the time they met them in Paris André was the European Secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation.¹ They described him to me as being a big man, passionate, sometimes domineering, sometimes rough with words. They described him as a person who had two driving forces in his life — to help the poor and a high regard for the preciousness of human life. He was a Christian whose favorite stories (as we would suspect) were the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the Good Samaritan. He felt his role in life was to diminish evil — to be against the destruction of human life and the human passions that motivate the harming of others.

¹ Served from 1948 to 1960.

They said his wife, Magda Trocmé, did not consider herself a Protestant or Catholic. She hardly ever spoke of God. Never spoke of religious motivation as her reason for offering help. She just felt people needing help should be helped. *Toujours prete a servir.*

André died in Geneva in 1971, at age 70. Magda died in Paris in October of 1996, at the age of 94. Both are buried in Le Chambon.

The two, met in New York, in the autumn of 1925. André was a student in NYC, when he met Magda Grilli. He was on a scholarship at Union Theological School and she was preparing to become a social worker. She had been raised a Catholic in Florence, Italy², but she felt no allegiance to the Catholic Church. She had been placed in a Florentine convent early in her life, and had felt, she said, imprisoned there, physically and mentally.³

While living in New York, André earned money as a private French tutor to Winthrop and David Rockefeller.

TROCMÉ ASSIGNED TO LE CHAMBON

After he completed Seminary, the French Protestant Church assigned André to this remote post of Le Chambon because of his pacifist views.

² Andre was born in Florence in 1901.

³ Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm by Philip Hallie, 1997, p. 45.

One of the first things André did when he arrived in this remote parish in the mountains of France was to establish a school, (*L'École Nouvelle Cévenole*⁴) which prepared students for the regular French *baccalaureat* but also offered the study of non-violence.

JUNE 1940

On June 22nd, 1940 France surrendered to Germany. The next day in a sermon, Trocmé said:

“Tremendous pressure will be put on us to submit passively to a totalitarian ideology. If they do not succeed in subjugating our souls, at least they will want to subjugate our bodies. The duty of Christians is to use the weapons of the Spirit to oppose the violence that they will try to put on our consciences. We appeal to all our brothers and sisters in Christ to refuse to cooperate with this violence...”

“Loving, forgiving, and doing good to our adversaries is our duty Yet we must do this without giving up, and without being cowardly. We shall resist whenever our adversaries demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the gospel. We shall do so without fear, but also without pride and without hate.”

When the Vichy authorities found out what was going on in Le Chambon they warned André Trocmé he would be arrested if he did not give them a list of the Jews being hidden. Trocmé refused. When the SS came to the parsonage

⁴ The **Cévennes** are a [range of mountains](#) in south-central [France](#). In French, the adjective derived from "Cévennes" is Cévenol

to arrest him, Magda invited the Nazis in for dinner. Afterwards, when the officers left with the pastor, the congregation had gathered in front of the house singing, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” When some of the Chambonnais criticized Magda for inviting them in for dinner, she replied, “*What are you taking about? It was dinner-time.*” Later released, her husband resumed his dangerous work. But eventually, he and Edouard Theis had to go into hiding for 10 months — but stayed in contact with rescue efforts.

WHY LE CHAMBON? — SIX FACTORS

The story of what the citizens of Le Chambon did for four years is a remarkable story. They lived out a dangerous and courageous love that brought hope to those who needed it the most.

I identify at least 6 factors that help explain why this “outbreak of goodness” happened in Le Chambon:

FACTOR ONE: CITIES OF REFUGEE

André Trocmé was attracted to the concept of “cities of refuge” mentioned several places in the Old Testament.

Numbers 35:9-12. *“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, so that a slayer who kills a person without intent may flee there. The cities shall be for you a*

refuge from the avenger, so that the slayer may not die until there is a trial before the congregation.”

Deuteronomy 19:7-10. *“...You shall set apart three cities... then you shall add three more cities to these three so that the blood of an innocent person, may not be shed in the land...”*

These city sanctuaries were for those guilty of what we now call “involuntary manslaughter.” They were protected in these sanctuary cities until they could receive a fair trial. Pastor Trocmé expanded the meaning of “cities of refuge” to include innocent refugees who were being threatened.

FACTOR TWO: HUGUENOT HERITAGE

As Huguenots they were familiar with the experience of being a persecuted minority. French Protestants had to deal with repeated religious conflict with French Catholics during the 16th and 17th centuries. Huguenots in the northern part of France had to flee to the south central part of France to escape religious persecution and to freely practice their Protestant faith. The persecution of the Huguenots didn't end until 1789, when they finally gained the right of equal citizenship with French Catholics.

FACTOR THREE: SCHOOL OF NON-VIOLENCE

The school André started - and the classes on Christian non-violence that the Pastors taught were an influence on the townspeople. Their faith was based on following the essential

ethical message of Jesus, which they believed was living an non-violent life. After the war, in 1961, Trocmé published a book about Jesus & The Non-Violent Revolution which became influential for those interested in the study of non-violence.^{5 6}

FACTOR FOUR: THE CIMADE

The Cimade is a French NGO started by French Protestant youth at the beginning of W.W.II to give assistance, shelter and support to people uprooted by the war. The Cimade still exists and now works with undocumented immigrants in France. At first, the Cimade in Le Chambon was made up entirely of women. The women were the backbone of much of what occurred there. They organized themselves into teams, called *equipés*, that aided the refugees. They never felt they were superheroes during the war. They were just people helping people in need.

FACTOR FIVE: STUDY/DISCUSSION GROUPS

In Le Chambon this study took the form of Bible Study groups.

Every two weeks Trocmé met with 13 villagers and they discussed a passage from the Bible that they had been

⁵ Published first in France in 1961. Published in English in 1972, one year after his death.

⁶Trocmé's core argument: Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God based on the Jubilee principles of the Old Testament. These principles call for a political, economic, and spiritual revolution in response to human need....with debts forgiven, slaves set free, and the land returned to the poor. Compare today's Prosperity Gospel.

thinking about for two week. These 13 then became the facilitators of 13 more Bible study groups of 13 people. This network of individual and cooperative thinking and discussion on “how to live decently together” was described by one participant as the “nervous system of Le Chambon.” And the first 13 leaders were given the honorary title “the responsible ones,” the “*responsables*.”

Even when some of the villagers were interred by the Gestapo they kept these discussion groups going. And they used some clever code words. When they were discussing, say Karl Marx, instead of saying Marx’s name they substituted, “Pétain,” (for Marshal Pétain) - the French leader who was collaborating with the Nazis, so the guards never caught on to what they were really talking about.

FACTOR SIX: BELIEF IN HUMAN DECENCY

Their belief in human decency. The Chambonnais did what they felt they had to do, what their faith required of them. As one woman in the village said; “*One gets used to the risks*” involved.

Albert Camus’ narrator, in his novel, The Plague, (which some think may have been influenced by what was going on in Le Chambon) says at one point:

“There always comes a time in history when the man who dares say that two plus two equals four is punished with death....And the issue is not a matter of what reward or what punishment will be the outcome of that reasoning. The issue

is simply whether or not two plus two equals four. For those of our townspeople who were then risking their lives, the decision they had to make was simply whether or not they were in the midst of a plague and whether or not it was necessary to struggle against it.”

The Chambonnais simply did what was natural, what came naturally to them - human decency.

EXCEPTIONAL STORY OR ONE OF MANY?

You would think the story of Le Chambon was exceptional by all the honors the town has been awarded. I listed a number of them in my article in Atención. And in a sense their story is exceptional. However their ethical example of non-violent resistance is just one story of people coming to the aid of refugees, very moving and inspiring, but a “tiny” episode in the scope of things happening in the world during W.W.II.

No doubt there were many other tales of “good against evil” — some of which we know about, and others that we don’t. Some acts done by individuals. Others by groups.

Victor Bremson mentioned to me the work of Rabbi Harold Schulweis⁷ of Encino, California (who died in 2014). Rabbi Schulweis established a Foundation that seeks to catalogue these acts of goodness, and honor the “righteousness Gentiles.”

⁷It was originally called the Institute for Righteous Acts.

“Schulweis also served as technical advisor for Judaism-themed episodes of The Simpsons.”From Wiki.

THEN AND NOW

The story of Le Chambon was then...Flash forward to today. Today, according to UN statistics, over 65 million people around the world have been forced from their homes and livelihoods to escape famine, climate change and war in the greatest human displacement since W.W.II. For the first time since the UN has been keeping statistics that the number has topped 60 million. In the last year the number has made a 10% jump. Syrians account for almost a third of the total.

As citizens of the world, what are we doing? Are we doing enough? What are we going to do?

The Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei just released a film about the refugee crisis called "Human Flow." He visited 23 nations to show us the breadth of today's refugee plight. The film comes at a crucial time when compassion and trust are needed more than ever, and when many are just turning a blind eye to what is going on.

The European Union Charter, Article 18, guarantees "the right of asylum for refugees," but we know not all European Union members are honoring that right. We see the isolationist trends that are growing in the U.S. and elsewhere around the globe.

The world is shrinking, populations are being displaced, and people from different backgrounds are going to have to learn to live with each other.

One of the refugees in Weiwei's film says, *"Being a refugee is much more than a political status. It's the most pervasive kind of cruelty that can be exercised against a human being. You are forcibly robbing this human being of all aspects that would make this human life not just tolerable, but meaningful in many ways."*

These refugees are people living without context, which means they really aren't having much opportunity to live at all.

I know you believe as I do that we need to realize — denying someone else's humanity is effectively denying our own.

We must not be apathetic when our own identity is at stake.

Pierre Sauvage, the director of a film about Le Chambon, *"Weapons of the Spirit"* has said: *"If we don't feel deeply, within ourselves, that we are capable of good we will be extremely reluctant to face the extent to which we are capable of evil. And indeed, without question, we are capable of both."*