

Rescue and Resistance in Vichy France: Teaching with Selected Survivors' Testimonies

by Joanne S. Silver

The following provides a fresh look, including new materials, at two aspects of Nazi-Occupied France, based on first-person testimonies: rescue and assistance of the persecuted, including research on altruism, courage and related motivation; the different forms of resistance and, rather surprisingly, how music in everyday life reflected resistance.

At the outset, it is necessary to establish the rationale: Why teach the Holocaust? And how to teach the Holocaust in the context of teaching French? In itself, the content is not a happy subject. Only in recent years have schools in France included the topic. For young people especially, it is important to choose materials carefully—indeed, to put aside those terribly sad materials that leave us paralyzed. While the devastating and long-lasting effects on many survivors cannot be ignored or denied, and despite the fact that genocides continue in more recent times, the teacher's goal must be to draw hope and lessons from the past, to inspire young people to be ever watchful of the conditions that allowed the Holocaust to take place, and to believe that even the very young can make a difference and effect positive change.

Many civilians and servicemen who were involved in World War II chose not to speak of it after the war. Ruth Kapp Hartz, a former hidden child in France, relates that her parents always responded to her questions with, “Non, c’est trop triste.” The deaths that war always brings, the crimes against humanity in WWII, against Jews, political dissidents, gypsies, resisters, the elderly, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the disabled, children—one would choose to forget all that, to protect oneself and to try to regain a “normal” life.

But people like Ruth Kapp Hartz decided to tell their stories, after others spoke out in denial of the Holocaust. And teachers of French have a golden opportunity with the right memoirs: to present a compelling story while teaching French in that context.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum guidelines for teaching the Holocaust state the following: “Democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured and protected; silence and indifference to the suffering of others, or to the infringement of civil rights can—however unintentionally—perpetuate the problems; the Holocaust was not an accident in history—it occurred because individuals, organizations and governments made choices that not only legalized discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred and ultimately mass murder to occur” (www.holocaust-trc.org/uhmguide.htm p. 1).

A plateau in southern France brought rescue and assistance to an extraordinary level. The people in the region of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, with help from outside organizations, saved an estimated 3,500 men, women and children from concentration camps by absorbing them into their families, working them on the farms, hiding them in the countryside, supplying

forged identification and ration cards, and escorting refugees across the border to neutral Switzerland.

The region of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon has been honored repeatedly. With his inspirational pacifist sermons, Pastor André Trocmé had inspired the people in their rescue activities. In 1981, Magda Trocmé, his widow, accepted a Ph.D. *honoris causa* from Haverford College (Pennsylvania) for Le Chambon and neighboring communities. In 1990, the town and surrounding area were recognized by Yad Vashem of Israel as “Righteous Among Nations,” for humanitarianism and bravery under life-threatening danger.

In 2004, French President Jacques Chirac used Le Chambon as a symbol of rescue, delivering a landmark speech against racism from the local public school. In 2007 Chirac again mentioned Le Chambon along with other French “Righteous Among the Nations” at a ceremony and posting of a plaque at the Panthéon in Paris. At that time, Simone Veil, Holocaust survivor and one of the most influential and distinguished women in modern French history, also delivered a speech honoring rescuers. Jacques Chirac’s and Simone Veil’s speeches can be found online and used as authentic reading material in French classes:

<http://lewebpedagogique.com/histoire/documents/les-justes-au-pantheon-discours-de-jacques-chirac-18-janvier-2007> and
www.fondationshoah.org/FMS/.../pantheon%20discours%20SV.doc.

And on April 21, 2009, Holocaust Remembrance Day, President Obama cited Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in his Remembrance speech. Many of the people rescued in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon are still with us; it is typical for them to become great achievers, and to bear testimony as their way of giving thanks and passing on the lessons to be learned from World War II.

For the French as well as for other Europeans, there was ample opportunity during the war for ordinary people to become extraordinary. Focusing on some of them does not in any way obscure the fact that six million Jews were murdered nevertheless, and that much more could have been done to help all the persecuted.

Looking at the elements of courage we ask, why would some people risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones to help others, often strangers, in such times? What does it mean to be a person of character, to do the right thing? What is altruism? What is courage? What is the role of prejudice? What part does religion play in these decisions? (The people of Le Chambon had a history of strong resistance to Huguenot persecution.) These themes can be explored with students.

Merriam Webster defines altruism as the unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of others. But where does it originate, and what makes people risk everything in order to do “the right thing”? The answer is complex. In her research of 1986 (Scrase 37) and 2004 (Scrase 45), Holocaust survivor and noted scholar Nechama Tec established a theory of altruistic rescue, and a suggested profile of rescuers, as follows:

- Individuality or separateness—rescuers did not quite fit into their respective social environments (the notable exception being the Danish people, who together defied the government overtly);

- Independence or self-reliance—acting according to personal convictions, regardless of the opinions of others;
- Broad and long-lasting commitment—standing up for those in need and a history of performing charitable acts;
- A tendency to perceive aid to Jews in a matter-of-fact way, consistently and strongly denying that they were heroes, or acted in an extraordinary manner;
- Absence of premeditation on the rescue, which could have been extended gradually, suddenly or even impulsively;
- Universalistic perceptions about the Jews. Rather than seeing a Jew as someone to be protected, rescuers would see them as helpless and totally dependent on aid from others. All that mattered was extreme suffering and need.

In 1988, the research couple the Oliners (Oliner 80, 88, 100) supported Tec's views of altruistic personality, but rather than emphasizing autonomy, noted the rescuers' capacity for a stronger sense of attachment to others and a feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside their family or social circles. The Oliners also underscore close family relationships, modeling of caring behavior and rather lenient discipline by parents, with rare physical punishment, setting high standards for the children, particularly with regard to caring for others, and discipline with reasoning rather than an autocratic approach.

Researchers Fogelman (Fogelman 317) and Monroe (Monroe 229) basically support all of the above theories.

Rescuers and the rescued speak in documentaries. *Courage to Care* (Rittner) features Magda Trocmé and her daughter Nelly of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, and Odette Meyers, a Parisian. Distinguished survivor Emanuel Tanay, author Irene Opdyke of Poland and Dr. Marion Pritchard of Holland also tell their very moving stories and support researchers' views as they speak of their rescuers.

In the bilingual, subtitled documentary *Weapons of the Spirit*, Pierre Sauvage, who was born in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon during the war, returns as a young adult seeking to understand his origins. He interviews several residents and produces an unforgettable video available in original and classroom versions, with outstanding bonus material.

In the materials on Ruth Hartz (Cretzmeier, English and French editions; Silver, English and French study guides), little Ruth, passing as Renée, survives hidden in the convent of Sorèze, where only the Mother Superior knows about her and the other Jewish children in that orphanage, which is periodically inspected by the Germans. (The clergy, especially nuns, have been especially modest about their rescue actions. Approximately fifty Belgian nuns have been named "Righteous Among Nations" by Yad Vashem.)

The following summarizes the teaching rationale for *Tu t'appelles Renée*, created by Marjorie Callahan Beck, M.S.Ed, Teacher of English, Middle School Dean Moorestown Friends School, Moorestown, New Jersey. Ms. Beck first presented this rationale in 2005, at a workshop entitled *Every Life Evocative: Holocaust Studies and the Development of Empathy in Adolescents*, at the Nineteenth Annual E.L.M.L.E. (European League for Middle Level Education) Conference in Warsaw, Poland. The entire rationale appears in the *Study Guide for the book Your Name is Renée* (Silver 12) and in the *Guide d'Étude pour le livre Tu t'appelles Renée* (Silver 8–9).

How do Youngsters Learn to Make Ethical Decisions?

While intellectual development can be effected through any number of learning styles, *moral development is largely dependent on life experience*. This presents an enormous obstacle when teaching the Holocaust because there can never be a full understanding of the period by those who did not experience it.

Studies indicate that American youth are becoming increasingly desensitized to violence, making it more and more challenging to affect their moral development. Therefore, it is crucial for young people to see every 'statistic' of the Holocaust as a real person: a devoted parent, a beloved uncle, an idealistic teenager, or a playful child.

Through the use of the first-person voice of a young child and detailed descriptions, students of both genders can relate to Ruth Kapp. Teenagers can still remember being very young themselves, and can understand young children of either gender. They can relate to Ruth's confusion and heartache when her name was changed and she was forced into hiding. This is the type of intimate literary transaction necessary for the history or academic knowledge of the period to become emotional knowledge, leading to individual advances in moral development. This book presents the choices and motivations of real individuals, and the consequences of their decisions. Teaching the Holocaust with *Tu t'appelles Renée* can help young people learn to make right and just decisions as they grow.

For the older adolescent and for adults, the story resonates even after moral development seems a *fait accompli*. Age is irrelevant, for anyone can make a difference when faced with a decision requiring courage. Selected memoirs furnish examples of persons who have done just that.

With survivor testimony, French language and culture are framed in a meaningful, powerful context. Moreover, with certain works available both in French and in English, students can read in English independently, in order to fully understand the story, and then work with the material in French in the classroom. The *Guide d'Étude* is flexible, enabling the instructor to pick and choose strategies, and facilitating interdisciplinary work.

It is essential to begin a Holocaust unit with a history and/or chronology of the period, providing students with the background and ongoing points of reference for World War II testimonies. An excellent chronology for the classroom is available in *Visages de la Shoah : Marcel Jabelot* 2ème édition (Barnett 63–66), and is included in the *Guide d'Étude pour le livre Tu t'appelles Renée*. (Silver 10–12) The entry for April 21, 2009 (Holocaust Remembrance Day or Yom HaShoah) brings history closer to contemporary times, when President Barak Obama recognized the "Justes" (Righteous Gentiles) of the region of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.

Students should be made aware that in Israel, the Hebrew word Shoah ("catastrophe") refers to the Holocaust. In France, *la Shoah* is the preferred term, rather than *l'Holocauste*.

Another valuable reference, especially for the teacher, is *La France dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Vial), which is used to prepare students for the *Baccalauréat*. For a visual introduction, *La France Divisée* (25 mins.) or the full length film *Le Dernier Métro* are recommended.



Figure 1. Photographie d'école prise à Arthès, France, le 1^{er} octobre 1944, le premier jour d'école.
From the personal collection of Ruth K. Hartz.

Another very moving memoir showing both Rescue and Resistance is *La filière des enfants*. The author, Jean-François Elberg, a multi-talented surgeon in Paris, researched his father's story and found this—very briefly: His father was a dashing young immigrant in Paris who became a physician, married, had a good practice and a life filled with love, friends, music, art exhibitions. Due to the war and the *Statuts des Juifs*, he was not allowed to practice medicine. Eventually he was sent to Drancy internment camp, in the northeast suburbs of Paris, a holding place before the “selections” for the death camp of Auschwitz. There, the Nazis needed Dr. Elberg's medical skills. He and other medical personnel formed a network: they taught the children to mimic serious contagious diseases, which their keepers feared, so the children were sent to the Rothschild Hospital in Paris, where another part of the network took over and found safe homes for them. By risking his life, Dr. Elberg saved many children. He could not save himself, however, as there was an informer, with dire consequences. The language is very moving, with a humane, rather elegant touch. The French is about intermediate level, and the accompanying *Glossaire* is helpful. The following are some of the newly created comprehension questions (Silver, supplemental materials).

LA FILIÈRE DES ENFANTS

1. (Chapitre 3) Comment Michel se rend-il compte de l'antisémitisme à Paris ?
2. Michel et ses amis sont conscients de l'ambiance menaçante envers les Juifs. Donnez un ou deux exemples des « signes » qu'ils remarquent.

3. Comment Michel protège-t-il Georgette de ses soucis ?
4. (Ch. 7) Décrivez en bref le mois de vacances au bord de la mer.
5. (Ch. 8) Expliquez dans vos propres mots le « discours haineux » à la faculté de médecine.
6. (Ch. 9) Pourquoi Michel et son ami Edmond vont-ils à la manifestation ?
7. (Ch. 11) Racontez l'incident bouleversant en ce qui concerne Annie.
8. (Ch. 11) Qu'est-ce qui est arrivé à l'hôpital après la naissance de l'auteur ?
9. (Ch. 12) Quels lieux publics sont interdits aux Juifs ? Aux enfants juifs ?
10. (Ch. 13) Pourquoi Michel se sent-il « heureux » après le départ de M. Lagrange ?
11. (Ch. 14) Qu'est-ce qui est arrivé au Vél d'Hiv ?
12. (Ch. 15) Comment quelques jeunes ont montré leur solidarité avec les Juifs ? Michel imagine l'effet si chaque Français aurait suivi leur exemple. Qu'en pensez-vous ?
13. (Ch. 15) Décrivez la scène chez la belle-mère de Michel. Quelle solution trouve-t-elle pour protéger les enfants ? . . .

Referring to the *different* forms of resistance—Dr. Elberg's apparently was one. But many small acts of resistance went unnoticed. Individuals did what they could, when they could. The most overt and militant were the Maquis, who wore Basque berets and armbands, and women numbered among them. The French WWII heroine Lucie Aubrac became a weapon-bearing resistant after she had engaged in much more subtle activities.

The following survivors are noteworthy for resistance, each different in age and type of expression: In *Un costume rayé d'enfer*, author Jean-Pierre Renouard belonged to the Freedom Fighters, a branch of the Maquis. When he was nineteen, he and his brother were arrested after a long period of running guns for the Resistance. His brother perished in a camp, but J-P was liberated by the Russians from Bergen-Belsen, and lives comfortably in Paris. Questions in French are available for Jean-Pierre's story.

Girl in the Belgian Resistance by Fernande Davis is available as a complete book, a DVD in French and English wherein the author highlights her story, questions in English and a comprehensive packet of questions and activities in French. The author, a spunky, no-nonsense middle child with seven siblings, served in the underground from the age of seventeen, for two and a half years. Her brothers tell about the different punishments they endured, such as standing outside without winter coats, in raised-arm salute, for refusing to stand and greet the teachers with the salute and a loud "Heil Hitler."

In *The Incredible Walk*, it was French resistance members who helped author Judi Olga Cahorn's parents escape across Europe and then on foot across the Pyrénées. This slender book in English affords many options: The English questions included are also available in French; the beautiful color illustrations afford much conversational material for French classes; the intermediate reading level lends itself well to interdisciplinary work with Social Studies, History, English and Reading classes.

In *Jamais je n'aurai quatorze ans* and its English edition, François Lecomte relates an example of how he and his buddies exhibited their resistance. At the age of twelve, and before he was sheltered in Le Chambon, they would blow sneezing powder into the Paris Métro just as the doors were closing, when they saw German soldiers in the Métro car. (Lecomte 186) Again, there

are questions in English in the English edition, and these are available for the French edition published in Paris.

In *Tu t'appelles Renée*, six-year-old Ruth Kapp Hartz stood up to the Milice and pointed in opposite directions when asked where her Papa had gone. In her own words (this work is unique in that it is written in the voice of the child) she tells how proud she felt when her parents congratulated her on her courage. Little Ruth somehow knew the truth uttered by Martin Luther King, Jr. years later: “Courage faces fear and thereby masters it.”

The classroom editions of the memoirs of Armand Idrac, *Ma Normandie à Moi* and *My Normandy*, narrate a great deal about the sabotage and other activities of the underground. Armand was fourteen when the Allies landed near his home in Caen, Normandy. He felt that he was too young and too pacifist to participate in the Resistance, but his family did shelter a Jewish woman for a time, and he himself gave an old revolver to a friend who wanted to join the movement.

For a complete change of pace, the music of the Occupation can be used in the classroom. Resistance in French music is best known through “Le Chant des Partisans,” the wartime substitute for the German-censored Marseillaise. But there were other manifestations, some very bold. Because we find that, even under oppression, people will make music. People will perform music, and people will attend musical events. In “La filière des enfants,” Michel Elberg and his wife Georgette attend what they call *Washboard*—jazz. Jazz and swing, with their freedom of expression, spirit of independence and revolt, did not fit the Nazi ideology of compliance and repression. Michel and Georgette chat about the fact that, under the Occupation, jazz is forbidden, but it is being performed before an audience—and both the performers and the attendees are showing resistance.

An excellent resource is the CD *Les Chansons sous l'Occupation* with the new booklet, *Complement to the Compact Disc “Les Chansons sous l'Occupation.”* The book highlights a handful of the performers—resistants, collaborators, and others—who found themselves in compromising positions because they had to perform for German officers. Exploring further, one finds the variety of musical expression in WWII France: patriotic, romantic and humorous compositions, songs mocking Hitler, and music about the Free French Forces—even sheet music depicting women in uniform, bearing arms and wearing the FFF insignia (not distributed until after Liberation, however). The French lyrics to selected songs are included in the book, and activities for students include translating, biographical research, music and art.

The *Complement* includes “Le Chant des Partisans (Le Chant de la Libération)” (Hymne aux membres de la Résistance) by Maurice Druon, Joseph Kessel and Anna Marly, and sung by Germaine Sablon. The song is a passionate cry to arms. The last line mentions whistling. This “all clear” signal among the resistants was also used by singer Anna Marly, who whistled the first few notes on BBC’s French Service to signal their twice-daily radio broadcasts of the program “Honor and Homeland” (Silver 20).

Another good selection is “Où sont-ils mes petits copains ?” by M. (Marguerite) Monnot, sung by Édith Piaf. During World War II, Piaf performed frequently at German Forces gatherings in occupied France, and many considered her a traitor. There is no evidence that she

was a member of the Resistance, as she later claimed, but it is believed that she helped a number of individuals (including at least one Jew) escape Nazi persecution. She dated a Jewish pianist during the war and, with Marguerite Monnot, co-wrote this subtle protest song, “Où sont-ils mes petits copains ?” Moreover, she defied the Nazi request to remove it from her repertoire. According to one story, Piaf posed for photographs with French prisoners of war, and their images were later used to create false documents, enabling some of them to escape (Silver 9).



Figure 2. Drawing of Edith Piaf by Sharon M. Bagatta © 2010

André Dassary’s popular rousing recording of “Maréchal nous voilà” shows the other face of France at the time—that of the collaborationists. In the memoir *Tu t’appelles Renée* (Chapitre 1), little Renée relates how she and her kindergarten classmates are caught up in the show of support for Pétain. Children are mentioned in the song, and photographs of school children at rallies and parades, with Pétain very much the father figure, bear witness to the fervor of this song. “Maréchal nous voilà” was composed by A. Montagard and C. Courtioux, and was famously sung by André Dassary. Strangely enough, Dassary’s popularity seemed undiminished despite the broadcasts of the song.

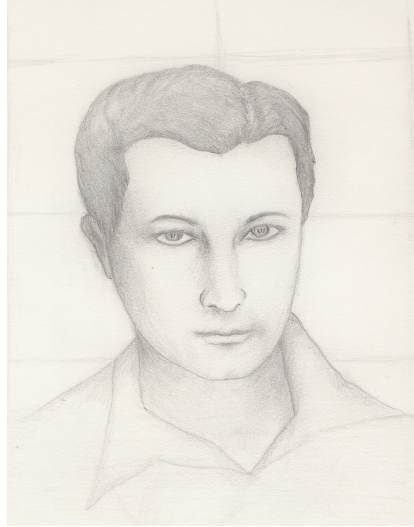


Figure 3. Drawing of André Dassary by Sharon M. Bagatta © 2010

Additional songs on the CD and in the *Complement* show the different creative expressions arising from life under the German occupation. The Raymond Legrand orchestra accompanies Irène de Trébert (“Mademoiselle Swing” of the album *Les Zazous : Swing Obsession 1938–1946*) singing “Dans le chemin du retour”; Suzy Solidor intones “Lily Marlène,” the soulful air of mystery, nostalgia and love lost which was extremely popular with German and Allied forces alike; and Léo Marjane’s beautiful contralto transports us to the loneliness created by the war, with her rendition of “Je suis seule ce soir.”

A few other songs of note cited in the *Complement*:

“On ira pendre notre linge sur la ligne Siegfried” (#2 on the CD). Equivalent to the French Maginot line, the Siegfried line was part of the German fortifications built starting in March 1936. It was meant to protect Germany from any attack coming from the West.

“Le Petit Réfugié.” Due to bombings, many civilians lost their homes.

“Ya du rutabaga.” Food was in very short supply for civilians; much was confiscated for the Occupant. Bread lines stretched for blocks, stores closed before the Jews were allowed to shop... But there were rutabagas, tasteless root vegetables of low nutritional value. This song treats with irony and humor the French obsession with food that characterized life from 1940 throughout the Liberation (Silver 31).

We know that even after the defeat of Germany, reprisals were carried out (Ouradour-sur-Glane) and concentration camps continued death marches. “Le Chant des Marais” (Song from the Marshes) originated in 1933 in Germany, in the Nazi concentration camp of Boergermoor. It quickly became a hymn to European deportees.

Other songs were written in the underground, and edited and distributed at the time of the Liberation, including the following: “Welcome to You” (Welcoming the Allies), “Marianne...mets ta robe aux trois couleurs” and “Ceux du Maquis,” which outlined the different stages of the Resistance movement in France.

The French student will be enriched by compelling first-person accounts and supporting materials which make clear the following: World War II France was not primarily a country of resistants (contrary to early teaching in French schools), but a country divided between Vichy-supporters and informers on the one hand, and those who risked their lives and the lives of their loved ones in rescue and assistance on the other hand. Yet reality was even more complex. This kaleidoscope of human behavior, ranging from violent resistance to indifference to pacifism, with basic survival behavior and creative expression added to the mix, brings to life the people who lived these times. Teaching language in context takes on added meaning as we seek to apply the lessons of the past.

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